

America's Promise, Found in the Army;
To More Immigrant New Yorkers, A Better Life Begins in Uniform

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Body

It was only four years ago that Fernando De Souza and his family arrived in New York from Lima, Peru. Mr. De Souza, the eldest of four children, scrambled to learn English at John Bowne High School in Flushing, Queens, kept his grades in the high 80's, and dreamed of studying medicine in college.

But disappointments quickly tumbled in: A guidance counselor questioned whether he could succeed in a pre-med program. And Mr. De Souza's father, a condominium maintenance worker, could hardly afford college tuition in any case. Mr. De Souza never bothered to apply. Instead, he enlisted in the Army.

Mr. De Souza, 17, plans to head off to basic training in Oklahoma by summer's end, and after training hopes to join an artillery unit. It was not the lure of being a soldier that changed his mind -- it was the regular paycheck and the Army's promise of \$19,000 for college. Mr. De Souza plans to send his first few paychecks -- \$800 a month -- back home to help his family with the rent. He hopes to take college courses near the Army base and eventually graduate from the Brooklyn campus of Long Island University.

"I don't like shooting people and stuff like that," Mr. De Souza said. "I thought I had to work for college, pay for my education. I didn't think I was going to be able to take that. That's why I thought the Army was the best decision."

Because many more high school graduates have been heading directly to college or landing jobs in New York City's booming economy in recent years, military recruiters say persuading young men and women to enlist is harder than ever. But for more and more immigrants, even legal residents who are not yet citizens, the military has come to represent a step up the American social ladder, much as it has long been for working-class youths born here.

At the Army station in Flushing, where Mr. De Souza signed up, officials estimate that half the recruits today are immigrants -- youngsters from India and Korea, Jamaica and Guyana. About a third of the recruits from New York City, where 13 percent of the children under 18 were born outside the United States, hold green cards.

Nationwide, the percentage of immigrants in the Army is still small: about 5 percent last year, up from 2 percent a decade ago. But Army officials say they believe that the children of immigrants, too, are enlisting in greater numbers. Since they do not keep statistics on immigrants who are naturalized citizens, that belief is supported not by hard numbers but by anecdotal evidence and by inference based on such signs as the growth in the percentage

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of Hispanic soldiers. More than 10 percent of the roughly 70,000 recruits in fiscal year 1998, for instance, were Hispanic, up from 4 percent in 1987. The Secretary of the Army, Louis Caldera, is himself the Texas-born son of Mexican immigrants.

At the Flushing station, Hojin Pak, 17, a Korean-American who immigrated at age 4, said he signed up for the Army because his parents could not afford to send him to the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he had been accepted. In the fall, he will be stationed in Virginia and work as a logistics specialist. He said he hoped that his stint would help pay for college and earn him a measure of self-confidence.

Amos Dobrowski, who was born in Poland before the fall of Communism, said he enlisted because he did not want to subject his parents to financial hardship. In exchange for \$50,000 for college, Mr. Dobrowski, 17, who once dreamed of going to culinary school, has agreed to a four-year assignment in Fort Hood, Tex., where he will be a tank gunner.

Margaret Rodriguez, a Dominican immigrant at John Bowne High School who wanted to study law at George Washington University, said she signed up because no one else was offering what Sgt. Marc Ross, a recruiter in the Flushing station, did: \$50,000 for college.

So Ms. Rodriguez, a strong-willed, serious 17-year-old with a delicate coil of curls, will spend the next four years as an Army chemical operations specialist, testing for toxic chemicals on the battlefield and, she hopes, attending evening classes at a college near her base.

Talking to Sergeant Ross one afternoon earlier this year "opened a whole new world," she said.

It is that glimpse of opportunity, Sergeant Ross said, that explains the Army's appeal to young people -- not only to native New Yorkers like him, but also to the immigrants of Queens. As he trolls for potential recruits, he peppers them with questions: Do you have any major health problems? Are you a high school graduate?

