

DEMOGRAPHICS

Latin boon for Brand Canada

Divisive immigration politics in the U.S. are pushing talented Latinos further north

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In brassy spirit, 24-year-old Jesus Allen – a member of Toronto's fastest-growing ethnic community – advertises his opinion of the United States on his jeans.

The words emblazoned in deep blue marker aren't very neighbourly and though the "c" has been omitted from the four-letter curse word preceding the name "Bush," the point is clear.

"I would never live there; moving there is like being a second-class citizen," Allen says in an urbane Spanish accent, while having lunch at Tacos El Asador, a popular Latin-American restaurant on Bloor St. Like thousands of others from Mexico, Colombia and his own native Venezuela, Allen has instead chosen Canada as the place where his future will unfold.

And as the politics of immigration continue to alienate the largest visible minority group in the U.S., many Latinos are joining others across the Hispanic world looking northward to right an American Dream gone wrong.

"We can still jump from here to sell in the U.S. and Latin America and, in the future, Europe," says Adrian Gonzalez, president of Fortul International Inc., a cosmetics and nutritional supplements manufacturer that just relocated its head office from Guadalajara, Mexico to Etobicoke. It plans to hire 60 staff here to handle its supplements production.

Even though Fortul sends the majority of its exports to the U.S., Gonzalez says relocating there wasn't an option.

"For my family I chose Canada because of the sense of security here. The discrimination is almost nothing," Gonzalez says. "In the (United) States, that's not the case."










Increased business between Canada and NAFTA partner Mexico is only part of the \$100 billion in foreign direct investment being pumped into Latin America – twice the amount we invest in Asia, where the vast majority of our immigrants come from.

Hispanics, market thyselfes

As Caribana takes its turn among the city's major cultural festivals – dominated by the highly visible Chinese, South Asian and Caribbean communities – Mauricio Ospina is determined to make Torontonians more aware of his booming but overshadowed community.

And as America's reputation wanes, statements made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper two weeks ago while on a trade trip to Colombia and Chile suggest the Conservative government wants to capitalize on the growing popularity of Brand Canada throughout the Latin American world.

"We recently launched free trade negotiations with Peru, Colombia and the Dominican Republic. We remain committed to negotiating an agreement with the Central American Four of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua," the Prime Minister said at an event organized by the Chile-Canada Chamber of Commerce in Santiago.

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"Canada is committed to playing a bigger role in the Americas and to doing so for the long term." It's a promise Gonzalez says has already attracted a number of Mexican businesspeople and professionals.

"We have a better quality of life here and we're still very close to our biggest consumer market. My children already consider this their home." They don't want to go back, he says – and they don't want to live south of the border.

Family members living in the U.S. are constantly subjected to treatment he doesn't want his children exposed to, Gonzalez says. "Discrimination is something the U.S. just lives with."

John Trasvina, president and general counsel of the Los Angeles-based Mexican-American Legal Defence and Educational Fund, is at the centre of the current crisis facing the Hispanic community in America. He says he understands why more and more Hispanics are choosing Canada over the U.S.

"We're now a community of 45 million in the country, and not everyone feels the same, but I'll tell you a story: When you hear about a woman in a grocery store speaking to her children in Spanish and someone says, 'Hey, speak English, this is America', it's that type of interaction that drives people away."

Trasvina mentions legislation that has further alienated the Hispanic community in the U.S., such as the Real ID Act, aimed at undocumented Hispanic immigrants and passed in 2005. It will require all Americans to provide proof of citizenship and only American documentation or foreign passports when obtaining a driver's licence, marginalizing thousands of immigrants without such documentation.

When it takes effect next year, Americans will also be required to register for government-approved ID cards, without which people will be unable to travel by air or Amtrak, open a bank account or enter a federal building.

"The goal of politicians is to gain popularity by making life difficult for illegals," Trasvina says, referring to the large number of Latinos, primarily from Mexico and Cuba, that enter the U.S. illegally every day, which has inflamed the immigration debate in recent years.

The country has been further polarized by current policies that deny immigrants' children access to educational grants and proposed legislation that would strip illegal immigrants of almost all the rights that currently protect their place in America's menial labour market.

"Certain attempts to pass laws raise the hostility level. A few angry people on talk shows can drive you away."

When asked how these negative perceptions have spread outside America and across the Hispanic world, Trasvina recalls an ugly incident that exploded in Los Angeles on May 1, during a national day of protest against the lack of immigrant rights.

Los Angeles police swarmed MacArthur Park to break up what was widely described as a peaceful rally attended by thousands of Hispanics, including women and young children.

Pictures still posted on the web show police beating up protesters with batons, firing foam bullets at people and assaulting Latino journalists from a number of different countries, including high-profile anchor Pedro Sevcec of the Spanish-language network Telemundo.

Even the city's chief of police said he was "disturbed" by the conduct of his officers.

"Those images reverberated throughout the Latino world," Trasvina says. "It's a very harsh reality in some parts of this country."

It is a reality that Octavio Villegas no longer has to face.

"In Canada you feel like you belong here, you are not self-conscious about being Hispanic," says the Columbia University MBA graduate, who was also educated at Oxford University before setting up an investment consulting company in Miami.

Villegas, who was raised in Colombia, moved to Toronto four years ago and now works as a financial consultant with Investors Group. He says a growing number of Hispanic professionals are flocking to Canada because of the quality of life here.

"It's much better than what I've seen in the States," he says, citing the benefits of universal health care and the Charter of Rights. "America's loss is really Canada's gain."