

PUTTING A FACE ON IMMIGRATION

Six profiles of Latinos in Port Richmond shed light and defy stereotypes

By **CLAIRE REGAN** / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Once Staten Island's bustling shopping hub, much of Port Richmond today is a gritty snapshot of shifting populations and commerce. The trendy department stores are long gone from Port Richmond Avenue where it stretches up from Richmond Terrace; bodegas and bargain shops are the new norm.

For a class of Wagner College students, there was no better way to learn about urban life and immigration trends than with some field work in Port Richmond.

Most of the immigrants who have settled in apartments off Port Richmond Avenue hail from Latino countries including Mexico, Honduras, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Many work as landscapers, kitchen workers and house cleaners. Many are undocumented and speak little or no English.

But as the students found out, that is only one layer of the story. The immigrants they met also run businesses, volunteer in food pantries and stay close to their churches. Most came to the U.S. — to Staten Island — to work hard and establish a better life for themselves and their families.

For their field work, the students



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/BILL LYONS

Born and raised in Tecuatitlan, Mexico, Emma is a steady volunteer at El Centro del Inmigrante. She helps distribute food and clothing to needy Latinos.

Community spirit needs no translation

By **KAITLIN MANNIX**

At first glance, 50-year-old Emma is what many Americans would call a "typical Mexican immigrant." She is a mother of eight, speaks no English, and cleans houses for a living. Her husband works in landscaping.

Taking a deeper look, however, Emma defies these misguided assumptions. She is not your typical Mexican immigrant, but instead, a faithful community leader, a woman of versatility.

Emma is devoted to her family, is an active member of the community parish, and is a longtime member of El Centro del Inmigrante, a multi-service center at 1546 Castleton Ave. dedicated to serving the undocumented immigrant community in Port Richmond. Emma's

On the inside

Victor's eyes fill with tears when he remembers the beating he got as a young teen in Honduras. Pouring boiling water on his back, his father whipped him with an electric cord to "take out the faggot inside of him." Twenty years later, he struggles with acceptance as an openly gay man in the immigrant community.

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IMMIGRANTS OF PORT RICHMOND/VICTOR

Under scars of immigration, a darker secret

Being shunned as a gay man adds pain to Victor's undocumented life

By KEVIN FERREIRA

Gazing upwards, Victor traces his fingers timidly across his baseball cap, remembering the experiences that brought him to the United States. He turns his head, his hair changing from a dark brown to deep red in the light. His young, steady eyes belie his ordeals.

Victor's day began at dawn: A search for work to no avail.

When he joins me at Port Richmond's El Centro del Inmigrante, I ask him: "Have you eaten lunch?"

"No."

"Have you eaten dinner?"

"Not yet."

He smirks, lets out a chuckle and talks about going to a friend's house around dinnertime to help care for her son, in hopes he'll be offered a bite, to eat.

Things have seemed to spiral downward for Victor amid the great recession: Not only has work become scarce, his mother is dying. One of 10 children, he is the only one in his immediate family living in the U.S. The rest of the family remains in San Pedro Sula, Honduras.

His siblings say he is the reason his mother is dying.

At 13, Victor confided to his mother that he was having strange feelings, that he liked boys. His mother went to the other room and told his father, who came out and confronted him, took an electric cord from the wall and whipped him. Then he poured boiling water on Victor's back, telling him it was to "take out the faggot inside you."

Victor's eyes begin to fill, but he holds back the tears and explains that he ran out of the house practically naked. A neighbor took him in, helping him heal and find a new home.



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTO

Victor hopes one day to open a flower stand in front of a local store. He hopes it will help him support himself again.

It seems that Victor has not stopped running ... moving among four families, coming to the U.S., being pushed from one state to another until finally arriving on Staten Island. Over this journey, the scars from coming out have never fully healed. His sexual orientation haunts him in each new place.

While Victor was working in a florist shop in his native country, the owner, Raul, took an interest in his intricate arrangements. Noticing his eye for beauty, Raul asked Victor to decorate his brother's wedding.

After the wedding, Raul, a U.S. resident, offered to bring

Victor to the States, enticing him with an "opportunity." But Raul had more on his mind than decorating, and for three nights Victor fended off sexual advances from Raul, who sent him to New Jersey to live with a brother and work off his passage.

Like many immigrants, Victor was forced into hard labor, installing air-conditioning units six days a week for just \$150. Raul's brother kept an eye on Victor, often threatening to call Immigration to make him comply. With help, he eventually escaped, landing on Staten Island, his home for the last eight years. Now 29,

Victor has found his first relationship.

