

## They're a Part of the Island

Immigrants pay taxes and otherwise contribute to our community

By David Dyssegaard Kallick

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As Long Islanders continue to react to the stabbing death of Marcelo Lucero, it's surely time to take a deep breath and look honestly at the issues surrounding immigration here.

One thing this shocking attack makes clear is that there simply isn't a bright line between legal and illegal immigrants. The group of teenagers charged in the killing were reportedly rallied by the call, "Let's go find some Mexicans to -- up." Latinos walking around the Patchogue train station are likely to feel a deep chill in their spines for a long time to come, regardless of whether they have working papers in their pockets. Immigrants from China and the Caribbean and Eastern Europe—and plenty of U.S.-born Long Islanders as well—may feel the same. It's hard to create a welcoming climate for immigrants while at the same time provoking hostility to undocumented ones.

And make no mistake, immigrants are crucial to the New York economy. First-generation immigrants—documented and undocumented combined—are responsible for 22 percent of the gross domestic product in New York State, slightly higher than their 21 percent share of the state population.

That may be surprising. But consider that while day laborers may generate the most controversy, registered nurse is the No. 1 occupation of all the immigrants in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Long Island has nearly 10,000 foreign-born nurses—almost one out of every three RNs here. And there are as many immigrant doctors and accountants as there are immigrant grounds maintenance workers and construction laborers.

Just because we can't draw a neat line between documented and undocumented workers, however, doesn't mean we should accept illegal immigration. Having undocumented workers is not good for the health of our society, just as being undocumented isn't good for the immigrants.

Immigrants who have no official papers are clearly trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder. Sometimes they are paid less than minimum wage, and sometimes unscrupulous employers don't pay them at all.

A common belief is that immigrants who are here illegally don't pay taxes. But sales taxes are paid by everyone—documented and undocumented, immigrant and U.S.-born. So are property taxes: Even if you rent, you are covering the cost of the property taxes paid by the owner. Together,

these make up nearly all of Nassau and Suffolk county tax revenues.

It is true that a significant number of undocumented immigrants don't file income tax returns. It is worth noting, though, that many do. In New York State, some 91,000 people—most probably undocumented workers—filed income taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers in 2003, and probably an even bigger number in subsequent years.

There are many good reasons to get all undocumented immigrants on the income-tax rolls. But doing so is unlikely to be a big revenue generator. Families with very low incomes who file regular tax returns are likely to qualify for more in tax credits than they owe in taxes.

At the same time, there are some important services that undocumented immigrants can't use. Take Social Security. Many undocumented immigrants get work by using false Social Security numbers. That means they have Social Security taxes deducted from their paychecks—in fact, the Social Security Administration has estimated that nationwide most undocumented workers are paid this way. As of 2005, some \$7 billion a year was collected from people with mismatched Social Security numbers, most of it from undocumented immigrants who will never collect Social Security benefits.

Wishing undocumented immigrants away isn't a realistic solution, nor is closing down every business that hires workers illegally. Undocumented immigrants are a fact of everyday life on Long Island: cutting grass, caring for children, painting houses, washing dishes in restaurants.

Let's get real about addressing the issues, rather than fanning the flames of intolerance. New York is already in a downturn, and a recession is no time to throw a damp rag on nearly a quarter of the economy.

A real solution would have three parts.

One: Raise the wages and improve working conditions in low-wage jobs, expanding opportunities for both immigrants and Americans who are citizens by birth.

Two: Create an earned path to citizenship, so that undocumented immigrants who are here today can move out of the unregulated economy and into regular jobs.

Three: Revise our immigration so there's more opportunity to come to this country legally and less pressure for people to find unauthorized ways in.

What's needed is a comprehensive national solution. As we work toward that on Long Island let's tone down the anti-immigrant rhetoric. Because we are all hurt by a climate of fear and vigilantism.

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