UNION CITY, NEW JERSEY

Cuban Americans

Bergenline Avenue, Union City's main thoroughfare, is lined with restaurants, stores and other enterprises, many of which are owned by Cubans. Business ownership by Cubans in the city peaked at 80 percent in 1990. *Amanda Brown*

Just four miles west of Manhattan, between the marshes of the New Jersey Meadowlands and the cliffs overhanging the Hudson River, is Union City, New Jersey, an area teeming with immigrants since the mid-19th century. Over the decades, the steady influx has introduced many new tongues and new foods to Union City's narrow streets and small shops, but no single group has had a more profound impact than the

newcomers from Cuba. Starting as a trickle in the 1950s, and becoming a flood as political exiles fled Fidel Castro's regime during the 1960s and 1970s, the Cubans so transformed Union City that it is nicknamed "Havana on the Hudson."

Only 49 blocks long and fewer than 10 blocks wide, Union City acquired an outsized reputation within the Cuban diaspora. This densely populated town came to be regarded as Cuba's northernmost province, second only to Miami in Cuban flavor and influence. By 1990 Union City's Cuban Americans owned 80 percent of local businesses.

Among the very first arrivals, according to local lore, was a young couple from Fomento, Cuba — Lyda and Manuel Rodriguez — who came in 1949. They became successful business people and helped dozens of relatives and townspeople from Fomento to emigrate to Union City. Jobs were plentiful in the local embroidery and textile factories. But the first substantial Cuban influx occurred after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, when large numbers of Cubans in professional occupations left their homeland, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Three more waves followed: from 1965 to 1974, when the "Freedom Flights" transported middle- and working-class Cubans to the United States; in 1980, during the Mariel boatlift, when Castro authorized a mass exodus; and post-1989, when communism collapsed and the U.S. tightened its economic embargo on Cuba, begun in 1962.

Union City served many Cuban immigrants as their first U.S. home. In 1980, the U.S. Census reported that 32 percent of Union City residents were of Cuban origin. But in the years that followed, many descendants of those original Cuban immigrants moved on to other cities and towns. By 2010, emigrants from Central and South America had moved into Union City's brownstones and small homes, while the Cuban share of the city's 66,455 residents had slipped to 10 percent.

On a recent steamy summer afternoon on busy Bergenline Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare, Union City resident Marcos Vicente wistfully acknowledged the changing landscape.

Vicente, 47, left Las Villas, Cuba, as a child along with his mother, father and grandmother. The family applied to the government for permission to leave Cuba and waited almost six years before it was granted.

They left in 1975 and moved to Spain for three years. Then an aunt who lived in Union City helped them relocate to the United States. Vicente was 13 when he arrived. He never left.

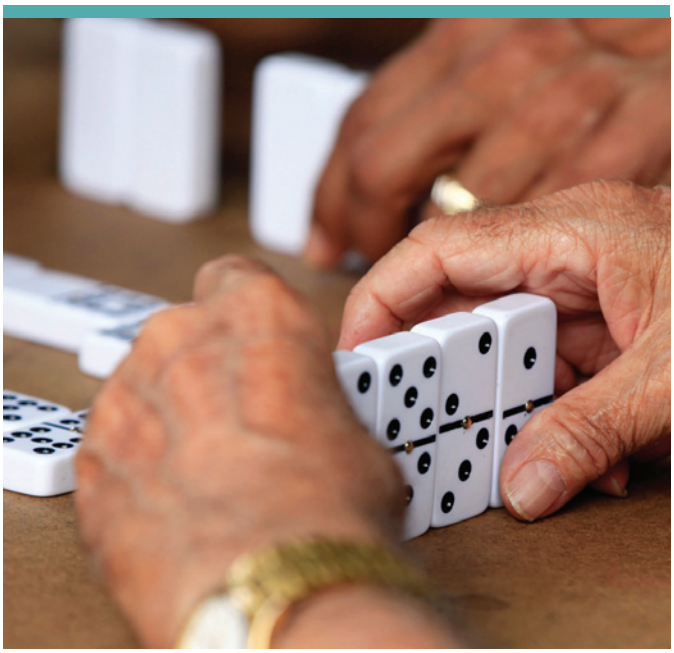
In Union City, his family found a vibrant, growing Cuban-American community. "There were lots of Cubans here in those days. But they left. Florida, Florida. They made their money, and they retired. They like the weather there better," Vicente said.

Yet even as Cuban Americans retire or gravitate to the suburbs, Union City retains plenty of its Cuban influence, both physical and cultural. Ownership of much of the city's real estate remains in Cuban American hands.

Recreation, Culture and Politics

Cuban-American men play dominoes at all hours in José Martí Park, a tiny vest-pocket park named in honor of the 19th-century national hero, a poet and revolutionary. An art gallery across the street, QbaVa Gallery, features the work of Cuban-American and Cuban artists. El Artesano restaurant pulls in

Dominoes is a favorite pastime among the Cuban men who gather at Union City's José Martí Park to swap stories and talk politics. *Amanda Brown*



customers looking for café con leche or authentic Cuban sandwiches.

