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Living the American dream

Families follow two paths to assimilation

**By Chris Wadsworth**

**cwadsworth@news-press.com**

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Some nights, Cape Coral resident Bob Hildebrand and his wife sit down to a dinner of enchiladas. Other nights, it's spaghetti. Occasionally, they eat steak. In the background, a Beach Boys CD plays on the stereo. Afterward, Hildebrand watches sports on ESPN.

A few miles away, Lucy Qui-ones prepares a dinner of pork, rice and beans for her husband and 14-year-old twins. Salsa music adds energy to the meal. Later in the evening, she turns on Telemundo network for her "telenovelas," popular Spanish-language soap operas.

Bob Hildebrand is German-American.

Lucy Qui-ones is Colombian-American.

These immigrant families have followed different paths to the American dream. Over the generations, the Hildebrand family has largely given up its native language, culture and traditions. Then there are more recent immigrants, such as Qui-ones. She is trying to help her family retain her native language and culture, mixing it with the language and culture of their American home.

That difference is often the focus of debate on The News-Press editorial page, which publishes a letter or two every few weeks about the growing number of new immigrants to Southwest Florida.

Similar viewpoints are mirrored nationally by callers to talk shows, by pundits on cable programs, even by some scholars.

According to U.S. Census statistics from 2000, more than 31 million Americans were born elsewhere. Of those, more than half were born in Latin America, with European-born immigrants following closely behind.

Southwest Florida mirrors the national trend. In Lee County, more than 10 percent of the population was born outside the United States. More than half come from Latin America, with Europe, Canada and Asia making up most of the difference.

Of those residents, 56,000 speak a foreign language and nearly 25,000 of them speak little English.



• U.S. Census Bureau numbers indicate that Lee County is becoming more diverse as it grows. From left, Linda Souvannasinh, of Lehigh Acres, has family from Laos. Bob da Frota was born in Brazil. Pierrette Faustin was born in Haiti. Bob Hildebrand is a third-generation German-American. Lucy Qui-ones was born in Colombia. *STEPHEN HAYFORD/news-press.com*

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The impact of these new immigrants is evident everywhere. From LaBelle to Bonita Springs, small ethnic groceries and restaurants are opening. The labels on store products are printed in English, Spanish and other languages. Walk through a Wal-Mart and you're likely to hear a variety of languages spoken by fellow shoppers.

This week, the nation marks the most American of holidays, Thanksgiving, which was celebrated by some of the country's earliest immigrants. Since America's founding more than 200 years ago, generation after generation of newcomers have arrived on its shores. But the newest wave of immigrants have left some people hopeful and others worried about the way they're achieving the American dream. The question is simple: Will today's immigrants mix into the melting pot like immigrants past?

"This seems to be the million-dollar question," said Chuck Underwood, founder of The Generational Imperative Inc., a Cincinnati, Ohio, consulting firm. "Experts can't agree on the answer because it's still TBD — to be determined."

### THE MELTING POT

Jennifer Buffington's great-grandparents arrived from Poland in the early 1900s. Other than occasionally preparing some ethnic food, the south Fort Myers resident says she has lost touch with her heritage.

"I'm Polish, my husband is Norwegian, but we have our own American traditions we follow," said Buffington, 42.

Her experience is not much different than most of the descendants of the first immigrants who came to America and formed what history teachers call "the melting pot." Traditionally, those early immigrants settled into enclaves in big cities, eventually spreading out across the land. Along the way, nearly all lost their traditions, languages and sometimes the religions of their homeland.

"The immigrants only add some spice ... a little flavor to it, but the dominant culture, in the end, has the upper hand," said Manuel A. Vasquez, an associate professor of religion at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Hildebrand's ancestors came from the vast German Empire in the mid-1800s. They eventually bought a large farm in Pennsylvania.

Over the years, traditional German meals of pork and noodles gave way to American dishes. The music of Germany's heavy brass bands was replaced by 20th-century jazz.

"My grandfather wouldn't let my grandmother speak German," Hildebrand, 67, recalled. "He said 'No, we don't do that anymore. We're here, and we speak English.' "

Today, the family name is about the only thing Hildebrand's grandchildren have left of their heritage.

"They're so Americanized that they don't identify with anything," Hildebrand said. "It's all chicken wings and hot spicy food. They're not going to do German potato salad and cabbage or coleslaw."

### DIFFERENT PATHS

Years ago, cultural experts say, assimilation happened rapidly.

From the 1800s to the early 1900s, immigrants rarely returned to their homelands, because travel was expensive and time-consuming. Communication was limited to mail, with long-distance phone calls, fax machines and e-mail still years away.

"Most of these groups of immigrants found it difficult to hold onto their native culture,"

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Underwood said. "They were pretty much thoroughly cut off."

Tolerance — or lack of it — was also a factor.

In the 1800s, Irish immigrants looking for work were often greeted by signs in store windows reading "No Irish Need Apply." The term Dutchman, meaning a German immigrant, took on a derogatory connotation. Anti-immigrant political parties sprang up, expressing concern over how foreigners were changing American society.

At the time, few laws protected immigrants from discrimination. This led many parents to push their children away from their native cultures and languages in an effort to Americanize them and protect them from an often angry public.

