



By Janelle Brown

# Welcome to the Salsa Century

Idaho's fast-growing Hispanic population brings changes to the state

**T**he stories trickle out in gestures and smiles, in half-finished phrases that require no translation. Stories of long days toiling at meat-packing plants, cooking at restaurants, tending children, working in fields, driving trucks, cleaning homes, sorting potatoes, landscaping yards. Stories of perseverance and the transcendent power of dreams.

At Boise State's Canyon County Center in Nampa, Hispanic students enrolled in English-as-a-Second-Language classes work on their English and let their hopes fly.

They spin tales of a future far different than the present, where their hard work yields rewards.

"I want to be an accountant," says Oscar Ramirez, who works at a meat-packing plant.

"A trucker, that is my hope," says José Alfredo Garcia, who moves irrigation pipe in Caldwell farm fields.

"I like the computers," says Isabel Cisneros, who tends plants and helps customers at a Nampa berry ranch.

Ambition shines from these students' faces. For a piñata full of reasons, it is ambition that may well be realized. As the Hispanic population swells in southwestern Idaho, the group is gaining new political, economic and cultural clout. While some of that influence is still invisible, it is increasing. And it will exert a profound impact on life here in years ahead, say Hispanic experts and leaders.

"We'll see more Hispanics in prominent roles. We'll see increased acceptance and more sharing of cultures, food and language," predicts Boise State sociology professor Richard Baker, who specializes in Mexican American studies. "It won't be a smooth process, but they will have a much greater voice here."

Sam Byrd, director of the Council on Hispanic Education and a senior majoring in multiethnic studies at Boise State, points to the growing number of Latino-owned shops, restaurants and Spanish-language video stores as examples of what the future holds. "We will be much more visible," Byrd says.

Recent statistics support these assessments. According to the 2000 Census, the Hispanic population in Idaho nearly doubled over the past 10 years and now accounts for more than 8 percent of the state's population.



JOHN KELLY PHOTO

ESL program coordinator Fern Van Maren works with student Efred Felix, a native of Sinaloa, Mexico.

Nampa's Hispanic population increased 18 percent between 1990 and 2000. In Caldwell, 28 percent of residents claim Hispanic roots; some officials believe that number is low and should be closer to 35 percent.

The dramatic growth in Idaho's Hispanic population has had repercussions around the state on a number of fronts, including the political arena. In August, after months of rancorous debate, Idaho's Commission on Redistricting approved new maps for Idaho's 35 legislative districts that includes five where Hispanics or a combination of Hispanics and Native Americans make up at least 1 of every 5 people.

Hispanic leaders lauded the commission's action. "It's absolutely fantastic," says Byrd. "It gives us a real opportunity for representation."

Growing Hispanic clout also was felt at the State Capitol last spring when the Idaho Legislature overcame considerable opposition to pass a bill that guarantees the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 for almost all of Idaho's farmworkers. While Boise State's Baker says that the victory was mostly symbolic and fell well short of guaranteeing the living wage that is needed, it still points to a new willingness to consider Hispanic issues.

Even Hispanic culture and history recently grabbed headlines when it was announced that the proposed Hispanic Cultural Center in Nampa stands to receive \$2.8 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Commerce. That amount, combined with about \$1 million already raised, would put the project over the top of its funding goal.

"It was a total surprise ... You always have faith something great is going to happen when

you persevere on a project like this," says Ana Schachtell (BA, bilingual/multicultural education, '91) who served as president of the center's board for five years and is now a board member. "Our goal is to create leadership, appreciation and pride for Hispanic culture and people."

Hispanic students are also gaining a stronger foothold in higher education, including Boise State. According to Scott Willison, director of the Center for Multicultural/Educational Opportunities, migrant students who enter college as part of the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), are majoring in engineering, computer science, business and many other fields.

"Each year the qualifications of the applicants are better and better," says Willison, whose office annually fields about 150 applicants for the 40 CAMP scholarships.

Boise State's Hispanic graduates are highly sought after by businesses, Willison adds. "Businesses recognize the value of employees who can provide a different perspective to the organization," Willison says. "Besides being bilingual, our Hispanic graduates are connected to communities and livelihoods that many businesses are unfamiliar with."

Despite the gains in political and cultural stature and the individual success stories of Hispanics in business and education, leaders caution that huge issues loom ahead. The most critical is the school dropout rate among Hispanics in Idaho, estimated at 30-50 percent. This dismal statistic is challenging educators to reassess how to teach children who come from different cultures and have limited English skills.

"You come to first grade in Idaho, and you're

## Young and foreign in America

More and more refugees and immigrants are searching for the American dream right here in Idaho — creating unique challenges for public school administrators.

In the Boise School District alone, educators are grappling with educating more than 1,000 foreign-born students who have been in their adopted country for two years or less. Speaking 57 languages and representing almost three dozen countries, these students must somehow be taught American culture and the English language before being successfully assimilated into a regular classroom.

Achieving that goal has required changes in both how and where instruction is delivered. In order to make the best use of district resources, secondary students are pooled at the Language Academy at Riverglen Junior High School.

