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wednesday, september 14, 2005

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D.M. Latinos offer their reflections on change

by olivia gonzalez howe
juice staff

Meet five young Latinos who have chosen to make Des Moines home, or at least a home away from home. They're local leaders who shape Latino culture in Iowa - a state where attitudes about immigration are continuously shifting. They speak at least two languages in a place that's made English its only official language. They are part of Iowa's, as well as the country's, largest ethnic minority group. They come from different countries, but it's that diversity within their Latino heritage that brings them together. We asked them to talk about the changing face of our community.



Nannette Rodriguez, business owner

Nannette Rodriguez was young, had a graduate degree and real-world work experience, but after graduating from Drake University, she didn't land a job for six months.

"I found out I was too much of an independent thinker to thrive in a corporate environment," said the native of Puerto Rico.

When she did land a job with a local company, she realized she could sell her talent just as well on her own.

Now her advertising agency, VIVAMEDIA, is an award-winning multilingual company in Des Moines.

Convincing some clients to reach out to the Hispanic market, which commands nearly \$600 billion of buying power in the United States, isn't easy.

"It's a tough sell in this market, but times are changing," said Rodr'quez, who came to Des Moines to attend Drake. "English-only isn't going to be the case much longer. Latinos are a viable market. Their money is green just like everybody else's."

Most of VIVAMEDIA's clients who use bilingual marketing products are large corporations. Although local Latino business owners don't make up a significant portion of her clientele, she's used her position as president of the Alianza Latino Business Association in Des Moines to put herself and other Latinos into a network of peer support.

"They say we're leaps and bounds behind the times," Rodr'quez said. "I refuse to believe that when we have players like Principal, Wells Fargo and the Greater Des Moines Partnership. It's just that some get it and some don't. And we'll be there when they do."

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events today

- **Vietnam Moving Wall Memorial** 9 am, VA Central Iowa Health Care System, Knoxville
- **"Women in the 21st Century: A Balancing Act"** 11:45 am, Polk County Convention Complex
- **Independence Today Festival** 2:30 pm, Gateway Park
- **Jim Woodard** 6:30 pm, Franklin Avenue Library

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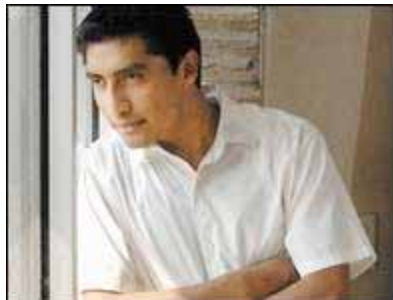
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Update: Rodriguez was one of 10 Latina business owners in the United States to receive an entrepreneurial award Thursday in Milwaukee. [Read more about the award here](#)

Age: 30

Lives: West Des Moines

Roots: Puerto Rico



Enrique Cruz-Garcia, editor

Members of the Des Moines Catholic Worker's organization encouraged Enrique Cruz-Garcia to come to Des Moines while they visited Chiapas, Mexico, to aid Mayan Indians.

So he came here two years ago on a student visa to study English at Iowa State University. Since then, Cruz-Garcia has promoted the Catholic Worker's Chiapas Project. He's also worked with

Habitat for Humanity and helped teach religious education class at Visitation Catholic Church.

Aside from working full-time at Basil Prospero, Cruz-Garcia has spent the last year preparing to launch a new Spanish-language magazine called El Puente, which means "the bridge."

Although Cruz-Garcia and other contributors to El Puente have yet to set a launch date, he said the first edition is all but printed.

Cruz-Garcia said that, unlike other free local Spanish-language publications that cover sports and entertainment, El Puente will feature articles and philosophical views on topics such as immigration and other social issues. Articles will be written by both local and international writers.

With three correspondents in Mexico, Cruz-Garcia hopes the publication will help foster an understanding of Latin American and North American cultures.

"I don't want my magazine used for garbage," said Cruz-Garcia, co-editor of the magazine. "I want it on a bookshelf. I want it to be useful."

Age: 23

Lives: West Des Moines

Roots: Mexico



Brando Guerrero, entrepreneur

A year ago, Brando Guerrero was in the final stage of a job interview that would have taken him to Spain to work for the Gallup Organization. Instead of completing his last interview, he chose to help a friend establish a Des Moines branch of J.D. Technology Systems, a multilingual information technology consulting firm.

"It was one of the hugest decisions I've ever had to make, almost as hard as deciding to stay in state for college," said Guerrero, who turned down offers from Princeton University and the University of Florida to stay near his mother, who lives in Perry.

