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PORTUGAL CONNECTION

Officials celebrate opening of Portuguese consulate in Palm Coast

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PALM COAST — Jose Cesario, secretary of state for Portuguese communities abroad, said he visits the Palm Coast area a few times a year.

When he's in town, he's surrounded by people who call Portugal their homeland. Palm Coast is so densely populated with Portuguese-Americans, he said it was the most logical place to open an honorary Consulate of Portugal, which celebrated its grand opening Wednesday morning.

"I'm very happy to be here today. It's a great pleasure, a great honor," Cesario said to a crowd of more than 30 people, which included the honorary consulate, Flagler County Sheriff Jim Manfre, Flagler County Commission Chairman Frank Meeker and Maria J. Avila, who serves in the Portuguese parliament.

Cesario apologized for his limited English and spoke more than five minutes in Portuguese. The celebration included the unveiling of a plaque commemorating the new office.

The consulate in Palm Coast actually opened in April after moving from Orlando, said Caesar DePaco, who heads the office. The temporary home for the consulate is on the third floor of the office building at 145 City Place in Town Center. Soon the office and its staff of seven will move to a more permanent home on the first floor. Renovations are expected to begin later this year.

"I don't like it here, I love it here," said DePaco, who founded a nutritional supplement business. In spite of being appointed the honorary consulate by his government, the finances necessary to run the office come out of his pocket, he said.

The mission of the consulate is to assure the defense of rights and serve the legitimate interests of Portuguese citizens. The office works in conjunction with the Portuguese Embassy in Washington DC.

The Palm Coast consulate provides various services, including granting passports, offering notary signatures, and more.

Thousands of Portuguese-Americans live throughout the Northeast where they start careers and raise families. A generation or two ago, they would return to Portugal to retire. Nowadays, more and more are coming to Florida, said DePaco.

"It's a new phenomenon," he said. "Every day I meet more and more people."

Miami and other parts of South Florida are great to visit for a couple of days, but Palm Coast is a far more desirable place to call home for DePaco and thousands of other Portuguese-Americans. Estimates vary, but during an interview earlier this year, DePaco said there are more than 5,000 Portuguese living in Flagler County.

"It's such a great place to live and to relax," DePaco said. "This is the place."

DePaco was appointed honorary consulate, which is a position he can keep for as long as he wants it and for as long as he is wanted. There are no term limits. The decision was Cesario's to move the consulate from Orlando to Palm Coast, said DePaco.

Consulate services also are available in Miami, but the Palm Coast office offers more for Portuguese citizens than any other office this far south of Washington D.C., according to the diplomatic team.

Among those celebrating Wednesday was 21-year-old Marco Branquinho, who was born in New Jersey but spends time in Portugal every summer. He made sure to never detach from his cultural background. He wore traditional Portuguese clothes during Wednesday's ceremony, which was followed by a luncheon at the Portuguese American Club on Palm Harbor Parkway.

"I love my culture very much," he said. "It's very close to my heart."

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