And then he adds: Were you born in this country? If not, do you have a green card?

The sergeant, a jovial, fast-talking man with a close military haircut and a pencil-thin mustache, grew up in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and now lives with his wife and their three sons on the Army base in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn. When he was the age of his young immigrant recruits, Sergeant Ross, 30, said, his world was actually not all that different from theirs. He was not exactly brimming with patriotic fervor as a teen-ager. All he wanted after high school was a good job and a way to provide for his girlfriend, now his wife. When a recruiter told him that the Army could help him do just that, he signed up.

He said he often wondered how many of his old friends were in jail, or dead. He still sees some of them hanging out on street corners, he said, and his conversations with them usually go like this:

"Why don't you join the Army?" he asks.

"No, man, I don't want to join the Army," they reply. "You got \$20?"

Today, even though the Army is smaller than it was a decade ago, finding soldiers has never been harder, recruiters said. In New York City, they said, it has become harder to attract young people with a high school diploma (the Army can take a few with only equivalency degrees) and without a criminal record. Even among high school graduates, finding applicants who can pass the military entrance exam is a formidable challenge, recruiters said.

And then there is the challenge of competing with the lure of a college education. Compared with previous generations, many more high school graduates are going to college. One recent morning Sergeant Ross went recruiting at La Guardia Community College. On campus, Sergeant Ross passed a young man dressed in camouflage pants. "You want the whole suit?" he asked.

"Nah," came the nonchalant reply.

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Sergeant Ross pointed to a table where young men were playing cards. "That's what college is all about -- playing," he said, barely hiding his contempt.

Down the hall, he ran into Brandon Baxter, a student he has been trying to recruit for months, and resumed the hard sell.

Deeply ambivalent about joining the Army, Mr. Baxter, 20, is ambitious and thoughtful. He said he wanted to be like the billionaire investor, Warren E. Buffett. "Rich people inspire me," he said. "Maybe 'cause I'm broke."

Sergeant Ross reminded Mr. Baxter that the Army was a \$64 billion business, and that jobs in finance were available to candidates like him.

Mr. Baxter told Sergeant Ross that he wanted to move out of his mother's apartment and was thinking about taking the Army test soon. Sergeant Ross pressed him to act before it was too late -- before he ended up with a criminal record. Mr. Baxter insisted that he was not involved in criminal activity. Sergeant Ross simply shrugged and reminded him of Amadou Diallo. "He probably wasn't into anything either," he said.

Sergeant Ross is much like his recruits in focusing on the security of Army life, rather than its rigors. Many of the young men and women who have signed up at the Flushing recruiting station say they give little thought to the dangers they may face in the Army or the violence of combat.

Mr. De Souza, for instance, said that even though his mother cried for him every time she saw television reports about the war in Yugoslavia, he was confident that he would not be in danger. "I'm not scared about that," he said.

Assembled at the recruiting station one afternoon last week, the newest recruits from Flushing reflected on the lives they will be starting soon.

Lnu Geevarghese, 18, an Indian immigrant, said he knew that combat could be part of the bargain. "It's your job to defend," he said. "Obviously, you have to be prepared."

That evening, Mr. Dobrowski said the war in Yugoslavia had prompted him to think long and hard about serving the United States Government. He became an American citizen two years ago. "I'm seeing it as another Holocaust," he said. "It's good they're helping the people."

But he was also a bit cynical about the American military action. "From history," said Mr. Dobrowski, who plans to major in the subject, "I see they get interested where they have an interest."

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Graphic

Photos: Immigrants are increasingly drawn to Army service. From left on the couch, Hojin Pak and Tony Ham, Korean-Americans, and Amos Dobrowski, a Polish-American, listened to Sgt. Nathan Thompson, a recruiter in Queens. Fernando De Souza, 17, whose family left Lima, Peru, for New York four years ago, recently enlisted in the Army with an eye toward paying for college. (Photographs by James Estrin/The New York Times)

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