

## Europeans, Americans make connections

Cultural, business networks formed

BY EVANGELIA GANOSSELLIS • EGANOSSELLIS@NEWS-PRESS.COM • FEBRUARY 13, 2010

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What Trish Leonard enjoys most about her involvement with the European American Network is meeting new people and learning about their cultures.

"It's just amazing how things are different," said Leonard, the group's president. "I think they also want to learn from us. It's really a win-win for everyone."

The European American Network, formerly the European Chamber of Commerce, provides an environment for people - business and academic professionals, or anyone simply interested in European culture - to create business, social and cultural connections.

Leonard, president of TLC Consulting in Estero, became involved with the group three years ago to see how Americans and Europeans relate and do business together.

"I've been to Europe, so I was kind of intrigued by Europe anyway," she said.

The European American Network comprises about 30 individuals, including board member Arnold Haake, who has been a part of the group since its start in 2000.

During a 20-year span, Haake lived in Germany, Holland and the United Kingdom.

And, like many other European residents, he eventually made his home in Southwest Florida.

Haake founded Royal Palm Bank on Immokalee Road. He was the bank's director and CEO until he sold it in 2006.

And when other people from Europe make their way to Southwest Florida, whether for the winter or permanently, many establish businesses of their own as well.

"There's just all kinds of connections between Europe and here in Southwest Florida," he said.

European American Network members meet the third Tuesday of every month for a luncheon at the Bonita Bay Clubhouse, where topics range from tax issues confronting Europeans in the United States to visa laws.

Vice president Candace Wehbe-Dennen, a member for five years, said she's continually impressed with the group's evolution.

"We're a very engaged group of professionals who are interested in opening doors where we can for local people," she said.

Wehbe-Dennen, a native of Switzerland who spends half the year in Punta Gorda and half in France, is a consultant for people traveling between Florida and Europe with business goals.

When she arrived in Southwest Florida, Wehbe-Dennen said, she wanted to be able to interact with people with whom she could relate - and the European American Network made that possible.

"One immediately is able to form either business contacts or friendships," she said. "And that's what that organization has provided me with."



Trish Leonard, president of the European American Network, and Nancy Hamilton, director of communications for the Lee County Visitor and Convention Bureau. (special to the news-press)

### NEXT MEETING

- When: March 16, 11:30 a.m.

- Where: Bonita Bay Clubhouse, 26660 Country Club Drive

- Cost: \$25 for members, \$35 for nonmembers

- Contact: Trish Leonard, 398-9999

RSVP by March 12 to 941-244-3164.

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