

*New website provides information to a growing community*

# Light shed on Hispanic heritage

By DEIDRE WILLIAMS

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

It was not an easy start for Juan and Ramona Alsace when they first arrived in Buffalo from the Dominican Republic in 1958.

They had very little money. Neither spoke English, and the only people they knew were her brother, a migrant worker, and his family.

But Juan quickly got a job as a laborer at Kaufman's Bakery on the East Side, and they moved into a house on Pennsylvania Street on the West Side.

They raised four children here. One daughter, now deceased, became an attorney in New York City. One son is an attorney for the federal government. Another son is plant manager in Pennsylvania. And the other daughter, Tamara, is the director of the multilingual department for the Buffalo Public Schools.

"We did good," said Juan, reflecting on the life he and his wife made here in Buffalo.

The Alsaces' story is one of migration and assimilation repeated by thousands of others, and it's part of a local history project launched on a new website by the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York. The website is sponsored by Kaleida Health and provides news, events and information pertinent to the growing Hispanic community.

Unveiled last month, the site is counting down the days leading to the start of National Hispanic Heritage Month beginning Saturday.

In addition to the history project – which will take three to five years to interview, record, digitize and electronically format the stories and documents – another communitywide initiative featured on the website involves plans to build a Hispanic-Ameri-

can Veterans Memorial at the Buffalo & Erie County Naval and Military Park on the waterfront.

"We want to reconstruct the history of Western New York and show how we contributed like all other immigrant groups in Western New York," said Casimiro D. Rodriguez Sr., president of the Heritage Council. He got the idea for the history project while helping organize last year's local kickoff of Hispanic Heritage Month and realized that the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society and the Central Library downtown had very limited information on Latinos here.

"That really struck me personally, because there is a lot of history for Italians, Polish- and African-Americans. Everyone [else] has their history documented in those institutions," Rodriguez said.

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# 41,356 Latinos live in WNY, 27,519 in Buffalo

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The Historical Society and the public library are both partners on the history project. Once completed, the collection will be housed at both locations to help the "broader community better understand the Hispanic community," Rodriguez said. "It's also especially important for our children, our future leaders, to show them how Hispanics arrived here and how they contributed to the economy and the daily life."

Today, 41,356 Latinos live in Western New York, with 27,519 in Buffalo alone, according to statistics provided by the Heritage Council. Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans represent the largest groups.

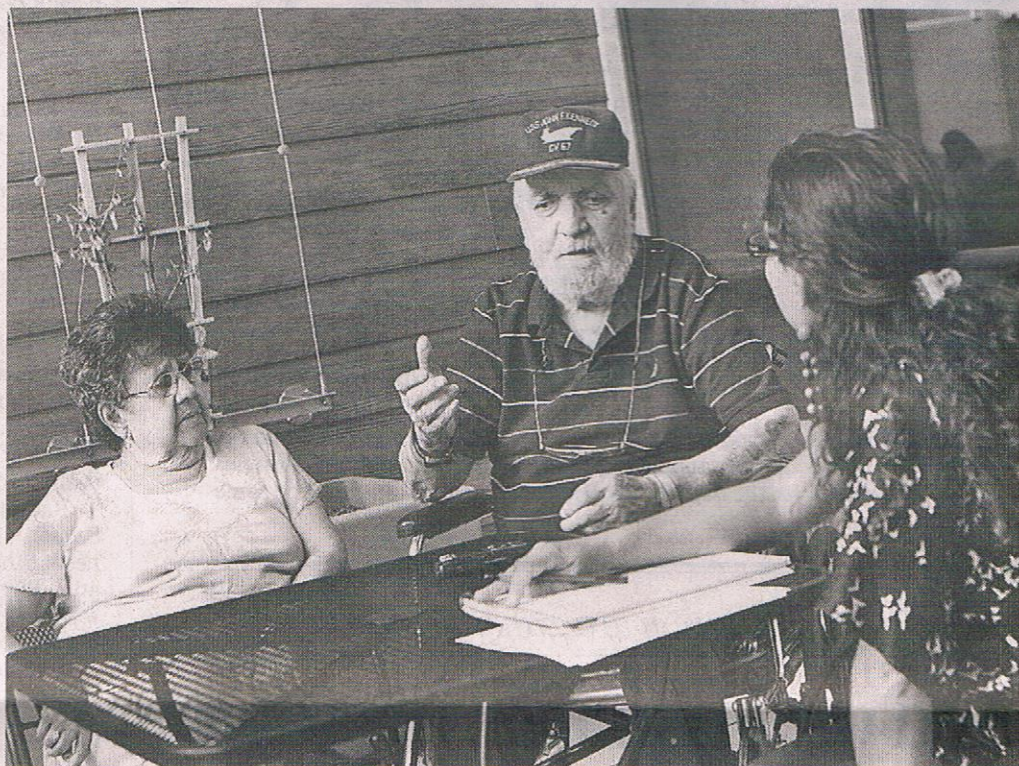
The "first wave" of Hispanic immigrants migrated to the region in the 1950s. Many - including Pedro Mauras, who came here from Puerto Rico in 1955 with no education - started as migrant workers in farm towns such as Brant and North Collins and then found work in the industrial sector, including at Bethlehem Steel and the Lehigh Valley and New York Central railroads.

