

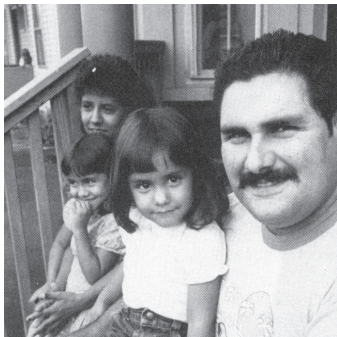
MANCHESTER

AMHERST • AUBURN • BEDFORD • CANDIA • DERRY • GOFFSTOWN • HOOKSETT • LONDONDERRY

AUGUST 1988

A Tale of Two Families

Samuel Morales came here from Puerto Rico 34 years after Tony Rolon did. Here's how their lives intersect.



A house in the suburbs, a front lawn for the boys, a garden for June, a car: Tony Rolon has come a long way from the poverty of his native Puerto Rico. Not too far, though, to forget other newcomers who need a helping hand. Tony is trying to get the Morales family settled in their own apartment. Top photo: June and Tony Rolon. Bottom photo: Patria, Maria Sols, Carmen, and Samuel Morales.

The soft vowels and rounded lisp of Spanish words moved around me as Tony Rolon, executive director of the Latin American Center in Manchester, translated for me the story Samuel Morales, a recent arrival from Puerto Rico, was telling him. My inadequate Spanish allowed me to catch only bits and pieces as Samuel, his face tired but energetic, told Tony about how hard he had been working but how glad he was that he had finally gathered enough money to bring his wife and two children from Puerto Rico to live with him. Tony informed me that after the interview he was going to help Samuel contact the gas company so he could get service connected in Samuel's new apartment.

Here was one man, Tony Rolon, who had spent almost his entire life in the United States, reaching out to help another man, Samuel Morales, a traveler in a new country. Unused to the folkways of American society, Samuel must depend on the kindnesses of friends to help him through. It was a moment when it was possible to glimpse the historical process that has helped define the character of the city: The process of the new immigrant turning to, and getting assistance from, the old immigrant who had somehow become "native." In that small room on the second floor of the Latin American Center Tony and Samuel added another episode to the story of how the hopes and efforts of immigrants have made Manchester the city that it is.

Tony had come from Puerto Rico to the United States in 1950 at the age of four, his family settling in Jersey City, New Jersey. Life in Puerto Rico was, as Tony said, "rustic": a simple diet, people working in the fields, calm. And also poor, which was the reason why the Rolons came to the United States to look for employment. Being four years old made it easier for Tony to fit into American society because he was able to learn enough English quickly from his friends to survive in school and in society at large. "One of the problems," he said, "for older Hispanic people coming to the United States is that they have to learn where everything is, and that can be very intimidating. I was able to learn quickly how to get things that I wanted because I started out so young."

Tony Rolon married his wife June in 1968. They met during a joint choral concert sponsored by Iona College (which Tony attended) and Mount St. Mary's College in Hooksett (which June attended). They decided to stay in Manchester, living first in a 3½-room apartment on Merrimack Street (for the princely rent of \$25 a week), and then in a slightly larger place on Grove Street for \$50 a month.

After their marriage in 1968, Tony worked at the Sylvania plant on South Willow Street for four years as a production supervisor. In 1972, he worked independently as a contract cleaner, but even though the money was good, he wanted to finish his college education (both he and June left school as sophomores to get married). He returned to Jersey City for two years in 1975 to finish his college education, and when he returned to Manchester in 1977, he began part-time as the executive director of the Latin American Center, which had been established five years earlier. In 1979 he began work for Nashua Corporation. His position as production foreman lasted for nine years until he became the full-time director of the Latin American Center. It's been a life, he admitted, balanced between his Spanish roots and his American loyalties.

This balance expresses itself in interesting ways. For instance, his three sons - Mark, Christopher and Michael, all in high school - are taking classes in Spanish. English has always been their first language. While Tony said it was a mistake not to speak more Spanish in the house, he realizes that the loss of the language is part of the assimilation process for the second and third generations. "They don't feel like a minority," he said. "They've become assimilated, 'blended in.'"

