Community Development and Civic Participation among Pittsburgh’s Hispanic Population

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It is very rare for non-Hispanic residents of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to brush shoulders with the city’s Hispanic residents. They don’t hear Spanish on the streets; most of them don’t know where the three Hispanic grocery stores in the city are located. They likely have never set foot inside St. Regis, the Catholic Church that offers Spanish-language mass on Sundays and is a fixture in the Latino community. At best, they know a Hispanic faculty member at one of the universities in the area or another high-ranking Latino professional.

This is the story of Pittsburgh’s “invisible” Latino population, a growing number of working-class, Spanish-speaking immigrants who remain largely unseen by the city’s traditionally non-Hispanic population. They go to work each day in the backs of restaurants, stand at the city’s few unofficial hiring sites, hoping for construction or landscaping work, or clean residential homes. While traditionally a hub for Hispanic university professors, doctors, and other professionals, Pittsburgh is among the growing number of smaller cities in regions throughout the U.S. to which working-class Latinos are flocking, even though they have not traditionally been considered Hispanic. Pittsburgh is a city of nearly 300,000 in Allegheny County, a region in the southwestern corner of Pennsylvania, whose Hispanic population has increased by 26.2% since the year 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau). Despite this marked increase, the Hispanic community here struggles to find its own members in this geographically disparate region, and works even harder to pull together enough funding to provide services the community desperately needs in a region that doesn’t have as many collective resources as major cities with large Hispanic centers, such as New York, Los Angeles, or Miami.

1 For the purposes of this paper, the term “Hispanic” is used interchangeably with “Latino” and “Spanish-speaking.”
This paper will discuss the formation of Pittsburgh’s Hispanic community as a case study of the development of civic involvement among Latino populations in midsize cities, as well as regional and national urban population trends that may indicate the potential growth of the Hispanic populations in Pittsburgh and nationwide in the future. It will also assess the extent to which the city has made progress in identifying and resolving the unique issues that Latinos in Pittsburgh face, and what still must be done to further integrate the city’s newest members into the already-existing social infrastructure of Pittsburgh. Lastly, it seeks to address the question, “How does a city with limited resources that has not traditionally had a large Hispanic population provide for the needs of its Hispanic residents?

Latinos are hardly strangers to the United States. Latino communities have existed long before many U.S. territories gained their statehood. The first Latino movement in the United States was that of the Mexican-American community that formed in 1848, following the Mexican-American War.\(^2\) Fifty years later, when Puerto Rico became a territory of the United States, the Puerto Rican community formed, and its ties to the U.S. were further strengthened when it became a commonwealth in 1952 (Marquez and Jennings 541). Since the 1960s, the Hispanic population of the United States has been growing steadily, mainly because of immigration from Mexico and Cuba and the relocation of residents from Puerto Rico.

\(^2\) The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) was fought between the United States and Mexico over the portion of Mexican territory that composes present day Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and the southern portion of California, which Mexico had inherited from Spain. The United States won, gaining the tract of land that composed nearly 50 percent of Mexico’s territory at that time (PBS.com).
By the 1990s, legal Latino immigrants made up 45 percent of the 10 million foreign immigrants who entered the United States (Sierra et. al. 536).

As of 2000, there were 35.5 million U.S. residents who identified as Hispanic, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (Guzmán 1). The Hispanic population of the United States is characterized by its rapid growth (four times faster than the rate of overall population growth between 1990 and 1997) and relative youthfulness (35% of Latinos are under age 18, compared to 25% of U.S. residents overall) (Affigne 524, Guzmán 7). Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population increased by 58% and accounted for a staggering 45 percent of the 10 million immigrants who entered the United States during this decade (Guzmán 2, Sierra et. al. 536).

However, what’s important is not just that the population is growing, but how it’s growing. A survey of 2000 U.S. Census data by Edward L. Glaeser and Jesse M. Shapiro of the Brooking Institution’s Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy reveals that cities in the western and southern United States grew the fastest, while northeastern cities actually declined in population (Glaeser and Shapiro 8). Hispanic demographics reflect this trend; according to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, 43.3% of Hispanics lived in the west and 32.8% lived in the south (Guzmán 2). Glaeser and Shapiro also indicate that older cities built for pedestrians, most commonly found in the northeast, were on the decline, and that sprawling cities more dependent on cars, found out west, were on the rise (Glaeser and Shapiro 11). Lastly, the analysis revealed that cities built on manufacturing industries grew more slowly than those dependent on service industries (Glaeser and Shapiro 10).

3 The U.S. Census Bureau defines “Hispanic” as any person who identifies as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. Hispanic participants had the option of selecting “Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano,” “Puerto Rican,” “Cuban,” or “other Spanish/Hispanic Latino” (Guzmán 1).
All of these factors indicate that Pittsburgh’s growth is stagnating. While Glaeser and Shapiro cite the mean city growth nationally at 11.2% for the period 1990-2000, Pittsburgh’s growth actually declined by 9.6% (Glaeser and Shapiro 7). An analysis of 2000 U.S. Census data by William H. Frey of the Brookings Institution sorts the 100 largest metropolitan areas into four categories: “white-black fast-growing,” “white-black slow-growing,” “mostly white, fast-growing,” and “mostly white, slow-growing.” Frey classifies Pittsburgh as a “mostly white, slow-growing city,” along with others such as Boston, Des Moines, Minneapolis, and Buffalo (Frey 2). Pittsburgh, a city built around the steel industry at the turn of the 20th century, also falls into the category of an older, industrial city, according to an analysis by Patrick A. Simmons and Robert E. Lang of the Fannie Mae Foundation (Simmons and Lang 5).

However, Glaeser and Shapiro also note something else—that cities with more foreign-born residents experienced more growth than cities with fewer such residents. Pittsburgh’s growth reflects this trend. While Allegheny County’s Hispanic population is comparatively small—17,182 people, only 1.4% of the county’s 1.22 million residents—the county experienced a 50% increase in its Hispanic population between 2000 and 2007, even as the overall population decreased (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette). Between 2000 and 2007, the city of Pittsburgh’s population decreased from 334,563 to 296,324, an 11.4% decrease, while the Hispanic population increased from 4,425 to 5,584, a 26.2% increase (U.S. Census Bureau).

Still, an increase in immigration rates is not unusual for Pittsburgh. The city has long been home to a large population of foreign immigrants, beginning with the Eastern European and Italian immigrants who arrived in Pittsburgh around 1900,
with the promise of work in the city’s steel mills. Since then, the immigrant population has remained equally influential but grown more diverse—in 1900, 98% of foreign immigrants were of European origin; in 1990, only 65% were (Bello 1).

Locals often refer to Pittsburgh as a “city of neighborhoods” because of the geographic dispersal of its residents. Built around the intersection of three rivers—the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio—led the city’s residential areas to develop haphazardly, often designed to connect residents with the nearest river but not necessarily to adjacent neighborhoods, leading to the development of the notorious phrase “You can’t get there from here.” Neighborhoods are still separated along ethnic, racial, and economic lines with little interaction between groups. Ties to certain areas of the city extend back over 100 years. At the turn of the century, Polish immigrants claimed the area now referred to as Polish Hill; the Italians claimed nearby Bloomfield; the Jews, Squirrel Hill, due to deed restrictions. Shadyside is known as an upper-class, mostly white neighborhood; the Hill District and East Liberty are known as traditionally black. In most urban areas, neighborhoods are passed from one ethnic group to the other, as members of one group move out and members of another move in. One example of this in New York is the Washington Heights neighborhood, at the northernmost tip of Manhattan, first inhabited by the Dutch, followed by Irish and Jewish immigrants in the early 1900s and later dominated by Cubans in the 1960s. A large Dominican population arrived in the 1980s, followed by Mexican and Ecuadorian immigrants in the 1990s and 2000s. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, approximately 74% of the area’s population identifies as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau). In contrast, in Pittsburgh, groups have tended to stay put, leaving little in the way of a cohesive area for Latinos to claim as their own. As a result, members of the Latino population are scattered in different
'pockets' around the city, such as the neighborhoods of South Oakland and Beechview.

In addition, many of the city’s Latinos, particularly single men, are choosing to settle outside the city, particularly in the nearby suburb of Cranberry and the more urban area of Aliquippa, which carries most of the same demographic characteristics of Pittsburgh but lies just outside city limits. In 2000, an estimated 60% of Allegheny County’s Latino population resided in the suburban regions just outside Pittsburgh, according to U.S. Census data (Fabregas 1). And while Allegheny County accounts for 61% of the Latinos residing in a seven-county radius, the Hispanic populations of the remaining six—Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, Fayette, Washington, and Westmoreland counties—have grown faster between 2000 and 2005 than that of Allegheny. While Allegheny County’s Latino population increased by 11% over this period, that of the surrounding counties increased by 16% or more, the fastest growth occurring in Butler County, at 44%, according to U.S. Census data from 2000 and estimates for the period 2000-2005 (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette). Last year, representatives in the portion of eastern Pennsylvania along state Highway 222, encompassing Lancaster, Allentown, Bethlehem, and Reading, reported a Hispanic population of 550,000 that is expected to top 1 million within five years (Green 1).

Both Frey and Glaeser and Shapiro note that this type of urban sprawl is reflective of a national shift of domestic and international migration to suburban areas, and that such areas have begun to take on some of the racial and ethnic heterogeneity customarily found in central city areas. “The old ‘city-suburb’ typology also fails to recognize heterogeneous growth patterns within the suburbs. Many inner and even middle suburbs are experiencing demographic dynamics similar to those of
the cities,” Frey explains (Frey 2). Frey’s analysis of central city and suburb demographics reports that between 2000 and 2005, Pittsburgh’s central city population fell by 5.1%, while the city’s suburban population declined by only 1.2% (Ibid). Glaeser and Shapiro’s analysis reveals that sprawling cities largely dependent on automobile transportation grew more quickly than traditional cities built for mass transit and pedestrians, which the authors believe is reflective of an increase in suburban residents who own cars and commute to work (Glaeser and Shapiro 11).

