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Poultry, Thread, and Whitewater

By

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“Poultry, Thread, and Whitewater”

Keynote Speech

by

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at

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Before I begin my remarks, I would like to thank Dr. Guillermo Irizarry for inviting me to the conference. I also want to thank everyone on the conference committee for making this event possible. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the other keynote speakers at the conference — Dr. Tomás Almaquer and Dr. Ilán Staváns — as well as all the panel speakers, for their research and scholarship on important issues facing Latinos. I can honestly say that I will be leaving the conference knowing more about Latinos and this complex society for having been here. Again, thank you very much.

As someone who still remembers her childhood days in San Sebastián, Puerto Rico, before my family moved to the U.S.A., I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today about the Puerto Rican experience in Willimantic, Connecticut, where Eastern Connecticut State University is located. Clearly the range of scholarship regarding the Latino community in Connecticut and beyond is broad. This conference is evidence of the level of expertise and commitment that our community is bringing to rethinking the Latino intellectual ecology. Today, I would like to use the real-life experiences of a local community just ten miles down the road to explore what is happening to Latin American families living in Connecticut.

We live in the present, but the role of history is critical in our lives. As individuals, history grounds our personal experiences. As a society, history helps frame public policy decisions and gives us social context and a sense of cultural continuity.

As I look back on the history of Puerto Ricans in Willimantic, I hope to shed light on what we, as Latinos, as members of the academy, and as members of our own local communities, can do to help enrich the lives of Latinos and fulfill their dreams.

My research team has interviewed a number of people in Willimantic, while also uncovering some excellent historical documentation and research. In the interests of privacy, I will be using first-person pseudonyms for any individuals mentioned. Also, in the spirit of this conference, I will be using the word Latino instead of Hispanic throughout. And when I speak of “the island,” I will be referring to Puerto Rico. You will also be hearing me speak often of Willimantic and Windham. To be clear, Willimantic is the city that was created in 1833 within the township of Windham, which itself was founded in 1692.

The title of my presentation, “Poultry, Thread, and Whitewater,” not only refers to three economic forces that have emerged over the past 50 years in Willimantic, but also is meant as a reminder of how limited job opportunities have been for Puerto Ricans and people of all backgrounds in Willimantic. This narrow range of employment opportunity has been a major economic impediment in our town, and something that community leaders continue to address. At the same time, as I shall explain, Willimantic is a small rural town in Connecticut’s Quiet Corner that nonetheless has a decidedly urban demographic. In this regard, it may be unique.

How these two socio-economic factors impact Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in Willimantic is of interest to me as a Puerto Rican. When I found out that 57 percent of the schoolchildren in the Windham School System are Latino, compared to the state average of 16 percent, it also became clear to me that the economic well-being and future social order of our entire town is impacted by these issues.

However, while there are certainly cases of racial and ethnic-related discrimination that have served as barriers to progress in Willimantic and elsewhere for Puerto Ricans

and other Latinos, I believe that ultimately, beyond those concerns, we must address the manacles of poverty as an issue of class. To be effective, the solutions to poverty and its symptoms—social ostracism, lack of political power, unemployment, and lower educational attainment—must be addressed for all people, regardless of their race or country of origin. This is especially true in a small town the size of Willimantic.

Puerto Rican Life in Willimantic: The First 25 Years

I would like to start my review of Puerto Rican life in Willimantic by going back in time 50 years. A 1984 study, sponsored by the Windham Regional Community Council and conducted by two UCONN graduate students, found that the first Puerto Ricans immigrating to Willimantic came in 1956, recruited to town by the Hartford Poultry Company, which sent representatives to Puerto Rico to actively recruit workers. One of the company's supervisors, Don Cheo, and his wife Eloa, would loan airfare to the workers, who arrived in town to stay in the Cheo's boarding house, paying \$20 a week to live there.

Several years later, the American Thread Company, commonly known as ATCO, also began to send recruiters to the island to bring back Puerto Rican workers. They copied exactly what the Poultry Company had done. The reasons for the recruitment campaigns were several: the two companies were desperate for workers, and knew from migrant farm workers coming to Connecticut that Puerto Ricans had a strong work ethic and were willing to perform difficult jobs for low wages if necessary. And Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens, which eliminated the need for visas.

