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# Puerto Ricans struggle for piece of the action

By WENDY FOX  
They've come looking for the good life—in droves from Puerto Rico to the mainland.  
But the good life can be elusive if you don't speak the predominant language or if you came here in the first place because you were under-educated and couldn't find a job back on the island. Opportunities for Spanish-speaking citizens who didn't finish high school don't seem any better here than in Puerto Rico.

A good many came through Wilmington as migrant farm workers and insensitive employers. Some stayed because they found jobs in nearby mushroom houses or because Wilmington just seemed a better place to live than New York City.

Others waited until their friends or relatives were settled here, then came along, hoping life in Delaware would be better than in Puerto Rico.

Now there's a little enclave in the middle of Wilmington where most of the city's 6,000 to 8,000 Spanish-speaking residents live in the area between E. Lancaster Ave., 4th, West and Union Sts. is a critical but historically neglected part because the city's Spanish-speaking residents, mostly Puerto Ricans with a smattering of Cubans and South Americans, comprise at least 8 percent of the city's population.

But they were largely neglected until about a year ago when city officials really began trying to make living in Wilmington easier and better.

It's a volatile and unorganized group, aware of the linguistic, economic, cultural and social barriers it must overcome, and so far unsuccessful in overcoming those obstacles.

Estimates by people in and out of the community are that roughly

half the city's Spanish-speaking residents do not know enough English to understand or be understood by the English-speaking majority.

Over an percent of the Puerto Rican community — more than the city's overall 13 percent — is estimated to be unemployed. The problems with unemployment, welfare and food stamps are magnified by the language barriers.

## The promise of the mainland is elusive

Social agencies are unwilling or cannot afford, to help. Three out of five Spanish-speaking social workers in the entire division of social services, none of them in Sussex County.

Family Court sends out to court notices in Spanish and has no official Spanish interpreter for its clients. Superior Court has one.

Most job training programs cannot help those who don't speak English, and few employers are willing to hire them.

But food protest about such things from the Spanish-speaking community has been rare.

James Chero Rizzo, a Villanova law student working in the city's public defender's office, was formerly with Model Cities.

They're not like the Chicanos of the southwest, he maintains, who immediately band together and pick a leader.

"There's always maaaaa (murmurs), he smiles and goes

slowly, meaning "things can wait."

As a result, only recently has any effort been made to unify the community. The city's several Latin American groups who often worked at cross purposes in the past, have just formed a community-wide coalition.

In June they sent representatives to a workshop in Boboath Beach where El Congreso Latino, The Latin Congress, was born. It hopes to incorporate soon.

The Rev. Ronald Arma of the Methodist Action Program was picked as chairman. The goals, according to Cecile Esteves, director of the Latin American Community Center, are to eliminate discrimination against Spanish-speaking people, develop a voter registration program and improve social services and educational opportunities.

The Latin American Community Center (LACC) at 4th and Harrison Sts. has had internal troubles, both financial and managerial, for years. Its last director, Bernabe A. Lopez, was convicted in February of a conspiracy charge in connection with a food stamp fraud in Washington, D.C.

Man Esteves, also Mayor Tom Rains' special assistant for Spanish community affairs, was named executive director this time and decided to take time and attention to the community.

Man Esteves, Cuban-born, was LACC director for 2 years before quitting in December 1971 over disagreements with the residents.

In March 1972, she opened La Borinqueña, a highly successful recreational center, across the street.

Feelings between the LACC and La Borinqueña were competitive and sometimes hostile. But with Man Esteves now at LACC, and La Borinqueña in the hands of her young assistant, Julio Morales, rumors have ceased.

The Mayor's Home Committee, headed by the late Jose Ramon Bermudez, works with the state's migrant workers. It has been plagued by many troubles since it was started in the summer of 1974.

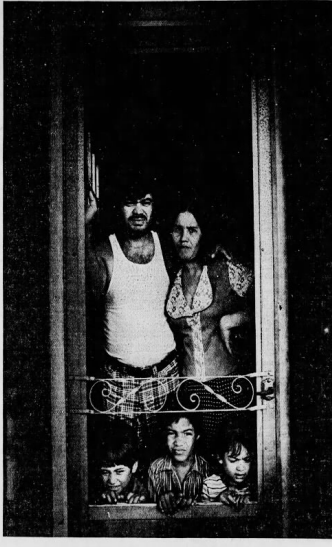
Bermudez announced the home's opening prematurely. Shortly after he died, 70 hungry, homeless migrants arrived on his doorstep from New Jersey.

Bermudez was unable to care for the children. They finally were fed and housed only with the help of several other state officials.

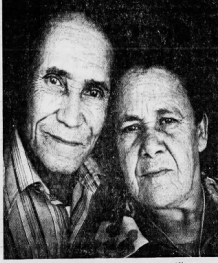
Esperanza is a self-help sewing and craft group that meets regularly, and is expected to develop in Wilmington and Philadelphia.