In light of Pittsburgh’s declining growth and comparatively small Hispanic population, it is unclear why foreign-born Latinos would choose this city as their new semi-permanent home. The job market is fluctuating at best. “[Pittsburgh] still hasn’t recovered, job-wise, from the collapse of the steel industry,” wrote Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter Bill Toland in 2007 (Toland 2). Now, some of the jobs that disappeared with the decline of the steel trade are beginning to be replaced by jobs in the medical field, not only within the vast University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) but in several private companies based in Pittsburgh that manufacture medical supplies. The city has also benefited from the presence of several local universities, which have spurred increases in technology research, as well as entrepreneurship in computer software and biotechnology (Streitfeld 1). However, few Hispanic immigrants, save for those who are professionals recruited by universities or Pittsburgh companies for their expertise in such fields, have the training or certifications necessary to gain access to these types of jobs. The best unskilled labor jobs are found in construction and landscaping, which are both heavily seasonal industries. Toland believes that immigrants may be waiting for jobs that will be available once more and more baby boomers retire, but as the average
age of retirement has been increasing in light of the current economic crisis, no one’s
sure when exactly that will be (Toland 3).

There is one more aspect of Pittsburgh’s immigrant population that makes it
unique—it includes an exceptionally high proportion of foreign-born professionals
for a city its size, most of whom come for work in technology or higher education.
However, this dynamic has created a pronounced rift in the Hispanic community
between the professional elite and the working-class, undereducated majority.
Oftentimes, upper-class professionals don’t want to be associated with the working-
class laborers, whom they regard as embodying the traditional stereotypes of Latinos
in the United States that they have worked so hard to shed. “Class dissention among
Latinos has often centered on the reluctance of middle and upper middle class
Latinos to direct resources and influence to aid the Latino poor, and their willingness
to follow class interests that run counter to the needs of the impoverished” (Schmidt
et. al. 565).

But there are other differences between the two groups. Members of the
former group usually enter into a ready-made social network made up of their
colleagues and have a better grasp of English-language skills, which makes it easier
for them to assimilate once they arrive in Pittsburgh. In contrast, members of the
latter group arrive with few, if any, job prospects and limited English. In addition, it
is often difficult for immigrants, particularly if they are illegal, to bring the whole
family over at once. As a result, many members of this group are single men who
have left their wives and children in their country of origin. These three factors, in
combination, mean that working-class immigrants are often socially isolated and
largely unaware of the local resources that are available to help them. This means
that members of local civic organizations are usually professionals who have very
little contact with the population that such organizations were in large part formed to serve.

However, an exceptional Argentinean businesswoman named Liliana Petruy believes all that can change. Her solution was the Tango Café, a small café in the middle-class neighborhood of Squirrel Hill owned and operated by Petruy herself and several other employees. The Tango Café has become an informal center of cultural exchange, where clients can listen to live music, attend Spanish classes, view the work of local and international Latino artists, and chat with each other over empanadas, alfajores, café con leche, and other traditional Argentinean cuisine.

When I met with Petruy at noon on a weekday, the café was empty. This is a rare occurrence, as the place fills up later in the day when the classes begin, which is most days of the week, and in the evenings, when movies let out at the Cinemagic Theater next door. Standing behind the counter, Petruy, a slight woman with green eyes and gray hair pulled back into a ponytail, was dwarfed by the wooden boards hanging side by side from the ceiling into which the restaurant’s menu offerings are carefully etched.

Petruy arrived in the United States in February 2002 from Mendoza, the wine capital of Argentina. She arrived to join her sister, who had lived in Pittsburgh for 40 years. Now, she also has two daughters and a grandson here, while her son and two grandsons remain back in Argentina, where Petruy visits them every year, or year and a half.

By December 2002, Petruy had opened the Tango Café. “I have very much enjoyed the part of the senses, the cultural part, and I’ve always thought about a thematic café, not only to have the Argentinean food, the Argentinean drinks, but
also to have other activities to diffuse the culture,” she said. “Diversity is very important. It is always good for many reasons—for economic growth, cultural growth.”

Petruy insisted that there is a considerable amount of interaction between the different social and ethnic groups that patronize the café. Since it offers language and culture classes in both Spanish and English, many Americans, particularly university students, come to the Tango Café to learn Spanish, while many Latinos come to learn English. When asked about the relationship between the white and Latino communities in Pittsburgh, she answered firmly:

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4 This interview was conducted in Spanish. All quotes were translated from the original Spanish.
“I can’t talk about everyone because I don’t know them. The one thing I can say is that, from what I see here in the café, there is interaction. I have students in the Spanish class who come to learn Spanish to be able to give service to the Latino community. There are people who, because they have lived in Latin American countries, are active in this movement … there are mountains of identities … there are as many Latinos as there are Americans working to achieve the same goals.”

She also said that she regularly sees interaction between Hispanic professionals and those of the working class. Moreover, she said her interactions in her personal life were very similar—a mix of Latinos and Americans, many of whom are among those who gather regularly at the café.

Petruy currently lives in the neighborhood of Edgewood, a municipality located just outside city limits that characterized as upper-middle class, with a median household income of about $63,000. Petruy described the area as mostly white with few Latinos. When we asked her if she would like to see a Latino barrio in Pittsburgh, she said ‘no,’ because “integration does not happen with only one barrio.” She would, however, be interested in being part of a Latino commercial district, or a centralized location for the city’s businesses, cultural centers, and other services.

However, Petruy’s business, despite its success as a cultural center in Pittsburgh, is in trouble. Individuals in the city plan to demolish the building in which the Tango Café is located and build a hotel in its place. While the building’s developers offered her a small space in the new structure once it is complete, Petruy said that it will not be able to accommodate the same kind of cultural activities for which the café is known. Petruy has fought back by collecting close to 2,000
signatures on a petition opposing the new construction, which has drawn the attention of the local media to the issue. But the bottom line is that the Tango Café is lacking the necessary funds and available space to relocate. If Petruy loses the café, she will lose the work visa that allowed her to enter the United States, and she will be deported back to Argentina.

The situation in which Petruy finds herself is not uncommon among immigrants, even those who entered the country legally. Once most immigrants arrive in Pittsburgh, Petruy said, they face a similarly hostile environment. When asked what she wanted for the future of the Latino community in Pittsburgh, she answered: “I want all Latinos to feel more welcome, because Pittsburgh has been, and still is, very hostile to groups that want to come here.” As for why immigrants choose Pittsburgh as their new home, she said the reasons were varied. “Not that many come because we say there are a lot of jobs—there aren’t. The numbers have increased in the last few years, but Pittsburgh has not been a place of choice for Latinos, except for doctors and professors.”

In addition, Petruy is not involved politically in the city because as a foreigner she does not have the right to vote. Although she said that local political figures have expressed interest in helping the café survive, with so many immigrants who are non-U.S. citizens, it is very difficult for Latinos to become a powerful voting block and elect Hispanic politicians in the city to represent them. Because of the lengthy process for becoming an American citizen, Petruy said she is not interested in gaining American citizenship and plans to return to Argentina when her temporary visa expires.
Petruy’s disinterest in local politics due to her own citizenship status as well
as a perceived lack of interest in the Hispanic community by local politicians is
representative of Latino political trends over the last 100 years. Historically, Latinos
did not have the base of support necessary to exert political influence over the
community in which they lived. As a result, they turned to civic involvement as a
way to gain support for their cause. “Social movement organizations were often the
only outlets for political representation and self-defense in a society where Latinos
were outnumbered and barred from effective participation in the institutions of
government,” wrote Benjamin Marquez and James Jennings (Marquez and Jennings
541).

The first civic organizations that existed for Latinos in the U.S. were the
mutualistas, which began to appear in the late 19th century. Mutualistas were
mutual aid societies where Latinos could attend cultural activities, find a job, receive
health care or legal protection, or further their education, all under one roof. The
institutions served as a symbol of unity and a means by which Latinos could
socialize with one another, and promote the spirit Mexican nationalism, but also
were grounded in their organizers’ resistance to cultural assimilation and American
political institutions. Most existed in the southwestern United States, the territories
which formerly belonged to Mexico, as well as areas of Florida, such as Tampa,
which had large Cuban populations (Ibid). One such organization was the League of
United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), formed in 1929 as an activist group that
worked to bring social and economic justice to Latin Americans and still exists today
(LULAC).

Once Mexicans and Mexican-Americans joined the labor force, they grew
distrustful of the leaders of the farming and ranching industries, who wanted to
profit off having an available unorganized source of labor and treated the workers as enemies, a similar situation faced by African-American workers due to segregation. In response, Mexican immigrants formed labor unions of their own to fight discrimination in the workplace and break down the barriers that the ardent nationalism of both groups had built up. By the 1930s, the progress gained by the *mutualistas* and labor unions, coupled with the increasing predominance of U.S.-born Mexican Americans, gave rise to the formation of Mexican-American civil rights organizations. Such groups were predicated established on the basis of “the belief that the American free enterprise system was normatively acceptable and that Anglos would eventually accept Mexican Americans as their social equals” (Marquez and Jennings 542). While many of the movement’s new leaders lacked the strong sense of Mexican nationalism so central to the mission of the earlier leaders, they believed that “racial solidarity was considered necessary only to eliminate the evils of discrimination” (Ibid). However, the shift also meant that the Mexican-American movement was being led by a more educated populace who were more integrated into the cultural and economic fabric of the United States; as a result, it was this group that started many of the Mexican-American civil rights organizations of the time, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens, Coordinating Council for Latin American Youth, and the Mexican American Movement, all of which continued to gain momentum after World War II (Ibid).