Puerto Rican workers came to Willimantic not only because wages were better, but also because certain industries on the island were disappearing. For instance, 50,000 women did home needlework in 1940. My mother and aunts were experts at embroidering. They embroidered gloves beautifully and made a steady income doing so. By 1960, that figure was down to 10,000; by 1970, the industry had vanished.

Imagine the social dynamic — groups of people who could not speak English coming to town with a guaranteed job when they arrived. “Rosario” gives us some sense of the time in a 1984 interview: *“We were 14 young girls who were brought here (from the south coast) to work at the chicken factory. The beds were in a line and two of us would sleep in each bed. Our sponsor would lock us up to prevent us from leaving the house late at night.”*

Rosario and her friends processed 3,000 chickens an hour: *“The work was fast and sometimes the girls would cut themselves with the scissors.”*

“Norberto,” a Puerto Rican who came to Willimantic the more typical way — Florida to New Jersey to Connecticut — also worked at the poultry plant. His work consisted of killing 40,000 chickens a day for processing: *“I worked there two months; if I hadn't left, I would have died there.”* “Norberto” eventually went to work at the American Thread Company where the money was better, although he lost a finger in the 1970s in a dyeing machine. The work was dangerous but the money was better and jobs were seen as an improvement from what was typically agricultural work back in Puerto Rico. Almost two thirds of the Puerto Ricans who responded to the 1984 survey indicated their first job was either at Hartford Poultry or the American Thread Company.

The Hartford Poultry Company was located on Capitol Drive in a building that now houses the *Willimantic Chronicle* newspaper. The company was big enough to cause

pollution problems. Forty years ago in 1967, long before we were talking about “green” initiatives, the City of Willimantic had to ask the poultry company to pay \$1,500 a month to clean up what had become a serious problem of excessive grease and chicken parts in the city’s sewers. No wonder Norberto said he would have died if he stayed at the processing plant. The work was dirty, tedious, and dangerous. There is evidence that workers as young as 16 worked in the plant.

Killing, cleaning, and processing thousands of chickens each day from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., day after day, was a torturous introduction to what had been imagined as the good life in America. Other than a machine that took the feathers off the chickens, everything was done by hand. The women hung the chickens upside down on hooks by the feet, and then the men cut off the heads and feet. Women pulled the entrails out by hand, and since the chicken carcasses were hot, the result was often swollen hands. Every chicken part—livers, gizzards, and so on—had a team of specialists performing the task of cutting up the parts, washing them, and packaging them. The Puerto Ricans cut their fingers off. This was common place.

The hourly rate at the poultry factory in the 1960s was \$1.35 an hour for women and about \$100 a week for men, wages that were much better than those on the island. Thus, they came to Connecticut looking for a better income and a better life. As “Dolores” noted in 1984, “You couldn’t make that anywhere in Puerto Rico.” For instance, construction workers in San Juan might make \$45/week, and housecleaning in Ponce might bring in \$25/week. To put the wage difference in perspective, 62 percent of Puerto Ricans were below the poverty threshold on the island in 1980, compared to 27 percent in Willimantic. But in return for better money, Puerto Ricans endured difficult conditions. As the 1984 study noted, *“The jobs that Puerto Ricans have been able to obtain in Willimantic have often been the lower paying, more unpleasant, and more hazardous jobs in the labor market.”*

It is important to understand that companies like Hartford Poultry and the American Thread Company had offered unskilled and semi-skilled workers employment for many years, dating in the case of the thread company back to the mid-1800s. French-Canadians, Poles, the Irish, and other 19th century immigrants were recruited to Willimantic to work in difficult, sometimes dangerous conditions. As a result, by the time Puerto Ricans started arriving, there was already de facto segregation. The middle class, including college professors from UConn and Eastern, professionals, and the managers at the thread mills, lived in Victorian homes in the “Hill Section,” while low-income families lived in what was known earlier in the 20th century as “Down Sodom,” or the downtown/Main Street area.

