

Chasing dreams, building America

Immigrants coming to Wisconsin to build new lives aren't taking just the jobs no one else wants — they're playing vital roles in the state's economy

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Park Falls - Heide Clapero made a \$7,000 bet on an American dream.

Ten years ago, she paid a nursing recruiter, bought a one-way plane ticket from Manila to Houston, shared a garden apartment with nine other young Filipino women, crammed for certification exams and waited for that fateful day when she heard a woman announce: "We need nurses in Wisconsin."

Clapero and three others took a chance, packed their bags and headed north, past Milwaukee, past Wausau, past a rolling landscape of lakes and trees, until they finally arrived at Park Manor, a long-term care facility in the Ruffed Grouse Capital of the World.

The three other nurses have long since left for other jobs, other homes, but not Clapero, who stayed, an immigrant who fulfilled not just a dream, but who filled a vital need for a small, rural community in desperate need of one more nurse to care for the ill and the aged.

"Personally, I am a good worker," says Clapero, 37, married to a local law enforcement officer and now on the cusp of achieving full citizenship. "I can give the same dedication to what I do as my fellow Americans."

Clapero's story is an American story, but one frequently lost in the contentious debate over immigration. Immigrants such as Clapero fill key gaps in the economy, not just nationally but also within Wisconsin, where a graying work force and demographic shifts have created a need for more workers.

The days are long gone when small Wisconsin farms tended by large families produced not just enough labor to keep the milking going, but also to work in factories and construction.

Yet even the new era resembles a bit of the old. Wisconsin, a state built by immigrants, mainly from northern Europe, now finds its labor pool replenished by new immigrants, mainly from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

This isn't just a story of unskilled immigrants filling low-wage jobs, cleaning hotel rooms in the Wisconsin Dells and Lake Geneva, washing dishes at Milwaukee restaurants or working as janitors, jobs supposedly unwanted by most American citizens.

Immigrants pack meat at Cargill in Milwaukee, tend golf courses and greenhouses throughout the region, and work the product lines making such products as hand wipes at Tufco Technologies Inc. in Green Bay.

Immigrant labor has fueled the rise of The Bruce Co., one of the top 20 landscape and nursery businesses in America, a firm so desperate for seasonal labor to cut lawns and tend to golf courses that it legally brings in workers from Mexico.

Want to build a home in southeastern Wisconsin? An immigrant is more than likely on the job, roofing, siding, laying bricks or putting up drywall.

"In southeast Wisconsin you have a mix of labor," says Matt Moroney, executive director of the Metropolitan Builders Association. "You've got definitely some immigrant labor in certain trades, some of the masons, some of the drywallers,

even getting into carpentry a little bit as well. In the construction industry, what we always heard was there was always a qualified pool of labor coming from the farms. That is definitely drying up."

Needs of dairy industry

And Wisconsin's signature industry, dairy farming, now relies on immigrant labor.

What would happen to Wisconsin's agricultural sector if the supply of immigrant workers was cut off?

"It would be difficult, particularly for our larger farms, dairy farms, tree farms, fruit farms. All are dependent on Latino workers," says Rod Nilsestuen, secretary of the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Nilsestuen opposes the immigration bill that is backed by House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.). Congress is at loggerheads over immigration, with the House backing a get-tough bill to tighten borders, sanction employers who hire undocumented workers and criminalize illegal immigrants and those who assist them. The Senate bill contains provisions to put some 11 million undocumented immigrants on a path to citizenship.

"It's the wrong policy for the wrong reason," Nilsestuen says of the House measure. "Being punitive isn't going to solve this. It may play to his (Sensenbrenner's) base. It is not going to help Wisconsin or other rural communities."

Demographics drive the debate, both here and nationwide, and so does fear. A number of large companies in the state known for having large Latino work forces declined to be interviewed for this story, saying the issue is too hot politically.

Immigration in America is generally focused on the rise of the Hispanic population. There are now 42.7 million Hispanics who compose the largest minority population in the country, a country on the verge of a population of 300 million people, but also a country growing older. Hispanics accounted for about half of America's population growth of 2.8 million people between 2004 and 2005.