By the 1960s, the spirit of nationalism had reemerged in the newfound Chicano Movement. Taking a cue from the Black Power movement, the Chicano Movement advocated for cultural and racial separatism as a way to achieve equality. Two of the most powerful organizations of this type were the *Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres* (the Federal Alliance of Free Towns), led by Reies Lopez Tijerina,
which fought to reclaim the New Mexican land grants in Tierra Amarrilla that were taken from Mexican settlers after the Mexican-American War in 1848, and the United Farm Workers Union, led by César Chavez, which sought to gain labor rights for Mexican and Mexican-American migrant farmworkers in California through strikes, boycotts, and other forms of non-violent protest to draw attention to the difficulties the workers faced. Today, organizations such as the Mothers of East Los Angeles, the Mexican American Women’s National Association, the Industrial Areas Foundation, and the Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice, operate with similar agendas to advance economic interests and opportunities for their members (Marquez and Jennings 543).

While the Puerto Rican community in the United States has been organizing urban social movements, such as the Young Lords Movement and the Community Control Movement, for as long as the Mexican community has, the Puerto Rican struggle has evolved differently than that of the Mexican American community because Puerto Ricans are United States citizens and have been since 1917, when Congress imposed that citizenship after it was formally rejected by the Puerto Rican House of Delegates (Affigne 524). Conversely, Puerto Ricans statistically have the lowest rates of political participation in the public arena. Wrote Marquez and Jennings:

“Mobilizing to transform urban structures is especially important for Puerto Ricans because members of the group tend to be among the poorest and least educated individuals in the United States. They are also among the least likely to vote ... Puerto Rican social and political activism provides an illustration of how a group that has had relatively low participation in the electoral arena for many decades has, in other, nonvoting ways, done much to challenge dominant
urban and economic interests” (Marquez and Jennings 543-4).

The Community Control movement was started by Puerto Rican parents to spur education reform via increased community involvement in education policy; the Young Lords Movement was a Puerto Rican nationalist movement that fought against urban renewal in cities that was forcing Puerto Ricans out of their neighborhoods, and leading to violent altercations with police; and the Puerto Rican student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. (Marquez and Jennings 544).

However, in terms of politics, a review of political tactics from the turn of the 20th century reveals that Hispanic immigrants may have wielded more political power and thus been viewed as more politically valuable than they are today. Early in the 20th century, the U.S. government was quick to register foreign immigrants as new citizens and offer them jobs to integrate them into the U.S. economy. Once the new citizens had a stake in the future of the United States, political candidates would frequently compete for their votes in the next election (Bello 2). This changed quickly with the onset of the Great Depression, during which half a million Mexican immigrants were deported; therefore, while the proportion of U.S.-born Mexican Americans increased, this statistic is deceiving, because the actual number of foreign-born Mexican Americans was drastically reduced. Today, the process for getting a visa with which to enter the United States is so lengthy and difficult to negotiate that Latinos are forced to enter the country illegally, fearing that la migra, the migration police, will find them and deport them back to their countries of origin. Moreover, for those that do receive a temporary visa, it is even more difficult to gain American citizenship, the point at which one has the right to vote in general elections. Because there are so many Latinos who are ineligible to vote, along with
those who are eligible but choose not to vote, it is difficult to wield any political power as a demographic group. As a result, politicians are less likely to cater to them or represent their interests, and Latino politicians often cannot find a broad enough base of support to win an election. Therefore, in many cases, Latinos risk being left out of the political realm entirely unless they take action to become involved.

While Pittsburgh hasn’t been as vocal in its pleas for civic or political reform, the number of resources throughout the city catering to the growing Latino population is on the rise. The goal of these organizations is to create a support system for Latinos by enabling them to connect with one another, which, due to the disparate nature of the Latino community throughout the city, may not have happened without the aid of a central organization, that has to some degree disseminated Latin American culture to non-Latinos and increased the visibility of the Latino population in Pittsburgh. For Latino professionals, at the center of this effort are five organizations: the Hispanic Center, which specializes in helping Latinos find jobs in the community and supporting Latino-owned businesses; the Latin American Cultural Union, which is devoted to promoting cultural diversity and preserving the ethnic heritage of its members through the arts; the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, an offshoot on the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs based in Harrisburg; the Latino Round Table, an internet forum run by a coalition of prominent individuals in the Latino community from socio-economic, religious, political, business, educational organizations devoted to increasing Latino visibility in southwestern Pennsylvania; and St. Regis Church, a Catholic Church which offers Spanish-language mass and serves as a social and cultural center for both members and non-members.
One of the city’s most well known Hispanic residents, and a man partially responsible for the success of such organizations, is Brent Rondon. Rondon arrived in Pittsburgh from Peru in 1993 to pursue a master’s degree in public and international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, around the same time as many Latino professionals, particularly those who arrived to teach in the universities. Since then, Rondon has worn many hats in the Latino community, the most visible being the president of LACU. His involvement in the organization has shaped his life in more ways than one—in addition to connecting him with fellow Latinos in the city, it was also the means through which he met his wife, who came to Pittsburgh from Brazil. The couple has two children. Now, Rondon is the director of the Small Business Development Center at Duquesne University, a private Catholic university located in downtown Pittsburgh. However, the work Rondon does at the Center has no relation to Latino small businesses in Pittsburgh, as the title might suggest; instead, he connects businesses in Pittsburgh with potential vendors in Latin America. When we spoke last February, Rondon was planning a trip to Mexico with several business owners, making stops in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey to find markets for their products.

Rondon’s office at Duquesne is covered with posters of Peru and other picturesque sites throughout Central and South America, demonstrating his allegiance to his roots in Peru and his passion for Latin American culture. In Hispanic circles, Rondon’s reputation precedes him—he is known as an active contributor to the community with the kind of genial personality that allows him to easily bring people together and forge friendships with all. Until the Latino population explosion in the last decade, others claim that Rondon knew every Latino
in Pittsburgh, and Rondon himself admitted to still maintaining a database of names and contact information for every Latino he’s ever met. However, throughout our interview, Rondon made it clear that the popularity has not gone to his head. Only after he discussed his family and job did he mention that many people associate him with the Latino community because of his tenure as the president of LACU.

LACU experienced a tremendous period of growth in the time that Rondon served as its president, mostly due to his own networking efforts. “When I found a person with a Hispanic last name, I contacted them and invited them to LACU, and LACU grew and grew,” he said.⁵

However, LACU’s structure and mission is becoming increasingly outdated as the composition of the Latino population continues to evolve. LACU, formed in 1986, was founded when the majority of the Hispanics in Pittsburgh were of the professional class. The group created a structure that enabled the organization to run effectively and efficiently, and devoted itself to more high-brow activities such as promoting ethnic arts and culture and advocating for better representation in state and federal government. With the influx of working-class Latino immigrants, LACU must find a new way to relate to a group of people who are very different from those who founded LACU almost a quarter century ago:

“When the Latino community was, more than anything, students and professionals, everyone communicated and everything functioned. When immigrants with different needs arrived, we found sometimes that our level of communication did not match with theirs. For example, many did not have access to the internet. There were social problems. They called LACU for these problems. It

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⁵ This interview was conducted in Spanish. All quotes were translated from the original Spanish.
might be ‘my sister needs to go to the hospital, it’s an emergency.’ What do we do? We are there to help, no? They say that someone is in jail and needs money ... the group was not designed for any of this.”

The other issue holding LACU back is, of course, money. All of the positions in LACU are filled by volunteers to keep costs down, but it is difficult for board members to balance their LACU responsibilities with full-time jobs. With few full- or part-time paid positions, it is difficult for members to devote enough time to the organization to move it forward. Unfortunately, in this sense, LACU is not unique. “The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is voluntary. The Hispanic Center is voluntary. Everything is voluntary,” Rondon explained emphatically. Moreover, with 501(c)3 non-profit status, he said, “on paper, it looks excellent. Everything functions. When we go to the foundations, they say we need volunteers, not money, because the organization is functioning.”

Like the Latino community itself, there is a sharp division between resources for upper-class professionals and the working-class workers, for the simple reason that they have very different needs. For the city’s most recent immigrants, life revolves around the church, specifically St. Regis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh’s Oakland neighborhood, which holds one of the city’s only Spanish-language Catholic masses. It is through St. Regis that Latinos new to the area can meet one another and have their individual needs met. However, there are numerous religious leaders of other faiths who are pro-immigration and involved in the Latino community, particularly those from the Baptist and Fundamentalist traditions, as well as Muslims and Jews, who are working together to create the city’s new Latino Family Support Center. In addition, the Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network (PIIN), is an
alliance of 25 member congregations of all faiths, including Unitarian Universalist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Quaker, and Islamic. In addition, several leaders of faith sit on the organization’s board of directors. One of the organization’s five main issues for which it advocates is civil rights for immigrants (Pittsburgh Interfaith Action Network).

It is Sister Janice Vanderneck who works to meet the needs of the city’s newest, poorest Latinos who remain largely invisible to the rest of the population, washing dishes in the backs of restaurants, mowing lawns, working on construction sites. On the way to Vanderneck’s office at the Allegheny County Community Justice Project, located in the Allegheny Building in downtown Pittsburgh, on a Wednesday afternoon, I got lost and arrived fifteen minutes late. Although she later told me that she wasn’t feeling well and had been “chugging Pepto-Bismol all day,” Vanderneck met us in the lobby of the building with a smile. “I thought you wouldn’t be coming!” she said. A security guard reminded her that she had to call ahead if she was planning to have guests. “Oh, right,” she said. “That’s my fault, that’s my fault.” She guided me into the elevator that would take us to the seventeenth floor of the building. We stepped off into a newly carpeted, scarcely furnished maze of offices. “This is our brand new office, and we’re really excited about it,” she said as she led us down the hall to an available room.

Sister Janice Vanderneck knows St. Regis well. Since she began work with the Latino community in 2002, Vanderneck, who speaks Spanish with a fluidity usually reserved for native speakers, has helped connect hundreds of Latino families to the resources they need to start their lives in Pittsburgh. Above all, she is an optimist, proudest when discussing new initiatives aimed at the Latino population, while being a staunch supporter of immigration reform and the Dream Act,
legislation that if passed could allow teenagers brought illegally to the United States by their parents when they were children a chance to enroll, legally, at an American college or university. Although she is not Latino, Vanderneck said that the Latino community has welcomed her with “total acceptance.” “I am often told that I’m an honorary Latino, which is a tremendous honor to me,” she said. “Some of the people call me madre and I think that’s so beautiful.”