The American Thread Company had had a complicated history in Willimantic long before it started recruiting Puerto Ricans from the island. The Willimantic Linen Company was established in 1854, but by 1857, it had converted to thread manufacturing. By the 1890s, the company employed 3,200 people and was Connecticut’s largest employer. In fact it was the largest cotton mill in the world, occupying 1 million square feet on 40 acres of land on both sides of the Willimantic River near the junction of Union, Jackson, and Main Streets. Its workers made 85,000 miles of thread a day!

The plant manager, William E. Barrows, offered his workers free snacks on breaks, and provided them with a library, dance pavilion, and The Oaks housing project, a

precursor to Windham Heights and other projects later occupied by Puerto Ricans. Mr. Barrows was an enlightened man.

Thomas Edison's first job was illuminating the linen company's Mill #4, which was the first mill in the world to get electricity. In 1898, the mill was purchased by the English Sewing Company, along with 13 other New England mills, and renamed the American Thread Company.

In 1925, the American Thread Company in Willimantic endured a nine-month strike after 3,000 workers walked off the job because of an announced 10 pay cut. A major flood in 1936 and the hurricane of 1938 were two natural disasters that further tried the will of the people of Willimantic.

By the 1960s, ATCO was Willimantic's largest employer, with 2,000 workers. It began to recruit Puerto Ricans from the island to jobs that were paying \$2.34 an hour. In addition to thread rolling machines, there were dye machines to operate, as well as spooling apparatus. In addition to these "task" areas, piece work sewing was also performed by Puerto Rican women to earn extra money.

Workers at both the chicken factory and the thread mills would bring their lunches from home. Unlike today, there were no local restaurants catering to Latino palettes. In fact, years later, people would have family bring rice and beans to work so that they could eat "at least one meal a day" of food they were used to eating at home.

By 1975, ATCO's workforce had been reduced to 1,300 workers, and then down to 550 by 1984. A year later, the mill closed. After it left Willimantic in 1985, ATCO moved to North Carolina, buying out the famous Coats and Clark Thread Company. In the early 1990s, ATCO relinquished control and the company is now again Coats American, selling industrial threads made by a small workforce of 100 workers, a far cry from the height of its days in Willimantic. Let's talk about who was here before us.

The influx of Puerto Ricans in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s did not go over well with the incumbent population of Willimantic, and one can understand why. In a town of 12,000, which had seen only a one percent annual population growth from 1900-1940, any flood of job seekers would be viewed with trepidation. Other ethnic groups struggling to survive in Willimantic — French Canadians, Poles, Irish — were upset. Newspaper reporter Thomas Beardsley, in his 1993 book, *Willimantic Industry and Community*, shared the personal testimony of people that reflect the tension and racial animosity that was evident at the time:

- *"We were born and brought up in Willimantic and we were working here. It seems that we should get a better job than those Puerto Ricans."*
- *"The American Thread Company brought planeloads from Puerto Rico to Connecticut, 50 to 60 at a time. It got to a point that in some departments, they only spoke Spanish."*
- *"One Puerto Rican was sent back home by American Thread to recruit workers and he got \$50 for everyone who signed up."*
- *"They cut everybody's throat, you know, them Puerto Ricans... they pushed us out."*

This natural concern for self-preservation by the white community in Willimantic reinforced the typical discrimination and distrust that emerges when groups from different cultures come together in communities accustomed to ethnic homogeneity. The result was an underlying racial tension and the typical signs of bigotry (*"I was called*

'Spik,'” “If you couldn't speak English, they put you in special education,” “The Americans would show disgust because we spoke Spanish to each other.”) In a 1998 interview, “Dahlia” tells of having the windows in her family's home broken in the late 1960s: “We were the only Hispanics on the block. Most of the people around didn't want us here.”

There was also tension initially within the Puerto Rican community. The 1984 study I have referred to makes the point that the early migration from Puerto Rico included people from the western highlands and the south coast, and the two groups had trouble getting along. The *prietos* (“dark ones”) from Juana Diaz and the *jibaros* (“hillbillies”) of the highlands took turns belittling each other and picking fights. Over time, assimilation into the local community and additional immigration served to blunt the discord.