Wisconsin's Hispanic population grew by 23% from 2000 to 2004, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Hispanics accounted for 4.3% of the state's population of around 5.5 million in 2004. More tellingly, the Hispanic population grew by at least 1,000 in nine counties, including by 14,647 in Milwaukee County.

But numbers tell only part of the story. So does geography.

In many ways, Hispanics are keeping rural America alive, filling meatpacking jobs in the Midwest in such states as Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. They're also fueling population growth in the southeast, building homes and providing services to retirees who continue to flood the Sun Belt states.

"Hispanics are geographically dispersed as a population," says William Kandel, a demographer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "This is one of the reasons why immigration has gotten a lot of attention. We're seeing Hispanic population growth in new destinations, like Atlanta, Cincinnati and in rural areas."

How do immigrant workers affect the economy, affect citizens in search of work?

"In general, the academic literature shows that the competition for jobs is very minimal, that these foreign-born workers who are coming in are not taking away jobs that Americans want," Kandel says. "But there is a fair amount of debate and a very real perception that the presence of undocumented, foreign-born workers keeps wages low in certain industries. The big industry in urban areas is construction, and in rural areas it's meat processing and agriculture."

But that's how immigration works on the large scale.

What about the smaller scale?

Hard work pays off

Take a look at two businesses in northern Wisconsin: Park Manor nursing home in Park Falls and Trig's Food and Drug in Minocqua.

Park Manor employs 25 nurses and lies at the center of a lovely town that, like other rural communities, has trouble luring medical talent. Over the last decade, to prevent shortages, the facility contracted to bring in eight nurses from the Philippines. All of the nurses fulfilled their contracts, but it was Clapero who stayed, who found contentment and love in northern Wisconsin, marrying a local man.

And Clapero is beloved by staff and patients, her infectious smile and positive manner providing energy and compassion.

"People want to come to the United States," Clapero says. "They know if you work hard here, you'll go places."

At Trig's in Minocqua, another immigrant story plays out - with an eastern European accent. Each summer, to cope with the tourist rush, the grocery chain hires a dozen or more students from Poland and the former Soviet Union to pack groceries and run cash registers. And when they finish one job, many of the students find other work, cleaning hotel rooms, waiting tables, working at summer camps.

"We have a shortage of quality seasonal workers," says Gary Tallman, a manager at Trig's. "These kids work hard, always want more hours."

And they return year after year. On his desk, Tallman has three boxes of Russian candy, brought to him by returning students.

One eastern European who worked in the Wisconsin north and stayed is Lithuanian-born Rita James, 25. She married the foreman at a local nursery. Now, she works full time at Trig's in the floral department.

"I think we work hard," James says of immigrant laborers. "We do the jobs other people don't want to do."

A problem, and a solution

Now, meet Bliss Nicholson, president and CEO of The Bruce Co. in Middleton.

Ten years ago, Nicholson was out to grow the company. But he had a problem.

"We couldn't grow because we couldn't find enough people," he says.

An industry that once relied on farm and rural kids to fill summer jobs came up against the reality that those kids no longer exist in large numbers. The landscaping jobs - Nicholson employs some 600 people - are also physically demanding, with summer days spent in the heat, dirt and mud, digging holes and irrigation systems. The company advertised in newspapers and on the Web site of the state's Department of Workforce Development.

"People say that there are people around who want to work, but we hadn't had them apply," he says, adding, "It's hard to find people who want to work seasonal jobs, although we pay competitive wages and benefit packages - even offer health insurance - for seasonal people, but it's very difficult to find people who want to work in our industry. Our work force is changing and it's also aging."

To get the needed hands, Nicholson says his firm turned to the H2B visa program that allows companies to go to Mexico to recruit workers if they can prove to the U. S. Department of Labor that the jobs can't be filled with local workers.

So now, in a state whose history is inextricably linked to the land, Nicholson's company brings in 75 workers from Mexico every spring and summer season to do the work that helps keep the gardens and fairways in many Wisconsin communities alive and well.

