

## **PANEL DISCUSSES IMMIGRATION SERIES' IMPACT**

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)

April 30, 2000 Sunday

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**Section:** LOCAL; Pg. 1B

**Length:** 708 words

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### **Body**

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When Hildara Blakesley moved from a tiny village in South America to her husband's hometown of Aitkin, Minn., 25 years ago, the new bride didn't know a word of English.

At age 24, Blakesley adjusted to the new culture with the help of her husband, whom she met when he was a Peace Corps volunteer, and a tutor who came to her home as part of a local program.

"That's how I got to where I am today," said Blakesley, a mother of two girls, who after 20 years of hard work received her high school diploma in 1995.

The St. Cloud, Minn., resident shared her story Saturday during the League of Women Voters Action Forum at the Minnesota History Center. The event was a culmination of the League's community circle discussions on **immigration** held throughout the state in the past several months.

A total of 17 communities and 1,000 people participated in the discussion circles, said Judy Duffy, president of the Minnesota League of Women Voters. The idea behind the "Changing Faces, Changing Communities" **series** was to get people talking about Minnesota's tremendous increase in immigrant populations during the past decade.

Minnesota's foreign-born population is believed to have increased by at least 50 percent in the 1990s, fueled by the arrival of African and Asian refugees and by secondary migration of immigrants who moved to Minnesota from other states, such as California, to be closer to relatives. By 2025, if current estimates prove correct, 15 percent of Minnesota's population will be minorities, compared with about 9 percent today.

Representatives from the circles attended Saturday's event to share results of their discussions and brainstorm about how to implement their ideas. In nearly all groups, issues relating to education, resources and community partnerships were mentioned.

Many said that welcoming immigrants and acting as partners with them are key.

Those who spoke expressed a desire to see goals reach fruition and not end up, as one woman said, as a report that gets stashed away in a drawer some place.

"We're going to try to continue this process," Duffy stressed during a break in the program. "It's certainly had an **impact** throughout the state."

Many speakers praised the circles for promoting interaction among people of different backgrounds. A few shared stories of how their involvement positively changed their everyday relationships - with family, friends and co-workers. Many said they learned just how diverse their own communities are.

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Jane McWilliams, a member of the Northfield League of Women Voters, said she was touched by the experience. In her group, a 16-year-old girl translated information for several members. The girl was explaining how McWilliams was curious about national anthems in the others' homelands when an Asian man, understanding the question, abruptly stood up and began singing his national anthem.

"It was one of the most moving experiences of my life," she said.

At the same time, some speakers said they had hoped for more diversity in their circles and wondered if they couldn't have done things differently to encourage more people to attend. A circle discussion in Austin, Minn., came up with the mantra "Meet, Greet and Repeat" to encourage continuing relationships.

Small group discussion topics included advocacy, benefits, community services, youth, education/language, housing and health care. From these discussions, participants came up with lists of available resources, possible and current collaborations, and follow-up steps.

Blakesley is eager to see what comes of the circle discussions. She knows immigrants, both those who arrived in Minnesota years ago like herself and newcomers, would benefit by having access to more resources - especially mentors.

Joining the community circle discussion in St. Cloud helped as well because it allowed her to speak freely about her immigration experience. She grew up in Montero, Peru.

"For me, it was the greatest thing that happened," she told the group of about 100 people gathered at the history center. "This is the first time I could express or tell my experiences since coming to this country."

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## Notes

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See related series: The New Face of Minnesota

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (90%); VOTERS & VOTING (88%); POPULATION SIZE (78%); HIGH SCHOOLS (75%); MINORITY GROUPS (73%); VOLUNTEERS (71%); REFUGEES (69%)

**Organization:** PEACE CORPS (57%)

**Industry:** HIGH SCHOOLS (75%)

**Geographic:** SAINT PAUL, MN, USA (73%); MINNESOTA, USA (97%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); SOUTH AMERICA (79%)

**Load-Date:** January 29, 2002

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