

Truly celebrating immigrants

By: Veronica Cool ⌚ June 4, 2017



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Since June of 2014, Immigrant Heritage Month has provided a forum for Americans across the land to explore their own heritage and history and to celebrate the differences and cultural richness that creates the fabric of America.

"I Am an Immigrant," a nationwide effort to gather and share the motivational stories of American immigrants, has launched with many supporters, including America Ferrera, Jason Sudeikis and George Takei. There's an accompanying video that is beautiful. As we know storytelling is one of the most effective ways to connect as people. And connecting is something we need to do desperately.

We are living in a time where alienation is real.

We, as a people, are at the risk of forgetting our humanity. Our roots. Our heritage. Although the foreign-born population of Maryland is only 14 percent, hailing mostly from Asia and Latin America, we've forgotten that our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents hailed from England, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Germany and Spain.

Immigrant blood flows through our veins.

Some 33 percent of the population in Montgomery County is foreign-born. Prince George's is 21 percent, followed by 19 percent in Howard County, 12 percent in Baltimore County and 10 percent in Frederick. Baltimore City has a foreign-born population of 8 percent.

Do note, that this data is dated, from the 2010 U.S. Census. Be assured that the quoted numbers understate the reality of the immigrant population in our region.

Immigrants migrate for multiple reasons, mostly tied to improving their lot in life or to provide better educational opportunities for our children. Sadly, some fearfully migrate to simply survive — escaping wars, civil strife, terrorism, drug violence, sexual trafficking and worse.

These immigrants contribute significantly to our country. Forty percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants. From 1982-2007, Asian-American firms grew by 545 percent, and Hispanic-American firms grew by 696 percent while Caucasian firms grew by only 81 percent.

This is just the entrepreneurs. Our workforce, food, entertainment, sciences and future are heavily influenced by those with the desire to become American.

Ways to celebrate and learn

Here are some tips to commemorate the contributions of immigrants in your world:

- Conduct a cultural assessment, both for your organization and yourself as an individual. Learning your current status facilitates the prioritization of tactics and initiatives to improve engagement of your employees, including those who are immigrants or of immigrant descent.

- Institute a diversity council or committee, sponsored or championed by a senior leader to ensure it receives proper attention and respect. Leverage the committee with community volunteer activities, mentoring programs, inspirational programming and speakers. This committee also serves as a great talent development tool by increasing engagement and retention.
- Incorporate cultural competency into your professional development curriculum and training programs; include “unconscious bias” and “cross-cultural communication” workshops.
- Read books or watch movies that explore different cultures; one of my favorites is *The Fifth Element*. Talk about immigration!
- Listen to music from other cultures or trying different foods. Try Mari Luna’s in Pikesville or Akbar in Baltimore. Delicioso!
- Attend cultural festivals and public celebrations or demonstrations such as the upcoming EBLO 36th Annual LatinoFest (latinofest.org), Baltimore’s celebration of Hispanic culture, music and art. There is live music from world-renowned artists and bands; arts and crafts displays; Latino cuisine from the Americas and the Caribbean; and community booths and family activities. Grab the kids and partake.
- Take a language refresher, whether French, Chinese or Español. Use Rosetta Stone or try some of the latest apps, like Duolingo.
- And, of course, travel to a new country and explore the non-touristy areas to get a feel for the natives and how they truly live. Seeing with your own eyes how destitute yet resourceful some countries truly are will certainly give you a tremendous appreciation for the United States.

And a gentle reminder, I appreciate the acknowledgement of my immigrant status during this commemorative period, but do remember that I remain an immigrant and a Latina throughout the rest of the year.

Amigos, till next time!

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