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Friday, August 05, 2011

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## Montgomery County adopts first Sister City

70 representatives traveled to El Salvador to mark partnership

by Erin Cunningham, Staff Writer

When Neftali Granados fled war-torn El Salvador in the early 1980s to live in Maryland, he thought it would just be for a couple of years.

"But the civil war was 12 years," he said.

In that time, Granados married, had two children and started a local business. The middle-aged Poolesville resident now owns Morazan Groceries, with stores in Gaithersburg and Washington, D.C.

And last week he was part of a 70-member delegation representing Montgomery County in his birthplace, Morazan, El Salvador — the county's first Sister City.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), County Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park, former U.S. Congresswoman Connie Morella, Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Dist. 18) and others traveled July 23-30 to El Salvador. The group, which included representatives of government, business and nonprofit organizations, visited schools, organizations and historic places in El Salvador.

Leggett said no taxpayer money was used for the trip. Employees used vacation time or leave, and all participants paid for their own travel. Leggett said he used security personnel provided by El Salvador, not his county-funded



From Patrick K. Lacefield/ Montgomery County Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) (back right) and his wife, Catherine (back left), were part of a 70-member delegation that traveled to El Salvador last week to establish a Sister City relationship with the state of Morazan.



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The partnership is intended to help officials learn more about El Salvadorans — about 50,000 of whom are estimated to live in Montgomery, Leggett said. Morazan

also will benefit, he said, through connections with county businesses and nonprofits. Already the county's chapter of Habitat for Humanity started work on a house that will go to a schoolteacher in Morazan. There are plans for 37 more homes.

Granados, who helped organize the trip, said he was pleased to assist representatives from his new home learn more about the impoverished city where he was born.

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"It was a dream come true," he said.

Montgomery joins Prince George's and Calvert counties, as well as Baltimore city, as Maryland jurisdictions with Sister City relationships. The state also has several Sister Cities, including in China, Iraq, Mexico and Belgium.

Typically, Sister City programs tend to be festival-oriented, according to Gutierrez of Chevy Chase, who held up Oktoberfest events as an example of the celebration of connections with cities in Germany. Montgomery's program, however, is intended to make a difference in the lives of El Salvadorans in the county and in Morazan, she said.

Leggett emphasized Wednesday that the program is not political.

"In the long run, this will prove beneficial to Montgomery County and certainly to El Salvador," he said. "You can't assume that in one trip you've completed the mission."

Leggett said Salvadorans living in the county struggle with issues such as housing, education and jobs. By knowing more about where such people come from, he said, it will allow the government to better understand how to meet their needs.

While in El Salvador, Leggett said he visited a hospital where limited resources forced patients to share beds. The county's recreation director, Gabriel Albornoz, said he was struck by a recreation center for children sharing two soccer balls — one of which was flat.

"It was a great opportunity for me to understand the heritage and background of more than 50,000 of my constituents," said Leventhal, whose wife also was part of the delegation. "I return home with a much greater depth of understanding of the circumstances of a large number of my constituents."

Leggett said Leventhal acted as an unofficial translator during the trip.

Gutierrez said she already is focused on planning another trip to Morazan.

"Montgomery County is the mecca of Salvadorians," she said.

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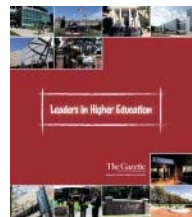
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