

TUESDAY, JUNE 12, 2007

Puebla Yorkinos

Quickly and dramatically, the city has taken on the flavors of Mexico amid a historic migrant surge

Part Two tomorrow: A look at 'El Barrio'

This story was reported by Rolando Pujol and Mariene Peraita and was written by Pujol

When Geraldo Sanchez left Mexico 12 years ago, he said farewell to his parents and siblings — and his graphic-designer aspirations — to begin an arduous life in the United States, all to keep his struggling relatives afloat back home.

Beat up during a stint in Texas, he soon found himself in New York, walking from LaGuardia Airport until he found a room to stay in the city.

Today, the 29-year-old lives with many of his countrymen in the Sunsets Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he works at a music shop. But his bones bear the scars of his dangerous resume — a knee and arm broken doing construction work.

"When one doesn't have papers, it is very difficult," Sanchez said. "We take jobs other people won't dare take."

Peek into any bustling restaurant kitchen or scan any of the city's construction sites and you will find Mexican immigrants. Hundreds of thousands have navigated a treacherous path to the city in the past 15 years, reshaping neighborhoods and changing the economics of industries.

Their numbers in the city soared from around 62,000 in 1990 to more than 400,000 by many estimates, with economic and agricultural crises in Mexico spurring the exodus. So great has the growth been that the Mexican consul general's office in Manhattan, where maddening jams outside its doors are not uncommon, is looking to establish an annex in Queens.

WILLING TO WORK

The community is now New York's third largest immigrant group after Dominicans and Chinese. "Hard work is probably



A child enjoys some corn and a man sports his Mexican pride in Sunsets Park.



The colors of the Mexican flag are found all over El Barrio.

the overarching characteristic," said cultural anthropologist Alyshia Galvez.

The Mexican influx has revitalized neighborhoods such as El Barrio in Harlem, where the Mexican presence is vivid even as the one-time Puerto Rican stronghold remains that community's symbolic heart.

Nilda Perez, a Puerto Rican, is married to a Mexican and has Mexican colleagues at 116 Flowers Shop in El Barrio. She feels a great kinship with Mexicans, and the well-trod immigrant footsteps they are following.

"They came to do what they really wanted to do. It was to work hard, to get money to send to their families," said Perez, who remembers when the shop's block between Second and Third avenues was barren — until the Mexican influx began. "Little by little, you would see taquerias, floristerias, restaurants... they brought their culture and food."

A GROWING INFLUENCE

Indeed, the Mexican presence in New York before 1990 was far from palpable. New York was hardly renowned for its authentic Mexican cuisine and Cinco de Mayo was no household word.

"You'd see a Mexican and you'd think they were your brother," said Guadalupe Aguirre, 50, speaking of the old El Barrio. Her shop, Little Mexico Meat Grocery on Third Avenue, began as a Dominican bodega before its Mexican metamorphosis.

Those changes began to happen quickly in the mid-1990s, Galvez

said, prompted by forces such as instability at home and economic changes resulting from the 1994 NAFTA free trade agreement. "What we saw was people being displaced from the countryside without having anywhere else to go but the United States," she said.

A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

The road to America, often facilitated by "coyotes" who ferry immigrants across the border in exchange for deep debts, is notoriously dangerous while the challenges of setting up a new life in New York can be overwhelming.

Some Mexicans who have settled in the city don't even speak Spanish, but rather indigenous languages, making acclimation even more difficult.

The soaring cost of housing also puts undocumented immigrants in a delicate position. Juan Haro, leader of Movement for Justice in El Barrio, said that since December 2004, his group has been working with hundreds of Mexican tenants. "Landlords have been threatening them by calling immigration, attempting to illegally evict them, offering money," Haro said.

The breathtaking birth rate among Mexican women could alone ensure the population's continued expansion, even if immigration were to ebb, said Laird Bergad of the CUNY Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies.

Adding to the population growth could be a new wave of immigration prompted by the lifting of protections on Mexico's corn industry set for next year. "We're going to see a massive exodus of people from the countryside who can no longer grow corn," Galvez said.

Ultimately, observers see the community on steady path toward findings its voice, much as previous groups such as Dominicans, who now enjoy considerable political clout in the city.

Minerva Flores 44, a home health attendant, came to the U.S. 22 years ago. She still misses her life in the Puebla state of Mexico. "I miss those mornings waking up to the singing of the roosters," Flores said. "Here in the mornings, you have to get up because you have to go to work and worry about not being late."

Dreams deferred for many kids?

A largely hidden problem is poised to come into greater view soon: Undocumented students, many of who came here as young children in the 1990s, who are now questioning whether they can move on to college and beyond.

Their parents are gearing up for the heartbreak of long-held dreams unrealized.