Recalling recent events, Victor stares straight ahead and describes a fight. An older man had suggested a threesome, and when his boyfriend relayed the offer, Victor rejected it. He said, frankly, "He told me I needed to have an open mind. [But] that is not for me. I have had many chances to get involved with bad things at many points in my life, but I just was never interested."

"There is a great emptiness in my life that I cannot fill," Victor states slowly. He lowers his eyes, searching, and whispers, "They only come looking for me with those things. I am the hardworking type but I do not know why I haven't gained anything in so much time. I truthfully don't know what is happening."

Hardship, abuse and negative attitudes have followed him across borders. He tells of successful times in the U.S. when work was abundant and he sent clothes, toys and money back home, only to be told by one of his brothers to stop because they burned everything he sent.

Victor allows that he had tried to "buy their love," and since then has stopped. People have continued to try to harm him, yet his resilience and desire for a better life have helped him to go on. Every week he calls his only sister, who has never judged him, to see how she is and ask about the rest of his family.

Victor hopes one day to open a flower stand in front of a local store. He hopes it will help him support himself again.

"I came here to demonstrate to myself that I can continue moving forward," Victor tells me, and it seems that although his eyes are heavy with tears, they glisten with hope that he can create a full life for himself.

EMMA FROM PAGE A 1

Community spirit needs no translation

most admirable quality is the fact that even though she is undocumented, she is deeply committed to her community.

In two wide-ranging interviews conducted at El Centro, Emma, a petite woman with a strong, stocky build and hair loosely tied back, talked about her upbringing, motherhood, journey and dreams.

Emma explained, through a translator, that she is an active member of her church, St. Mary of the Assumption. She attends its Spanish mass every week and shuttles her daughter there for dance lessons three times a week. All of her children have attended Bible Study at St. Mary's.

She herself has even attempted taking English classes at the church. But the classes proved too complicated for Emma, who didn't make it past fifth grade in Mexico. She does not read Spanish well, so learning English is especially difficult.

COMMUNITY LEADER

As one of the first volunteers to become involved at El Centro, Emma has remained an active member of the community organization for the past 14 years. From the start, Emma defined herself as a leader and committed member. During the interviews, Emma explained her involvement at El Centro. On Mondays, she meets with the women of the organization for classes related to personal health and abuse. On Thursdays, she takes part in a food pantry program.

She is most eager to take part in the clothing donation drives on Wednesdays, during which she sorts and organizes donated clothing and then helps distribute it to the women who need it. Excitement lights her face as she describes that it also is a time for women of Port Richmond to socialize and gossip about recent events.

Although Emma is a strong, leading member, she boasts that she is also simultaneously helped by El Centro. She "learns about laws and policies for immigrants and gains confidence" within herself and her community. Right away, she praises El Centro for reaching out to the immigrants there, helping them learn about documentation, and taking care of their needs.

Optimistic in character, Emma hopes to see El Centro expand its presence in the Port Richmond area. Many women in the community come from small towns and are uneducated, and she would like to see more of them learn English.

She is concerned about the lack of child care in the community. "A lot of women have multiple children with nowhere to go when they have to go to work," Emma explained. She would like to see El Centro open a child-care center.

Emma was born and raised in Tecuaitlan, a small town at the outskirts of Puebla, Mexico. She thinks back nostalgically, remembering "tons of water and fruit, a house with two rooms." She married Guadalupe at 27 and his mother let them rent one of the two bedrooms in her house. Before coming to the U.S., they had four sons together.

When Emma was 32, Guadalupe made the decision to move to the U.S. simply because he was told "there were jobs."

"To get to the United States, you had to find someone to help you cross," Emma explained. "One place in Mexico helps you to cross into Arizona. My husband had a problem crossing the actual fence. It's



PHOTO BY LEE MANCHESTER

More on the web

For a video of Wagner College faculty discussing the immigrant project, and a second video of Emma, who volunteers at the El Centro food pantry, go to silive.com/video.

like a desert; no one is watching, and he had to climb over it. At that time, you had to find someone in Arizona to buy you a plane ticket."

That is precisely what Guadalupe did. In 1991, he borrowed money from his brother for a ticket which landed him in New York. He found a job working at a restaurant in Manhattan.

Emma explained that it was uncomfortable for Guadalupe to have his wife in Mexico with their kids, so he suggested that they, too, come to the U.S. Emma made the journey about three months later with their sons, ages 11, 6, 2 and 1. Guadalupe had a place for them to stay in the Bronx.

She remembers being "scared and alone; not many people spoke Spanish." Fidgeting slightly in her seat, she admits she was worried, got lost often, and had trouble making friends.