Vanderneck is a native of Indiana, PA, a coal-mining town with 15,000 residents about 60 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. She began to study Spanish in seventh grade. “I just loved the Latin culture, I loved studying Spanish, [and] I found that I had a facility for it,” she recalled. She majored in teaching Spanish for grades K-12, after which she taught the language for several years in elementary and secondary school.

But it was a four-year position as a missionary in the Amazon region of Brazil that changed the course of her career. “It was absolutely a fantastic experience,” she said. “A whole different world. A whole different reality.” Vanderneck explained that the Catholic Church plays a major role in Latin America, often intersecting with cultural and political life. One example is the popular Our Lady of Guadalupe, who serves as both a spiritual and national symbol. “The church that I got to experience when I was in Latin America was so inspiring,” Vanderneck said. “The documents that were written by the bishops of Brazil when I worked there were absolutely inspiring. They were really on the theme of ‘the church having a preferential option for the poor.’ And in Latin America, it’s even more urgent, the lack of justice. The misery of the poor, it’s just so awful, so disturbing, to see the poverty.”

She took her experiences back to Pittsburgh, at which point the chaplain of the then-budding Latino community asked her to consider a position in the Latino
faith community, which she accepted. “To me, it was wonderful. I was able to be a missionary but right here in my own home environment,” she said. “Since [2002], I’ve become very, very integrated in, connected with, and advocating for the low-income immigrant Latino population in Pittsburgh.”

She then spent five more years in the office for Latino social services funded by the Diocese of Pittsburgh, a position that ended in December 2008. “That was a very important place for people to orient themselves, for new immigrant people to orient themselves in the city,” she said.

It’s a population that, according to Vanderneck, has certain characteristics across the board, regardless of its seemingly haphazard geographic dispersion. Even that, she said, is somewhat systematic. “It mostly has to do with bus transportation and affordable housing,” she said. She named Oakland, the neighborhood in which St. Regis lies, as well as two of the city’s universities, the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon. Another popular neighborhood is Beechview, which lies outside of city limits but is located on the route of the small commuter rail that transports residents into downtown Pittsburgh. “That trolley has a lot to do with it, that train that is so convenient, and the affordable housing, and the fact that there are [ethnic food] stores, tiendas, in both Oakland and Beechview.” She slated a handful of other neighborhoods in which there are concentrations of Latinos—Carrick, Mount Oliver, Monroeville, Robinson, Coroapolis, and the North Side—but was also quick to point out that there is a growing population of Latino residents in neighboring counties, namely Washington, Beaver, and Butler Counties, where she said men have been able to find what she called “outdoor jobs”—seasonal landscaping and construction work, while women find work in housecleaning. Other jobs can mainly be found in the backs of restaurants, which do not require that the employee be able to speak
English. “There are very few restaurants where if you don’t go into the back of those restaurants, the food prep and the cleaning of the dishes is not being done by Latinos or other immigrants,” she said.

Vanderneck said that “a definite segment” of the Latinos with whom she works are undocumented immigrants who have come to Pittsburgh because they felt that the traditional major Latino areas—New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and several cities in Texas—were experiencing a “saturation of jobs,” meaning that they no longer had enough jobs to offer unskilled workers. In addition, those Latinos with children felt that Pittsburgh is generally safer, with less gang violence, than other loosely comparable cities, such as Philadelphia. She believes that the recent increase in the Latino population in Pittsburgh is largely due to the migration of the working class. “The influx is coming from the worker classes, and that is driven by NAFTA. When the free trade agreements were created, that increased the poverty in South America, and pushed in the immigration north,” she said. In addition, she said that the majority of such immigrants arrived with a “certain set of issues that are very specific and required a lot of study on our part in the first couple of years to learn how to navigate the systems.” Vanderneck said that such study is necessary because the children of many foreign-born Latinos were born in the United States and are American citizens, and therefore eligible for certain forms of assistance from the federal government and other agencies. Once they figured that out, she said, they set to work training employees in professions with which Latinos come into contact most frequently—hospital finance personnel, hospital social workers, Department of Welfare caseworkers—on the benefits for which members of this group are and are not eligible for, in the hopes of eliminating conflict between English-speaking workers and Spanish-speaking patients, while also working to make sure that
Latinos will not get screwed by a system that puts non-English speakers at a disadvantage simply by the complicated nature and vast amounts of paperwork involved in completing these types of transactions. “Pittsburgh is not prepared, even now as we speak, to deal with this population in terms of providing services in Spanish,” Vanderneck said. “There are just not persons available to speak Spanish to the consumer who speaks only Spanish.”

Vanderneck is adamant about the need for English monolingual speakers—who make up 71.13 percent of the population nationwide, according to the U.S. Census Bureau—to at best, respect, at worst, tolerate, Spanish-speaking residents, especially if they themselves have never mastered a second language:

“One thing I want to make clear, because I think people need to understand this: when you are a first-generation immigrant and your schooling in your home country was limited at best, it is very difficult for you to learn another language. You’re an adult already. Especially, we have some people who do not read or write Spanish. Their native language is not Spanish, it’s indigenous. Although I’m not saying we don’t have some that actually learned to speak Spanish well, and are learning to speak English well, without knowing how to read or write in those languages. But that’s one thing that persons who have a bias or a prejudice will say, “Well, let them learn English.” For the first-generation uneducated or poorly educated, that is really hard. So I think Pittsburgh needs to be able to provide for this population.”

She is also a very vocal proponent of immigration reform, submitting to frequent interviews like ours for local media publications and speaking on panels at nationally televised events opposite local and state representatives who are firmly and sometimes aggressively anti-immigration. Often, Vanderneck must remind the local community that the need for Latino immigration reform is a very real and
growing problem in Pittsburgh. “I look for every opportunity I can to speak about the importance of comprehensive immigration reform, that families are really suffering. It’s not like this is just something that’s happening on the news in New York City or something,” she said.

One of her staunchest opponents is Pennsylvania state legislator Darryl Metcalf (R-Cranberry). Metcalf is known among immigration advocates as possibly the most outspoken anti-immigration government representative proposing to cut off job opportunities and public assistance to illegal immigrants and punish American citizens who have offered jobs or housing to illegal immigrants. By cutting off their resources, Metcalf and his supporters reasoned, such immigrants would have no choice but to go back where they came from.

However, Vanderneck is also quick to point out that Pittsburgh is anything but an anomaly:

“We experience here what they’re experiencing in the rest of the nation, and our government [is not] making some kind of decision about immigration reform. We have families that are being broken up by deportation. It’s dreadful, it’s dreadful. Usually it’s the father and main provider who is picked up, and then he’s deported, and mom does not want to go back to Mexico or Guatemala or Honduras or wherever because she has no hope for her children there, no hope for their healthcare, no hope for their education, and it’s a very, very difficult thing for her, because she’s now looking at herself having to go out and get work, and try to find [someone] who’s going to care for the kids in her absence.”

That includes racial profiling by police, in which police officers pull over cars being driven by Latinos for a minor offense, then, once the car is stopped, ask the driver for his immigration papers, which is an illegal but common set of procedures
throughout the U.S. According to Vanderneck, this practice does more harm than good:

“It does not promote the security of a community to profile Latinos and then call immigration when you stop them, because that creates terror in the community and you have less willingness to cooperate. People won’t even report their victimization at the hands of criminals because they’re scared to death. It’s taking down the moral fabric of our country, to allow things like racial profiling on the part of our police, stopping a guy just because he’s Mexican, stopping him and then saying ‘Your tail light is out.’ Or, ‘You didn’t use a turn signal.’ It’s obviously a pretext, and then right away they ask for their documents. Don’t they have other things to do? The purpose of the policing to begin with was to get the criminal element. That was the purpose of it, from the directives of homeland security. Well, they’re not getting criminals. They’re getting fathers of families who are simply trying to work. If you were a father and you had your kids growing up in the environment of Latin America, you would do everything you could too to provide for the future.”

Recently, Vanderneck said, she and other advocates for immigrants, such as University of Pittsburgh professor David Harris, have been working with the Chief of Police of the City of Pittsburgh and had success with the implementation of anti-racial profiling policies. “He’s been wonderfully cooperative and collaborative,” she said.

The eternal optimist, Vanderneck excitedly told us about her next venture, a position as the site director of Pittsburgh’s soon-to-open Latino Family Support Center in Squirrel Hill, which will provide resources for families with children under 5—a sizable portion of the community. “This promises to be just a wonderful and long time overdue service to the needs of the immigrant families with very young children, of which we have many,” she said. The Center will fill a need that has
increased dramatically over the past few years as the Latino population has increased and social services have been scaled back, or, in cases such as the program at St. Hyacinth, another church in the city, that drew a large Latino population, eliminated altogether.

The main existing initiative that Vanderneck believes is one of the most successful ventures in the city in terms of its effect on working-class Latinos, is the annual Servicio a la Comunidad fair, often referred to as La Feria. Now in its sixth year, La Feria is a gathering of about 70 vendors, from health care providers and insurance agents to realtors and bankers, all with information for Latinos on crucial services they may need. Over 1000 people usually attend. She also cited the Catholic Church, which offers activities for the immigrant community that go beyond just religious education. One upcoming event, aimed at Latino youth, will feature Latino professionals in all different fields to get Latino teenagers thinking about what type of career they might want to work toward down the road. In addition, the Civil Rights for Immigrants Task Force, on which Vanderneck herself sits, and the new advisory council for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, a coalition of representatives from different immigration populations throughout the city who meet every three months with the Allegheny County Director of Human Services, both provide additional support to the Latino community. Vanderneck is also part of a team that is developing a Promotores network, through which families can receive health education and get connected with doctors and clinics in the area. Lastly, she is involved in the fledgling Motivadora program, a women’s mentorship initiative. Thus far, Vanderneck has gathered fifteen Motivadoras, bilingual women who have agreed to act as mentors to other Latina women who may be experiencing hardship and isolation. “A perfect candidate is one of these women who is left
because of deportation, and she feels like her life is over,” Vanderneck said. “You know, ‘What am I going to do?’ And [the Motivadoras] can say, ‘these are your options, even though it feels like the world is falling down, you still have options, these are your choices, these are the steps.’ Coach them along to independence.”