"Right now we're just beginning to see in New York children who have been here since they were infants, who came as undocumented immigrants but have been here essentially their entire lives, graduate from high school" and they can't take out college loans, said cultural anthropologist Alyshia Galvez.

That's a concern shared by the Mexico Consul General Ramon Xitlatl-Ramirez: "Why don't the immigration reforms incorporate channels of legalization for those young boys and girls" upon completion of studies?

(Rolando Pujol)



An El Barrio sign promotes a big show for this Sunday.

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Mexicans make their place in NYC

This story was reported by **Rolando Pujol and Marlene Peralta** and was written by **Pujol**
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June 12, 2007

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The community is now New York's third largest immigrant group after Dominicans and Chinese.

"Hard work is probably the overarching characteristic," said cultural anthropologist Alyshia Galvez, who added that Mexicans are focused on self-improvement even at great personal cost.

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Those changes began to happen quickly in the mid-1990s, Galvez said, spurred by forces such as instability at home and economic changes resulting from the 1994 NAFTA free trade agreement. "What we saw was people being displaced from the countryside without having anywhere else to go but the United States," she said.

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Adding to the population growth could be a new wave of immigration prompted by the lifting of protections on Mexico's corn industry set for next year.

"We're going to see a massive influx of cheap U.S. corn into Mexico ... we're going to see a massive exodus of people from the countryside who can no longer grown corn," Galvez said.

Ultimately, observers see the community on a steady path toward finding its voice, much as previous groups, such as Dominicans, who now enjoy considerable political clout in the city.

"We have advanced in the sense that you can see small stores owned by Mexicans in the tri-state area. This is thanks to the Puerto Rican community -- they opened the door, the Dominican community as well. Many businesses owned by Puerto Rican and Dominicans were sold to Mexicans," said Manuel Guerrero of the Comité Cinco de Mayo.

Minerva Flores 44, who came to the U.S. 22 years ago, remembers waiting at her coyote's house until her boyfriend in San Diego could send for her. Soon after, she found out her boyfriend was married. Now with an 11-year-old daughter, Flores' goal is for her child to be a professional.

But the home attendant can't help but think of the life she left behind in Puebla.

"I missed those mornings waking up to the singing of the roosters, very nostalgic," Flores said. "Here in the mornings you have to get up because you have to go to work and worry about not being late."

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Photos by amNY photo editor Lane Johnson; dancer photo, Willie Davis/Veras

A 'constant fear' down in the subway

By Amie Correal
Special to amNewYork

When the NYPD began random bag searches in the subway following the July 2005 terror bombing of London's Metro, recent Mexican arrivals in New York shied away from taking trains.

Many lived in "constant fear" that they would be stopped in the subway and asked for their papers, said Ambrosio Sosa, 40, who came to the city from Mexico 20 years ago. He described seeing new immigrants run out of the train stations when they saw a checkpoint.

That fear still exists almost two years later.

Celso, a 27-year-old deli worker from southern Mexico who did not want to give his full name because of his immigration status, said he had heard stories of people being deported without even being able to retrieve their belongings. Standing on 110th Street in East Harlem with a group of workers, also from southern Mexico, he said he would not go to a station with a checkpoint. The others agreed.

Some in the growing Mexican community feel they are targeted because of their dark complexion.

"It's like a magnet," says Omar Guzman, 29, who lives in Astoria. "Police see the darker skin and they come over." Guzman, who came to New York from Mexico City seven years ago, has never been stopped but says it's because he is pale and "blends in."

The police department maintains these fears are not grounded in reality and it denies Mexicans are targeted.

"Absolutely not," said Capt. Patrick Kerins of the NYPD's transit bureau. "It's random and not focused on any one group. We don't stick our noses in it. We

have nothing to do with immigration officers."

Edward Juarez, president of the International Immigrants Foundation, said it was important for the Mexican community to know this.

"The Constitution guarantees everyone in America the right to freedom and mobility," Juarez said. "They should not be afraid of the authorities."

"If people are running out of stations, or avoiding checkpoints, we have to prevent this from happening," he said.

Young people sample the cuisine in Sunset Park.



Mole Poblano is among the highlights at Mexican restaurant standby El Parador in Murray Hill.



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Go online to see more photos, videos and an audio slideshow of El Barrio.

Mexicans in NYC: By the numbers

There are more than 250,000 Mexicans in the city, according to 2005 statistics from the city Department of City Planning. (Estimates exceed 400,000.)

More than 150,000 are foreign-born.

More than 30 percent entered U.S. after 2000.

More than 65 percent speak a language other than English at home and are not English proficient.

More than 35 percent live below the poverty line.

(Source: City Department of Planning)

The Ballet Folklorico Mexicano de Nueva York performs at a Cinco de Mayo event at CUNY.

