Immigrants change the face of Delaware

Hispanics say they feel more accepted as numbers have grown

By SUMMER HARLOW
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When the Cabrera family moved to Delaware 15 years ago, they were the only Hispanics on their block.

If they wanted green bananas like they ate in their homeland the Dominican Republic, they made a special trip to one of Wilmington's few Hispanic grocers.

And they could forget about attending a non-Catholic worship service in Spanish.

With the wide availability of jobs in the poultry and construction industries, though, more and more Hispanics began calling Delaware home. In the past five years, as grocers, salons and restaurants catering to Hispanic customers sprang up from Wilmington to Georgetown, the Cabreras began noting a shift in Delaware's ethnic makeup -- a shift the U.S. Census Bureau confirms.

Hispanics make up 5.9 percent of Delaware's population -- roughly 50,000 residents -- according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey Hispanic report. The report, based on 2004 data, shows a 23 percent increase since 2000. The Census Bureau also reported Delaware's Asian population increased from about 2 percent to 2.8 percent between 2000 and 2004. And the state's black population climbed, albeit slightly, from 19.23 percent to 19.8 percent, during that same period.

Structural changes

Increased diversity changes the state's structure, said Ed Ratledge, director of the Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research at the University of Delaware.

"It changes the impact on the public educational system, the needs of employers and the kinds of jobs that are needed," he said. "The governments that provide public services will have to take account of these differences in the population, especially because the language problem creates more difficulty."

But the changing landscape has also created opportunities for people like Joon Yoo.

Yoo, a Korean immigrant who owns Young's Oriental Grocery in Elsmere, moved to Delaware in 1988.

"For Korean people to stay in Delaware, they have to find a job at another Asian business, or they have to run their own business," Yoo said.

He expects to see more Asians settle in Delaware because of opportunities to work as scientists, doctors and lawyers.

"At the professional level there are a lot of jobs available for Asians," Yoo said. "They're just not necessarily available for first-generation immigrants."

But more than any other immigrant population, Hispanics have changed the face of Delaware.

"There are bodegas on every corner, and Hispanic products in every supermarket," said Jose Hector Cabrera of Bear. "The Hispanic community has advanced, and grown into a great community."
More accepted

Delaware's Hispanic population has grown steadily since the early 1990s, Ratledge said.

"The larger these small groups become, the more accepted they are," he said. "This means we will see things like more Spanish language radio stations and newspapers and Hispanic food markets."

Years ago, said Joanna Vanessa Cabrera, 20, all Hispanics were Mexicans in the eyes of Americans.

"I think now, though, that's changing, because they know a lot more Hispanics, so they know the difference between Dominican Republic and Guatemala," she said. "They know there are different countries."

At age 27, Jose Hector Cabrera, a government official in the Dominican Republic, used his diplomatic passport to immigrate to the United States in 1979.

Cabrera is a legal permanent resident. His wife Joanna, 41, who immigrated when she was 18, is a naturalized U.S. citizen.

In New Jersey, Cabrera found a job washing dishes in a restaurant.

"I didn't know the language, so I functioned with hand signals," Cabrera said in Spanish. "But I had the desire to work, the necessity to work, so I did what I had to."

Cabrera moved to New York City, where he purchased a taxi and eventually the entire cab company, he said. In 1987, he said, he bought a gas station and car wash, and then in 1992, after moving his family to Delaware, he bought a used-car dealership.

North and South Auto Inc. in New Castle has become a family business for 54-year-old Cabrera, his wife and children.

"I come from a very humble, poor family," Cabrera said. "For me, work is my pride. Working satisfies me."

The Cabreras moved to Delaware because they didn't want their children to grow up in New York City. To Joanna Cabrera, Delaware seemed tranquil and safe, she said.

The Cabreras' oldest son, Marco, 21, is studying international business administration at Delaware Technical & Community College. Their daughter Joanna is studying child psychology at the University of Delaware. Hector, 15, and Simon, 14, both attend Red Lion Christian Academy.

The Cabreras speak Spanish at home in Bear -- the parents wanted their children to know both languages and appreciate their heritage. Plus, they said, they knew their children would learn English in school.

And while Jose Hector doesn't speak much English -- he's tried, but hasn't had the time to dedicate to English classes -- his wife and children speak it.

"Some people don't even know I'm Dominican, because I don't have an accent," Joanna Vanessa said.

About 39 percent of Hispanics reported speaking a language other than English at home, but still said they spoke English "very well," according to the census report. About 23 percent spoke only English at home.

The numbers for Asian families are similar, with 23.5 percent speaking only English at home and about 40 percent speaking a language other than English at home.

Teaching Korean

"At home we talk to them in Korean and they speak back in English," Yoo said. "I wish they could
speak both languages fluently, but it's not easy to do. I keep pushing them to talk more Korean, but they spend most of their time in school with other English-speaking children. Most immigrants work 12 hours a day, so it's hard to spend time with children at home."

Delaware's Asian population increased to about 22,000 in 2004.

Because the Asian population tends to be better educated -- about 85 percent are high school graduates and 48 percent have at least a bachelor's degree -- Asian immigrants tend to end up in Delaware for different reasons than Hispanics, Ratledge said.

"It's a fairly big increase that's not necessarily driven by jobs," he said. "It's a totally different dynamic because a lot of the Asian population comes here to go to college and graduate school and they are able to get appropriate visa status to stay here."

**A better life**

Yoo came to the United States from Korea with his parents and brother in 1974, when he was 13.

His parents decided to immigrate, he said, for the same reason so many others have left their home countries.

"They wanted me and my brother to get a better education, lead a better life," said Yoo, 45, who lives with his wife and three children in Pike Creek.

The growth among minority populations -- black, Hispanic and Asian -- is "only going to continue," Ratledge said.

"You'll see African-American, Hispanic and Asian populations increasing at least as fast as Caucasians, or faster."