



Laszlo Meszaros, an immigrant whose foundation runs business training programs for high school students in Buffalo and Budapest, discusses a Herbin painting with a Hungarian tour group at Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

Hosting young Hungarians

Entrepreneurship is focus as immigrant works to share his success

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Like so many immigrants, **Laszlo J. Meszaros** came to this country in search of opportunity. Today the Hungarian native is giving students from his homeland the same chance to experience the American Dream.

This month the Meszaros International Center of Entrepreneurship, or MICE, has brought six Hungarian high school students to the United States for a two-week business training program that includes tours of companies and sightseeing in Buffalo and New York City.

MICE, founded by Meszaros and Joseph F. Salamone, a business professor at the University at Buffalo, is a nonprofit foundation that develops and runs training programs on entrepreneurship for high school students in Buffalo and Budapest.

The center, run in partnership with UB, offers a 20-week program in both cities modeled after an entrepreneurship course that Salamone teaches. The program culminates with students creating and pitching their own business plans. The six Hungarian students with the best plan were rewarded with a trip to the United States for the first time this year.

"We get feedback from parents that their kids have changed," Salamone said, noting that students are often more preceptive and critical of the decisions businesses make by the end of the course. "It's different than traditional high school education because it encourages discussion; it encourages critical thinking. ... If you give people the chance to say something, they'll say it."

The students will visit Noco Energy, Rich Products, the Ford Stamping Plant, the Albright- Knox Art Gallery, City Honors School and the Robert Moses Niagara Power Plant, among other places, getting a chance to see Meszaros' adopted home of more than 50 years.

As a young man, Meszaros escaped then-communist Hungary and arrived in New York on Oct. 23, 1956, the same day the Hungarian Revolution began. With the help of Catholic Charities and the local Hungarian community, Meszaros, who didn't speak a word of English, came to Buffalo and got jobs sweeping floors, washing dishes and working at Bethlehem Steel before gaining employment at Roswell Park Cancer Institute taking care of research animals. He eventually became assistant director of experimental surgery, despite his lack of training. He had wanted to become a surgeon but couldn't afford medical school.

Meszaros instead took to digitizing Roswell Park's medical records, and in 1980 started his own computer business, which he sold nine years later. He started a second company, Voice Technologies Group, which he sold to Intel in 2000. Today he is "semiretired," though he says he is busier than ever with the MICE program.

"The whole goal is to train them, to give them a path, an idea of how they should pursue their careers," Meszaros said. "I don't want to make a businessman out of everyone."

The program, which is in its fourth year in Hungary, began in Buffalo three years ago and has graduated about 150 local students. In Hungary, a recent grant from the European Union this year has allowed the course in Budapest to be expanded from 40 to 120 students annually.

The six Hungarian students in Buffalo this week won the trip to the United States by designing a grocery delivery service. Up to two decades ago, independent businesses were illegal in the former Eastern Bloc nation, and these students are among the first Hungarians with the opportunity to become entrepreneurs.

"This program is totally unique in Hungary," Hungarian student Marcell Balogh said. "It gives us the opportunity to start a business."

Students in Buffalo, too, have found what MICE teaches useful in running businesses. Carson Ciaggia, who will be a freshman at UB this fall, used his MICE training to grow a student-run cafe in the cafeteria at Williamsville North High School.

"We wanted to expand the restaurant," Ciaggia said. "Going to MICE helped with that." So what do the students from Hungary think of Buffalo so far?

"I would live here," Balogh said. "Yeah, I would live or study here," David Balazs added. Most of these students plan on going to college in Hungary and earning graduate degrees in the United States or elsewhere abroad.

It's these business leaders of tomorrow, program coordinator [Eugene Hegedus](#) said, who will determine Hungary's future, especially since the country joined the EU in 2004.

"Whatever nation you pick," he said, "youth is the greatest natural resource."