LATINOS FROM PAGE G-1

Ten travelers assemble in the pre-dawn dark of a Monroeville parking lot, their greetings in Spanish. It will be a killer of a day: On the road in a rented green van by 6 a.m. for Pennsylvania Latino Day in Washington, D.C., back home after midnight.

Seventy-five Latinos statewide will bring issues to the conference room in the Hart Senate Office Building. Senators Rick Santorum, Arlen Specter and Utah's Orrin Hatch will man the podium.

Hatch is on the Senate's Republican Task Force on Hispanic Affairs. Born in Pittsburgh, calling himself "Pennsylvania's third senator," he will tell his story about living in a South Hills chicken coop in an effort to ally himself with the struggle of underprivileged Latinos. Inexplicably, he will say he considers himself a Latino.

But the assembly — most from eastern Pennsylvania — is worried about Latino children, whose public school drop-out rate of 6.7 percent almost triples the state average; concerned about the disparate levels of commitment to their health care and about diabetes, an oft-cited "Latino" disease; appalled that though they make up less than 5 percent of the state's population, their brethren contribute at least more than double that percentage to the state's prisons.

Before the green van plowed home in a heavy rain that night, a little dream of Pittsburgh got voice. Brent Rondon, president of the Latin American Cultural Union (LACU), stood and told the assembly that Pittsburgh's Latino population is dispersed and without a focal point: "We want to pursue funding, maybe a grant, to establish a community center. In Pittsburgh, we have no 'place.' "

The Latino presence in most cities is concentrated in neighborhoods called *barrios*, where cuisine, shopping and support services cater to them. In such a community center in Harrisburg, Rondon began learning English when he came from Peru 11 years ago.

The timing of Rondon's proposal coincides with a changing Latino demographic in Pittsburgh: "In the last six or seven years," he told the assembly, "we have seen a growth in our population of workers in jobs that are not professional." Unlike Pittsburgh's earlier phalanx of Latinos, this population will struggle longer for position, for a second language and for a sense of community.

Long-time Latino residents say they see new faces in dance clubs and at the grocery store. They see men they're sure are fellow Latinos walking with lunch pails and Latinas boarding buses with their children. These are the people who most need a place, says Rondon; the reason there was never a *barrio* was because the professional classes never needed one.

"My vision is of a place where people could be free to stop by and get help and advice," he says. "I know a doctor who told me he is willing to do free consulting, but where? Women who are isolated with children need day care so they could learn English better or explore opportunities. Our center could have day care."

The center would also need a staff. Rondon devotes time to LACU in addition to a job managing international programs for Duquesne University's Small Business Development Center. But he has been as influential as anyone in the blossoming of Latino cultural presence in the city.

LACU members dance at fundraisers, holiday events and festivals. They team with The Andy Warhol Museum for Day of the Dead celebrations and exhibits. Their authentic cultural displays have helped build esteem for the annual Latin American Folk Festival at the University of Pittsburgh.

For now, the Latino presence is portable. People flutter to the flame of a variety of clubs and restaurants that didn't exist 10 years ago — Cozumel and the Fajita Grill in Shadyside, Kenny B's Downtown, La Fiesta in Oakland, Mago Latino in Bloomfield, El Campesano in Monroeville, Club Rios on Mount Washington and Club Havana in Shadyside. At a new South Side club, Angels, one of the managers is former Pirates catcher Manny Sanguillen.

This little bloom of night life has given rise to several Latino bands. Miguel Sagué's Guaracha is the most venerable, dating to the late '70s. More recently, Orquesta Tropical, Latin Impulse and the traditional Andean band Musuhalpa have gained footholds.

Sagué, Cuban born and Erie raised, has built Guaracha into a cross-over band since the late '70s. The Gateway Clipper hired them for dinner cruises, and Sagué brought dancers from LACU aboard. In the early '90s, impresario and musician Karl Mullen began booking Guaracha at Rosebud in the Strip, where the very first Latino night led to more at other clubs. Now, almost every night of the week, if you want to dance salsa or merengue, you can find dance partners and instructors at various clubs in the city.

At the same time, the Latino presence here risks being defined within the almost clichéd confines of salsa dancing and salsa dip. Latinos have not made an intensive claim on this city, partly because no barrio was ever established, partly because the professionals who made up most of the Latino population for so long didn't project their being Latino on the rest of the city.

Many non-Latinos think the chicken enchilada they always order is an ethnic experience. They may never know about pigeon peas, fritters or seafood stew. Many non-Latinos believe all Latinos are Catholic, but significant numbers belong to Mennonite, Jewish, Evangelical and other congregations. Further, if you think someone looks Latino, his accent may be a better indicator.