Public policy also was not always helpful to the Puerto Rican cause. In the late 1960s, Puerto Ricans in town created the People's Barrio Place, a youth center in the Union Street area, home to many Puerto Ricans in town. In the 1970s, downtown urban renewal demolished the building. The situation mimicked what was happening in Hartford. As “Tom” in Ruth Glasser's 1997 book, *Aqui Me Quedo*, remarked, “Urban renewal tore the economic heart out of the community. They broke up the physical and geographical ties that make a community a community.” Puerto Ricans in Willimantic also attempted to organize politically, forming the Puerto Rican Organization Program, which provided a myriad of services and created a sense of empowerment for its clients. It has disappeared in the past 10 years.

While the experience in Willimantic was certainly not unique, it is not the norm in terms of how Puerto Ricans have come to this country. As U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans have mobility and access far beyond that of other Latin American nationals. Like my own father did, many Puerto Rican men would make the journey to the States, perhaps on their own or in a small group, reaching Miami, New York, or another Eastern seaboard landing point. They might have followed a relative or friend, had some other contact, or in the case of the very brave, ventured off the island without much support expected when they got here. They melted into large urban areas or passed through rural towns as migrant farm workers. However, changing a small town's makeup, as Puerto Ricans did in Willimantic, certainly was not the norm.

The Impact of the Economic Downturn

At its peak in the 1970s, Willimantic's downtown was thriving, with shoe stores, jewelry stores, a Woolworths, the Capitol Theater, and even a maternity store. Since then, life has changed for Puerto Ricans living in Willimantic, and indeed, for the town's other residents — African Americans, whites, and other Latinos. The loss of Willimantic's major employers has impacted everyone. Hartford Poultry closed in 1972; the Kendall Company, which made a fabric used in disposable diapers closed in 1983; the American Thread Company moved to North Carolina in 1985, after reducing its Willimantic operations for several years; and the Rogers Corporation, an electronic components manufacturer, moved to China in the late 1990s. In the middle of this upheaval, 30 percent of Willimantic's Puerto Ricans were unemployed in 1984, and faced the prospects of having no transferable skills or English skills.

Similar to other “Rust Belt” towns in New England, there have been no replacement companies and the town no longer has an industrial base. The move to a national service economy means we will not be seeing a resurgence of manufacturing jobs. This not only has had a negative impact on the Puerto Rican population, but the growth in other Latino groups, especially Mexican immigrants, along with growing high school and college populations, has created significant pressure on the lower end of the job market.

I want to dig a little deeper to see how the plant closings I have just described, especially Hartford Poultry and the American Thread Company — the two companies that had gone to the island to recruit Puerto Ricans — have had a long-term impact on the lives of Puerto Ricans in Willimantic.

1. Poor English Language Skills. Since entire department floors at the American Thread Company spoke Spanish, for the most part, there was no need or any interest in learning English. Puerto Rican families in Willimantic, like the rest of the country, reinforced their native language skills at home by chiefly speaking Spanish. 82 percent of Puerto Rican families in the United States speak Spanish at home, and 40 of Puerto Rican homes in the United States in 2000 were considered to be “linguistically isolated” (households in which family members 14 years and up were deficient), the highest percentage of any Latino group. Compare this to 1980 Census data that showed 44 percent of Puerto Rican households in Willimantic with similar poor English language skills among 18-year-olds and older.

The language problem that was hidden when entire American Thread Company departments spoke only Spanish became evident as these workers now sought work in other companies. In addition, while the school system initiated a bilingual program in 1970, “it was like a caste system,” in the words of “Mary.” If your surname was Latino, you were tracked into the program, whether you could speak English or not. The Windham Bilingual Program now has a program called *Compañeros*, with Latino and Anglo students taught language skills in English and Spanish, as well as all the other academic areas. The program is in its 19th year and serves about 200 students out of the 700 who are enrolled in bilingual education. The other 500 are in the traditional track for Latinos transitioning to English. Given the emerging demographics of Willimantic, the program’s advisory board wants to create an intra-district Magnet School to expand the program. The issue of language continues to be central in the Latino attainment gap.