Formation of the Congress, a union of the community's unions in one of several roles of programs.

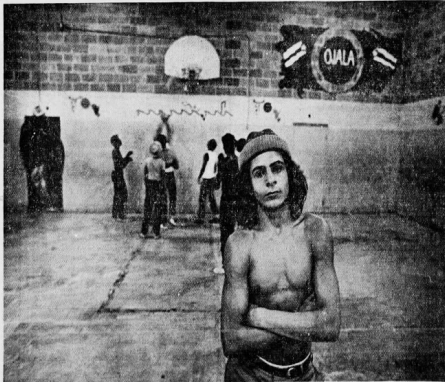
A bilingual program began a year ago in the Wilmington schools. A year before there were three Spanish-speaking teachers in the city's schools for about 200 Spanish-speaking children. The new federally funded program



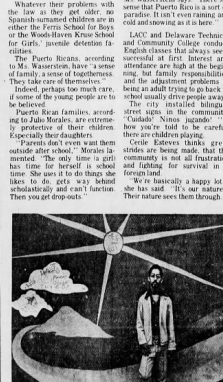
At their door are Mr. and Mrs. Luis Burgos and their children, Luis, 7, Jose, 8, and Malebel, 4. (Staff photos by Pat Crowe)



Two older residents, Mr. and Mrs. Ramon Allica.



Mike Gonzalez stands on recreation center basketball court.



Junior Cruz leans against a mural at La Borinqueña.

raised that to 23 bilingual teachers and 13 para-professionals.

"There's been a feeling for a long time that the Puerto Rican community was not getting its fair share," said Luis Wazquez, a Community Legal Services lawyer and the only Spanish-speaking lawyer in the state who was instrumental in making the bilingual program.

"There's a mood of frustration. It's hard to keep up the good values and strengths of back ground and who you are. The community needs a lot to support its sense of culture and language."

The community's relationship with city police seems to have improved, too. Charges by the Puerto Ricans of discrimination against them by Wilmington police have ceased. Both the police and members of the Spanish-speaking community say they've better relations.

Man Frank Rivera Sr., an outspoken member of the community, was arrested and held in jail for a year ago for driving a car of "harassment" went up. Rivera maintained the police didn't understand the Puerto Ricans' practices of "preventing on the plan" and that those who sit outside of an evening drinker beer or wander about are only following the normal customs.

"It's acceptable over there to drink on a corner. Juan Morales

**The language barrier can be frustrating**

said, "Somebody's trying to stop something they've been conditioned to do all their lives."

Nonsense, says Wilmington police officer Ramon (Chico) Rodriguez, himself Puerto Rican.

"I looked up the laws in Puerto Rico on responding," he said recently. "There's no honor all around, and you can't walk around. You've got to be decent just to walk on the plan."

Whatever their problems with the law as they get older, no Spanish-speaking children are in other the Ferry School for Boys or the Woods Haven Krew School for Girls' juvenile detention facilities.

The Puerto Ricans, according to M. Wasserstein, have a sense of family, a sense of togetherness. They take care of themselves. Indeed, perhaps too much care, if some of the young people are to be believed.

Puerto Rican families, according to Julio Morales, are extremely protective of their children. Especially their daughters.

Parents don't even want them outside after school. Morales is convinced. The only time a girl has time for herself is when she goes to the dancing. She likes to get out, way behind everybody and not function. Then you get drop-outs.

Community social events sometimes include dances in neighborhood churches. Weekend night at El Ponce de Leon, a new Spanish restaurant at Harrison St. and Lancaster Ave., with a Latin American band, are lively.

Some youngsters came from her native Puerto Rico to Wilmington last April, having finished high school on the island. She's living with her sister and was hired as a secretary at La Borinqueña.

She likes living here but she's homesick. She has a good social life, a man attraction, but misses her parents.

"I'm probably going back to Puerto Rico to visit in December, but next month, I wish that were not."

It says there, she remembers, warm and tropical. True, she probably wouldn't have a job there and might be starting but she'd be among the people she knows and loves best.

People come here to my city and see the map of Puerto Rico and get a sense of warmth. M. Wasserstein says. "There's a sense that Puerto Rico is a sort of paradise. It isn't even raining and cold and snowing as it is here."

LACC and Delaware Technical and Community College conduct English classes that always seem successful at first. Interest and attendance are high at the beginning, but family responsibilities and the adjustment problems of being an adult trying to go back to school usually drive people away.

The city-installed bilingual street signs in the community, "Calle" versus "jardín," show you're told to be careful. Especially their daughters.

Cecile Esteves thinks great strides are being made. The community is not all frustration and fighting for survival in a time. She sees it to do things she likes to do, gets way behind everybody and not function. Then you get drop-outs.

"We're basically a happy lot," she has said. "It's our nature. Their nature sees them through."