Patricia Documet, a Peruvian native and doctoral student in public health at Pitt, says, "People ask if my children are Chinese because their hair is straight and black and their eyes go up a little." Documet, like most Peruvians, is part Indian.

Mexican-born Juan Bravo, CEO of Harbison-Walker Refractory Co., says, "I'm a Mexican of Italian descent, but when I'm in London, everyone confuses me with being an Arab. My wife was speaking Spanish with our daughter one day in the supermarket, and someone asked if she was a migrant worker."

Because Latinos are considered a minority group, they often are misperceived as a separate race, but an estimated 25 percent of Latin Americans are African Americans. The dominant European ancestry is Spanish, with American Indian ancestry dominant in Peru, Guatemala, Ecuador and Bolivia.

Juana Roman of Peru develops art-related mentorships for at-risk youth at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild. When Pedro Meyer, a Mexican photographer, exhibited there, the African-American children in the program interviewed him in their public-school Spanish. They had not previously considered the link between African and Latin Americans, Roman said.

Through the outreach program of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Latin American Studies, children at Miller Elementary, in the Hill District, have for two years been learning *capoeira*, a Brazilian form of martial arts dance and discipline with roots in Angola.

Kenya Dworkin, an assistant professor of Spanish at Carnegie Mellon University, is the Cuban-born daughter of a Cuban mother and a father whose Jewish family fled Poland in the '30s. She recalls two of her daughter's experiences in race relations at school: "When she went to middle school, she was asked what she was. One frustrated classmate said, 'You have to pick black or white.' " Later, in high school, a teacher would not let her write about a Cuban general for Black History Month: "She said he wasn't an American.' "

■

Pittsburgh's most visible Latinos have always been Pittsburgh Pirates. The former 6th Street Bridge now bears the name of the most famous of all, Roberto Clemente. Another, Sanguillen, has lived here off and on since his playing days in the '70s. The current roster of Latinos includes Jose Silva, an American-born Mexican, Abrahim Nuñez, a Dominican, and Francisco Córdova of Mexico.

In spite of their glamorous status, some Latino players live in isolation, talking only to each other, not venturing out much, shy of fans who speak English.

During Clemente's first years in Pittsburgh, as he struggled to be cogent in his second language and was chided in print for his accent, Edward Litchfield was building an empire in the neighborhood where he played. Litchfield, the chancellor at Pitt from 1956-65, believed in the importance of having Latin America in that empire.

Latin America made its academic debut at Pitt when the national psyche was occupied with the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Today, the 35-year-old Center for Latin American Studies bears witness to Litchfield's prescience.

He hired Cole Blasier, a prominent scholar who had Latin-American foreign service experience, to build the center. Blasier hired Eduardo Lozano, an Argentine who has for 30 years been developing a Latin-American collection of books that number now about 380,000 volumes. It is one of the 10 largest such collections in the country.

Carmelo Mesa-Lago became the center's second director in 1977, nine years after assisting Blasier. In charge of social security reform for the Cuban government before Castro, he fled his country in 1961, at age 27. Previously a lawyer and a professor, he received a Ph.D. in economics from Cornell University.

During his tenure as director, government funds brought Latin-American engineers to study at Pitt in exchange for Pitt engineers, and the medical school began recruiting doctors from Latin America.

A film buff, Mesa-Lago started the Latin American Film Festival in 1968 and, in the early '70s, a Latin-American theater series. The center also sponsored art exhibits at the Frick under his direction and established the first Latin American Folk Festival.

Brent Rondon remembers that festival, just a few weekends after he arrived in Pittsburgh for classes at Pitt. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, this is great. There must be a lot of Latinos in Pittsburgh.' "

If that ever seems so, it seems so in Oakland, where Latinos are seen and heard the most.

For about 20 years, the Pittsburgh Catholic Diocese has offered 1 p.m. Sunday Masses in Spanish at the Cardinal Dearden Center. The service was set in Oakland because of the number of Spanish speakers in academia, but the Rev. Bill Lies said the congregation has grown in recent years from 40-60 a week to about 120-150, with many new faces: "It's more of a trickle than a wave, but it is something."

Spanish and Portuguese can be heard on the radio, too. Four years ago, the program director at Carnegie Mellon University's radio station wanted to fill an open slot with a program in Spanish. Martha Mantilla, a Colombian, was starting doctoral work in education. A friend convinced her to take the slot. She and another doctoral student designed a program of news, music, sports from Latin America and community event announcements. The Latin American Radio Magazine airs on WRCT-FM (88.3) from 6 to 7 p.m. on Mondays. The last Monday of each month, Brazilian Carla Murillo is host of the show in Portuguese.