To compensate for this seeming loss of roots, however, the Rolons have taken trips to Puerto Rico where they have come to understand better their own heritage. Tony spoke of a "spiritual awakening" that happened for them all during these trips. His family had a chance to see where he had come from and what his life had been like as a child. And he had the opportunity to better comprehend what life was and is like in Puerto Rico. The incredible beauty of the place shelters, but can't completely hide, a persistent and damning poverty.

Having the sources of his identity in both the American and Hispanic worlds gives Tony a special edge in his work at the Latin American Center. The Center's function, as Tony sees it, is to form a support network so that Spanish-speaking people in Manchester, whatever their needs, can develop "bicultural competency." Tony's term describes an ability to learn enough about a different and confusing society so as not to be cheated or at the mercy of the environment. Language is the greatest obstacle to bicultural competency, and much of the work Tony wants the Center to do focuses on building fluency in both Spanish and English. Tony said



Patria hopes Maria Sols will pick up English from her friends so she can understand her teachers. (Photos by Peter Blakely)

new arrivals in particular need successful peer models, people who have acquired the skill to navigate the shallows and reefs of American society.

One of the people for whom Tony is working hard is Samuel, who recently came to the United States from Puerto Rico at the age of 24 with his wife Patria and his two young daughters, Maria Sols and Carmen. Life in Puerto Rico was much the same for Samuel as it had been for the Rolons a generation earlier. In Puerto Rico Samuel was a truck driver making \$15 a day. Seeing that he was not going to advance economically (Puerto Rico is currently running double-digit unemployment), he came to the United States in the spring of 1986. He stayed with a cousin in North Adams, Massachusetts, and worked at a car dealership prepping cars for customers. When that job ended, he came to Manchester on the advice of his brother-in-law and worked at Prevue Products as a general laborer until the company closed in 1987. Faced with unemployment here, Samuel returned to Puerto Rico, partly to try to find work and partly to nurse a sick uncle. Eight months later, unable to find work at home, he came back to Manchester searching for employment.

Samuel had to come to the United States alone because he could not cover the expense of bringing his entire family. It took a month of working two full-time jobs-a day job at Carol Cable testing the conductivity of cables and a night job at the Millyard as a dishwasher and general kitchen help-to earn a deposit on an apartment and plane fare for his family. He missed his family a great deal during that time. But even though they are now here, the living is still not easy. Samuel has had a few run-ins with what he calls *molestosos*, people who harassed him because of his Hispanic background. The apartment also fell through, and the Morales are still looking for a place to stay. But even given all of these pressures, Samuel still feels that they all have a good life. They like Manchester (Samuel called it a “tranquil” city) and believe that in the end they’ll be able to save money and prosper.

Tony and Samuel attested the English language (or rather, the lack of a command of it) is the most difficult obstacle Samuel faces. At work Samuel can get along because most of his workmates on his shift at Carol Cable speak Spanish. At home, he and his family find themselves frustrated when they have to do simple tasks. For example, Tony had to help with getting the gas service installed. But because of his heavy work schedule, Samuel does not have time to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. His children will most likely pick up the language from their friends, as did Tony when he arrived at the age of four. Maria Sols, who is five, may have a problem in school if she has not picked up enough English to get through her classes. Samuel was not sure how to handle the language problem, but he knows they all need to learn English well if they are going to have a chance at economic success in the United States.

As the interview ends and Tony gets ready to call the gas company, Samuel waits patiently. I want to try my fragmented Spanish with him but feel embarrassed about it, and I suddenly know what it must feel like for him as he faces signs and lingo and the conversations of strangers in a language he doesn’t yet know. And as Tony makes contact with a company representative, I can hear in his brisk tone the voice of one who knows his way around, and I also know how comforting that must feel for Samuel.

These two men and their families are like parentheses that bracket the immigrant history of our city. Tony Rolon had time to establish himself and become accustomed to the ins and outs of American culture, and he and his family inhabit a world both Spanish and American, rooted in a sense of history that combines different cultures and world views. The Morales are

new, and in them one can see afresh the struggles that must have engaged all our ancestors as they came to these shores and tried to make their way. Tony hopes that soon the Center will be able to move beyond programs of maintenance and begin active political and economic organization of Manchester's Hispanic population. But that goal of unity can only be achieved through individual acts of assistance and kindness that allow people like Samuel and his family to gather their collective breath and face the challenge of meeting, and prospering in, a new society.