While considerable progress has been made in the seven years since Vanderneck began work with the community, she believes there is still more work to be done. Her next goal is to establish a Latino youth center. “One of our hopes [is] to get some type of a place where the Latino youth can go,” she said. “Our goal would be to encourage their pride in their culture, and they wouldn’t be ashamed that they speak Spanish, and that they would look for some way that they could have some hope, rather than going into the backs of restaurants and working.”

But for Latino youth to be successful as adults, at least in the United States, they must complete their education, which means graduating high school and, in some cases, continuing on to college. And getting through school can be a deceptively large hurdle for children who must learn in a language different from the one they speak at home, or whose parents do not have the resources to help them learn and don’t know enough English to ask for help from those who do.

Meanwhile, administrators of Pittsburgh’s already suffering public school district are struggling to accommodate increasing numbers of students who are non-native English speakers. The district employs 14 teachers in its English as a Second Language (ESL) program for grades K-12. That number may change as more incoming students require ESL instruction. In the 2004-05 school year, the district enrolled 273 students in its ESL program. That number jumped to 485 in the 2007-08 school year, and experts predict that enrollment will top 1,085 by 2010. The largest
single language group represented in the classroom is Spanish speakers. In 2007-08, 115 ESL students were native Spanish speakers—almost a quarter of all students enrolled in the ESL program (Smydo 1).

There are ESL programs established in only a handful of the district’s schools. Administrators refer to these schools as “regional ESL centers.” Up until this year, the only high school ESL program was offered at Schenley High School in Oakland. After the school was shut down, the district established two ESL regional programs, one at Taylor Allderdice High School in Squirrel Hill and the other at Brashear High School in Beechview, which ESL program director Timothy McKay told the school board would accommodate the increasing number, diversity, and geographic dispersion of ESL students (Pittsburgh Public Schools). Programs for students in grades K-8 are available at seven schools throughout the district. The ESL curriculum is a combination of instruction in English for a portion of the school day with other ESL students and general education classes in math, science, social studies, and other subjects in which ESL students learn alongside non-ESL students. Schools determine an incoming student’s language ability via the Home Language Survey. If a student or his parents report that the main language spoken at home is not English, the student is assessed to determine if he or she qualifies for ESL instruction. According to Pennsylvania state law, it is mandatory for all students who qualify for ESL to be enrolled in one of the district’s schools that also serves as a regional ESL center (Ibid).

While Pennsylvania is not particularly diverse in relation to the rest of the country—the state is ranked 32nd out of 50 states and the District of Columbia—Allegheny County is ranked eighth out of 67 counties within Pennsylvania, with a total of 1,206 Hispanic students as of 2006, roughly 1% of the total student
population county-wide. Moreover, the Pittsburgh Public School District is ranked fifth of 60 school districts within Allegheny County in diversity, with 294 Hispanic students enrolled in 2006—also about 1% of the district’s 30,594 students (U.S. Department of Education). In comparison, out of the 48,504,876 students enrolled nationwide in the same year, 21% of them were Hispanic (Ibid).

Regardless, Pittsburgh is far from the only school district working hard to find the best way to serve its non-English-speaking students. As of 2005, the number of public school students who were English Language Learners was 5.1 million (about 1 in 10), a 60% increase from a decade earlier (Thompson 2). In 2000, 77% of ESL programs surveyed were located in a school, as opposed to on a separate site, and 65% were full-day programs, versus 28% that ran for a half-day or less (Center for Applied Linguistics). Among schools that do offer ESL, most offer either Self-Contained (“English Plus”) ESL programs or Push In/Pull Out (“stand alone”) programs, which are more popular than bilingual education programs because they allow instructors to teach to children of many different native languages at the same time (Rennie 1). Self-Contained, or High Intensity Language Training (HILT) ESL programs, run the entire school day and students in the program learn all their core subjects together, joining native English-speaking students for non-academic subjects such as music, art, physical education, and lunch. In a Push In program, ESL students attend classes with mainstream students, but an ESL teacher will work with the mainstream teacher and be on hand during class time to help the ESL students. In a Pull Out program, ESL students are pulled out of their mainstream classes for part of the day and attend a specialized class geared specifically toward ESL students (McKeon 1). Pittsburgh Public Schools offers a Pull Out ESL program.
According to Vanderneck, most schools within the city of Pittsburgh have responded positively to incoming Latino students and their families. “I have to say that Pittsburgh Public Schools have wonderful people involved in their ESL program at both Taylor Allderdice and Brashear,” she said. “They’ve been very supportive of the immigrant kids, not just the Latino kids—the teachers, and the ESL program in general. They’ve been wonderful.”

However, outside the city, she said, is a different story:

“We’ve had some problems in outlying districts. In one district, the worst case was they said, ‘If the family comes in here to register their children, we will call ICE.’ It was outrageous. And the parents were so frightened. We wanted to create a scene out of it and really make a test case scenario, because they must take the children. That’s true in these United States, a child gets to go to public school if he lives in that district. But the family didn’t want to, they were too scared, so the Catholic school took them in and they preferred to stay in the Catholic school where they felt welcome and received. But that was the worse case scenario.

“Another case I had to intercede with the principal. She didn’t want to take the child. She said ‘But this child is an illegal alien!’ ‘But the precedent in the country is that you take the child.’ ‘Well, no other school district can tell me what to do!’ I guess school districts are, to a certain degree, independent, but we determined they have to take the children, so she did. So I would say Pittsburgh city schools, wonderful. Outlying districts, some problems, because they’re not as aware, not as familiar with the workings of these things. That’s the best case scenario. The worst case is that they’re bigoted.”

According to federal law, it is illegal for children under 16 not to enroll in school, and school districts are required to accept them as long as they can provide proof of address, which could be as little as a bill sent to their home address, said Andy Pugh, the executive director of Welcome Center for Immigrants and
Internationals in Squirrel Hill. I went to meet Pugh at the center in Squirrel Hill. Well over six feet, he towered over me like a gentle, slightly balding ex-basketball player, crushing my fingers in his own as his hand enveloped mine in a firm handshake. “We are so excited to have you here,” he told me. The center serves all of Pittsburgh’s immigrant groups, not just Latinos, but is one of the only resources in the city equipped to handle the needs of the lower-class immigrant population in a way that LACU cannot. The center’s main office is equipped with pamphlets in almost a dozen different languages containing basic information such as how to get a driver’s license, find quality health care, and enroll children in the public school system. The center’s volunteers collectively speak fifteen languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, French, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic, and of course, Spanish. With regard to the Latino population specifically, Pugh said the center was working on putting together a Latino youth group—grupo de jóvenes—that would meet weekly and be staffed by college students to act as both mediators and mentors, and perhaps get some of the kids thinking about graduating high school and going on to college. Pugh also said that the center was also working with the families of individual children who are struggling in school and need individual instruction to catch up but whose parents can’t afford to hire a tutor.

One of the families with whom Pugh and Vanderneck work is the family of Marisol Reyes,⁶ a single mother of five. The family lives in an apartment house in Greenfield, a neighborhood next to Squirrel Hill, supported by Marisol’s meager income as a housekeeper. While the family has lived in Pittsburgh almost fifteen years, Marisol speaks little to no English, and her children speak Spanish as their

⁶ Name has been changed.
first language, even though four of them were born in the United States. As a result, Marisol’s two older children, Carolina, 14,\(^7\) and Oscar, 11,\(^8\) are struggling in school. Marisol’s sister and her children live in nearby Oakland, and there is more family in Philadelphia; however, day-to-day, Marisol is the sole provider for the family, and does not have the time or familiarity with the American education system to help her children with their homework. Pugh asked if I would be available to tutor Carolina once a week.

The next Monday evening, we met at the Welcome Center. Vanderneck brought Carolina and Oscar, apologetically five minutes late. Both kids had been coasting through school for several years, graduating each grade without fully mastering all of the required concepts. As a result, their skills had dropped farther and farther behind those of their peers, and they needed to learn the equivalent of several years’ worth of material to catch up. Although Oscar was 11, he was at a fourth grade level, two below where he should be based on his age. In addition, his math skills were at a first grade level, and he had yet to master basic concepts like rounding, multiplication, and adding three-digit numbers that he would need to succeed, or at least keep up with his class. Pugh had found another tutor for Oscar—a male, since Oscar’s teacher had said that he lacked a father figure or other positive male role models—and they set up in vacant conference room.

Carolina was in seventh grade, which made her also a year or two older than the other students in her class. “Liz needs to work on reading and writing,” Vanderneck told me. “Reading anything. I don’t care what it is, as long as she’s

\(^7\) Name has been changed.
\(^8\) Name has been changed.
reading. And maybe you could work on writing sentences. In English. Or in Spanish, even."

“Spanish,” Carolina said, in English.

“English is the language of education,” Vanderneck reminded her. “If you want to do well in school, you have to do it in English.”

Carolina’s shoulders slumped momentarily in defeat.

“Maybe you two could just talk for today. About anything,” Vanderneck said. She looked at her watch. “I’ve got to run. You have my cell phone number, right?” She asked Carolina, who nodded. She thanked us with a quick wave.

Of her siblings, she was the only one born in Mexico, but had grown up in Pittsburgh. However, as a Mexican citizen and technically an illegal immigrant, she would not be entitled to the same opportunities as her siblings, who were all American citizens, such as attending a public college or university. She would also have a more difficult time getting a job once she graduates, since many employers will not hire employees who are not American citizens, and anti-immigration advocates are trying to pass laws that will increase the severity of punishments for employers who hire illegal immigrants. Vanderneck had given me the impression that Carolina needed not just a tutor, but a mentor, and seeing that she had evidently not brought any of her homework, perhaps so she wouldn’t have to do it, I decided to channel some 14-year-old angst and start a conversation instead.

