

From the Andes to Milford: The latest immigrant wave

Ecuadorean immigrant Wilson Valdez stands in his store, Unievious, in Milford. In the past three years, an estimated 2,500 immigrants from the South American country have come to Milford looking for work and a quiet place to live.

By Liz Mineo, DAILY NEWS STAFF

GHS

Sat Jun 30, 2007, 11:55 PM EDT

Milford, Mass. -

Editor's note: In the past three years, Milford has experienced a boom in immigration from Ecuador. Today's story explores why some of the thousands came to this area. Next Sunday we look at family life of these immigrants and how it has been portrayed by some Milford officials.

Until three years ago, Segundo Calhuana made a meager living growing potatoes, corn and wheat and tending cattle in a small village in the Ecuadorian Andes.

These days, he earns close to \$800 a week repairing roofs of houses around New England. Although sometimes work is scarce, Calhuana manages to send \$200 or more per month to help his wife and three children back home.

"There aren't jobs down there," said Calhuana in Spanish at an Ecuadorian convenience store on Main Street. "Life is hard here with my family away, but it was harder down there without work or money to feed them."

Calhuana, 36, is part of the newest wave of immigrants in Milford. It's a wave that follows in the steps of immigrants from Portugal, Italy and Brazil who, like the Ecuadorians now, came here seeking a better life.

But the Ecuadorians' rapid growth over the past three years, from an estimated 300 to more than 2,500, has some in town worried. Officials said Ecuadorians are straining town

resources, raising health and safety concerns, and having trouble assimilating. Many are here illegally.

Ecuadorians are feeling the heat. They said they're being targeted by police, who often send them to court for driving without a license, and by the town, which has passed regulations to crack down on overcrowding.

The tension between local residents and newcomers is high, but it is part of the immigrant experience, said Peggy Levitt, a sociologist at Wellesley College who has written "God Needs No Passport," a book on how immigrants are changing the nation's religious landscape.

"When Irish and Italians first came to Boston they were greeted the same way," said Levitt. "Every wave of newcomers is greeted by some people with open arms and excitement about the energy, entrepreneurship and innovativeness immigrants bring and by others who see them as a threat to the status quo. But as history shows, waves upon waves of immigrants become part of this country and assimilate."

Still, some in Milford worry that Ecuadorians may face more challenges in adapting than Brazilians because most hail from the mountains of Ecuador, speak Quechua, a native dialect, besides Spanish, and seem too attached to their culture by keeping to themselves and having little interaction outside their group.

"The fact that they come from the Andean region doesn't make them any more foreign than immigrants who hail from the rural parts of Brazil or the Dominican Republic," said Levitt. "It's a new group to learn from, watch and help in the process of assimilation."

From the Andes to Milford

Most Milford Ecuadorians come from the mountains, with large numbers hailing from the province of Canar and smaller groups from the Chimborazo and Azuay provinces, all located in the central part of the nation of 13 million.

In those provinces, marked by the presence of the Andes, it is common for people to speak Quechua as their first language. About a third of Ecuador's population is indigenous, and many speak both Quechua and Spanish.

In those regions, poverty is endemic. Basic services such as clean water, education and family planning are hard to find. More than 70 percent of the population of Canar lives in rural areas, where people make a living from farming or working tracts of lands that belong to others. Many Canar natives migrate to other provinces within Ecuador looking for jobs. Growing numbers are immigrating to the United States.

One is Cecilio Castro, 24, who came here to join his brother, uncles and cousins seven years ago, shortly after the Ecuadorian economy collapsed amid dropping oil prices, bad weather and other outside factors.

"I was working in Canar, but we didn't earn much," said Castro, who has been living in Milford since 2004. "After the crisis, the money was nothing, and my relatives in Newark told me to come here."

Like Castro, many Ecuadorians in Milford are in their second migration, from Newark, N.J., where an estimated 5,000 live. Until recently, Wilson Valdez was one of them. Valdez, who came to the United States in 1994, owned three convenience stores in Newark and sold them all to come to Milford.

In 2004, he began seeing Ecuadorian customers from Milford in his Newark stores, and decided to venture into Milford. First, he would come every Sunday with his van full of products to sell at the local fields after the volleyball games. In 2005, he opened the first store in town.

"I came here following my clients," Valdez said.

The same thing happened with Victor Villasis, who opened a store on Main Street a year and a half ago.

Many followed the money to Milford.

Construction jobs were getting scarce in New Jersey, he said. When word spread that there were jobs with better pay in Milford, many moved. A roofer can earn as much as \$25 an hour.