By 1955, the population even had its own four-page newspaper, *La Tilma*, a monthly publication for the Spanish-speaking in the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo.

The following year, the diocesan newspaper at the time, the *Union and Echo*, devoted a whole page to the Puerto Rican community. "The Diocese of Buffalo Welcomes the Puerto Ricans," it read.

An article in the same issue estimated that between 1,000 and 1,500 Puerto Ricans were "scattered throughout Buffalo, a number of them being located on the West Side between St. Anthony's and Holy Angels parishes."

In addition, a concentration of 40 families and about 60 men without families settled on the East Side, living near what then was St. Lucy's Catholic Church



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

**Stephanie Bucalo, right, interviews Juan Alsace, center, and his wife, Ramona as part of a project that compiles photos and audio interviews of local Hispanics.**

on Swan Street.

The growing numbers led the bishop at the time to assign a Spanish-speaking assistant to the pastor in 1954.

As a group, they had humble beginnings, but quite a few went on to become active in the community, as in the case of Mauras, who started as a migrant worker in Brant in 1955 until he got a job with Buffalo & Susquehanna Railroad months later. He attended night school at Bennett High, got his general equivalency diploma and then went on to build a career as a civil rights advocate.

In 1966, he started working at the Community Action Organization with the youth corps. From 1969 to 1990, he worked as an investigator at the state Division of Human Rights. Mauras also was the founder of the Puerto Rican Holy Name Society at St. Lucy's Church, the first Puerto Rican/Mexican Conference of Erie County in 1971 and

the Puerto Rican American Community Association.

"He was really active in a lot of social justice advocacy for people who couldn't advocate for themselves or didn't speak English or had the resources to help themselves," said Stephanie Bucalo, a doctoral student at the University at Buffalo, who is conducting the audio and video interviews for her dissertation. UB is another partner on the project.

In addition to the local history project, the website also features communitywide projects such as the Hispanic-American Veterans Memorial planned for the military park. The \$185,000 memorial will be built alongside other tributes at the park for veterans of Polish, Irish and Italian heritage.

Part of the memorial will highlight the 65th Infantry Regiment - a mostly Puerto Rican company also known as "The Borinqueneers" - that began

as a volunteer regiment in 1899 and participated in both world wars, according to the regiment's website. The Borinqueneers also led a bayonet charge against invading Chinese forces during the Korean War.

Assemblyman Sean M. Ryan, D-Buffalo, recently secured \$100,000 of capital improvement funding from the state to be combined with the \$65,000 raised by the Hispanic-American Veterans Memorial Committee. To help raise the remaining funds, the committee is planning the first Hispanic-American Veteran Memorial 5K Run and Family Walk at Erie Canal Harbor. It also will kick off Hispanic Heritage Month.

Organizers expect to unveil the memorial by next Memorial Day. For information or to participate in the history project, visit [hispanicheritagewny.org](http://hispanicheritagewny.org).

email:  
[dswilliams@buffnews.com](mailto:dswilliams@buffnews.com)