2. “Circular migration.” While some Puerto Ricans ventured back and forth to the island, some returned permanently to Puerto Rico. In 1977, after the poultry plant closed but before the thread mills left Willimantic, the net migration back to the island was 70,000 people. Others continued traveling back and forth, either following seasonal work or their hopes and dreams. Anecdotal comments from local Puerto Ricans say this has resulted in negative inertia regarding the acquisition of English language skills, community integration, and political presence.

3. De facto Residential Segregation. For almost 50 years, Puerto Ricans have lived in housing projects with names such as Windham Heights, Ivy Gardens, and Village Heights. In 1995, Willimantic had the third highest number of public housing units in Connecticut, despite being a town of less than 15,000 people at the time. In addition, Puerto Ricans in Willimantic are largely a renter population; 85 percent rent, compared to the New England average of 68 percent. They are looked down upon by Anglo property owners as people receiving services yet not paying property taxes. Ironically, since they do not pay taxes, they cannot leverage their taxes to demand better services.
4. Job Disintegration. Puerto Ricans suffered job disintegration in Willimantic. *Willimantic Chronicle* President Lucy Crosbie said: “It was difficult for Puerto Ricans to move beyond those first entry level jobs.” Without the need to learn any skills, some Puerto Ricans stayed at the thread company for almost 30 years. It was a self-contained workplace without need for a sub-industry of local suppliers and maintenance/service companies. Everything was done in house by someone who was essential to ATCO, but whose skills weren’t applicable elsewhere. Once the mill closed, in addition to inadequate language skills, the workers also had no transferrable job skills. As a result, Willimantic’s three major employers—the hospital, the town, and Eastern Connecticut State University — have Latino employee numbers far below the population density. Eastern’s figures are 9 percent Latino; the hospital’s number is 10 percent; and the town of Windham Latino workforce is at 12 percent.
5. Other social issues. In the 1980s, as the mills closed, Willimantic’s welfare recipients per capita were second only to Hartford. Even in 1995, 38 percent of the town’s residents were on welfare, many of them Latinos. The Covenant Soup Kitchen began operations in November 1981 to help feed many of the people who were out of work, due to the closing of the American Thread Company. The Soup Kitchen continues feeding the needy to this day. In the absence of job opportunities, selling drugs was seen by many as inevitable. In 2003, a *Hartford Courant* series on Willimantic’s heroin problem spawned a feature on CBS’s “60 Minutes,” and the town took another huge hit in public perception. Unfortunately, the media connected the drug trade with Puerto Ricans in Willimantic. Only now is it beginning to overcome this reputation.

The Future

As a result of these factors, on the whole, Puerto Ricans have not achieved the social and economic upward mobility they may have dreamed of when they originally moved to Willimantic. Yet despite the loss of its industrial base, Willimantic is optimistic and this optimism flows to the Latino population. Many of the people we talked with expressed a similar view that Puerto Ricans had become more integrated into the life of the town and had begun to see political representation and a number of services created in response to the needs of the Latino community.

There are many positive signs that progress is being made and new opportunities are being created. The Connecticut Small Business Development Center is interested in assisting local Latino small businesses. The Spanish American Merchants Association

will soon open a satellite office in town. Of special note: the First Selectman and his staff are learning Spanish!

There are other positive signs, including efforts to revitalize the downtown area — renovation of the thread mills, façade upgrades on Main Street buildings, and the emerging Willimantic Whitewater Partnership project. Unfortunately, this project has not been welcomed by Latinos the way the job opportunities of the 1960s and '70s were. They see the project as long-term, and have criticized it as being for the rich. Another person I interviewed said, *“Kayaking? Are you kidding me?”* One local Puerto Rican leader dismissed it by saying, *“We don’t swim.”* In addition, no Latinos sit on the Whitewater Board of Directors, although the board is trying hard to recruit from the Latino community. One board member acknowledges, *“We are talking about the future, 10 years from now, and our local Latino community is concerned about feeding their families today.”* With both parents in local Latino families working, sometimes at multiple jobs, no wonder one person said, *“We don’t have time for politics,”* referring to participation in community-based ventures similar to the Whitewater project. The Whitewater Board is confident they will attract Latinos to serve, given the project includes plans for hiking trails, parks, commercial growth, and job creation. How this will be done is something I do not have an answer to, nor have I heard one yet from community leaders. This issue of how to convince local Latinos to buy into what has the promise of being a transformational economic development project for Willimantic is fundamental to the future of the town. Indeed, it may be the number one, long-term public policy issue facing Willimantic’s leaders.

