The Melting Pot

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When 19-year-old Tyler Waltz was a child, Fairfield, Ohio, was a typical Midwestern town. In the small suburb 20 miles north of Cincinnati, life centered on sports and Catholic festivals. Teenagers hung out at the town's strip malls, its three bowling alleys, and in the wooded areas between subdivisions. Area automobile-part factories had laid off thousands of workers since the 1980s. Like Waltz, 90 percent of Fairfield residents were white.

It was just two years ago as a high school senior that Waltz first noticed the Latino influx to Fairfield. In 1990, the Latino population was an estimated 290. By 2009 estimates, it had increased fivefold to 1,570 -- out of a total city population of more than 42,000. With more immigrants arriving in Fairfield to work in manufacturing, food processing, and construction, Mexican restaurants began popping up on the town's main drag, Dixie Highway.

Waltz hadn't previously taken much notice of his Latino classmates; racial groups staked out a spot on campus and didn't mix. A moderate conservative, Waltz says he believed the stereotype of Latinos as gangbangers -- though gang violence is rare in Fairfield -- and was convinced that most Latinos did not speak English. "It had to do with the language barrier," he says. "You can't be friends with someone you can't talk to."

Then Waltz met Jerry Solorio, a Latino sophomore on his soccer team who was a native English speaker. "At first I would've been slightly prejudiced if I knew he was an 'immigrant,'" Waltz says, enunciating the T and making air quotes. Like Waltz's family, many here are descendants of Germans and other Europeans who immigrated in the 19th or early 20th centuries. But Waltz soon learned that Solorio had been born in the United States.

The two became friendly at practice and over pizza. Within months, Waltz realized that equating Latino with "illegal" immigrant was unfair and wrong.

Waltz's original prejudices are shared by other Ohioans, according to University of Cincinnati sociologist Jeff Timberlake. In a 2009 study, Timberlake found that, in comparison with other immigrant groups, the majority of 2,150 Ohio respondents ranked Latinos lowest in every category: intelligence, violence, use of government assistance, poverty, and assimilation. "Huge swaths of Ohio have almost no new immigrants," Timberlake says, noting that less than 4 percent of Ohioans are foreign-born. "It's hard to imagine how very many Ohioans are forming their opinions based on local concrete interactions with immigrants. They're absorbing national-level debates."

In recent years, that debate has become contentious and at times hostile. The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that only 39 percent of Americans surveyed in 2010 thought that immigrants "strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents," while 44 percent said that immigrants "threaten traditional American customs and values." Latinos have noticed: Last fall, the Pew Hispanic Center found that 61 percent of Latinos surveyed believed "discrimination against Latinos is a major problem."

In the absence of federal immigration reform, states, and municipalities have moved to pass anti-

immigrant laws and policies, most famously Arizona's legislation (SB1070) requiring immigrants to carry documentation of their immigration status and allowing police to detain those they suspect are undocumented. More than a dozen states, including South Dakota and Maine, have drafted laws similar to SB1070. Legislators in at least 14 states want to deny citizenship to American-born children of undocumented immigrants -- a constitutional right.

Simultaneously, immigration enforcement is intensifying. Local law-enforcement entities in 25 states now cooperate with Immigration and Custom Enforcement through the 287(g) program, which allows police to check immigration status and detain undocumented immigrants. More than 950 jurisdictions in 37 states are also part of ICE's Secure Communities program, which provides access to FBI and Homeland Security biometrics databases to check for criminal and immigration history. As a result of the collective tracking efforts, deportations have more than doubled since 2005 to nearly 400,000 last year.

In this climate, people like Waltz -- those dubious of immigration who learn about Latino immigrants through first-hand experience and develop an openness to immigration as a result -- may be rare. But the informal, organic relationships they are fostering with Latino immigrants are novel. Even activists who have successfully built community coalitions to battle anti-immigrant sentiment say that these one-on-one relationships effectively bridge the gulf between whites and Latinos, and by doing so, slowly bring civility back into the immigration debate.

By the time Waltz met Solorio, the immigration climate in Fairfield -- part of conservative Butler County and House Speaker John Boehner's district -- had already turned volatile. In January 2005, when Waltz was in 8th grade, Butler County native Richard Jones was elected sheriff, succeeding his wife's uncle. Then in June, a 9-year-old white girl was raped, as Jones puts it, "a rock's throw from here by an illegal." The suspect, 25-year-old Mexican immigrant Alfredo Lopez-Cruz, disappeared -- to this day only resurfacing on the television program America's Most Wanted. Although Waltz doesn't remember hearing about the crime then, Butler County exploded.

Within days, the house where the rape occurred was torched. Then the Ku Klux Klan arrived, passing out fliers that read, "The time is now to stand against this and cleanse our country of this brown flood." Church leaders organized a peace march, but Latinos complained of threats and feared being attacked. The girl's father, Phillip Sauls, told CNN, "It used to be that blacks and whites didn't like each other. Now it's the whites and blacks who don't like the Mexicans."

