

Smoothing out resistance to Harlem's Latinization

By **Jesús Triviño**

Latino Reporter

Antonio Salazar pounds on the pizza dough till it's spread flat. Then he twirls it in the air as eager customers at Slice of Harlem watch. The R&B sounds of R. Kelly's "Ignition" fill the shop, which is populated by black customers. Everyone in the shop bops their heads to the rhythm, except for Salazar and his Mexican co-workers. They don't care for that kind of music.

In a place so different than home, Salazar feels out of place. "People talk about my people but they do it behind our backs," says Salazar, 30, in Spanish. "People are surprised when they see a Mexican doing an Italian's job. We add our Latino flavor."

The distinct flavor that Latinos bring has increasingly spread throughout the United States since the 1990s. It's evident in the number of political debates held in Spanish, in Grammy Award-nominated songs and on T-shirts portraying the image of Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

This month, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that Latinos became the largest minority in the country. According to their report, people of Latin American origin increased from 35.3 million counted during the 2000 Census to 38.8 million on July 1, 2002. The flow of Latin American immigrants attributed for their rise in numbers. Harlem is no exception.

It's a neighborhood where young blacks like to shoot hoops and rarely play fútbol (soccer), and 50 Cent's gory lyrics are now heard side by side with Vicente Fernández's romantic ballads and Hector Lavoe's sweet voice. It's a neighborhood credited with spawning a flourishing African-American culture, but now Harlem is about 42 percent Latino, according to an analysis of 2000 Census data.

Former President Bill Clinton wasn't the only non-black moving in. From Honduran home attendants to Dominican supermarket owners and Mexican vendors, Harlem today is not only the core of black culture but of a new Latinized United States.

Politicians are altering their priorities, business owners are carrying more Goya products, and stores are hiring more Latinos. Meanwhile, some blacks disapprove of the new immigrants' presence. Being black and proud is Harlem's credo and being Latino might make it difficult to be "down."

A look at Slice of Harlem, at 308 Lenox Ave. between 125th

and 126th streets, and a man who sells ices illustrates how the settling in of Latinos has not only brought cheap labor into the neighborhood but also an unwanted cultural change that has irked some longtime locals.

Back at the pizzeria, Salazar takes a breather from making four pies in a row. He is quiet in his demeanor. He makes it a point to clean the chair before he sits. Like many before him, Salazar came to New York for a better future. He came to the Bronx from Puebla, Mexico, 10 years ago. According to the Mexican Consulate in New York, Pueblanos make up 50 percent of Mexicans in this state.

He began working at Slice of Harlem three years ago. A husband and father of three children – all born in New York City – Salazar works 50 to 55 hours a week with only Sunday

up because one of them didn't want to pay 50 cents for the cherry ice."

Jiménez came from Oaxaca, Mexico, to New York City six years ago. He started work as a busboy or waiter at various restaurants in Manhattan. Three years ago he began pushing his small, weathered ice cart that serves everything from cherry to bubblegum ice flavors during the summers. He works at restaurants as a dishwasher in the winter.

Despite Jiménez's assault and others who have experienced similar attacks, Harlem's most prominent politician, Rep. Charles Rangel, sees the alliance between blacks and Latinos at its apex.

Rangel seems to be paying close attention to the rising Latino community in his 15th Congressional District, which is already 46 percent Latino. His protest of U.S. military bombing exercises on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques was a clear attempt to show his solidarity with Puerto Ricans. In New York City's 2001 mayoral race, Rangel spearheaded a group of black leaders to endorse Democratic candidate Fernando Ferrer, a Puerto Rican.

"In the last 20 years there has been an increase of Latinos," Rangel said in a telephone interview. "It's far beyond Puerto Ricans; it's now Dominicans and Central and South Americans. I don't think there is tension between the two groups (blacks and Latinos). Normally you see tension in the political spectrum in terms of vying for votes. There aren't any two races like Latinos and blacks that are more united in (Harlem)."

That unity comes with some racial difficulties between Latinos and blacks. Although not overtly evident, it's often heard in comments.

"I went to the gym and some guy was criticizing Latinos," says José García, 36, a home attendant from Honduras. "Well, he was telling this Dominican he should go back where he came from."