“So, Carolina,” I started in. “Are you the oldest kid in your family?”

“Yeah.”

“So am I. It sucks.”
Carolina laughed. I told her about my younger brother and sister, who are twins. She told me about her younger siblings, Ana, who is 6, Arturo, 5, and Rosita, 2.

“Who’s your favorite?” I asked.

“Rosita. She’s so cute. She sleeps in my room sometimes.”

“Do you share a room with your siblings, or do you have your own room?”

“My own. But in our old house, there was only one, so my mom had her own room and me and my brothers and sisters all had to share a room.”

“So now you live in a bigger house.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s your relationship with your mom? Do you hang out?”

“No. I don’t really see her. Like I come home, and I’m like ‘Hi,’ and she’s like ‘Hi,’ then I go to my room. We don’t, like, talk about stuff.”

“Okay.” As far as I was concerned, she was a typical red-blooded American teenage girl.

“What does your mom do for work?” I asked.

“She cleans houses. Well, she cleans, and sometimes takes care of kids, or cooks food for them … she’s like a maid, kind of.”

“So she does lots of different stuff.”

“Yeah.”

When I said I was from Los Angeles, not Pittsburgh, she told me she wanted to go there because she wanted to be in a gang, and there were lots of gangs there, and that girls could be in gangs too. Her friend was from California, she said, and reported that there were lots of gangs. I told her that gangs tended to be violent, and
she probably shouldn’t be in one. But then I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up.


“Why?”

“So then I could bust people.”

I didn’t ask for her interpretation of what ‘bust people’ meant. “You know, policemen usually bust gangsters,” I said.

“Yeah.” Apparently this wasn’t a problem for her.

“You know, it’s really good if you can speak another language if you’re a policeman,” I said. “Especially Spanish. People who are bilingual also get paid more than people who aren’t bilingual.”

“Yeah, there are lots of people who speak Spanish in California.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Where do you live in Pittsburgh?”

“Squirrel Hill.”

“Are there lots of people who speak Spanish in your neighborhood?” I asked.

“No. There aren’t any Mexicans. Where my cousins live in Oakland, everyone speaks Spanish.”

Her cell phone started ringing. Surprisingly, she ignored the call.

“Who was it?” I asked.

“It was my cousin. He never calls me,” she said.

“Do you hang out with your cousins a lot?”

“We used to hang out with my aunt and my cousins who live in Oakland a lot after church, but now we don’t anymore, because everyone is busy.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Not really. I don’t really care about it.”
“So what do you like better, speaking English or speaking Spanish?”

“I don’t know. My friend who speaks Spanish is going to come to my school next year, and then I’ll be able to speak Spanish to her, and no one will know what we’re saying.”

Up until this school year, Carolina had attended Colfax, a K-8 public school that runs one of the district’s ESL programs. Despite its location in the mostly-white Squirrel Hill, only about 50% of the school’s students identify as white; however, only 30 students (4.51%) identify as Hispanic, which is the smallest ethnic group listed. The rest of the school’s population is split between African-American (32%), Asian (8.12%), and multiracial (5.41%) students (Pittsburgh Colfax K-8). This year, Carolina was moved to St. Rosalia Academy, a K-8 private Catholic school in Greenfield, which she attends with the rest of her siblings.

“Why did you switch?” I asked her.

“Guess.”

“Um … you got in trouble?”

“No.”

“You got bad grades?”

“No.”

“You mom wanted you to go somewhere different?”

“No.”

I looked at her expectantly.

“I got kicked out for fighting,” she said.

“Why did you fight?” I asked.

“Because girls are mean. They say mean things. So I got mad and punched one of them. I would rather just hang out by myself in my room.”
“That probably wasn’t too smart,” I told her.

“Yeah, I know,” she said, and giggled.

“So what kinds of things do you like to do when you’re not at school?”

“I like hanging out with my friends, and sometimes I go to the library by myself, or hang out by myself.”

“What’s your favorite subject in school?”

“Gym.”

“That’s not a subject.”

She laughed. “Fine. Science.”

“And what’s your least favorite subject?”

“Math.”

“Sister Janice said she wanted you to work on reading and writing. Do you have trouble with that?”

“No, I’m okay at reading and writing, I’m just bad at math.”

“Yeah, a lot of people have trouble with math. Did you bring any of your homework with you?”

“No, but I have a book.” She pulled out a copy of *Ella Enchanted*, a chapter book written for 8-12 year olds, which told me that her reading skills were below grade level. “I don’t know what some of the words mean.”

“Okay, great!” I said, ecstatic that she was asking for help on something, anything. “Why don’t you show me which words you’re having trouble with, and I’ll tell you what they mean.”

She pointed to the word “tresses.”

“That means hair,” I said. “Like, ‘she had beautiful tresses,’ means ‘she had beautiful hair.’”
I pulled out a pen and tore a sheet of paper out of my notebook. “I’m going to start a vocabulary list for you, and when you’re reading, write down all the words you don’t know, and we’ll look them up when you come in.” I handed her the list.

At 6 p.m., I drove Carolina and Oscar home to a modest but well-kept apartment house on a side street in Squirrel Hill. Carolina sat in the passenger seat and played me Spanish pop music from her iPod, while Oscar quietly played a handheld videogame in the backseat.

“I had fun hanging out with you,” Carolina called to me as she got out of the car.

“I had fun hanging out with you too,” I said. “Don’t forget to bring your homework next time we meet.”

Before our next session, I spoke to Janet Allen, Carolina’s teacher at St. Rosalia. “Carolina has a lot of potential,” She sighed. “She doesn’t have any learning disabilities per se, but she tends to be unfocused during class time, and, well, something we see with children who don’t speak English as their first language is that they understand everything, but they don’t catch the nuances that native English speakers do. We have her on an adapted curriculum right now, and since we started that her grades have been improving, mostly Bs and Cs, but that’s only with the easier curriculum.”

I asked whether Carolina needed more help with reading and writing or with math.

“Well, she has separate one-on-one math lessons with our principal, who is also a math teacher. She’s so far behind the rest of the class that it wouldn’t do her any good to sit through the regular lesson,” Allen explained. “Her skills are probably at a third-grade level. She’s never learned fractions, decimals, any of that. We’re still
working with her on her tables—multiplication, division. Very basic. If you want to work with her on math, just start from the beginning of the book. Anything will help.”

Before I had time to process what Allen had said—that my fourteen-year-old student was still learning multiplication and division—Allen had moved onto Carolina’s other subjects. “With the other subjects, she just needs to work on getting organized. Study skills. She has a history test coming up this week that she needs to study for, and a French project that she needs to get started on. If you could help her get organized for those so she’s not doing everything at the last minute, that would be great.”

Later that evening, I arrived at the center ten minutes ahead of time. Marisol was going to come in with Carolina instead of just dropping her off so that I could meet her and we could discuss the logistical issues of the tutoring. Forty-five minutes after our scheduled meeting, Marisol entered the center with all five kids in tow. Carolina gave me a wave. She and Marisol entered the main office while the four younger kids played tag out in the lobby.

My first impression of Marisol was that she didn’t look like someone who had given birth to five children, or who worked on her feet all day. She was petite, almost the same height as Carolina, and wearing a pair of tiny high heels. Carolina looked like a giant next to her. Her mother didn’t speak English, Carolina said, but she could understand it pretty well. We established that 5 p.m. on Monday evenings would be an acceptable time for us to continue meeting for our sessions. She thanked me and explained that she had to go; Oscar had a track meet, and the rest of the family would be attending. Carolina and I relocated to a conference room.
“I spoke to your teacher earlier, and she told me you have a test later in the week,” I said. “When you study for tests, what’s the first thing you usually do?”

“I look at all the words really quick before I take the test, and then I get everything right,” she told me. “I usually study at the last minute.”

“Okay. Well, if you didn’t study at the last minute, what’s the first thing you would do?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I asked her if she brought the study sheet her teacher said she received in class with all of the terms that would be on the test. She shook her head. I pulled out the American History textbook from the extra set of Carolina’s books that her teacher had dropped off at the Center and turned to the first of the assigned pages.


“No.”

“Let’s start from the beginning, then.”

Little by little, Carolina began to remember some of the information she learned in class. By the time we got to the Monroe Doctrine, about the United States’ policies with Latin America, she was reciting the countries that were affected by the new laws, in perfect Spanish. Chile. Venezuela. Colombia. Panama. On a map of the Americas, she pointed to the spot in Mexico where her family was from. I showed her the parts of present-day Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California that used to belong to Mexico. I wrote definitions and drew maps on lined paper for her to take home. I felt that we were making real progress. When the hour was up, I handed her the homemade study sheets and drove her home to her house in Greenfield.

“Good work today. I’ll see you next week,” I said as she got out of the car.
“Thanks.”

“Don’t forget to bring your homework next time we meet,” I called as she walked up the steps. Watching from the car to make sure she got in the house safely, I saw her throw the study sheets in the trash can outside before she let herself in.

Did she not want to learn, or was it just too difficult for her? Would she make it through college? Would she make it through high school? Would she end up in a gang, like she told me she wanted to? Would she actually grow up to be any better off than her own parents were, despite their incredible sacrifices? I put those questions out of my mind and focused on the one that would make the most difference to both of us— how do you teach a child who is not interested in being taught?

One solution is to create partnerships with local universities and their students. And increasingly, the university community is taking a leading role in recognizing the emerging issues in the Latino community and getting involved with the local leaders who are devising both short- and long-term solutions to meet the needs of the city’s Latino immigrants. For the most part, students and volunteers do not make the distinction between legal and illegal immigrants and offer the same services to both groups. Often, non-Latino students are unsure of how to become involved in the community and, as a result, are never able to find an outlet in which to work among Latino population, however good their intentions might be. In this case, it is helpful to have university professors who are more familiar with the Hispanic community act as advisors to these students, connecting them to community leaders who are seeking volunteers and otherwise guiding them towards
a service opportunity that would be fulfilling for them and provide a unique form of support to the community.

