

# HISPANIC NEIGHBORS

## ARE A GROWING PART OF OUR RURAL COMMUNITIES

As Latinos blend into the North Carolina economy and culture, Touchstone Energy cooperatives reach out to Hispanic members

*Text by Rick Martinez | Photos by Villa photography of Asheboro*

**T**he signs of North Carolina's changing face are everywhere. Sometimes they're subtle, such as running across a Spanish-language station when scanning the radio dial. Other times they're as literal as the signs over the hundreds of tiendas and mercados that dot the rural landscape.

"I used to say North Carolina was an emerging Latino state," said Andrea Bazan Manson, founding executive director of El Pueblo Inc., the state's largest Hispanic advocacy group. "But I don't say that anymore. Hispanics have arrived and we're an important part of the state."

The numbers prove her point. State census data says that in 1990 the state was home to 76,726 Hispanics. By 2000, that number exploded to 378,963—a jump of 393 percent. No other state had a higher growth rate during the 1990s. The latest U.S. census estimate (2003) pegs the state's Hispanic population at 456,334, but conventional wisdom among advocates and public officials is today's number probably tops 500,000.

It's no secret that many Hispanic immigrants in North Carolina and elsewhere are here illegally. Why they remain undocumented is a complex question. U.S. immigration policy makes it relatively difficult for most low-skilled Latin Americans to legally migrate here. Businesses that hire illegal immigrants (which is against the law) typically do so unknowingly because they cannot determine the authenticity of documents and employment information provided by applicants.

Hispanics have flocked to North Carolina for the same reason most folks have come to the state: jobs. Manual-labor



*Carlos Delgado (above), a customer service specialist at Piedmont Electric, is a trusted friend and advisor for the co-op's Spanish-speaking members.*

*Photo at right: Inside a Randolph County market (mercado), Veronica Martinez Albarra and her children Yulissa and Donald.*

jobs in the construction, agriculture, textile, manufacturing, maintenance, services and hospitality sectors have fueled North Carolina's explosive Hispanic population growth, according to Dr. Nolo Martinez, of the Center for New North Carolinians at UNC-Greensboro.

A look at the state's Hispanic population distribution confirms Martinez's observation. Counties with the highest percentage of Hispanics—Duplin, Lee, Sampson, Montgomery and Chatham—remain rural, with strong manufacturing and agricultural economic sectors. The wealth of jobs in construction, landscaping, maintenance, food service and hospitality industries in Mecklenburg,



Wake, Cumberland, Forsyth and Durham has attracted many Latinos to those urban areas.

**COOPERATIVES RESPOND**  
The dramatic rise in North Carolina's Latino population—particularly the



*A Selig Center study reports that North Carolina's Hispanic community represented \$8.8 billion in buying power in 2004, and that is expected to double in four years.*

*Left and above: Young Russell Viveros is with cashier Robert Avilla inside "El Mercado" Tienda Mexicana in Randolph County. Russell leaves the stores with his mother, Irais Martinez Viveros, and brother Ruben.*

influx of undocumented immigrants—has impacted the state's member-owned Touchstone Energy cooperatives. According to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., the undocumented population is estimated at 300,000. Only about 43 percent of these immigrants are fluent in English, according to a report on Hispanics in the South released this summer by the Pew Hispanic Center. To serve this growing community, a number of electric cooperatives have hired Spanish-speaking customer service representatives like Carlos Delgado, a native of El Salvador who immigrated to this country as a child and later served in the U.S. Navy.

Delgado is Piedmont Electric Membership Corporation's point man for Spanish-speaking members. Initially, he helps them set up accounts. However, he's also become a trusted friend since approximately 95 percent of the cooperatives'

Latino members come to Piedmont's Orange County home office to pay their light bill. They invariably ask for Carlos and because of this one-to-one contact, Delgado has developed into a defacto energy advisor and community information source. "Even those who know English like to do business in Spanish," Delgado explained of the personal interaction favored by Latinos. "And there are times when I'll use Spanish to better communicate a procedure or concept that may be new to them. People generally understand better in their native language."

Cooperatives are also finding that Spanish speakers are a beneficial resource in Hispanic neighborhoods. Union Power Cooperative, based in Monroe, learned that fact when it hired ABC Professional Tree Services for its right-of-way maintenance program. ABC crew chief Will Ortiz is a native Puerto Rican and bilingual. Union Power General Manager

### Hispanics in Randolph County A Snapshot

Population growth 1990–2000:  
**up 925% to 8,646**

Percent of county population:  
**6%**

Employment growth 1990–2000:  
**up 1,470%**

Percent who work in textiles and furniture:  
**67%**

Sources: U.S. Census 2000; Pew Hispanic Study, July 2005

Tony Herrin said Ortiz's language skills have proved invaluable in a variety of operational situations.

"There are times when we have Spanish-speaking members who don't understand why our trucks are outside their home and our crews aren't able to communicate what they need to in English," Herrin said. "Will has been



very good at dropping what he's doing to come over and help us with the (language) problem. There are some definite advantages in having bilingual people on your work force."

