

**Archive | NHPRC COMMENTARY HOME...George Rabasa on hispanic homes
1PBVBVGSVDV2VDENW4Q893HANKR**

SPEAKER: For most of us, home is not a complicated concept. It's the place where we lay our head, hang our hat, find our heart. It's not a matter that takes great deliberation. Our knowledge of home is a self-evident as our name, our age, our face. We know we're home when we're there.

Yet for the thousands of immigrants that have settled in Minnesota most recently from places as disparate as Laos and Vietnam, Somalia, Eastern Europe, Mexico, and Central America, home becomes a considered decision, a deliberate act that involves both a wrenching from the past and a claim on the future.

The Mexican population in the South Central Minnesota heartland in Wilmer, Glencoe, Mankato, Granite Falls has grown tenfold from just a few hundred in the 1980s to several thousand today. It started with groups of mostly men who made their way North from Mexico and Central America, and also from Texas and California to harvest sugar beets and slaughter turkeys, to work in canneries and poultry packing plants.

They came because they were needed. The men could hardly call their new quarters home. Sharing house trailers and ramshackle rooms gave no sense of the ownership of physical space that a home requires. Still, the work was plentiful, and it provided hope as well as cash. The landscape, even one as flat and frigid and foreign as the prairie, offered some vision of a future and there was room in it for newcomers.

The starting point of a new life is the making of home. In the Mexican culture, home requires the basics of a house, a market where one can find chilies and cilantro, pork rinds, and bio beans, a neighborhood that echoes with a familiar language. But without family, home remains a reality that is a thousand miles away and years in the past.

To build a home, the men had to be joined by women. Mothers brought their children, brothers and sisters came together. Grandparents and in-laws and uncles and nephews gathered, sometimes in close quarters. The more complete the family, the more tangible and permanent the feeling of home became.

In the Mexican culture, children are not encouraged to go off on their own when they're 18. Grandparents are not placed in nursing homes. The errant sibling or the casual cousin is not denied a place at the table. Everyone belongs. The more the merrier, the warmer, the noisier.

The effect of immigrant family growth on the mainstream communities has been a shock. Landlords are at a loss when their properties envisioned for nuclear clusters of four become homes for extended families. Some apartments are easier to rent if you have a dog than if you have a child. Rented properties are inspected to ward off new arrivals there are rules about house guests, three days max then out.

The mainstream community frets. Why are there so many of them? It would be nice if our new immigrants, some might think, became fully Americanized, their numbers more manageable, the family arrangement more symmetrical, the tempo of their family life more orderly. Dear Minnesotans, it's not going to happen.

The sense of family and home are so ingrained in the Mexican heart that it's no more capable of disintegrating and extended family than of sacrificing a limb. The solution is not to expect to change a culture that is several thousand years old. The key is to make it easier for this culture, so rich and wise in the ways of the family, to find a way to be nourished and preserved in this foreign country.

This can only happen by making home ownership more widely available to low income immigrants. This transformation in the available habitat will take work, education, investment. The result will be the final flowering of the immigrant's dream to be at home in the adopted land.