

They: Latinos in North Carolina

Written by Robert J. McCarthy
Thursday, 21 January 2010 10:07 -

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A Personal Essay

By Bob McCarthy

Senora Gavilan arrives with her baby at the hospital business office where I volunteer. Mounting medical bills have driven her here. She appears tired, the twists in her single, black braid loosened, perhaps a visual into her state of mind. She responds to my efforts when I greet her, guide her to the office, and assist her in filling out the application for aid, each time with a smiling "*gracias*."

I serve as a Spanish interpreter, "*mas o menos*" (more or less) I always say, adding, "*mas menos que mas* ." It usually draws a smile, if not a laugh, from nervous lips. Three years before I retired, I decided to learn Spanish. More than an oft-deferred life goal, I wanted to help. Latinos are a community presence in Henderson, North Carolina, many of them speaking little or no English.

Sra. Gavilan's handshake is mild, she wears a floral perfume, and her voice is low-pitched, slightly hoarse, and warm. It is the voice, as it always is, that tips me over, that cinches the meeting of individuals. Whatever I might be for her, she is a distinct person for me, one who leans forward and engages my eyes when she speaks. We go from there, working together to complete our complementary tasks.

Learning she is eligible for help, her eyes tear. Her gratitude swells when I insist upon carrying her daughter as I escort Sra. Gavilan back to her well-traveled Chevy Blazer. A quick glance at the baby reveals two staring black eyes over a puddling brown smile. Teeth lie in the future. I wonder if the baby senses her mother's relief?

I am always amazed at the burden of trust people like Sra. Gavilan must shoulder even to come to the office. The overwhelming majority are *indocumentados* who don't speak English. Discovery has to be a constant fear.

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I've often heard Latinos dismissively referred to as *they*. But for me, Sra. Gavilan is no longer (if she ever was) a part of a faceless grouping. She is who she is, a human being with a unique personality and an intelligence ready to engage. And in that, she enriches my life even as I try to make hers a bit less burdensome.

Pass a construction site in Henderson, you will likely find Latinos working. Where at one time there were set-asides excluding Latinos—masonry conceded to blacks, finish carpentry to whites—that is changing. *They* increasingly do everything that involves labor, what I call *real* work. Agriculture, lawn and property maintenance, manufacturing (what little there is) — *they* are there.

My wife and I contracted to have the exterior of our house painted. Jorge—"call me George"—and his crew, Latinos all, arrived and went to work. Between reversed ball caps and trimmed mustaches, their eyes rarely strayed from the task at hand, even when conversing. The white contractor told me, "I've been in the business over twenty years, tried all kinds. These guys are the best."

By the time the paint dried, they had prepped and painted two interior rooms while repairing cracks in inner walls, a damaged ceiling, and a rotted threshold. They also added mortar to gaping brickwork, and replaced warped decking. All of this in addition to the exterior painting, and the work was exemplary. More importantly for my wife, they removed a snake that fell off the garage door as they were painting it.

In brief interludes—a water break, a breather from intense North Carolina heat, general clean up—I spoke to Jorge in Spanish. I never pass up an opportunity to practice. He complimented my "*acento*." In turn, I expressed my satisfaction with his good work.

With the increasing presence of Latinos in Henderson, I've heard occasional sniping comments about "the language," as in *they* don't speak "it"—*it*, of course, English. In Henderson (as I suspect is true elsewhere), the children of Latino immigrants learn English rapidly, even when Spanish is solely spoken at home. But if the barrier of language is what primarily separates some residents of North Carolina from others, then I want to help dismantle it or, at the very least, help *them* negotiate it. It was for this reason I underwent the hospital's volunteer orientation.

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As far-fetched as the *anglo* fear of a Spanish conquest strikes me, it might be more conceivable if everyone who spoke Spanish was culturally similar. Descriptors like “Latino” falsely suggest a single people, providing only a telescoped *they*. At best, “Latino” loosely clumps culturally diverse peoples who speak many languages derived from Spanish. Moreover, when we overcategorize, does this not blind us to the individual? If I say “Latina” rather than “Senora Gavilan,” am I not forcing her into a *them*, leaving me subservient to a bias I might fail to recognize?

Craig Ferguson, comedic host of *The Late Late Show* (I TiVo it), ends each night asking, “What did we learn tonight?” a humorous lead-in to signing off. But the question is more broadly relevant to my experiences with Latinos in Henderson. What have I learned thus far?

I’ve become more aware of the humanity, collectively and individually, of people striving for a better life. Rather than ennobling them (the *Dances with Wolves* effect), the humanity I detect is *human*, and in that, warts and all, it brings them closer to me. To *us*.

I’ve also become increasingly aware of North Carolinian generosity through our programs to keep the undocumented from drowning beneath waves of unremitting medical bills. The experience has increased my sense of pride in North Carolina. Behind the public grumbling against *them*, we do care.

And I’ve learned the Spanish word for “disrobing,” i.e., *quitarse*, as in “*Por favor, quítese su ropa*.” Please remove your clothes. Perhaps I should explain.

I was asked to assist Senor and Senora Camarillo in her preparation for an endoscopy, an outpatient procedure designed to visually examine the upper gastrointestinal tract. An attractive couple, they seemed a good match, her quiet assertiveness balancing his courtly reserve. She asked the questions, then, they would confer. Their hope was that her doctor might finally be able to explain continuous GI distress; mine—that I might alleviate her presurgical anxiety by explaining the *procedimiento* and guiding her through each stage of the process until the OR nurse took over.

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I accompanied her to the surgical-prep bay, interpreting the nurse's instructions up to the moment she was to disrobe and don a surgical gown. In the middle of my instructions, I forgot the verb for disrobing. Without flinching, Sra. Camarillo reminded me it was "*quitarse*."

Let me quickly add: when I asked Sra. Camarillo, per the nurse's instructions, to disrobe, I also requested that she immediately put on a hospital gown. I experienced no difficulty remembering the verb "to put on." I thanked her for her assistance and left.

I then returned to the husband in the waiting room, and explained where his wife was in the process—omitting the part about disrobing.

What else have I learned?

I've learned we've experienced an influx of people much like our ancestors—possibly the most desperate but likely the bravest. Would I, in similar straits, have the courage to uproot myself to, say Brazil, no matter the opportunity, where I'd become a foreigner without the language, social connections, or cultural acceptance? Where at the caprice of economic downturn I become suspect, perhaps viewed as a drag on native advancement, especially if I'm undocumented?

North Carolina is experiencing an economic downturn. In Vance County, the unemployment percentage is high and rising with the loss of major industries (tobacco, textiles, and manufacturing)—the industries that initially attracted Latino workers. Faced with the impact of this recession, some Latinos will leave; others have already left. To succeed, one must first survive. But the stouthearted, the ones with fiber, will abide. Sra. Gavilan and her *bebe*, Jorge and his

campaneros

, Sra. Camarillo and her husband—all of
them

are still here, seeking to find and fit a niche.

They

will remain, eventually becoming fully fledged Americans.

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They will become *we*.

(The names in this piece are fictional; the individuals exist.)