

Museum display highlights Hispanic Heritage Month

Local priest who chronicled culture in Western New York is part of it | PAGE D6

CITY & REGION

SECTION | D

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Priest's work showcased in Hispanic exhibit at museum

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Father Antonio L. Rodriguez came to Buffalo in the early 1950s, for the most part to minister to the migrant workers who started coming to work the crop fields in places like Barker and North Collins.

The diminutive priest got to know the community really well and promoted the idea of the workers getting good jobs and a good education for their children.

"Because of him, a lot of them stayed here, and they found jobs in the rail yards and steel yards when the industry was big. Some started their own business, as well," said Casimiro D. Rodriguez Sr., president of the Hispanic Heritage Council of Western New York, who is not related to the priest.

On Monday, Father Rodriguez – who is retired – got to see the fruits of the growing Hispanic community he helped launch when he was given a special tour of the "Echando Raices: Hispanics Building a Life & Legacy in Western New York" exhibit in the Buffalo His-

tory Museum.

The exhibit, launched to help celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month – which runs through Oct. 15 – has been four years in the making and includes large panels of photos, letters and newspaper articles that tell the story of Hispanics in Western New York.

Father Rodriguez helped write much of that story.

"It's good," said the priest, who turns 90 on Saturday and was viewing the exhibit for the first time, "because now we know the stories of how everybody came to the area."

Since 2010, the Hispanic Heritage Council has been compiling the stories of migration and assimilation of scores of Hispanics – like Father Rodriguez – to put together a local history project that was launched in 2012 on its web site, www.hispanicheritagewny.org.

In addition to the personal stories, the web site – sponsored by Kaleida Health, the University at Buffalo, the Buffalo Erie County Public Library and the History Museum – provides news, events and information pertinent to the growing His-



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

Father Antonio Rodriguez, left, and Casimiro D. Rodriguez, president of the Buffalo Hispanic Heritage Council of WNY, view the Hispanic heritage exhibit now on display at the Buffalo History Museum Monday.

panic community here.

The traveling exhibit was fashioned from the collection and will be at the History Museum until January. From there, it moves to the Central Library downtown, and then will go into

the community at health and government institutions like City Hall and Erie County Hall.

With photographs and text, the exhibit's panels tell the stories of Hispanics who came here from Puerto Rico, Mexico

and elsewhere to work in factories, serve in the military, start businesses, and form social clubs and community organizations.

Father Rodriguez was the first person to be interviewed for the project, Casimiro Rodriguez said. He contributed information from as far back as the 1950s, including video he shot over the decades at community gatherings. The Heritage Council acquired more than 7,000 feet of his film that will be reproduced and digitalized for the history project, Casimiro Rodriguez said.

Today, roughly 41,000 Latinos live in Western New York, with approximately 28,000 in Buffalo alone, according to Heritage Council statistics. Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Cubans represent the largest groups.

Though the exhibit traces Hispanic migration to Western New York beginning as far back as the late 1800s, the pace picked up with what's called the "first wave" of immigrants in the 1950s.

That's when many came to work on the farms, the railroads and in the factories like

Bethlehem Steel.

By the mid 1950s, LaTilma, a four-page monthly newspaper, provided information for Spanish speakers in the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo. Father Rodriguez would send LaTilma to the households of any Hispanic surname he found in the telephone directory.

The oral history project that's on the web site would not have happened if it were not for people like Father Rodriguez, who was an integral part of the history of the Hispanic community here, Casimiro Rodriguez said. He led Masses in Spanish, and he was an advocate for Hispanic migrant workers.

He also helped secure funding for the Agustin "Pucho" Olivencia Community Center, which opened in 1969 on Swan Street.

"To the community," Casimiro Rodriguez said, "he's very special."

For more information about the history project or to make a donation, call the Hispanic Heritage Council at 402-1442.

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