Shelly Bromberg, a professor of Latin American Studies at Miami University Hamilton, says the rape was a catalyst for Jones' anti-immigrant rhetoric: "I know some Latinos who voted for him in 2004 because they thought he was going to be tough on crime. He actually said very little about immigrants back then." By late 2005, the Republican sheriff had teamed up with state Rep. Courtney Combs to push lawmakers to classify being in the country without authorization a crime in Ohio.

Soon Jones was covering billboards with a photo of himself, arms crossed and gun at hip, with the tagline: "Hire an Illegal -- BREAK THE LAW!" In 2006, Jones joined the ICE 287(g) program. In 2007, ICE raided Fairfield's Koch Foods chicken-processing plant, arresting 160 employees. Jones has become such a strong ICE ally, joining the Secure Communities biometrics program, that Fox News recently named him America's "seventh-toughest immigration sheriff."

In Southern California's Inland Empire, an area that spans Riverside and San Bernardino counties,

similar efforts to identify and arrest undocumented immigrants frightened Latinos and heightened the conservative area's "very strong anti-immigrant feelings," according to Suzanne Foster, executive director of the day-laborer assistance organization Pomona Economic Opportunity Center. In 2008, local police partnered with the U.S. Border Patrol, conducting frequent raids at day-laborer sites and several warrantless raids on homes.

Foster worked with churches, labor unions, and immigrant activists in a coalition to fight the patrol's actions. Yet it wasn't until neo-Nazis began roaming Latino neighborhoods that community support became widespread. Activists videotaped and photographed raids, contacted their congressional representatives, and organized rallies at which undocumented immigrants spoke. In approaching residents who were unsupportive of immigrants or indifferent, Foster says, the coalition challenged "people to see if these practices fit their values. If [police] go so outside their bounds with one group of people, it's a slippery slope. It creates an environment of hostility and hate." By fall 2009, Riverside's head Border Patrol agent was transferred and demoted, local police stopped partnering with the patrol, and the raids ceased.

Public forums that include the undocumented help create a common understanding between once divided neighbors, says Marisa Zapata, an urban-planning professor at the University of Cincinnati. Zapata studies efforts to connect white and Latino communities and has found that as non-Latinos "interact with people who are undocumented ... it helps to lessen the idea that [immigrants] are a threat."

In 30 interviews with community leaders and residents of California's San Joaquin Valley, Zapata found that white people who heard Latinos talk about their lives kept details of those stories with them -- often for years -- and began to appreciate the diversity in their community. While one-on-one personal relationships are ideal, Zapata says, community-planning activities bringing small groups of whites and Latinos together can also be fruitful. After learning about one another, participants often make policy decisions in consideration of how the proposed changes will affect themselves and the other group.

Zapata admits that programs focused on fostering friendships between whites and Latinos are rare. Ohio activists wish they could enact such programs but say their efforts are focused on battling policies and practices of anti-immigrant local police and governments. Despite this, activists have found ways to work on changing public sentiment. A newly formed immigration coalition of unions, the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), clergy, lawyers, and urban planners is gathering complaints from Latinos about mistreatment by police and other public officials and agencies and will request policy changes. LULAC is also working with Jewish and Muslim civil-rights groups to garner support for Latino immigrant rights and has begun trying to convince local conservatives to withhold support of immigration crackdowns, citing those expensive efforts as an example of big government.

Just as the coalition in Riverside has done, the Cincinnati Interfaith Workers Center periodically sponsors church testimonials so that non-Latinos can hear undocumented immigrants talk about hardship in their home countries and their hidden lives in the U.S. "People were really touched by their stories," says Don Sherman, the center's director, "and we've had [parishioners] who have now donated funds" to the center.

Last November, 18-year-old Bernard Pastor (a recent high school graduate who came from Guatemala at age 3 and had been denied political asylum) was arrested after a minor traffic accident and held in the Butler County Jail. LULAC organized Pastor's community in the Cincinnati

suburb of Reading -- including dozens of white classmates and friends -- to push for his release. "They never looked at Bernard as any different than themselves," says LULAC Ohio director Jason Riveiro. Because of the outpouring of support, the following month, ICE released Pastor, and he is now petitioning to stay in the U.S. legally.

Last fall, two years after Tyler Waltz met Jerry Solorio, Waltz enrolled in Bromberg's Latin American literature course at Miami University Hamilton. For extra credit, he attended a Latino soccer tournament, eventually joining an all-Latino team. Waltz was amazed by how well he meshed with his teammates, though they spoke little English and he, even less Spanish. Getting to know Solorio and his most recent teammates convinced Waltz that immigration is necessary and that federal reform should allow immigrants more options to come to the U.S. legally.

For Bromberg, the steady stream of anti-immigration students who enroll in her classes and subsequently come to a more complicated understanding of immigration and immigrants gives her hope. "A lot of times there's just nothing you can do about someone who is racist," she says. "There is something you can do about people who lack information. I just have to keep trying to get them the information that will help them to become their own agents and figure out exactly where they stand. Most of the time, they walk away saying [immigration] is not a bad thing: Our community is changing, but it's changing for the better."