Hispanic population on rise in Martin County

By Jim Turner

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STUART — Dr. Veronica Diaz wanted to return to South Florida, but the Miami-born Cuban-American surgeon was looking for a place where growth was better managed.

Peruvian-born Mili Mendola, an art teacher at Crystal Lake Elementary, moved to Palm City for a more peaceful community than Boca Raton.

Diaz and Mendola are among the 46,721 Hispanics — from those who left other countries to those who are U.S.-born children of Hispanic heritage — who, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, relocated to the Treasure Coast between 2000 and 2010.

In Martin County, the Latino population increased 88.1 percent.

Within that group, people from Mexico or with Mexican heritage now account for 4 percent of the county's population, followed by 1.7 percent who are from, or had family come from Puerto Rico. Cubans account for 0.8 percent.

"It's such a safe environment to raise kids, you don't see much of the violence you see in bigger cities," said David Rodriguez, who after three years running the kitchen at Costa' d'Este in Vero Beach has opened his own restaurant, Tapas Latin Fusion in Stuart.

Born in Cuba and raised in Bergan County, N.J., Rodriguez and his wife Ana brought their two daughters from Miami to the Treasure Coast, escaping the traffic and "jammed" classrooms.

"We wanted to come to Stuart because of the fact that there was less competition than in West Palm or Miami, and the rents are much higher there than in Stuart," Rodriguez said.

Blending in

For the majority of Hispanics, there wasn't a vast social or business organization drawing them to the area. Instead, they came, as most everyone else comes to the Treasure Coast, to resettle their family in more affordable locations, for employment and, for many, to retire as just another of the region's many affluent families.
They brought with them a wide range of diverse cultures. They purchased homes and became involved in the community, but at the same time, they've quietly melded into the fabric of the Treasure Coast.

"These are just new families coming to our community, like everyone else," said Bobby Rodriguez (no relation to David Rodriguez), who founded the Hispanic Chamber of the Treasure Coast. "They're busy working. They're getting their kids in school."

To handle 2,181 students with English as a second language this school year, the Martin County School District has the equivalent of 30.5 full-time paraprofessionals. In 2003, there were 1,372 English Language Learning students, said Cathy Brennan, school district spokeswoman.

"There are a lot of new people moving in, but they're more trying to get familiar with the community," Bobby Rodriguez said. "They're not mingling with other Hispanics — there are not too many activities going on." Unlike the Italian-American and Irish-American clubs that are a staple of many urban areas in the northeast, few Hispanic organizations have made the leap from South Florida to the Treasure Coast.

Hayley Colina, born in New York to Cuban immigrants, said since she relocated her family from Coral Gables — and law firm from West Palm Beach — her mother is the one who has had the hardest time adjusting.

"There is a lack of social activities for elder Spanish speakers," said Colina, who opened her Port St. Lucie office in 2006.

Otherwise, she has found few drawbacks to the area that is more affordable and has less traffic than Miami-Dade.

"When I came here there was a population of Hispanic people, but I couldn't see that many Hispanic attorneys or professionals," Colina said.

That has been changing, she said.

The Treasure Coast, Rodriguez said, might have a few additional Latino restaurants or supermarkets or bakeries than a decade ago, but the majority of businesses that have been opened by Hispanics are not being promoted as Hispanic businesses.

"It's not like they're saying this is a Mexican business or Puerto Rican business," Bobby Rodriguez said. "It's more like we sell pocketbooks or shoes or dresses, or we're lawyers. They're just trying to be more American than anything else."

Many of those coming to the Treasure Coast with Latino roots were born in New York and South Florida, the second and third generation of Americans.
"They're coming here mostly because they have family members here," Rodriguez said. "People still look at the Treasure Coast as an opportunity and a better life."

**Treasure Coast attraction**

Overall, Hispanics now account for 14.1 percent of the Treasure Coast's 562,135 residents, up from 7.5 percent a decade earlier, surpassing blacks as the three-county region's largest minority.

Blacks on the Treasure Coast account for 13 percent of residents, up from 10.5 percent in 2000.

Florida Atlantic University Assistant Professor of English Elena Machado, whose core focus includes Hispanics and globalization, said the cost of living — lower home prices and lower taxes — is a prime attraction for Hispanics.

"The stereotype of Florida Hispanics is Cubans, but the reality on the ground is more diverse," Machado said. "There are the typical immigrant, who is someone who is a laborer, but it's more class diverse. What we're looking at on the Treasure Coast, there is computer (work), manufacturing, tourism that can appeal to professionals, and always real estate in Florida."

The Cuban and Puerto Rican communities have long established networks that have been moving north for decades, from Miami-Dade and Broward counties to Palm Beach and Orlando and now from Palm Beach into the Treasure Coast. Meanwhile, Mexicans and Central Americans have been making deep inroads in the state.

"Were starting to see Central American and Mexicans and they don't have the same networks established in Florida that the Cubans and Puerto Ricans do," Machado said.

Agricultural jobs were the first draw as such opportunities dried up to the south, followed by construction, manufacturing and more professional services, ranging from health care to tourism. Robert Roldan, a founder of the Treasure Coast-wide Film Society of Port St. Lucie, said the cost of living and a less dangerous environment is what attracted him in 1987 to accept a transfer through his FedEx employer from New York City to Port St. Lucie.

And as one of the co-founders of the Puerto Rican Association for Hispanic Affairs, a nonprofit, cultural educational organization that funds college scholarships for minority students on the Treasure Coast, Roldan said that attraction hasn't changed as others follow from the north and move up from South Florida.

"Affordability," Roldan said. "There is a great opportunity to own your own home here. We have a problem with jobs, but that is all over the United States."