Afro-Cuban salsa is played, along with other styles of music, at the Park Performing Arts Center. Celia Cruz Plaza, dedicated in 2004, honors the memory of the Cuban-born salsa singer.

Every year, people come to watch the procession of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Cuba's patron saint, and the Cuban Day parade along Bergenline Avenue.

And there's nostalgia for the past. "Are we the Old Guard? Some of us who are maintaining the flame of liberty for Cuba are old, there's no question," said Matt Perez, 69, a frequent visitor to Union City as a supporter of an anti-Castro organization headquartered there.

His story, like that of other Cuban exiles, is one of hardship and struggle, but also a proud tale of survival and economic success. Perez' parents sent him out of Cuba in 1958, when the ongoing revolution disrupted his education.

A Helping Hand

Upon arriving in America, most Cubans were readily accepted by established Union City residents and swiftly became upwardly mobile. But building a new life in a new nation always is hard. Yolanda Prieto arrived in Union City in March 1968 at age 21. In her 2009 book, *The Cubans of Union City: Immigrants and Exiles in a New Jersey Community,* Prieto recalled that her move was heartbreaking. "I left many friends in Cuba, and had only a rudimentary knowledge of English. Very soon, however, I started to make new friends. Many came from Saint Augustine, the Catholic parish I attended with my family," she said. "Later, at college, I started to also make American friends." Prieto went on to build a successful career as a professor of sociology at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

"The Cubans have arrived. Big time."

Many second-generation Cuban Americans in Union City and surrounding New Jersey municipalities have played an active role in their communities' civic and political life.

JUAN CARLOS ROJAS, BORN IN THE U.S.A.

Juan Carlos Rojas was born in New Jersey, but didn't speak English at home because his father forbade it. His father was a political exile who left Cuba in 1961; his mother left the island before the revolution, at the age of 12. Juan Carlos was told that when his parents went on their first date, they danced at a Cuban club on Union City's 26th Street.

Rojas, now 37 and married with three young children and living in Rutherford, New Jersey, remembers a wonderful childhood mixing with people from different backgrounds. "There was always someone at school from somewhere else. The neighbors were Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Italian and Irish."

His identity as a Cuban American remained strong. While a student at Rutgers University, he wrote his thesis on revolutionary cinema in Cuba. At the New School in New York, where he earned his master's degree, Rojas produced a documentary on Afro-Cuban music in Union City. Later he and a friend started a business they named Havana on the Hudson, selling T-shirts aimed at bicultural Latino Americans with a sense of humor.

Today, Rojas directs constituent affairs for Union City Mayor Brian Stack. He also, with his mother, runs The Learning Depot, a preschool in Union City. Rojas is proud of his cultural heritage, and sends his 10-year-old daughter to a Cuban-owned dance school "so she doesn't fade into the mainstream. She gets to speak Spanish, and after class she goes to a restaurant across the street to eat rice and beans."

A second-generation Cuban American, Juan Carlos Rojas is director of constituent affairs for Union City Mayor Brian Stack. *Amanda Brown*

None are more prominent than U. S. Senator Robert Menendez. Born in New York a few months after his parents left Cuba, the senator grew up in Union City, where his political career started at age 19 with a seat on the Union City Board of Education. Today, Menendez, 58, is New Jersey's most prominent Cuban-American politician.

But there are others, including Albio Sires, a former speaker of the New Jersey State Assembly, who is a representative in the U.S. Congress for a heavily Hispanic district that includes parts of Newark, Elizabeth and Jersey City. In 2006, after Menendez became a U. S. senator and then-New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine tapped Cuban-born attorney Zulima Farber to be attorney general, the *New York Times* reported: "The Cubans have arrived. Big time."

Each year, revelers gather along Bergenline Avenue for the North Hudson Cuban Day parade in Union City. *Luigi Novi*

Still, They Come

Like many other immigrant groups, many of the original Cuban exiles' children have moved to the suburbs. Between 2000 and 2010, the Cuban-American population grew in four out of every five of New Jersey's 566 municipalities. Bergen County, a short distance away, attracted many.

But newly arrived Cubans still find their way to Union City. They are not highly visible and are not nearly so politicized as earlier emigrants, according to Prieto. They have a closer relationship with their homeland because government policies in both Cuba and the United States make it easier to maintain old ties.

It's easier for recent arrivals to send money back to relatives, Prieto notes. "After they become permanent residents, they can go back and visit Cuba. For the most part, they want the political situation to improve between Cuba and the U.S."

For these new Cuban Americans, Union City remains their gateway to the American dream.

Mary Jo Patterson is a freelance writer in New Jersey.

This little girl joins Union City officials as they begin their march in the 11th annual Cuban Day parade on Bergenline Avenue in 2010. *Luigi Novi*