



LATINOS IN ATYPICAL DESTINATIONS

By Eduardo Díaz, director Smithsonian Latino Center
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Annually, as the eve of Hispanic Heritage Month dawns, I field around 10 requests to speak on a variety of Latino cultural topics, to groups representing government, business, public policy and education. As I was reviewing this year's requests, one in particular stood out. It came from the head of Multicultural Education programs at the Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), in Tifton, Georgia, in what is known as Wiregrass Country, a broad swath of Southern Georgia, notable for its prodigious agricultural production.

I was asked to lecture to a Rural Studies class on Latino identity and participate in a contemporary Latino issues roundtable with the Mexican Consul in Atlanta, a scholar who has been tracking Mexican immigration to Dalton, Georgia, a noted Latino education specialist, and the CEO of the Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Part of the day included the screening of a segment from the recent PBS series titled "Latino Americans," a Q&A with the producer, a Mexican lunch provided by area restaurants, folkloric dances from Mexico and El Salvador, a parade of Latin American flags, and Merengue and Bachata dance demonstrations. Taken as a whole, it was a surprising and remarkable day.

Nothing really remarkable for a Hispanic Heritage program, you say. This is Georgia, remember. This is a state with English-only driver's license exams and, worse, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act (2011), which drove out thousands of Latino immigrants, leaving millions of dollars of produce rotting in Georgia fields. Growers were none too happy, which left a dazed governor scrambling for a range of options, among them mobilizing state prisoners. As with other Southern states, Georgia has recorded its fair share of xenophobic harassment cases and physical assaults. The state hasn't exactly rolled out the welcome mat for Latino immigrants.

For me, what made Abraham Baldwin's Hispanic Day program exemplary is that it symbolizes the organizers' intent and long-range view. College President David Bridges and his leadership team fully realize that the very future of Wiregrass Country is directly tied to the achievement and prosperity of its burgeoning Latino communities, and that educating its youth

and creating a welcoming environment for the community are keys to securing this future. I should note that in addition to conferring two and four-year college degrees, Abraham Baldwin also offers a GED program. I had a chance to meet and converse with some of them, young people who had just arrived from Michoacán, Querétaro, Mexico City and other parts of Mexico. I don't think I broke any laws by speaking to them in Spanish -- I wasn't counseling them on the how to parallel-park.

In preparing for my presentations, I consulted with a resident Smithsonian expert, none other than Wayne Clough, the Institution's Secretary. Dr. Clough was born and raised in Coffee County, located just east of Tifton. Before coming to the Smithsonian, he served as president of Georgia Tech, and has been actively following the dramatic population growth and demographic shifts in his home state. It is no mystery that during Clough's leadership, Georgia Tech enrolled an unprecedented number of Latino and Latin American engineering students. Georgia's Latino population nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010, a growth rate of 96 percent, which compares with an 18 percent growth rate in the general population. Six of seven states with the nation's fastest growing Latino populations are in the South. University of Georgia demographer Matt Hauer asserts that "Georgia is the new California."

While chatting with the Mexican Counsel before the start of the program at Abraham Baldwin, I proudly showed him a picture of me with the Mexican Ambassador and his wife at the annual *16 de Septiembre celebration* at the Organization of American States in Washington, attended by some 800 people. He proceeded to pull out his cell phone and show me pictures of a similar celebration he presided over in Atlanta, an outdoor affair that drew over 35,000 compatriots! The *Nuevo* South is for real, and Georgia is part of it -- like it or not.

During my day at the College I was escorted to and from the various activities by second-generation Mexican American students on the cusp of graduation and a bright future, primed to be the new leaders of the *Nuevo* South. I have to say that this one trip has altered my view of Hispanic Heritage Month. It never will be the same for me. I'm hoping that 2014 will bring a new and welcome surprise equal to the one I found in Wiregrass Country.