The Puerto Ricans who came to town 50 years ago and their descendants have survived in Willimantic by acting like a small village within a village. Neighborhoods are based on family and friends, where food, child care, transportation, and other property and responsibilities are shared. As Ruth Glasser described in *Aqui Me Quedo*, as more Puerto Ricans arrived in Connecticut towns, they began to build networks to solve problems of discrimination and misunderstanding, to re-create their hometown atmospheres, and just to help with the business of day-to-day living. “Margarita” explains: “We were brought up (to be) very Americanized. It was the thing to do if you wanted your children to succeed and go on to college and so forth.”

However, depending on whom you talk to, while many lifelong Puerto Ricans acknowledge that things have improved in Willimantic, residual racial tension, political disinterest, poor educational performance, and the lack of an economic base continue to be present to a great extent.

Challenges Facing Puerto Ricans and the City of Willimantic Today

Let us bring ourselves forward to the present. What is life like today for Puerto Ricans and the other residents of Willimantic? Willimantic continues to be a rural town with an urban personality. Willimantic’s Latino population, which is probably over 40 percent, is far greater than the state (11 percent) or national (13 percent) average, and is the 3rd highest figure among Connecticut cities. While officially at 57 percent, the ratio of Latino children in the local schools is closer to 70 percent, according to observers, compared to 16 percent throughout the state. In 1984, the figure was only 18 percent, most of them being Puerto Rican. At the same time that 5.7 percent of the state’s population is Puerto Rican, 21 percent of Willimantic’s population is Puerto Rican.

The New Migration. A new wave of immigrants, largely coming from Mexico and other Central and South American countries, is again changing the face of Willimantic. Unlike the Puerto Rican community, these new immigrants are not U.S. citizens and most are undocumented. As a result, no one knows for sure how many are coming into town. Anecdotally, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of day laborers on Main Street corners, all of whom get paid in cash. As First Selectman Michael Paulhus noted in a May 2006 article in the *Hartford Courant*, firming up the numbers — who and how many are coming into town and where they are employed — is “*tough to get your arms around.*” As the *Courant* article noted, “*The numbers are impossible to pin down.*”

One social institution that is keeping track of numbers is the local hospital. In 2006, 97 percent of the clientele at the Windham Memorial Hospital’s prenatal clinic were undocumented immigrants. In 2005, the hospital wrote off \$1.6 million in “charity care,” up 60 percent from 2003. And today, the hospital’s emergency room has become a de facto doctor’s office for immigrants without health care. Town officials are also seeing a significant increase in the clientele in such agencies as the Department of Health and Social Services, the Windham Region Community Council, and the ACCESS agency.

For years, the Puerto Rican community in Willimantic has said that their own community is undercounted, due no doubt to mobility issues and distrust of formal authority. This underreporting is even more dramatic within the Mexican population, which does not enjoy citizenship status. The likelihood is that as this demographic shift occurs, more of Willimantic’s Latino population will be undocumented, needing social services, and not being in the position of openly pursuing educational, social, and economic options. At the same time, social service agencies, already operating on threadbare budgets, are being strained to breaking by demand for services, as is the Windham School System.

Whereas the Latino community in Willimantic was once chiefly a cohesive, Puerto Rican presence, perhaps 50 percent of the Latino community is Mexican and growing. There are also people from another 8-10 Latin American countries in town. That’s representation from almost half of the 21 countries in Latin America. There are Costa Ricans, Nicaraguans, Dominicans, Cubans, Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Colombians in Willimantic, which makes it more diverse than cities 10 times its size.