A course offered at Carnegie Mellon called “Service Learning in the Community: Hispanics in Pittsburgh” is designed to do just that. Taught by Hispanic studies professor Kenya Dworkin, who has been active in the Latino community in Pittsburgh since her arrival in 1993, the course aims to teach students about the experience of Latinos in the United States in two ways: first by having the students interview Latinos in the community and then by getting involved in a service project on their own. Dworkin started them off with a one-page list of Latino professionals who could be possible interviewees and were easy to contact and able to speak English if necessary. Soon, the students were finding interviewees of their own, from Carnegie Mellon professors to the staff of on- and off-campus eateries and anyone else they could find in the community who would agree to go on record about the Latino community in the city. My interviews with Petruy, Rondon, Vanderneck, and Quezada were conducted as part of that class.

The service projects ran the gamut, and each project was tailored to a different audience. Several students worked with Dworkin herself and other Carnegie Mellon Hispanic studies professors on Círculo Juvenil de Cultura, a children’s program that met on Saturdays at the university in which the children wrote and performed (using finger puppets) a short play in Spanish. The majority of the children enrolled have one Hispanic parent who speaks Spanish and one non-Hispanic parent. Since English is the language spoken in the public school system, it is also the dominant language used at home, and parents feared that their children would lose their ability to speak Spanish as they grew. “Círculo,” as it is called, was designed to provide a place for children to learn embrace their heritage and maintain
their Spanish skills while participating in fun activities with other kids of similar ages and backgrounds. Another two students attended Mass at St. Regis and began to form relationships with some of the young single men there, occasionally going out to lunch and talking to them about their experiences in Pittsburgh. Another three students worked as translators at the free clinic in Pittsburgh’s South Side neighborhood run bilingual pediatrician Dr. Diego Chaves-Gnecco. Not only does the clinic make medical care affordable for families that otherwise would be unable to pay, but Chaves-Gnecco also employs a staff of volunteers that is largely English-Spanish bilingual and able to communicate with families in the language they understand best. In addition, one Saturday a month the clinic holds the Salud para Niños (Health for Children) program, which invites families to bring their children to the clinic for precautions such as vaccinations and car seat checks.

Some of the city’s major corporations and smaller organizations have also begun initiatives to support the Latino community. The Carnegie Library of Oakland has begun a “Cuentos y Canciones” (stories and songs) program for young children and their parents. The program combines interactive stories, songs, and games, all conducted entirely in Spanish. Goodwill offers computer literacy classes for non-native English speakers at its South Side location, along with bill-paying help and a range of other services. PNC Bank offers free seminars in Spanish to teach Spanish-speaking residents how to buy a home, as well as to build and maintain credit. A growing number of organizations, such as the Catholic Charities of Pittsburgh, have recognized the increasingly important role that entrepreneurship and financial literacy play in the success of immigrants in the United States, and as such offer courses in business language and financial services (The Hispanic Center, Inc.).
One of Pittsburgh’s newest and most effective resources in connecting Latinos to the services they need throughout the city is *La Jornada Latina*, Pittsburgh’s only Spanish-language newspaper. The publication prints monthly and is distributed at 150 locations throughout the city as well as nearby Robinson Township, Monroeville, and Butler and Washington counties. Each issue contains a primary section labeled “*Noticias Locales*” (local news) and international news separated by region: “*Estados Mexicanos*” (Mexico), “*El Caribe*” (the Caribbean, which includes Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic), “*Centroamérica*” (Central America), and “*Sudamérica*” (South America). Each issue also includes national and international news under the headings “*Inmigracion y Asesoría Legal*” (Immigration and Legal assistance), “*Politico y Gobierno*” (Politics and Government), “*Economía*” (Economy), “*Salud*” (Health), and “Spanglish,” which contains one or two articles published in both Spanish and English. But perhaps the most important content in the paper is its “*Calendario,*” a list of cultural events, and section of “*Opportunidades*” and “*Clasificados,*” job listings and classified ads in Spanish that might be of interest to the paper’s audience, from bilingual legal services and financial help to “help wanted” ads from lumber companies and commercial cleaning companies.

While the newspaper is only three months old, its founder, Alejandra Quezada, has only lived in Pittsburgh for less than a year. Quezada grew up and attended college in her native Mexico, majoring in broadcast communications. After working for the production company Televisa in Mexico, she moved to San Diego to work for Univision. She and her husband relocated after his company, a job-seeking website called jobing.com, opened an office location in Pittsburgh.
Quezada’s first impression of Pittsburgh was less than positive. “When we arrived here, none of the plants were growing, everything was dead, there were piles of dirty snow in the streets,” she recalled. “It was a mess.” Now settled, she has begun to warm up to Pittsburgh’s charm. “Little by little, I am familiarizing myself [with the city]. I like Pittsburgh because it is a city with a lot of history. It’s very interesting for the simple fact that you can drive down the street and see two or three churches, and some churches that have become restaurants, some that are offices … But the climate doesn’t help.”

Accustomed to the wealth of Spanish-language newspapers and broadcasts, it struck Quezada when she arrived in Pittsburgh that there was no media available in Spanish at all. She also noticed that there was a lack of unity among the Latinos scattered throughout the city, particularly in Fox Chapel, the upper-middle class neighborhood where she and her husband live now. “In the Fox Chapel Giant Eagle, there is a Hispanic named Alberto who works in the photo lab. He was born in Los Angeles, and his father is from Mexico. He is Hispanic, but doesn’t speak Spanish,” she said. “And that’s it.”

In 2000, there were only 37 Hispanics residing in Fox Chapel, which makes up less than 1% of the total population. At that time, the borough’s population overall was 93.3% white, and the median household income was just over $147,000 (U.S. Census Bureau).

First, Quezada joined Marta Mantilla, manager of the Latin American collection in the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh, as the co-host of *Barrio Latino*, a weekly one-hour radio program on WRCT, Carnegie Mellon’s

9 This interview was conducted in Spanish. All quotes were translated from the original Spanish.
10 Giant Eagle is a chain of grocery stores located throughout Pittsburgh and Cleveland.
student-operated radio station, that delivers local and international news of interest to Latinos, publicizes local cultural events, and plays music by well-known Latino artists, all in Spanish. It is the only Spanish-language radio show produced in the city and is very popular among Latinos, and can even be heard emanating from the backs of restaurants, where Spanish-speaking kitchen workers will take a break to listen for news about their home countries.

With the radio show under her belt, Quezada decided to look for regional Spanish-language newspapers that could be adapted for the local audience in Pittsburgh. She found La Jornada Latina, which is based in Cincinnati. The Cincinnati edition of the paper began publishing in 1999 and soon added editions in Northern Kentucky, Dayton, Columbus, Detroit, and now, Pittsburgh. Brian Wiies,
co-owner of TSJnews, which publishes the paper, is a native of Pittsburgh’s Bethel Park neighborhood and felt that Pittsburgh was one of the region’s last major cities that had yet to integrate Latinos and news relevant to them into the local publications in the city that existed at the time of La Jornada’s development (Plummer 1). Quezada is the paper’s only full-time writer, and often writes most or all of the Pittsburgh-specific content that is published alongside the international news that is published in all editions and is written by a larger group of staff members.

Quezada’s main goal in creating the newspaper was to facilitate communication between the Hispanics dispersed throughout the city, many of whom feel isolated when they arrive in Pittsburgh and cannot find others with whom they share a common language and culture. “That’s one of the objectives, that people know who is here—if there is a lawyer that can help us, that there is a doctor that can help us, because sometimes people have a medical problem but don’t know how to explain it in English, and don’t want to feel ashamed when the doctor doesn’t speak their language. That is part of what we want to do with this newspaper,” She said.

Quezada acknowledged that it may seem counterproductive to develop a newspaper at a time when so many news outlets are switching to publishing exclusively online, but explained that the hard-copy format better suited members of the paper’s audience who did not have internet access or were part of an older generation that was not computer literate. “We are accustomed to the Internet … but there are people that do not use the computer, and there are a lot of them,” she said. “For example, my mother. For my mother and most people who are more than fifty
years old, the computer is a little difficult. It’s still a question of newspapers, of radio, of television. There are many of those people in Pittsburgh.”

Secondly, Quezada hopes that the presence of the newspaper will make non-Latinos in the city more aware of the growing Latino presence in Pittsburgh. That includes local and state government officials. Quezada said she felt that government officials did not think the Latino community was substantial enough to warrant representation of their interests. “I don’t think that the government thinks they need to represent us,” she said. “When I arrived [in Pittsburgh], I contacted the police because I wanted a press pass. Speaking to them, I realized that they did not give consideration to a Hispanic resident … who would need those kids of things. I haven’t lived here for very long, but I don’t see very much representation, or the desire for it, on the part of the government.”

While Quezada did not feel that Latinos in Pittsburgh are actively discriminated against, she did think that the general public knew little about the Hispanic community, which can easily give way to stereotypes and prejudice about Hispanics that are largely unfounded. Of the reaction of the general public to the Hispanic community, she said:

“People are not accustomed to Hispanics, and many people don’t know how to react to a person that speaks Spanish, or the majority of the information they receive in the news does not paint Hispanics in a particularly good light,” she said. “I think it will take a long time, but it’s a question of education for the Pittsburgh community to learn that Hispanics aren’t the people they see on the news, the illegal immigrant, the drug dealer from Mexico or Colombia who likes to dance salsa. I don’t know how to dance salsa. It’s a question of education.”
Some important local institutions have already grasped the importance of La Jornada Latina and what its presence indicates about the changing demographics of Pittsburgh. Several weeks after the paper’s first issue, the well-known *Pittsburgh City Paper* began printing a full page of services and events in Spanish in each of its weekly issues after it published an initial article about La Jornada’s inaugural issue. “They realized that there is a Hispanic community, there is an audience for this,” Quezada said proudly.