The cooperatives' bilingual efforts have gone beyond the spoken word. Fifteen electric cooperatives pooled resources to produce and distribute a convenient and comprehensive English/Spanish brochure that focuses on electric safety, emergency preparedness and child safety. Initially, the publication was in Spanish only, but Spanish-speaking members later requested a bilingual format to help them learn English. The bilingual edition has been so helpful, it's being used as a model by other electric cooperatives across the nation and additional bilingual projects are under development here at home.

### LEARNING ENGLISH IS A PRIORITY

Community leaders and advocates have told cooperative officials that learning English is among the top priorities of Spanish-speaking immigrants. To help the Latin community become proficient, the electric cooperatives and their state association have helped stage "Dia de Los Ninos (children)/Dia de Los Libros (books)" celebrations at libraries, schools and community centers across the state.

The celebrations commemorate Dia de Los Ninos or Children's Day, which is celebrated in Latin America much like Mother's Day and Father's Day are observed in the United States. Dia celebrations are open to all and feature international music and art, ethnic foods and story-telling. Each child is

given free bilingual books and adults are introduced to resources that will help them bridge the language gap.

"Dia is another demonstration of the cooperative's commitment to the communities we serve," said Nelle Hotchkiss, a senior vice president with the North Carolina Association of Electric Cooperatives. "Most importantly, it introduces to Hispanic members the importance electric cooperatives place on literacy and education."

Extensive research by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation has determined English fluency is a prime factor in Latino assimilation into U.S. culture. In a nutshell, their studies show the more English a Hispanic person knows, the more likely it is their values reflect the American mainstream. However, learning English is a considerable obstacle for many undocumented immigrants, perhaps because few received much formal education in their home countries. In contrast, English proficiency is not a problem for U.S.-born Latinos. Pew-Kaiser found virtually all second-generation Hispanics in the U.S. are English-fluent and half are bilingual. English becomes the dominant language by the third generation. In fact Latinos who don't speak Spanish are among the fastest-growing groups in the American Hispanic community.

Welcoming new people, and now new cultures, has always been part of the co-op tradition. It also makes good business sense. Hispanics are becoming a major economic force both nationally and in North Carolina. In 2004, the buying power of Hispanics was \$686 billion, according to the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth. In North Carolina, the survey pegged Latino buying power at \$8.8 billion, and it is predicted to nearly double to \$17.3 billion in only four years. Ultimately, the Selig Center predicts Hispanics will wield the largest economic stick among America's minorities, perhaps as early as 2005.

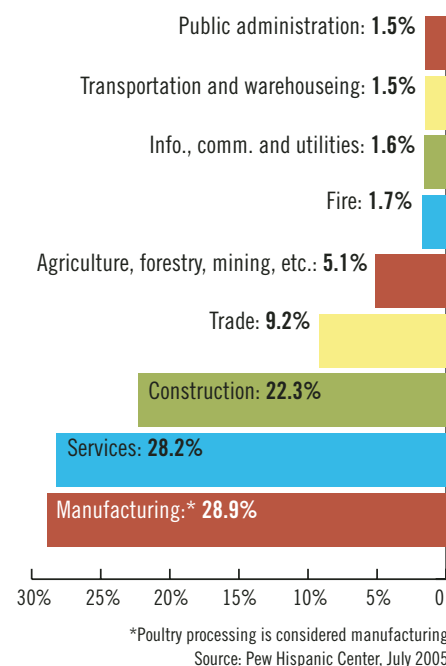
While census and economic numbers are telling, values that have long been part of the electric cooperative tradition are revealing a far more important story about North Carolina's future. El Pueblo's Bazan Manson said that primarily because of one-to-one contact, rural North

Carolínians and Hispanics have developed a mutual respect and appreciation.

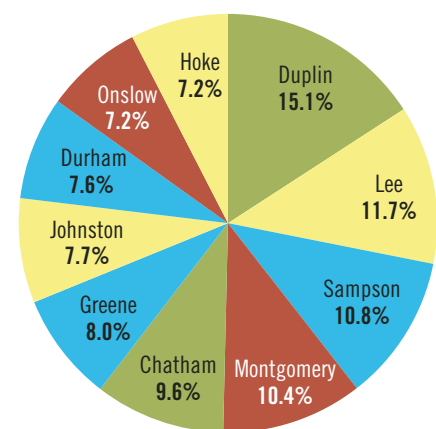
"Farmers have come up to me and said if it were not for Latinos, they wouldn't have a business," she said. "And I have been at Latino birthday parties where the "patron" (farm owner) and his children are there not because he is the patron, (pronounced pah-throne) but because he has become part of the extended family."

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### North Carolina Distribution of Hispanic Workers by Industry



### N.C. Counties With the Highest Percentage of Hispanic Population



Source: 2000 U.S. Census