The 300 or so local Brazilians, whose tongue is very similar to Spanish, nevertheless find solace in their own community. A music and dance group sprang from a Brazil Nuts Portuguese Club at Pitt, and many of the members are nonstudents, Murillo said.

Students, grad students, researchers, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs and other professionals have long contributed most to Pittsburgh's unique Latino makeup. But one drawback of academia as your greatest lure is the exodus. After two- and three-year programs, many take their training to larger cities or back to Latin America.

Echoing many, Mantilla says, "I don't know yet whether I will stay. I hope to finish my dissertation in a year. But I like the mix of cultures here. It seems there's room for people."

■

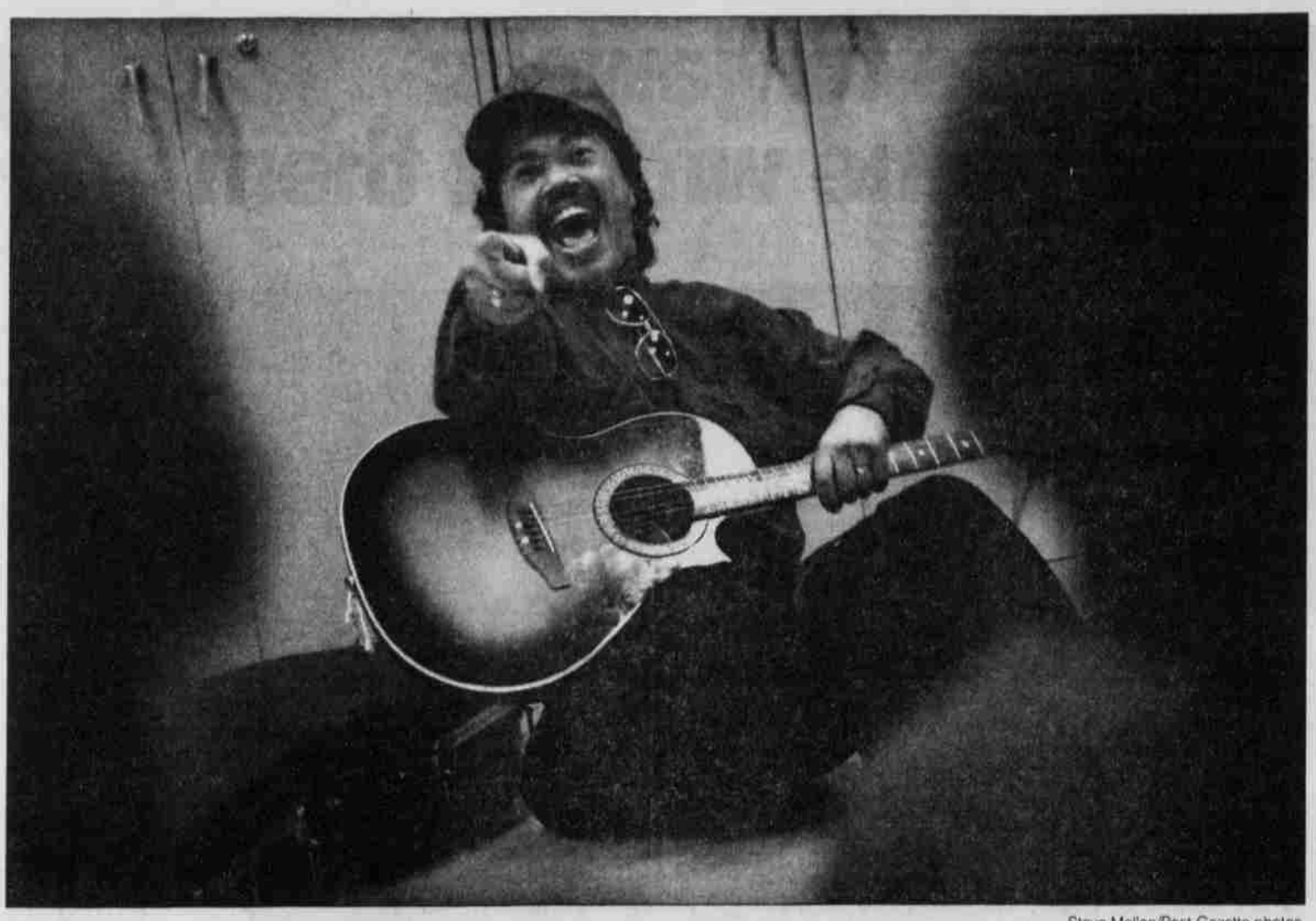
As Rondon and others hash out plans for a Latino community center, the city's third most notable Latino-focused entity is reconsidering its mission. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce formed in 1994 around the business interests of three men, Kenneth Rodriguez, Tomas Vasquez and Gilberto Zavala.