Unfortunately, not all victories will be as easily won. Often changing public perception must start from the bottom up—in the city’s public schools. And thanks to Dr. Shawn Alfonso-Wells and other Spanish-speaking professionals in the area, Spanish-language education is already a possibility for kids as young as elementary school. Alfonso-Wells, an adjunct professor of anthropology in the history department at Carnegie Mellon, is the co-director of Adventures in Spanish, a 45-minute after school program whose goal is to teach children in grades K-3 how to speak Spanish through games, songs, and dance. Alfonso-Wells is a New York native who spent several years in Cuba, married a Cuban, and now lives in Pittsburgh with her two children, ages 2 and 8; her older child is one of the students in the class.

The class is taught at the Imagine Environmental Charter School, which opened this school year with grades K-3 and plans to add one grade per year until the school is K-8. The school’s curriculum uses the environment as a springboard for activities in all subject areas while fostering “love of and respect for the environment and the will to preserve it for future generations” (The Environmental Charter School at Frick Park). Like all charter schools, it receives public funding and does not charge tuition, but enrollment is limited and students may be chosen via a lottery system.
The school is located in Regent Square, an upper-middle class neighborhood in Pittsburgh’s East End, but incorporates the municipalities of Edgewood, Swissvale, and Wilkinsburg, which lie just outside city limits (Regent Square Civic Association). Swissvale and Wilkinsburg are both characterized as middle-class, with median household incomes of around $38,000 and $32,000 respectively, although Swissvale is about two-thirds white and Wilkinsburg two-thirds black. The school’s location makes for an interesting student body, where the children of upper-class, environmentally-conscious parents living in the East End mingle with the children of middle or working-class parents living in Swissvale or Wilkinsburg who saw the Environmental Charter School as a way to get their children into a public school with a higher quality education than the local schools in their boroughs. “As soon as the school announced open enrollment, a lot of parents from Wilkinsburg jumped on it,” Alfonso-Wells told me over quesadillas and margaritas at happy hour at an Applebee’s in Edgewood on a rainy Friday afternoon.

How does one go about teaching a foreign language to elementary-age kids used to an educational model that does not value or teach foreign language skills, and most of whom have never heard their parents or anyone they know speak a language other than English? Be tough.

“Dos colas, por favor!” Alfonso-Wells yelled over the din of some twenty-odd chattering first, second, and third graders (and one kindergartner whose mother begged for her to be in the class) in the hallway where she meets them after school. “Two lines!” Once they assembled, she began to lead them upstairs, instructing me to wait for the stragglers in the back. The school has a standard dress code, so all the children wore some variation of khaki on the bottom and white or blue collared shirt on top, while wielding disproportionately large backpacks and heavy winter coats.
A select few of the students have parents that speak Spanish or another foreign language, or have made a family commitment to helping their children acquire foreign language skills. One of the four girls in the class named Olivia has a mother who spent significant time in Costa Rica and speaks fluent Spanish to Olivia and her younger sister, Gwendolyn, so they will have a chance of growing up bilingual. Another little girl in the class named Christine is the child of Hungarian immigrants and at home regularly translates for her grandmother, who speaks only Hungarian. Macey’s family is from Brazil and speaks Portuguese. Brenna’s family is going to Mexico over spring break to supplement the skills that Brenna has learned in class. But most students are trekking in uncharted territory, unsure of the process by which to learn Spanish and hesitant to speak it during class time. For this reason, Alfonso-Wells has designed all of the class activities to give the shyest kids the chance to speak together in a group, and offer additional opportunities to practice speaking to the more outgoing members of the class.

The first fifteen minutes of each class are devoted to the kids’ favorite activity—snack time.

“Quién quiere?” Alfonso-Wells asked as she held up the snack of the day, pretzels, to the kids, who were seated in groups of five or six around several round tables.

Some of the kids raised their hands enthusiastically, demonstrating that they understood that Alfonso-Wells had asked if they wanted snack.

“And what do we say when we want snack?” She prodded.

A few kids mumbled the chosen phrase, “Yo quiero, por favor.”

“Qué?” Alfonso-Wells asked rhetorically.

“Yo quiero, por favor!” the kids chorused.
Alfonso-Wells handed me the bag of pretzels. My job was to walk from table to table and ask each student, “Quieres?” Each child who responded with the magic words, “Yo quiero, por favor,” received a napkin and a handful of pretzels. Most kids recited the phrase nervously but correctly, or close enough. Then there was the class’s resident crowd pleaser, Tyrese.

“Quieres?” I asked him when I got to his table.

“Um … YES,” he retorted. His peers giggled and rolled their eyes at him. I gave him a stern, I’m-very-disappointed-in-you look, which made little impact, until I started to walk away from his table. Once he realized there was a very real chance that he would not get fed, he shaped up right away.

“Yo quiero! Yo quiero!” he begged.

“Excelente!” I praised him as I put a handful of pretzels on the napkin in front of him.

Each class begins with the same song, which is called “Es la hora.” Once the kids are arranged in a circle in a corner of the room, Alfonso-Wells begins, and the kids quickly join in once they recognize the familiar melody.

“Es la hora, es la hora,” she sings animatedly, encouraging the kids with her hands to join her. “De la clase de espanol!”

The kids muddled through the song, pronouncing most of the words incorrectly or not at all, but following Alfonso-Wells’s motions, especially when she got to the end of the song when the words turned into nonsense. The kids smiled with anticipation as Alfonso-Wells reached the end of the Spanish part of the song, poised and ready when she launched into the finale.

“Oh oh oh!” They chorused, waving their hands above their heads. “La-de la-de ay! Oh oh oh!”
The bulk of the class is spent on a new activity that changes from week to week. One week, Alfonso-Wells gave the kids finger puppets of different farm animals, teaching them how to say gallo (chicken), oveja (sheep), caballo (horse), conejo (rabbit), cerdo (pig), and perro (dog) and having the appropriately outfitted children run into the middle of the circle when she called out the name of each animal. Another day she took them outside for a scavenger hunt, giving them a list of easy-to-find items that included hoja (leaf), palito (twig), ardilla (squirrel), and yerba (grass).

On this particular day, the class was practicing a severely abbreviated version of Little Red Riding Hood, or in Spanish, Caperocita Roja. After Alfonso-Wells demoed the play for them, playing Caperocita Roja herself, which made the kids...
laugh, they took turns playing the protagonist as well as the grandmother (*Abuelita*), the wolf (*El Lobo*), and the woodsman (*El Casador*). Caperocita Roja was a coveted role because of the red velour cloak the character got to wear; *Abuelita* because it involved theatrically fainting onto a beanbag chair when El Lobo knocks on her door, dressed as her granddaughter. And *El Casador* was permitted to wield a sword, which the character pointed at El Lobo while screaming “*Vete! Vete!*” (“go away!”), which made the role a popular choice for the male members of the class. The students were practicing for a performance to take place the following weekend at Latino Fest, an all-day celebration of Latino culture that would be held at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

At the end of class, Alfonso-Wells leads the kids in singing another song that they have come to know well through repetition each week.

“*Adios amigos, nos vemos otro dia,*” she sang while the kids followed along with the hand motions, waving goodbye to their friends in the class.

When the parents arrived to pick up their children, Alfonso-Wells chatted with them in English and, if the parents speak it, Spanish, reminding each about the performance of *Caperocita Roja* next week. Most parents were enthusiastic about the opportunity, pledging to bring their kids and asking if there was anything they could provide—a red cloak? Brownies? The kids who were still left asked me if I could help them practice Caperocita Roja while they waited for their parents to arrive.

When all the kids had been picked up and signed out, Alfonso-Wells herded her daughter and the few students that she drives home every week—an arrangement with their parents so that they would be able to attend the class—out of the classroom.
“See you next week!” She called to me as she led the kids out of the building while carrying several paper grocery bags of snacks and toys. And then, in confidence: “We’ll do another happy hour soon.”

Both Alfonso-Wells and Quezada believe that education, in different contexts, is the key to acceptance of the Hispanic community. “I want to see recognition and respect,” Quezada said. “Education is everything. Unfortunately, when one doesn’t know something, they assume things about someone instead of looking for information. If they had more information, things would be easier for everyone on every level. To make good decisions for all, we need more education and information.”

For Pittsburgh, a city that is already hard-pressed for resources, it is necessary to create a multifaceted, partnership-driven solution to fully integrate the Latino community into the already-existing fabric of the city. That means that cultural organizations like LACU, the Hispanic Center, and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce must work together with schools, churches, universities, and local businesses. To finance cultural initiatives and the full-time staff it takes to run such organizations, organizations must create partnerships with large, locally-based corporations such as PNC Bank and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), as well as continue to recruit both bilingual and monolingual volunteers. Local media organizations, Spanish media such as La Jornada Latina and Barrio Latino as well as mainstream publications such as the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, City Paper and television broadcast stations KDKA, WTAE, WPXI, and community television, must continue to report on Latino issues and publicize Latino-related events. City police must agree to stop racial profiling of
Latinos. For a city its size, the Pittsburgh community has facilitated this multilevel collaboration extremely well.

However, there is much more that needs to be done. While a growing number of civic organizations recognize and represent the Hispanic community, Hispanics are still lacking representation in state and local government. City Council positions are divided by district, and since Latinos are geographically isolated from one another, it is difficult for them to elect a single representative to support their interests as a collective. In addition, change cannot occur without a change in the mentality of local residents, particularly those who have lived in Pittsburgh prior to the rise of the Hispanic community and are uneducated about and deeply resentful of the growing Hispanic presence in “their” city. But with an increasing number of Latino cultural programs in schools, a growing presence in the media, and the support of the community, Pittsburgh will raise a new generation of residents who are know more about the Latino community and therefore are more likely to accept Latinos as an increasingly valuable and integrated part of the city of Pittsburgh, a city that was built by immigrants, evolved because of immigrants, and continues to grow and change as its citizenry grows increasingly diverse and its own culture grows increasingly pluralistic. That is the future of the Hispanic community in Pittsburgh, but more so, it is the future of the city of Pittsburgh.

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