Latinos have created new spaces.

The Leaders

Joaquín Alves

Alves was a native of Aguas Dulces, in the Mexican state of Veracruz. The youngest of ten children, Alves left home at age 14 to migrate internationally within Mexico working in agriculture. In the early 1980s, at age 16, Mr. Alves left Mexico for the United States; he joined a relative who was in process of settling there. In North Carolina, Mr. Alves worked in agriculture, food processing, and the service sector. In the mid-1980s, Mr. Alves legalized his immigration status through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). At a time of yet little Latino presence in the state, Mr. Alves joined other leaders to formally create a community organization to represent the interests of the Latino constituency. The organization grew and through it, Mr. Alves has achieved local, regional, and transnational representation as an advocate for the Latino community.

Wilson Castañeda

Mr. Castañeda is from Cuatro, Puerto Rico, a small community near the city of Ponce. He joined the army, travelled the world, and ended up stationed in eastern North Carolina, where he met his current wife. Together with other Latinos, he founded a grassroots organization to serve a growing Latino immigrant community. Mr. Castañeda describes the role of the organization as follows: 
“We find that there is a lack of information, that people need to know, and that is the reason why I got involved in this. I decided to build a center, we teach English in the Center, where community organizations and other organizations organize festivals, health fairs, and serve as a broker between the community and the system of services, particularly health clinics and schools. In that way we always play an important role facilitating the adaptation of Latinos in this “new destination”.

Juan Concejeros

Mr. Concejeros immigrated from Honduras into the town of Clinton in 1999. Raised in Honduras’ middle class, Mr. Concejeros graduated with a Doctor of Medicine degree before emigrating to the United States (first Florida and then North Carolina). Unable to practice medicine, Mr. Concejeros founded a small media-resource center that includes a radio station and a newspaper, both of which serve the local and regional Latino communities.

Gaudalupe Fernandez

Ms. Fernandez is a Mixtec woman from Mexican state of Oaxaca. As it is common among indigenous people from Oaxaca, together with her family, at age six she left the “rancho” where she was born and headed to Sinaloa, where the family worked in the fields. At age 19, Mrs. Fernandez moved to Baja California, where she met her current husband and gave birth to two of their three children, and continued to work as a migrant farmer. There, as well as in the fields in Sinaloa, Mrs. Fernandez witnessed abuse and injustice against farmworkers. “Every time I witnessed an act of injustice, I tried to do something about it.”

María González

Ms. González left her hometown near Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, in 2003 and settled in Sunnyville, North Carolina. As a woman with her father who owned land where he cultivated corn, beans, chili, tomatoes, “everything.” About her father, Ms. González said: “He was fair with his employees, never treated them badly. He taught us never to treat anyone unfairly that we are all equal. He taught us a lot.” After leaving Oaxaca, Ms. González joined the U.S. eastern migrant stream, picking oranges and grapefruit in Florida, onions in Georgia, and tobacco and sweet potato in North Carolina. She settled in Sunnyville to give her two children what she saw as necessary stability. Following the teachings of her father, Ms. González started in Sunnyville a community garden and an organization of women and families.

Susana Hidalgo

Ms. Hidalgo left her home in the Mexican state of Nayarit in the early 1990s and headed to California with her husband, where the family joined the western migrant stream. There, the husband was employed seasonally in agriculture and construction, traveling north and south between California and Oregon. In the mid 1990s, Ms. Hidalgo and her family left the West to settle in Stanfield, eastern North Carolina. With the husband still working in agriculture, but now as a crew supervisor and truck driver, Ms. Hidalgo provides informal support to the seasonal migrant farmworkers who are members of the husband’s crew. “I cook for them, they are tired after a day of work in the fields. When they are ill, I take them to the clinic, and I also give them medicines. Tobacco makes them ill, they develop headaches.” Ms. Hidalgo developed a reputation among farmworkers as a natural helper, compensating for the absence of resources in the fields, but also becoming a broker between the workers and service providers, particularly the health care system.

Pedro Montes

Mr. Montes left his rural community in Oaxaca, Honduras, to settle in the small town of Ruralville, eastern North Carolina. Born into a peasant family, Mr. Montes graduated with a sixth grade education. As a normal school in his hometown, where he taught as a rural area for ten years before making the decision to emigrate. In Ruralville, Mr. Montes opened a store (“tienda”) in which he sells products and services of critical importance to the growing local Latino community.

Mercedes Reyes

Ms. Reyes comes from a small town in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, in the outskirts of Mexico City. In the mid-1990s, she moved to Wilmington, Delaware. In 2005, she started a restaurant in eastern North Carolina. In Wilmington, Ms. Reyes spent her early childhood in a single room with a dirt floor with no water or electricity. Although both parents were semi-literate, they made considerable efforts to put the children through school. As such, Ms. Reyes graduated from high school and went on to college and to enroll to the university in Mexico City, although the need to work for her family compelled her to drop out of college. In the mid 1990s, Ms. Reyes left Mexico and headed to eastern North Carolina to join close relatives who were living there. After joining the eastern migrant stream for a while, Ms. Reyes married and settled in the rocky Mount part of North Carolina, a city of 60,000 people in an area dominated by agriculture and food-processing plants. She is employed by the school system as a transition facilitator (a form of health broker).

Juan and Magdalena Vega

Juan and Magdalena Vega came to the United States as a husband and wife, came to eastern North Carolina from Guanajuato, Mexico. They are part of a Mexican educated middle class. In Guanajuato, he graduated from a teachers college, and she with one in education. Not satisfied with the job opportunities available for them, they decided to emigrate to the United States. They settled in Goldsboro, a city of 40,000 people in an area with a growing population of Latino immigrants attracted by jobs in food-processing plants (mainly pork and chicken) and agriculture. “We have worked in everything, restaurants, construction, food packing, and step by step we built a vision of what we wanted for ourselves, to succeed.” The couple now owns a tissue in Goldsboro, providing a variety of goods and services to Latinos.

Conclusions

These stories illustrate the experience of Latino immigrants in North Carolina communities of relatively new immigrant presence. Paralleling the incorporation and settlement pattern of the state, these ten individuals arrived in rural or semi-urban communities that lacked the service infrastructure necessary to support the newcomers. These ten stories reflect the efforts made by Latino leaders to open spaces for social participation and cultural expression, bridge the gap between formal institutions and the communities, provide immigrants with basic services, and advocate for their rights. Although all of these individuals have excelled in building community from inside; leveraging a form of horizontal social capital, they have also extended building bridges to and within vertical social capital, thus facilitating the insertion and adaptation of immigrants into these receiving communities. These community leaders facilitate insertion by building a sense of cultural citizenship (following Flores and Bannamyr 1997).

As a final conclusion, the study is allowing us to see that the process of incorporation of these Latino newcomers is not only shaped by structural institutional and cultural forces. An emerging thesis is that there are key individual and collective leaders as well as a study, who “pave” the system, forcing the creation of spaces and in doing so, they counteract the negative forces that serve for barriers as incorporation. As such, they are much more than cultural brokers: they are agents of change and creators of new spaces.

References Cited


