

CPCS Honors Latinx Heritage Month

This year, the Latinx Heritage Month theme is, “Latinos: Driving Prosperity, Power, and Progress in America.” In Massachusetts, the history of the Latinx community reflects migratory patterns in search of economic opportunity, along with consistent community growth. In our state, the first Latinx people to come in significant numbers arrived from Puerto Rico in the 1950s, including many who took on migrant farming jobs that led them from New York, through Connecticut, into the Commonwealth, and then toward Pennsylvania, Ohio, and beyond. From that time to the present, there has been a demographic shift, with some members of the Puerto Rican community staying within key communities and others moving to other cities or suburban locales across Massachusetts.

Our colleague Sam De Jesus, Supervising AA III for PDD-Boston, has lived experience reflective of this history, including his embrace and unyielding connection to “La Isla,” and the foods, culture, and traditions of the Puerto Rican community. Sam connected to CPCS when he was providing building security for a company in Boston and met employees and clients of our agency. At first, he held a stereotypical view toward public defenders, based on street talk and media images, but Sam learned by speaking with our staff and clients about our diversity and how serious and committed we are to the cause for justice.

When a CPCS AA (then called “secretary”) position opened, and through the supportive mentorship of Vanessa Vélez (now our Deputy Chief for our Private Counsel Division), Sam joined our agency and started his journey in support of justice. Sam has been proud to leverage his cultural awareness and Spanish language skills, along with faith in our work, to help when and where needed. He sees the intense complexity and labor it takes to represent our clients, and whether helping to find a client respectable clothes or supporting the legal processing of our cases, he has found a way to lead and support change.

Born in Boston, though most of his family were from Puerto Rico, Sam reflects on having not only African and Taino roots, but also a Chinese heritage born of migration to Puerto Rico after the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the movement of Chinese people from Cuba when Fidel Castro assumed leadership. He describes family get-togethers as “outrageous.” As a youth, Sam played baseball with some of the early Latinx nonprofit organizations and the Cardinal

Cushing Center in Boston's South End and attended Charlestown and English High Schools in the early 1980s, which exposed him to the vestiges of racism stemming from busing to integrate the Boston Public Schools. Sam heard the threats to turn over the buses he and his classmates were on, though thankfully, he did not experience further trauma.

Sam grew up in the tradition of massive Puerto Rican Festival parades in Boston and was inspired and sustained by the food and music brought here from the island. Today, for those who appreciate "old-school" traditions, Sam is a devotee of using a steel box grater to create the mash of yautia and green bananas essential to the creation of pasteles, an Indigenous, West African and Spanish-inspired banana leaf-wrapped meat pies in the tradition of tamales, pierogies, and empanadas. He sees how the community has changed, with more recent migratory trends watering down Puerto Rican political power but recognizes the great potential for the Latinx community to come together across our differences.

Today, the population of Latinx in Massachusetts is slightly over 1 million people, out of 7 million total residents, with roughly a quarter living in poverty. The population of native-born Latinx people is estimated at 69%, a number heavily influenced by the Puerto Rican community. A 2020 report from the Mauricio Gaston Institute at UMass-Boston noted that 48% of the 336,369 Puerto Ricans in Massachusetts as of 2017 reside in five cities – Boston, Worcester, Lawrence, Holyoke, and Springfield¹, with the remainder dispersed across other Commonwealth communities.

The next largest Latinx groups and their places of residence include Dominicans (Boston, Lynn, Lawrence, and Methuen), Salvadorans (Everett, Revere, and Somerville), Guatemalans, Hondurans, Colombians, and Mexicans. Each of these groups has significant representation within 20 key Massachusetts cities and towns where Latinx people have found homes, but many must face the struggle of bias based on their immigrant status, whether documented or not. It is therefore essential to recall that the vote for state and federal elections requires citizenship status, thus the importance of the Puerto Rican community as an anchor to Latinx political power cannot be understated, disparaged, or ignored.

¹ https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=gaston_pubs

Sheer numbers cannot define the economic reality in the Latinx community, but along with the wealth of tradition, culture, and an inherent drive to work and achieve, the potential for progress is clear and strong. Our good colleague Sam De Jesus makes the case plain through his career of vision, commitment, and compassion. Indeed, it is within these attributes that the Latinx community will persevere and take its deserved place of equality within our state and the nation.

Please take time to consider attending one or more of the events being celebrated across Massachusetts to share in the rich and deep culture within the Latinx community and bring your appetite!

Links to Consider

Here are some additional reading, viewing, and fun links:

Report: The Growing Population of Latinos

https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1309&context=gaston_pubs#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20American%20Community,represents%2014.4%25%20of%20the%20population.

Report: Persistent Economic Challenges and Opportunities facing Latinos in Massachusetts

https://www.bostonindicators.org/-/media/indicators/boston-indicators-reports/report-files/avancemosya_final050222.pdf

Chinese Immigration to Puerto Rico

<https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/how-chinese-immigrants-found-their-place-in-puerto-rico/>

History of Busing in Boston (YouTube link courtesy of our colleague, Kyle Cormier)

PLEASE NOTE: these materials include harsh and racist language along with difficult images as part of this ugly moment in the fight for racial equality

https://youtu.be/S2Hm8jqByvU?si=HsgBrP_GGJrN3uKd

https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/busing-boston

The History of Pasteles

<https://www.eater.com/2019/12/18/21028467/pasteles-puerto-rico-christmas-holiday-dish-history>