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CITYWIDE

Raising Young Voices for Illegal Mexican Immigrants



Oscar Hidalgo/The New York Times

Estrellita Montiel with children from Asociación Tepeyac's day camp in Queens. Ms. Montiel, 22, said helping friends her age who came here illegally was important to her.

By DAVID GONZALEZ
Published: July 16, 2007

Who knew a civics lesson awaited every time Daisy and Moises Mendoza looked around their neighborhood in East Harlem? Their parents came to New York from Mexico and raised them the hard way, earning pennies at a time handing out fliers on street corners and selling shaved ice snacks in parks. Other teenagers gave up on school to deliver food or bake pizzas. Their neighbors often slipped into the dreary low-profile routine of the illegal immigrant, sweating in gardens or construction sites and not complaining.



"Supposedly, they can't be heard," Daisy said.

That is where the civics lesson kicked in. Lucky enough to be born in New York, Daisy and Moises are citizens, for whom voting and civic participation are a birthright and duty. They grew up as pint-size bilingual guides helping their parents understand what was happening at school meetings and visits to the doctor's office. They are active in a youth group at Esperanza del Barrio, a local advocacy

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Oscar Hidalgo/The New York Times

Joel Magallan, a founder of Asociación Tepeyac, has redoubled his efforts to make the children of Mexican immigrants politically aware and active.

group that started out helping street vendors. And while they have to wait to cast their first ballots — Daisy is 17 and Moises 15 — they already feel a special responsibility to help their neighbors.

“We have more rights and they don’t,” Daisy said. “We’re legal and they’re not.”

Her brother, a spiky-haired laid-back sort, finished her thought.

“They need somebody to have a voice for them,” Moises said. “That’s our job to do.”

With Washington having failed to pass an [immigration](#) overhaul, advocates are increasingly turning to immigrants’ children as allies in their political efforts. Many young people raised in this country know their way around a system that sometimes baffles their parents. Those who are citizens can speak out for those who have yet to get their papers. And they can vote.

[Robert C. Smith](#), a professor of public affairs at [Baruch College](#) who has extensively studied New York’s Mexican population, estimated that the city’s half-million Mexicans could have as many as 150,000 children born in the United States. Another big chunk of children came to New York in the early 1990s, when they were reunited with parents who benefited from a 1986 amnesty law that made them legal residents, allowed them to bring their children here and put them on the path to citizenship. And many more are on the way right here, thanks to a rising birthrate.

“We’re beginning to see people coming of voting age,” Dr. Smith said. “Already Mexicans have surpassed Dominicans in terms of birth. For the next 20 years, Mexicans have the tremendous potential to become a political force.”

The image of the Mexican community for years was one of an illegal and politically apathetic group. But in recent years there have been signs that the younger generation is willing to speak out, starting with issues that most directly affect it, especially education.

In 2002, immigrants successfully pushed for the City University system to preserve in-state tuition rates for students here illegally. Currently, they are seeking to keep alive the Dream Act, federal legislation that proposes to offer tuition help and a path to citizenship to immigrant high school graduates.

Marisol Ramos was born in New York 23 years ago to parents who were here illegally at the time. Her mother worked as a seamstress, but lost her job after production shifted to Mexico. Her father has worked for 30 years as a cook at a restaurant on City Island. They benefited from the 1986 amnesty. When they finally became citizens a few years ago, Ms. Ramos tutored them in American history.

“I was the first in my family to go to college,” she said. “I became politically aware and I tried to pass it along to my family members.”

She is now trying to help other immigrant children go to college, working with a coalition that is seeking passage of the Dream Act. Next month, she said, the group plans to start a voter registration drive focusing on the children of immigrants. It is a first step toward nudging them into civic engagement, she said, rather than being complacent as citizens.

“There is ambivalence,” said Ms. Ramos, who is applying to law school. “So many second-generation youth can be allies to the undocumented but are not. And they are



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not voting, so their voice is nonexistent, when it should be there.”

Advocates at groups working with the city’s Mexican immigrants said politicians had become more responsive to their concerns. Some said they were ignored or even rebuffed in earlier attempts to meet with officeholders.

“The undocumented are phantoms who are not here legally, so they do not exist,” said Dr. Gabriel Rincón, a dentist in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, and founder of the advocacy group Mixteca Organization. “Politicians did not see any benefit because these people do not vote. So we need to get people registered or else the politicians will never listen.”

Joel Magallan spent much of last year reminding local politicians that the children of the immigrants who come to him for help are all potential voters. Mr. Magallan is the executive director of Asociación Tepeyac de New York, an education and advocacy group he founded 10 years ago. When he started the group, his focus was on religious and cultural events that eased the isolation of recent immigrants. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he scrambled to help the hundreds of laborers affected by the disaster. Now, without an immigration overhaul, he has redoubled his efforts among the young.

“I had been thinking about this for a long time,” he said. “We were just waiting for the time when their children could be able to vote. And we have a lot of children.”

He admitted there are challenges. Many young adults are focused on work, rather than community. And others come from homes where parents made them suspicious of politicians, thanks to the corruption that marked Mexican politics. Mr. Magallan focused his efforts on the children of his group’s earliest members, figuring they knew the issues and were willing to help. He hopes they will reach out to friends and encourage them to register to vote.

“The fight for immigration reform in 2009 starts now,” Mr. Magallan said. “We have to register all the children of immigrants who are 17 now so they can vote in the next election. These are the people who can then lobby our legislators in 2009.”

Estrellita Montiel’s uncle was among the founders of Tepeyac, so volunteering there was a family tradition. Her parents, who worked cleaning hotels and offices, came to New York illegally three decades ago and took advantage of the 1986 amnesty. She was born here 22 years ago and now attends [St. John’s University](#). This summer she has been working with several dozen schoolchildren at the group’s day camp in Queens.

“Their parents don’t know the language, so by working here we’re helping those who came here like my parents,” she said Wednesday as she took the group out to a playground.

Just as important to her is finding her own political voice to help young adults — including some of her friends — who are about to get college degrees, even though they have yet to become legal residents.

“They’ll have a diploma, but they won’t be able to work,” she said. “They came here with their parents, but they have been here so long, what are they going to do? They can’t go back to Mexico.”

Juan Carlos Aguirre, 27, has also been involved with Tepeyac since he was a teenager. He spent much of his early life raised by relatives in Mexico and joined his mother in New York 17 years ago. After a stint in the United States Navy, he became a citizen in 2004. Now he works at Tepeyac’s English program and is studying communications at St. John’s University.

Mr. Aguirre feels he “belongs to this country” and says he may one day get involved in politics. He is worried about teenagers like his brother, who dropped out of school to go to work and help pay the rent.

“A lot of them have not been as lucky as I was,” he said. “Those of us who can do something, especially for the undocumented, we should do it.”

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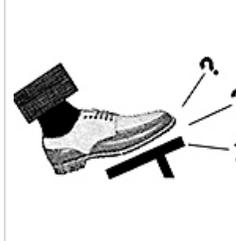
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