Rodriguez, the chamber's chairman, came to Pittsburgh in the '70s and '80s to manage construction projects for a New Jersey firm. In 1993, he convinced the firm to open an office here. He has since started his own company for international trade, Rodriguez & Offspring Enterprises on the North Side, and lives in Beaver.

"We were trying to be in business, having obstacles with the language and issues particular to us," says Zavala, whose company, Zavala Inc. has been named Hispanic magazine's 18th fastest growing Latino-owned business in the United States. A contractor of traffic and highway sign structures and street lighting, Zavala reported revenues of $3.5 million in 1999, a 116 percent growth rate over 1998.

Zavala met his wife, a Pittsburgher, while both were in college in Monterrey, Mexico. After college, his wife suggested they spend the summer here. "The summer turned into a year into a life," he says. At the time, he saw the same three or four Latinos,

SEE **LATINOS,** PAGE G-13



Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette photos

Cuban-born Miguel Sagué, founder of the band Guaracha, jokes with children during a song-and-story session of the Latin American Cultural Union in Oakland. Sagué's family moved to Erie when he was 11, and he moved to Pittsburgh in 1977.

The new boomers: Pittsburgh's 'invisible' Latinos

The Latin-American book collection at Hillman Library is among resources available to University of Pittsburgh students such as Melissa Montenes, 20, a junior who spent six weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico, last summer, when she researched Mexicans' attitudes about the political climate in their country.

As president of the Latin American Children's Fund, Florencia Mediate of Greensburg, left, organizes the packaging of donated goods that will go to orphanages in El Salvador. During one marathon session on Sept. 4, she had help from some Seton Hill College students, including Nate Newell, center, and Joe Darinsig.

"I came here in 1966, and everyone assumed you were a war bride. People asked, 'Do you eat chili?' People said, 'You don't look Latino.' They expected me to have dark eyes. They had this idea that you were in awe of everything."

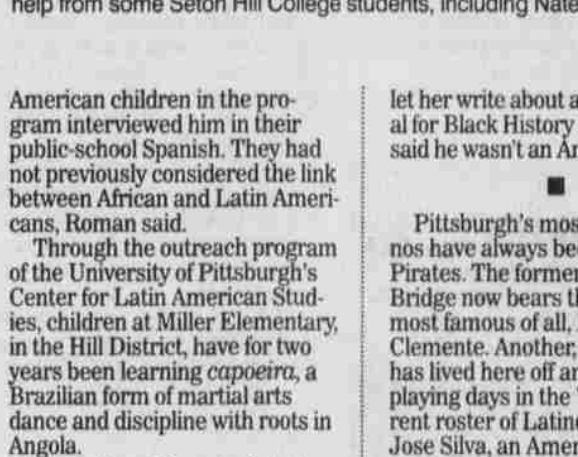
— Isabel Porterfield of Murrysville, a Colombian native and medical technologist

"My mom used to sell food on the street in San Luis, Mexico. I crossed illegal, and when there was an amnesty period, I got my papers. Friends showed me their friends and they showed me their friends. Now, there's not time to socialize because I am working every day."

— Vicente Valdez of Oakland, a native of Mexico and co-owner of La Fiesta restaurant in Oakland

"I don't expect to 'find' but to make. I make my own world, and my world is international and warm. I see a perfect life here. There is so much potential."

— Brent Rondon of Shadyside, a native of Peru and president of Pittsburgh's Latin American Cultural Union



"It took about two months for me to feel confident in English. Kids said, 'Oh you're from another land' and wouldn't play with me. At the end of the school year, a few kids said, 'Can you teach me a little Spanish?' "

— Yiena Zamora Vargas of Greenfield, 8-year-old daughter of Cuban natives Anely Vargas and Ruben Zamora

"I sent resumes all over the U.S. I was comparing costs of living, and Pittsburgh seemed reasonable to start with. I said, 'If I like it, I'll stay.' I studied English at Point Park College, to be an accountant eventually. People would see me dancing and ask, 'Do you teach that?' I'd say, 'No, in Latin America, dancing is part of your life.' Now I know I'll never work as an accountant."

— Marlon Silva of the South Side, Venezuelan native and full-time salsa and merengue dance instructor

"Growing up in a Latino culture as a child of European parents, more than one culture at once, has given me a step up and informed my eventual involvement with art. Art is a language. The more you study it, the more it will give back to you."

— Madeleine Grynsztejn of Squirrel Hill, Peruvian-born, Venezuelan-raised curator of the Carnegie International 1999-2000