

IMMIGRANTS' DREAM: ROOM OF THEIR OWN

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Body

BACK IN NOVEMBER 1961, when I arrived in Miami from Cuba very young and brimming with **dreams**, I moved in with seven friends into a one-bedroom apartment intended for two tenants.

Did I like it?

No, I did not, and neither did my roommates. Was I comfortable breaking the law? Of course not. But those days I was just taking my first steps in this country, and there was no other way I could afford a place to live. It sure beat a park bench.

That's why the tragic deaths eight days ago of four Polish **immigrants** in a fire in an illegal Maspeth boardinghouse rang such a familiar bell.

I know by my **own** experience that to have a place of your **own** is as much the **immigrant's dream** as any red-blooded American's.

I also know that the great majority of **immigrants** are hardworking, law-abiding people who want the best possible life for themselves and their families. Yet, high rents and scarce income force them to postpone the **dream**.

The Maspeth fire brought back to the forefront a problem with which the city Queens in particular has grappled on and off for generations.

Recent **immigrants** desperately need a place to live; homeowners make illegal subdivisions to take advantage of such a need. In some instances, as I did in 1961, people double or triple up in small apartments. Everybody hates it.

So does Rolando.

"I live in a one-bedroom apartment with five other guys. I have no choice," he says.

Rolando is part of a new wave of Mexican **immigrants** who have settled in areas of Queens such as Astoria, Elmhurst, Corona and Jackson Heights.

Like most Mexicans in New York, Rolando is young, eager and hails from the state of Puebla.

At 22, he wants to go back to school and make something of himself. He is hardworking and resourceful, but in his three years in New York has not yet found a job that carries the rent alone.

He and his roommates live on 90th St. in Jackson Heights. They are childhood friends, which makes things easier; they even have some good times together. Yet, every one of them wants a place of his **own**.

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"I wouldn't mind having one roommate or two," Rolando says. "But neither of us can afford it." Right now they live dormitory-style in their \$ 800-a-month apartment.

Four sleep in bunk beds in the bedroom while Rolando and another guy camp out on sofas in the living room. The place is surprisingly neat.

"I work nights and sleep until 11 or 12 in the morning," Rolando says. "They don't. It's very uncomfortable."

He works as a busboy in a trendy East Village restaurant and in a good week brings home \$ 250. Somehow, he manages to scrape up \$ 100 every month to send to his family in Mexico.

As it was for many generations before them, this is a temporary situation for the new immigrants. They'll find their own places as soon as they can afford to do so. In the meantime, they contribute to overcrowding their neighborhood and put a strain on city services such as hospitals and schools.

Tensions inevitably build up. Homeowners worry about real estate values, and community groups have concerns about the effect on their neighborhood's quality of life.

But then there is the human dimension. Jim Daley, director of Woodside on the Move, a nonprofit community group, puts it this way: "If you push these people out, where do they go?"

Great question.

The next great question, "If they go, what happens to the city?" was recently answered by the city Department of Planning. Its report on immigration in the '90s concludes, "In the face of continued outmigration, the city's population growth and the stability of its housing stock are inextricably tied to immigration."

In other words, if these people go, the city goes with them.

Fortunately, the city seems to have nothing to worry about. Queens certainly doesn't. Its future is in good hands.

FROM ASTORIA to Jamaica, from Flushing to Woodhaven, plenty of good, honest, hardworking people from Asia and the Caribbean, Europe and South America, are contributing with their ingenuity and their hands to the progress of their communities. Energetic, resourceful people like Rolando and his friends.

People who, like me 36 years ago, will do everything in their power to make their dreams come true.

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