Family, job opportunity and quality of life kept him from leaving the state. Guerrero was born in Acapulco, Mexico, and moved to Kansas and eventually Perry. He considers Iowa home.

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"My mother wanted me to have opportunities that didn't exist" in Mexico, said Guerrero, who graduated from the University of Iowa and is fluent in four languages. "We did what we could with the limited resources that we had."

Like many other Latinos who were either born in the United States or came here as young children, Guerrero remembers when Hispanic culture was less prevalent in central Iowa.

"I was one of only three Latinos in my sixth-grade class," said Guerrero, who plans to become a U.S. citizen this year.

Guerrero said it was difficult to identify with other immigrant students because they were put into classrooms specifically for students learning English as a second language.

During high school, Guerrero went without speaking his native language for nearly a year.

"I never forgot my culture, who I was," Guerrero said. "But I lost the ability to speak my own language, and that took something away from me. One of the reasons I started speaking it again was because my friends needed help in Spanish."

Since then, he has embraced his ethnicity and has used his leadership roles in student, civic and business organizations to help educate others about Latinos in Iowa.

"I'm glad I could help people realize that we're not all one culture," Guerrero said. "You have to show people that it's OK to be different. I've done that my entire life. Maybe it will trickle down."

Age: 23

Lives: Urbandale

Roots: Mexico



Claudia Schable, Brazil

It was a chance meeting with an Iowa boy at an ice skating rink in Japan that brought Brazilian-born Claudia Schabel to Des Moines.

In 1991, Schabel's family left Brazil for Japan. She was 17, had dropped out of high school and worked in a watch factory to earn a living.

"It was a place where we were discriminated against," said Schabel, international program manager for the Iowa Council for International Understanding. "Some of my Japanese co-workers thought we were there to steal their jobs, much like some people think immigrants are here to take our jobs. That wasn't the case, and it isn't the case here either."

She left Japan with her Iowa boyfriend, Brad Schabel, and finished high school in Brazil. After traveling through Europe and Latin America, the now-married couple came to Des Moines, where Schabel earned a degree from Drake University in international relations.

At Drake, she helped revive La Fuerza Latina, a student-run organization that promotes Latino heritage and culture. She also joined Latinos Unidos.

"It was a life-changing experience for me," Schabel said. "I never really thought of myself as a Latina until I came here."

In Brazil, Schabel said, people generally don't categorize themselves along ethnic or racial lines, but as Brazilians.

Spanish isn't her first language - it's her fourth, after Portugese, Japanese

and English. And although she speaks conversational Spanish, she insists she's not completely fluent.

Schabel has used her position to educate Iowans about different cultures and introduce international visitors to Iowans.

"I wish we would work together better," she said. "We need to realize that we have a lot of similarities and a lot of differences. That's what we have in common. That's what we need to be celebrating."

Since moving to Des Moines, she has taken up capoeira, a Brazilian form of martial arts, and has welcomed other Brazilians to the community.

"Every time I hear that someone has moved to Des Moines, I call them and let them know that there are others Brazilians here."

Age: 30

Lives: Des Moines

Roots: Brazil



Warren Morrow, consultant

Choosing a path after college wasn't an easy decision for Warren Morrow. For most of his life, he had planned to become an ophthalmologist, inspired by his blind grandfather in Mexico, whom he had always admired.

But when Grinnell College offered him the chance to accept a grant to help start up a youth organization called the Latino Leadership Project, he

changed his plans and came to Des Moines.

"It was our approach to economic inequality and poverty," said Morrow, who left Mexico City for the United States when he was a child.

Now, Morrow works full-time as a private consultant under the umbrella company Diverse Innovative Solutions. Most recently, he landed a private contract with the Neighborhood Development Corporation to help Latino business owners redevelop the Latino shopping corridor near East 14th Street on Grand Avenue.

The neighborhood directly surrounding the district represents the most significant chunk of Latino buying power in the state - more than \$100 million a year, according to the corporation.

The economic vitality of the area is what spurred the nonprofit Neighborhood Development Corporation to spend \$15 million to build additional retail space in the corridor. The project is scheduled to be completed in several years.

Morrow's role in the project is to market the area, provide technical assistance to business owners and to serve as a link between private developers and the Neighborhood Development Corporation.

He's also joined a group of business partners who are considering opening a tapas restaurant and salsa dancing venue early next year in the East Village.

Age: 28

Lives: Des Moines

Roots: Mexico