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Immigrants — the lifeline of a town

By: Renée Loth — May 18, 2013

I AM reading a page one story in The New York Times about a dying suburban town that has been transformed by the energy and optimism of Latino immigrants. The story describes how new arrivals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru are taking advantage of the abandoned storefronts and cheap rents in the depressed downtown to open thriving shops and ethnic restaurants, drawing customers from more affluent communities nearby. The immigrants are described as “the lifeblood” of the town, “which fell on hard times in the 1980s and ’90s after factories and mills closed and an older generation of Italian immigrants moved away or died off.” The story is so familiar I almost don’t need to check the dateline, but sure enough, the town is Port Chester, N.Y., where I grew up. The story didn’t really surprise me because Port Chester has always been a starting point for immigrants, just of a somewhat different complexion. My high school yearbook lists the graduates Abruzzese, Agonito, Agresto, Amendola, Anastasio, and four other Italian surnames, and that’s just the As. We were first- and second-generation assimilators whose grandmothers often didn’t speak English (mine didn’t). Now 72 percent of the students at Port Chester High are Hispanic — and 94 percent of them go on to college.

Some of the immigrants quoted in the Times story are in the US illegally, afraid to give their names. They opened their businesses with paperwork provided by friends or relatives. They can’t travel, receive most federal benefits, or vote, but they do pay taxes, and they stimulate the economy in ways the English-only crowd would rather ignore. As the immigration reform bill makes its way through the US Senate Judiciary Committee this week, the story of Port Chester is worth keeping in mind.

Because it’s the oldest story in America: the drive and achievement of immigrants. A recent study by the business-backed Partnership for a New American Economy found that 18 percent of this country’s Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants, and more than 40 percent by children of immigrants. They include the iconic names of American industry — Dupont, Pfizer, Kraft, Goldman Sachs — but the names weren’t always so all-American. Sun Microsystems was founded in 1982 by three Stanford University students, two of whom — Vinod Khosla and Andy Bechtolsheim — came to the US from India and Germany, respectively. Russian-born Sergey Brin cofounded a little start-up called Google.

Not every immigrant’s business becomes Google, of course, but success stories are hardly rare. The share of the overall US population with a bachelor’s degree is 28 percent, according to the US census. Many immigrant groups can match or beat that average: 35 percent of those with Colombian origins have bachelor’s degrees; 28 percent of Peruvians. Every year, the list of high school valedictorians from the Boston public schools is a crazy-quilt of ethnicities; 18 of last year’s 39 valedictorians were born outside the United States, bringing their ambitions over the oceans from Colombia, Haiti, Nigeria, and Morocco.

Opponents of laws that would give illegal immigrants new ways to assimilate seized upon an eye-popping study published earlier this month by the Heritage Foundation, which estimated the net cost to taxpayers of legalizing 11 million undocumented immigrants at \$6.3 trillion. Never mind that the report stretched its costs out over 50 years (instead of the more common ten) to make the number bigger. Or that under the Senate bill immigrants would have to wait 13 years until they could become citizens and thus access Social Security, public housing, and the like. The report was quickly denounced by conservative worthies like Grover Norquist, Senator Marco Rubio, and the Cato Institute, who said bringing illegal immigrants into the real economy would almost certainly increase GDP and reduce the deficit.

The Heritage report is spurious not just because it overestimates the likelihood that immigrants will become resource-sucking wards of the state, but because it wildly underestimates (read: ignores) the dynamic effects of giving immigrants provisional legal status so they can open businesses, create jobs, and save ailing communities. If they want eye-opening, the authors should get out of their think tank and pay a visit to Port Chester. I know where they can get some good Peruvian ceviche.

Renée Loth's column appears regularly in the Globe.'