Before the academy opened in 1998, students received individual help with their homework and tests but did not get basic language instruction. By pooling district staff, says program supervisor Ann Farris (MA, education/curriculum and instruction, '95), students can more easily achieve language proficiency, resulting in a stronger educational foundation.

"This is a newcomers' model school for students who need intensive English language instruction," she says. The program uses sheltered instruction, which couples standard district curriculum with hands-on learning techniques such as visual aids, group projects and oral presentations. "We use a lot of body language," Farris says.

Jill Ball, a former teacher for Boise State's Asia University program, is beginning her first year at the academy as a beginning English instructor. By answering student questions such as "How old are you?" and "Why do you want to be a teacher?" she smoothly guides her seven high school students through basic grammar and spelling.

By focusing on quickly transitioning students into regular classrooms, Ball says all students benefit from contact with those who are different than they are.

The program's focus on transitioning students out of sheltered classrooms means many second-year students attend a professional-technical center to study electronics, drafting and mechanics, or spend time in elementary schools working as teaching assistants for school credit.

"We need to help them learn the language and decide what they want to do," Farris says. "They are all here because of the American dream — it's still alive ... It's essential that we realize these students are not our guests, they are the future of our communities."

—Kathleen Mortensen

told or it's implied that English is superior, that in order to succeed you must forget your first language," says Byrd, who runs a cross-cultural consulting firm. "We've got to get over our ethnocentric attitude about that."

Political victories such as redistricting also challenge Hispanic leaders to motivate people who may feel disenfranchised to vote. People who have grown up in Mexico under a one-party system may not see voting as something important, observes Baker. And working class people, regardless of ethnicity, historically have a poor turnout at the polls.

There is also the touchy issue of backlash as Hispanic culture moves into the mainstream. "Whenever you have a group that is noticed by the dominant culture, things are going to get worse before they get better," says Byrd. "We aren't going anywhere, and we want to make a difference in our communities. But we know our presence may be misinterpreted."

For Lisa Sanchez, Boise State's studentbody vice president in 1992-93, being Hispanic in Idaho has always involved a certain amount of misinterpretation. Sanchez, who works for the Silver Sage Girl Scout Council, even credits her name "Lisa" to the inflexibility of cultures.

The story goes like this: Years ago, when Sanchez' mother applied for a Social Security card for her daughter, she was informed that her daughter's given name, Maria Elizabeth Espinoza Sanchez, was too long for the application form. Sanchez' mother was given a list of shorter names to choose from, and she picked Liza. It was the name Sanchez took to kindergarten with her, but her teacher, confused by a spelling that did not match English pronunciation, changed it to Lisa.

It was the first of many educational bumps Sanchez hit over the years. "I get angry because I'm an educated woman who never heard about César Chavez in school," she says.

On the surface, Sanchez moves easily between cultures. But the reality is more complicated. "There is no choice in my skin color. That is the first thing people see," she says.

Hispanics who face a language barrier face issues that are even more basic. During a recent evening ESL class at the Learning Center for Adult Basic Education at Boise State's Canyon County Center, students talked about how critical it is to learn English.

"I want a better job. But first, I need to speak better," says Ramirez in clear but halting



Jill Ball teaches English to students at Riverglen Junior High.

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English. Neatly dressed in a clean cotton shirt and jeans, Ramirez admits to being tired; he spent a long day at work on the "kill floor" of a local meat-packing plant before coming to class. But the El Salvador native says he's determined to stick with his English classes, and he feels heartened by the progress he's made.

Ramirez' determination is not unusual, says Fern Van Maren, ESL program coordinator. She's taught many students who have overcome tremendous obstacles to attend class. She's also seen the number of students enrolled in ESL programs increase; last year, 650 students registered for classes, a jump from the 392 who signed up three years earlier.

The ESL classes focus on teaching students practical communication skills; on one recent night, Van Maren's students practiced what they would say if they needed to call in sick to work. The class also filled out a map with the names of buildings and practiced answering questions about activities such as shopping.

During a break in the lesson, and for the benefit of the reporter sitting in their midst, Van Maren asked her students how the Treasure Valley has changed in recent years. Their answers underscored the growth in Hispanic influence: new bilingual teachers, more Mexican restaurants, new businesses to send money orders to Mexico, Mexican dances that attract hundreds to local venues, more homes bought by Hispanics.

"There are a lot more," says Anjelica Vences about Hispanic numbers here. "That's good."

Good, yes. Challenging, absolutely. Boise State's Baker looks to the future and envisions a "complex interethnic life" where different communities come together and also at times separate. "It's not total assimilation or total segregation," he says, but a "meaningful integration working together."

As the Treasure Valley hurtles into the 21st century and Hispanics move into the mainstream, it will become increasingly important to honor diversity, say business and community leaders from many quarters. If recent developments are any indicator, there is reason for optimism. But leaders also caution that it is naive to think there won't be conflict as Hispanics gain visibility and power.

"I'm going to make a positive stereotype here: We have always found opportunities in the challenges we face," says Byrd. "We need to get across the message that we share many things in common."