It is a new, fluid dynamic and much less cohesive. In addition, there is a natural level of distrust by Puerto Ricans, who feel the Mexican population will take their jobs and compete for services. In addition, it becomes more difficult for the dominant Anglo culture to establish connections. A member of our faculty is leading a local neighborhood group and wanted to translate an informational flyer into Spanish. After the Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Dominicans in his neighborhood demanded a separate flyer for each group, he gave up. It was discouraging to see the division among the Latino subgroups.

What are some of the other opportunities being considered or being implemented in Willimantic in response to the new wave of immigrants?

Activating the Political Pulse. As community leaders grapple with this new migration, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have increased their local political base over the years.

Today there is clear, active Latino political leadership in town, across different national groups. “Juanita” remarks that there have been improvements over the years in social and economic mobility for Puerto Ricans and other Latinos, as well as advances in public policymaking. However, she notes that the Latino community is not as involved politically as it is in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. Nationally, only 38 percent of Puerto Ricans in the United States are registered to vote, and 1.9 million eligible Puerto Rican voters did not vote in 2000. Even so, the number of U.S. citizenship applications is up 61 percent, mostly Latinos, and nationally the experts predict that the age of eligible Latino voters will go from 6 percent in 2002 to 10 percent in 2008.

While Puerto Ricans and other Latinos may vote at higher levels in next year’s national elections, Latinos as a group in Willimantic do not yet constitute a unified political force. One big reason is that they do not seem issues affecting their lives being debated or appearing on the ballot. When issues that impact Latino families are addressed, they respond. So far, they are lukewarm to the Whitewater project, but a “splash park” for children in Lauter Park is being used by the entire community. Jose Cruz, in Andrés Torre’s book, *Latinos in New England*, published last year, comments: “*Connecticut seems to be following the pattern in other states whereby Latinos achieve political representation but are not able to address the basic needs of the community. An important reason for this failure is the absence of a unified policy agenda.*” Establishing such a local agenda could generate support from all corners of the community. What should that policy agenda be? That perhaps is the central idea in this paper.

Confronting and reconciling cultural barriers. The Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies (AHAA) released its report, “The Latino Identity Project,” last November. It detailed a number of cultural differences between the Anglo and Latino populations that impact commerce, education, politics — all the interactions that occur between people — ranging from religion to time reference, from family to gender. It grouped cultural attributes into four categories: Gender Perception; Time/Space Perception; Spirituality; and Interpersonal Orientation. For instance, while Latino cultures generally take a more traditional view of gender roles, the dominant American culture emphasizes women’s rights and equality of the sexes. When Latinos and Anglos sit down for a meeting, neither is being rude when one group wants to get started promptly at 9 a.m. while the other needs to reestablish social connections. These are just two examples of culturally-embedded perceptions and behavior. We cannot overcome our sometimes negative reactions to each other, without a deeper understanding and accommodation.

CONCLUSION

The issues of upward social mobility, economic franchise, political representation, and educational opportunity for Puerto Ricans, other Latinos, and the rest of our American society are complex. I hope that this case study of Willimantic, Connecticut, has provided you with an historical and contemporary perspective of the dynamic forces being played out in the community down the road. Clearly, we face urban issues in this rural Connecticut town.

We have a responsibility as members of the society at large, to better understand what must be done to improve the lives of Latino residents in Willimantic, in

Connecticut, and in our great nation. We cannot do this as polarized groups. In a community the size of Willimantic, where the Latino population is fast becoming a plurality, if not the majority, we must face these concerns together. Leadership at multiple levels is needed, so I call upon each of you.

If we have communication barriers, we must approach and overcome them from both sides. If there are cultural chasms, we need to bridge them from both ends. If there is misunderstanding based on a lack of knowledge of each other's heritage, let us be about the task of educating each other.

We also have opportunities in Willimantic and in communities such as your own. You can empower Latino voters, to try new teaching methods, and to develop Latino small businesses. The policy agenda is still missing.

That is what we are beginning to do in Willimantic. I urge you as the educated leadership, and as members of your own neighborhoods, to find ways to bring our communities closer together.