**Election impact**

The biggest impact of the Hispanic growth in Martin County could soon come in the elections office.
Supervisor of Elections Vicki Davis expects to know in about a month if the U.S. Department of Justice will require all future election materials to be bilingual.

Among the federal department's requirements for a county to start printing bilingual materials is if more than 5 percent of the citizens of voting age are members of a single language minority and are limited-English proficient.

In Martin County, there are 17,881 Hispanics, representing 12.2 percent of the population, according to the 2010 Census numbers. The percentage of Hispanics in the county who are of voting age, along with the percentage who are limited in their English, are numbers the U.S. Census does not yet have available.

Each ballot and all materials distributed by the office will be written in both English and Spanish.

"We don't know how many of our Hispanics are literate as far as English is concerned," Davis said. "They narrow it down to the voting eligible population and then you have to factor in the literacy aspect as well, so we're not sure, but we're very close."

Davis expects there will be a backlash once the federal mandate is required.

"We already have the capability, on our website, that they can go in and hit the button and convert to Spanish. When we did that, we received some negative comments," Davis said. "I can only imagine the negative feedback if we have to go with that second language" (on the ballots).

Other government offices, however, have slowly been accommodating the growth and said they don't expect any dramatic need to alter services.

"It's been here for a while, it hasn't happened overnight, but it hasn't caused us any hardships," said Tax Collector Ruth Pietruszewski. "It's been very easy for us to accommodate because the state sends the driver's license books in Spanish and English, they send the tests in Spanish and English, the Sun-Pass signs, everything has been in Spanish and English."

**County reaching out**

County Administrator Tayrn Kryzda said there are employees in various locations, such as the Housing Program and Community Services, who can speak Spanish should the need arise.

"We do have some of our materials printed in Spanish — but not all," Kryzda said. "We know where the greater concentration is for those that need the Spanish interpreters and deal with them as needed — but we have not had to do anything out of the ordinary to accommodate."

Sheriff Robert Crowder said a perception that the influx of Hispanics has led to an increase in crime is incorrect.
"We don't see any real crime trends that would be reflective of the population increase and percentage," Crowder said.

Overall, the crime rate in the county is down from 3,169.8 major crimes per 100,000 people in 2000 to 2,526 per 100,000 in 2010, according to sheriff's records.

One of the things the agency is doing is having community patrols in neighborhoods to reach out to the Hispanic population, primarily day laborers, where many are not fluent in English.

For years, the agency has been able to provide suspected criminals of their rights in Spanish, and dispense Spanish-written advice to crime victims, through papers provided statewide by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. The agency also has an unspecified number of uniformed deputies and detectives who are fluent in Spanish, as well as a victim’s rights advocate, Crowder said.

Crowder said more often the Hispanics, mostly laborers in Indiantown and Golden Gate, have been the victims of crimes, rather than perpetrators.

"It's not been quite what you hear people say; a lot of people are making the problem sound worse than it is," Crowder said. "But there are so many people who are prone to criticize us regardless that we just have to keep doing what we feel is the right thing."

**The Mendolas**

Mili Mendola and her husband Michael would often get a glimpse of the Treasure Coast when they'd visit his parents in Port St. Lucie. They considered the area more family-friendly than where they were living at the time: Boca Raton.

In 2002, they decided to move north to Palm City.

"He works out of the house and his sales area is from the Keys to Vero Beach, so we had some flexibility," Mili Mendola said. "Plus we were trying to get away, it was getting too crowded down south, and we loved the area."

Once in Palm City, Mendola, who had been an art teacher in Palm Beach County, quickly found a similar job with the Martin County School District.

"I looked to see if there were any positions available and there was one and I got it, so I was very lucky," Mendola said.

Mili Mendola's path to the Treasure Coast began in Peru, with her first stop being Washington, D.C., where her father was stationed while a colonel in the Peru military.

When his tour was up, she returned to Peru with most of the family. An older sister, who stayed in the United States to attend college, became the family's lifeline.
Back in Peru, as Mendola finished high school, her father died. And with Peru's internal conflict reaching its peak in the late 1980s, Mendola's sister was able to sponsor the family so they could return to America.

"There was a lot of terrorism in Peru at the time we left," Mendola said. "My sister had become a citizen, so through her, we were able to get our papers," Mendola said. "Then my sister moved from Maryland to Florida, so we came to Florida."

In Boca Raton, Mendola went to Florida Atlantic University and met Michael, who is of Italian and German heritage and grew up in New Jersey.

**Veronica Diaz**

Two things brought Dr. Veronica Diaz to the Treasure Coast, and specifically, Martin County:

- A job where the field isn't saturated by others in her specialty
- A community where the population wasn't growing slower and more managed than in South Florida.

"I wanted something with a growing population, but growing in a healthy controlled way, not just kind of exploding," Diaz said.

Born and raised in Miami, Diaz graduated from Princeton University before getting her medical degree at the University of Florida. She returned to Miami for general orthopedic training and then spent a year in Pittsburgh for subspecialty training in hand surgery.

Last year, she joined South Florida Orthopedics and Sports Medicine in Stuart.

"I had done some demographics research and knew that there was no hand and upper extremity specialists in Martin County," Diaz said. "There is only one in St. Lucie and a handful in Palm Beach County. I knew my subspecialty was in demand, and being from South Florida I wanted to stay in the area, but not necessarily be in Miami."

Growing up with grandparents who spoke Spanish, and with bilingual parents, Diaz said Spanish was her first language, something that has also proven to be a niche at the local practice.

"I see a lot of Hispanic patients, a disproportionate number probably because I speak Spanish," she said. "I really only do shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand, but I've recently done two for lower extremity problems, agreeing to see them because they only spoke Spanish and they were adamant about someone who they could speak to."