

The New Face of Delaware

Immigrants have changed the state and its workforce. The state, therefore, has welcomed them with open arms.

BY RICHARD L. GAW

Cemal Idil was a fiber optic engineer in his hometown of Samsun City, Turkey. One day in June 2001, he took his father for a walk in the middle of his family's hazelnut field and told him he would soon leave for the United States.

The economic infrastructure of Turkey was crumbling. The closings of banks and factories and the rise of unemployment were a call for Idil to carve a new future. A friend who had recently immigrated to Delaware convinced Idil to join him.

"My father told me that I must go," Idil says. "He said, 'You can learn the language in America. You can learn everything there. You can do everything there.'"

After the U.S. Embassy approved his visa, Idil started working at a construction company here. He also worked for a while at a Turkish restaurant in Wilmington, then applied his 16 years of engineering experience at an electric company in 2004 where, soon after he began, he suffered an on-the-job injury that prevented him from working.

"My doctors told me that I could only perform light duty, and said that if I were ever able to apply my skills in America, I would have to do it through communicating."

So Idil has, for the past four years, attended classes at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute. With students from Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Germany, Sweden and Russia, Idil learns a language and a culture that has become for millions of new Americans the equivalent of pure gold.

A new face of immigration has replaced those seen on newsreels of men on ships waving derby caps at the Statue of Liberty. The once huddled masses are now educated men and women and their children. The thousands who have come to Delaware have been welcomed with guidance, education and economic opportunity.

"Whatever the reasons that bring immigrants to the United States, their adjustment to a new country is so often slow and painful, and their identities are undergoing a major life change," says ELI associate director Debra Ditzel. "They need to know that people here care about them. Once they know that, they will be able to connect back to themselves, gain confidence and find their voice, in a new language."

According to United States Immigration Support, 9 percent of Delaware's population of 864,000—about 66,000 Delawareans—is made up of immigrants or the children of immigrants, and our foreign-born population doubled during the 1990s.

Nearly 70 percent of Delaware's immigrants are part of the local workforce. Of those workers, about 90 percent are private wage or salary workers. About 40 percent work in managerial or professional jobs, and more than a fifth of them work in education or health care.

The successful immersion of Delaware's foreign-born can be traced to federal and state laws merging with educational opportunity. Delaware is one of the biggest beneficiaries of The Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which established a national workforce preparation and employment system that provides immigrants with federally funded classes in English.

"The English language is money today, not only for immigrants living in the United States, but for people who remain in their native countries," says Walt Babich, an instructor at ELI. "Being able to speak the English language well can make the difference between having a good job and a bad job. It is also the international language in business and general communication."

ELI has an enrollment of more than 1,800—many of them students at the University of Delaware, several hundred of them adults who have emigrated and are applying for U.S. citizenship.

"One out of every five Delaware families speaks another language in their home and, eventually, it will be one in four," says ELI director Scott Stevens. "This is where the United States is going. America has never ceased to remain a place of opportunity, and the expansion of our programs to more and more



where the United States is going. America has never ceased to remain a place of opportunity, and the expansion of our programs to more and more immigrants allows us to be a part of that.”

The ELI also reaches out to another foreign group: the spouses of visiting scholars and graduate students at the university, many of whom remained sheltered in off-campus apartments while their husbands or wives furthered their careers. As a result, the university began underwriting ELI tuition for spouses.

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The education of the foreign-born student extends beyond the classroom. In Middletown, Appoquinimink School District employs four social workers who, during the past year, have helped many families adjust to their new lives, sometimes connecting them with social services and counseling them on medical care, insurance negotiations, financial assistance and other matters.

Through a grant from the Red Clay Consolidated School District's Consolidated Grant Parent Advisory Council, funds are provided to increase proficiency of English learners. The group provides quality professional development to ESL/bilingual teachers, mainstream teachers, principals, and other school staff and community organizations. The program is also designed to improve the instruction and assessment of ELL students.

A dig into the origins of several of America's largest companies reveals a consistent thread: Many were born from the sweat of immigrants. Locally, E.I. du Pont of France built a gunpowder mill in Delaware in 1802 and founded an industrial empire. Today DuPont employs about 60,000 people at 220 sites in more than 75 countries.

Vishal Tandon says the main reason he is now vice president for global technologies for JPMorgan Chase is his involvement in the bank's ASPIRE (Asians and South Pacific Islanders Reaching for Excellence) program, one of many ethnic networking groups sponsored by the bank. A native of Bombay, India, Tandon became active in ASPIRE when he was hired by Chase five years ago. For the past two, he has served as its Delaware chairperson.

“ASPIRE allows us to channel our energy into events and ideas that strengthen the bank as well as our community,” Tandon says. “It gives those who share the same heritage a key to outreach at the bank.”

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JPMorgan Chase offers several other networking groups. Adelante promotes the development of the bank's Latino-Hispanic employees. Ujima is a forum for employees of African descent.

At W.L. Gore and Associates, there are six “business networks,” two geared toward Asian-born employees and those who have emigrated from Latino-Hispanic countries. “Our mission statement is part of our culture,” says Beth Teloh, diversity coordinator at W.L. Gore. “Everyone experiences the Gore culture in the same way. We want each associate, no matter what their background and where they come from, to know that there are other associates they can talk with and connect with.”

The number of immigrants in Delaware has remained steady in recent years, though the immigrant population in the United States has decreased, according to the U.S. Census.

The reason for the downturn may be the economy, says Edward Ratledge, director for applied demography and survey research at the University of Delaware. The country lost 240,000 jobs in October alone, the 10th consecutive monthly decline, and the unemployment rate rose to 6.5 percent, its highest level since 1994.

“I see no major acceleration in migration to Delaware, whether it is internal or from foreign countries, because these numbers are totally dependent on jobs,” Ratledge says. “The question now is whether the job picture in the state will necessitate that this population leaves Delaware.”

Idil is one course away from receiving his certificate in ELI's English as a Second Language program. “I want to live in this country,” Idil says. “After I receive my certificate, I will look at my life in a new way.”

The five-year waiting period of citizenship ended for Idil on January 28, a date he had marked on the calendar, because it is also the day he intended to apply to become a United States citizen.