Back at the pizzeria, Salazar's five-minute break is over. He and a co-worker get back to work on pizzas. Salazar smooths out the dough and the other man spreads on the cheese and mushrooms. On one side of the brick-walled shop, their black co-workers man the cash register and throw verbal jabs at each other.

Salazar begins to flatten out another piece of pizza dough, spreads the tomato sauce, and adds cheese and pepperoni. But no Habanero chiles.

At least not yet.

"In the last 20 years there has been an increase of Latinos. It's far beyond Puerto Ricans; it's now Dominicans and Central and South Americans."

— Rep. Charles Rangel

off. He didn't disclose the amount of his weekly check but said it "was more than \$300."

"In any business, you want to have reliable workers," says Michael Eberstadt, Slice of Harlem's owner. "They're good workers. I've hired and fired whites and blacks. They (Mexican workers) are very serious people – serious about work and family."

Salazar says the locals don't mistreat him but his co-worker, Rashid Rozier, disagrees.

Rozier is quick to point out some of the customers dislike him and his 11 Mexican co-workers.

"People will come in off the street and get an attitude because the pizza is expensive and they'll start calling them Mexican this, Mexican that," Rozier says. "It's an everyday thing. I step in and defend them. I mean they're here to support their families like everyone else is."

Slight disagreements can lead to violence. Just ask Tomas Jiménez, 23, an Italian ice vendor.

"Some of the people are aggressive, especially the teenagers," says Jiménez in Spanish, standing in front of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, named for the black-Jewish-Puerto Rican Arturo Schomburg. "When I first started, three years ago, three black teenagers beat me

SpaHa, from Page 1

changes will push out low-income residents and small-business owners who can't compete with the megachains.

"We just have to be careful that we don't switch the neighborhood over completely," she says. "It's a very fine line to create that balance and maintain it."

Nevertheless, the changes have the city taking notice.

On Tuesday, the City Council approved the largest rezoning of East Harlem since 1961. According to the Department of City Planning, the rezoning will open up more commercial space for new businesses and limit building heights in keeping with the area's low structures.

"There's enormous character – particularly in the architecture of East Harlem," says David Cutié, president of the Homeowner's Association of East Harlem.

Cutié and his wife, Betty, left El Barrio 15 years ago during the height of what he called the crack epidemic to raise their daughter in suburban Rockland County.

But they missed the city and wanted to return to the Latino community where his wife grew up. Upon returning, the Cutiés found a changed place.

"There are far more Mexicans and Central



Luz Rosario, center, is a regular at the first and only spa in East Harlem – an example of the type of businesses revitalizing the community.

Americans than ever," says Cutié, who is half Cuban and half Puerto Rican.

City Planning data show that from 1990 to 2000 the number of Mexicans in Spanish Harlem jumped by almost 250 percent from 3,000 to 10,000 residents. However, the Puerto

Rican population, which had been the backbone of the community, declined from 45,000 to 35,000.

"Also, there's less crime than there used to be," Cutié says. "The streets are safer. The streets are cleaner."

Like the rest of the city, Spanish Harlem saw a sharp drop in crime in the last decade. According to city police statistics, major crimes fell by 58 percent from 1993 to 2002 in the 23rd Precinct, which patrols the area.

Lower crime rates, renovated buildings and proximity to midtown have made the neighborhood more attractive, leading to higher real estate values.

Henry Calderón, president of the East Harlem Chamber of Commerce, says that a two-bedroom apartment that rented for about \$900 a month in 1990 now rents for more than \$1,700 a month.

Otterbeck pays \$754 a month for her two-bedroom apartment in a building for people with low to moderate incomes. She paid about \$240 a month when she and her two children first moved there from the Bronx.

In the 12 years she has lived in the community, she has grown along with it. She is a building contractor who now considers herself in the moderate-income bracket.

A native of Manhattan, Otterbeck indulges in all that Spanish Harlem has to offer these days, from art gallery openings to poetry readings.

There is only one thing missing.

"When I see a sushi bar come up here, boy, I'm going to hold onto my apartment," she says.