"(These immigrants) made themselves anew," Vasquez said.

But 150 years later, that is clearly not the path Lucy Qui-ones is following. The 36-year-old real estate agent moved from Colombia to Brooklyn when she was a year old. Like other immigrants before her, she lived in a neighborhood filled with Hispanics and blacks from the Caribbean. Her family ate traditional meals of rice and plantains. Spanish was the common language among her neighbors and playmates.

"I had a very ethnic upbringing," she said.

Qui-ones and her Puerto Rican husband celebrate the fact that they are Hispanic and American. Her American-born son and daughter learned Spanish first, then English, and speak both fluently.

"I knew if they picked up (Spanish) first, they would have a better chance of maintaining it," Qui-ones said.

They have created a hybrid of American and Hispanic traditions. Her children listen to music in English and Spanish. They like rice and beans and pizza.

"We've been accepted enough that we can celebrate our culture and our roots ... yet live with the blessings of every American citizen," Qui-ones said.

#### CHANGING ATTITUDES

Linda Souvannasinh, of Lehigh Acres, was born in America to parents from Laos, who taught her to value her heritage. The 22-year-old celebrates Thanksgiving this month, Christmas next month and the Laos New Year in the spring.

"I speak Laotian fluently," she said.

Experts credit the civil rights movement for the shift in American attitude that made it easier for immigrants such as Souvannasinh's parents. "(It) opened possibilities for immigrants to come and say it's fine to maintain the culture," Vasquez said.

Then, bilingual education was introduced in public schools to help ease the transition for immigrant students and their families. In Lee County, school translators prepare materials to be sent home in Spanish and Haitian Creole, the two languages predominantly spoken by Southwest Florida's immigrant families.

"They have a right to know what's going on in their kids' lives, in their education," said Pierrette Faustin, the program director at the Haitian Center of Catholic Charities in Fort Myers.

Not everyone sees this change as good.

"They're cutting themselves off from the rest of the population," said Jules Cibelli, of Cape Coral and a retired New York City police officer. "You go to Miami and you can't even buy a sandwich because the people waiting on you don't even speak English."

Cibelli's grandparents came from Italy. But the 74-year-old rarely heard the Italian language spoken in his home.

"They wanted the kids to fit in with the culture that existed here in the United States," he said.

While Cibelli is sympathetic to the difficulties faced by new immigrants, he questions why they cling to their cultures.

"When they come here, the desire is to be American," Cibelli said.

While many immigrant groups hold on to their native traditions, Hispanics from many countries make up the largest group of immigrants in Southwest Florida. Experts say that's why Hispanics often are the focus of debate.

According to Underwood, cheap air travel and Internet communication have made it easier for immigrants to maintain their culture.

Cinthya Torres knows. "If you're calling Honduras, it's real easy," said Torres, 19, of Fort Myers, who came to Florida in 1993.

She calls Central America often. "You just have to dial some extra numbers," she said. But otherwise, "It's not a big deal."

Add to that the sheer numbers of Hispanics in America. The 2000 Census reported that more than 35 million Americans identified themselves as Hispanic.

"There are so many Hispanics in America now that they can easily find fellow Hispanics in their new towns and neighborhoods, speak their language to each other and share and reinforce their native culture and customs," Underwood said.

#### AMERICA DIVIDED?

Some scholars have taken a hard line on the subject.

Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington wrote in the journal *Foreign Policy* that, "Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves — from Los Angeles to Miami — and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril."

But Vasquez thinks today's concerns are no different from the concerns Americans expressed 200 years ago about German, Irish and other immigrants. He thinks the big picture is what counts.

"You have neighborhoods that are Italian or Yiddish, but that doesn't mean these communities didn't integrate," Vasquez said.

While assimilation into the American culture may have slowed, it's still happening, he said.

Lucy Qui-ones agreed. "I have relatives whose kids don't speak any Spanish," she said. "By the time my kids have kids, I don't think they'll (speak anything) but English."

Indeed, a study conducted by the University of Florida and the University of Miami found that immigrants to the Sunshine State are generally learning the language and assimilating at the same pace as immigrants early in the 20th century.

"After a time, they speak better English. After a time, they become citizens. After a time, they move out to the suburbs and disperse," said Thomas Boswell, a University of Miami professor.

Meanwhile, some Americans are trying to reconnect with their roots — for themselves and their children.

"My youngest daughter didn't want to learn the (Portuguese) language," said Bob da Frota, a south Fort Myers financial adviser originally from Brazil. "Now she buys education materials, she listens to CDs ... and she's learning."

Buffington and her husband are making similar efforts for the two children they adopted from overseas.

"We sort of have a Polish, Norwegian, Korean, Guatamalan Christmas," Buffington said. "They need to embrace who they are and where they come from. Without knowing it and living it, they're never going to appreciate (their heritage)."

ASSIMILATION: When immigrants give up the majority of their original culture, traditions and language in favor of those of their new community. This is the method that most German, Irish, Italian and other earlier immigrant families followed.

"The immigrants only add some spice ... a little flavor to it, but the dominant culture, in the end, has the upper hand."

• [Manuel A. Vasquez,](#)

[an associate professor of religion at the University of Florida in Gainesville](#)

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