And Nicholson's firm is not all that unusual - Latino immigrant labor constitutes 25% of the state's "green industry," according to a 2002 report by the Wisconsin Agricultural Statistics Service and University of Wisconsin Extension. The \$2.7 billion-a-year business includes nurseries, landscape services, Christmas trees, greenhouses and sod.

"The (Latino) labor force is the backbone of the industry," says Brian Swingle, executive director of the Wisconsin Green Industry Federation. "The majority of the folks have been coming legally and illegally into the U.S. to work in agriculture, the service sector and the green industry."

Plant's location attractive

Take a small look at another quintessential Wisconsin business - meatpacking.

At Cargill's meatpacking plant in Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley, approximately 70% of the 875 workers at the plant are Latino, according to Jay Harrison, the human resources manager at the plant.

"A big part of our applicant flow comes from Latinos by virtue of our location on the near south side, where there's a large Latino community, and so a lot walk or can easily get here," Harrison says.

Pay at the plant starts at \$9.35 for probationary employees, with a base rate of about \$10.50 an hour, he says.

When Jesus Hernandez came to Milwaukee 26 years ago, he quickly found work at the meat plant, which was then owned by Peck and has changed hands several times during his years there.

After crossing the border in Nogales, Ariz., Hernandez headed for Idaho but heard jobs paid better in Milwaukee. He went to work skinning and removing hides from cows. Now, he's a supervisor.

"The work is hard, but it pays the bills," Hernandez says, a broad smile crossing his face.

The work is steady - no layoffs - and it is indoors, sheltered from the sizzling summer sun and frigid Midwestern winters.

Married with five grown children, Hernandez is now a U.S. citizen. And he is still learning, still gaining skills that will help him in the future. He takes English classes at Milwaukee Achiever, which runs an English as a second language class for Cargill employees.

Fleeing war-torn home

Francisco Hernandez is another immigrant who has followed a well-worn path into meatpacking. Fifteen years ago, he escaped the brutal conditions in his war-torn home of El Salvador and fled to America.

"There were bullets and bombs and they were taking boys 13 and up to the army," he says of the homeland he left behind. "One of my brothers was shot in the leg, so my dad said it was better for me to leave the country than to be dead."

He landed in Los Angeles but a few years later was lured by the promise of better prospects to work as a meatpacker in Milwaukee.

As time passed, Francisco Hernandez noticed that the work force at his plant was growing more Latino, and more efficient.

"I don't want to say we're better, but with more and more Hispanics, our production grew," he says.

In Green Bay, a growing Latino and immigrant population fills jobs in meatpacking and manufacturing, jobs that decades ago went to other immigrants, or even kids off dairy farms.

Tufco Technologies manufactures dry and wet wipes and handles specialty printing and business imaging. It has also won awards for its literacy efforts, teaching English on-site to its immigrant work force, in effect breaking the logjam of a years'-long waiting list in the area for ESL classes.

In 1998-'99, the company experienced a business boom and needed a lot of workers fast for around-the-clock shifts. Recent Asian immigrants from Vietnam and Laos were coming to Green Bay and many were hired. But when that immigration wave stopped, the company started hiring Latinos who were attracted to Green Bay by jobs in the area, particularly those in the meatpacking industry.

'I'd be hurting'

Latinos make up about 9% of the full-time work force and about half of the temporary workers, says Karen Selden, coordinator of corporate human relations for Tufco.

"Would I be struggling without the Hispanic community?" asks Selden. "Absolutely, I'd be hurting, especially without the temps."

Among the immigrant workers are Roberto Lopez and his wife, Silvania Maldonado, who arrived in Green Bay five years ago from Guadalajara, Mexico.

Green Bay was supposed to be a temporary stop, says Lopez, who was a reservation agent for an airline company back in Mexico.

But the work is good, and steady.

"Here I don't speak English, so I have to take a job with less status, but there's the opportunity to make more money here," Lopez says.

So Lopez and his wife remain, working different shifts, working on a new American dream.