In 1997, they moved their growing family to Staten Island, settling in Port Richmond. Her facial expression relaxes and she explains that she instantly felt at ease there. More people spoke Spanish, so she could communicate easily, and her older kids started going to PS 20, where many of their classmates were Mexican or Dominican.

MOTHER OF EIGHT

Together for 36 years, and in the U.S. for 20, Emma and Guadalupe now have eight children, ranging from ages 11 to 32 — all boys except for the youngest.

Raising a family outside of her native country has been "very hard," Emma says, because they have little money. But above all, she considers herself lucky. She has "always been with her spouse who was able to find work."

Emma found out about El Centro del Inmigrante through St. Mary's. Smiling broadly, she remembers she "felt great, felt protected and got involved right away."

For Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of El Centro, Emma is an asset to the organization and the community. He describes Emma as being shy initially but then coming out of her shell. Mercado commends Emma for valuing "the concept of community."

He appreciates Emma's suggestions, and confides that her dream of opening a child-care facility is coming closer to reality.

Emma shares that she puts a lot of trust in Gonzalo Mercado, that she "goes to him for everything." She says he "has a big heart; very few people are like him."

Mercado shifts the attention back to Emma.

"As a founding member of El Centro, she is one of the few people today still engaged and still volunteering. Her spirit of service to community is unlike anyone else's."

IMMIGRANTS FROM PAGE A 1

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collaborated with El Centro del Inmigrante, a storefront center developed in 1997 by Project Hospitality, the Latino Civic Association and St. Mary of the Assumption R.C. Church to address the needs of newly arrived immigrant day laborers and their families.

With El Centro translators, the students interviewed a cross-section of Latino immigrants for a series of profiles assigned by their professors, Rabbi Abraham Unger and Dr. Richard Guarasci, who also is president of the college.

Today, the Advance begins a three-day series, "Immigrants of Port Richmond," featuring six of those profiles.

To minimize harm, the full identity of only one of the six immigrants, Maria Morales, who owns a restaurant and is a U.S. citizen, is revealed in the series. The other five — Emma, Victor, Luciano, Geronimo and Moises — are protected by first names only.

Gonzalo Mercado, executive director of El Centro del Inmigrante, saw the Wagner College project as an opportunity to shed light and defy stereotypes.

Eighty percent of Latino families in the area are mixed status, he pointed out, meaning in most homes the parents could be undocumented or green-card holders while some or all of their children are U.S. citizens.

Immigration "is not a black-and-white issue," he emphasized. The profiles written by Kaitlin Mannix, Kevin Ferreira, Joanna Ng, Avery Miller, Joshua Piper and Joseph Conforti "humanize the issue, put

a face on the issue," Mercado said. "If you want to know about someone, you have to get to know them."

And that's exactly what the students did during the project.

"The more you learn about people, the more you realize we're not that different from each other," Mercado added.

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Costa Concordia to be salvaged in one piece

By COLLEEN BARRY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MILAN — Salvage work to remove the capsized Costa Concordia cruise ship from its rocky perch off Tuscany, where 32 people died, will begin early next month and is expected to take a year, the Italian owner announced yesterday.

The U.S.-owned company

Titan Salvage won the bid to remove the ship, which struck a reef off the tourist-dependent island of Giglio on Jan. 13, after the captain veered off course and steered the liner carrying 4,200 people close to shore in an apparent stunt. Thirty-two passengers and crew members died in the frantic and delayed evacuation. Two of those remain missing.

The salvage plan, which still needs approval by Italian authorities, foresees removing the ship in one piece and towing it to an Italian port, Costa said.

Workers completed the removal of fuel from the Concordia on March 24, and Costa said environmental protection will be a "top priority" during the ship's removal. The island of Giglio is

in fishing grounds and falls within a sanctuary for dolphins.

Islanders have expressed concern that the ship's presence and salvage work will disrupt tourism, Giglio's main economic driver.

Giglio Mayor Sergio Ortelli said it is important that the ship be removed in one piece with the least possible impact on the environment, economic and port activities, and that the operation be completed within a year, as foreseen, "so that we can return to normal."

Titan Salvage, based in Pompano Beach, Fla., has performed more than 350 salvage and wreck removal projects since 1980, according to its website. It will partner with Micoperi, an Italian marine contractor that specializes in underwater construction and engineering. Titan was one of six companies bidding for the job.

Salvage crews and their equipment will be based at the nearby port of Civitavecchia in a move aimed at minimizing the impact on Giglio's port activities, Costa said.

"As was the case with the removal of the fuel, we have sought to identify the best solution to safeguard the island and its marine environment and to protect its tourism," Costa CEO Pier Luigi Foschi said in a statement.

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