Most Ecuadorians like Milford. Compared to sprawling, crime-ridden Newark, Milford, with 26,000 people and its quaint downtown, is paradise.

"I like everything about Milford," said Sandra Ortega, 20, as she breastfed her 3-month-old baby girl in a convenience store where she works. "It's so nice and peaceful."

Visible presence

Ecuadorians have become the town's third-largest immigrant group after the Portuguese and Brazilians, something Census 2000 didn't detect. According to Census 2000, there were 15 Ecuadorians in Milford.

Groups of Ecuadorian men play volleyball in public parks; young women with long, black hair push carriages with small children around downtown; and a handful of small businesses bearing Spanish names have sprouted on Main Street next to Brazilian-owned stores.

At Variedades Ecuatorianas, owned by Villasis and his wife Cristina, customers find products from home such as mote, a type of dried corn; mellocos, a kind of tuber similar to potato; and a popular Ecuadorian soda called Tropical.

At Saldana Cargo Express, people can wire money to Ecuador, and buy phone cards, CDs and DVDs featuring Ecuadorian singers of cumbia or music typical from the highlands of Ecuador.

Until its recent closing, a restaurant called Anoranzas Latinas offered dishes such as "guatita," tripe with rice; "salchipapas," fried hot dog and French fries, and "caldo de bagre," catfish soup.

At Unienvios, owned by Wilson Valdez, customers call home in phone booths, buy work gloves, volleyballs and other products. From the store, they mail packages with photographs, videos and clothes back home.

On a recent morning, Maria Morocho came to Valdez's shop pushing a stroller with her 19-month-old son Charles to make a call home. Morocho, 34, who came to Milford two years ago after four years living in Newark, said she misses her three children she left behind. They are 15, 12, and 8 years old, and are being cared for by her mother-in-law.

"They know their brother from pictures we send," she said. "There isn't a way for them to come or for us to bring them here."

Like many Ecuadorians, Morocho is here illegally. She boarded a boat in an Ecuadorian port that took her, her husband's brother and dozens of people up the coast to Guatemala, where they continued the journey by cars and vans to the U.S.-Mexican border. The journey took her 23 days since she left her village in the Andes of Ecuador, and cost her \$7,500, she said.

In Newark, Morocho worked in a factory, but in Milford she takes care of her son and does housework. Some Ecuadorian women clean houses, work as housekeepers in hotels or janitors in fast-food restaurants. Most stay home because they lack papers or a second car.

Men work in construction, and often as sub-contractors, which allows them to get around the lack of papers. Most work as roofers, a type of job in which they have excelled, so much so that they're in high demand by American contractors, said Marisol Carper, an owner of a Brazilian convenience store who often helps Ecuadorian customers with translation. Half of Carper's customers are Ecuadorian.

"They're good workers," she said. "Americans who hire them like them a lot. They do a good job and are very hardworking people."

Most are also devout Catholics and attend Mass in Spanish at St. Mary's Church. Others attend services at Family Worship Center, a 400-member Protestant church that caters to Hispanics. The center has seen the number of its Ecuadorian members jump from seven to 30 in only two months, said member Rosy Nova.

When they relax, they throw parties where they eat dishes of their homeland, listen to music and talk about the old country. Their favorite pastime is volleyball.

On a recent afternoon, a group of young men traveling in a car slowed down when one of the passengers recognized a friend who was walking downtown and yelled at him saying, "Hey, let's go play volleyball."

"They work all the time," said Valdez at his multi-service store. "They don't go out. To have fun, they play volleyball."

Valdez said his people have strong family values, are hardworking and honest. They came here looking for opportunities they couldn't find back home.

Valdez, 47, who grew up in Quito, Ecuador's capital, said the situation in those small towns is desperate.

"Many of them worked in the fields," he said. "They come from provinces with large indigenous communities, which have been long forgotten by the government."

Like many immigrants, Ecuadorians come here with plans of going back home in a few more years. With money they earn here, many plan to build homes in their villages and save enough money to open businesses to secure a life down there.

That's the dream of Calhuana, the roofer who wired \$200 to his wife on a recent morning, but he's not sure when he can achieve his dream. After he was charged with driving without a Massachusetts driver's license, things are more difficult. He doesn't drive and depends on friends to drive him to work. He lives with two other men in a small apartment to split up the \$900 rent and save money.

After the immigration reform bill died again on Thursday in the U.S. Senate, Calhuana said he has no hope his life will improve.

"The only thing that keeps me going is that some day I'll be with my family," he said. "God willing, we'll be together soon."

Staff writer Liz Mineo can be reached at 508-626-3825 or lmineo@cnc.com.