

Immigrant economic engine

Regional economy benefiting from new businesses

By **Emma Sapong**

The foreign-born population of the Buffalo Niagara region has grown by 25 percent in the past 10 years, and it's showing on the local business landscape with a jolt of energy and creativity that could have long lasting impact.

"Immigrants tend to be deeply entrepreneurial, solution oriented and community minded," said Eva Hassett, executive director of the Buffalo International Institute.

Some newcomers have launched ethnic businesses, providing cultural services and products ranging from food to spiritual materials to grooming.

"They find ways to help their community and make a profit," Hassett said. "You don't have to go far to see their impact on the business community. Just look around."

You'll see Dominican salons offering their signature blow-out styles; Somali and Iraqi markets selling halal meats; Burmese restaurants serving up ginger Thai salads; and Indian grocers offering fresh and exotic spices and vegetables.

"We are a part of the community, so we know what the needs are," said Ali Mohamed, a Somali native and president of Hatimy Market on Grant Street in Buffalo. "And we speak the language, we know how to communicate with our customers, and that's better for them and for business."

Immigrant start-ups also have benefits beyond their niche markets. Experts say they are building blocks that can have a larger economic impact on the region.

Research shows foreign-born entrepreneurs are job creators. Immigrants have higher levels of education and are twice as likely than a native-born American to launch a business.

"Welcoming immigrants to your city is like dropping seeds into Miracle Grow," said Richard T. Herman, a Cleveland immigration lawyer and co-author of "Immigrant Inc."

For cities like Buffalo, an influx of immigrants can repopulate and ignite a much-needed economic renaissance, Herman said.

"Rust Belt cities need new blood, new ideas and innovations, and immigrants can provide all of that," Herman said. "Their prodigious economic output should be welcomed."

Immigrants are driven to entrepreneurial pursuits for various reasons, including their foreign credentials and work history not being transferable. That can force trained professionals to pursue business ventures to make ends meet.

Hassett said immigrants and refugees are great wealth assets to the community and arrive with the attributes needed to start businesses.

"You have to be pretty entrepreneurial to go through the hoops to get here," Hassett said. "You have to be a risk taker, enormously focused, driven and visionary to start a new life in a different country. It should be no surprise that they tend to become entrepreneurs."

The area's Asian and Latino minority groups have seen the greatest gains, and proof is in the plethora of Indian restaurants in Amherst and Puerto Rican eateries in Buffalo.

"One bakery folded, and a week later another one took its spot," said Lou Santiago, a State Farm insurance agent and former president of the Latino Business Association in Buffalo. "People are eager and are taking a chance, and that's great."

Diverse Asian growth

The Asian population has seen the most rapid growth. The region saw a 69 percent spike over the decade in its number of Asian residents, with a large concentration in Amherst due to the University at Buffalo's North Campus. In Buffalo, the number of Asians doubled to 8,300. And Amherst now has 9,675 Asian residents. Among that population, Indian Asians are the largest group in the town. That's why Kishor Patel, an Indian native, opened Spice Bazaar in 2008 in Amherst, not Niagara Falls, where he has lived since 2005.

"I knew my customers would be here in Amherst," Patel said, "because there are more South Asians in Amherst and the community is growing."

Longtime business owners have also felt the rising tide.

When Tariq Khan and his brother opened Super Bazaar 20 years ago, a local Indian community was nonexistent and business was slow. But as the population has grown, the store has seen increased activity. His business is also benefiting from the burgeoning Burmese and Nepalese communities.

"We are very busy now," Khan said. "We had to hire more people because the store is always packed. Things have improved a lot, and we are very happy."

Within the past decade Asian entrepreneurs have integrated into the retail and hospitality sectors, said Colleen Dipirro, executive director of the Amherst Chamber of Commerce. Their chamber memberships have also climbed, and there are two South Asians on the chamber's board.

"Amherst and the Buffalo Niagara region welcome diversity, and we are even happier to see relatively new residents in the community taking on leadership roles and starting businesses to address the diversity of the community," Dipirro said.

Chinese immigrants are the second largest Asian group in Amherst, and Jailin "Lee" Niu's business targets them. She has been an independent hairstylist at Serendipity Salon and Spa since

2008. Japanese, Korean and Malaysian women -- mostly UB students and instructors -- comprise much of her client base, which expands each year with new customers.

"They come to me because I have more experience with Asian hair, and we understand each other," she said.

Niu, who first trained and worked in China, has 20 years of cosmetology experience and picked up styling and coloring techniques ideal for Asian tresses, which she said tend to be more coarse and resistant.

Serving Latino needs

While the Asian population has grown at the fastest rate, the Latino population swelled the most, in terms of numbers. In the decade, Buffalo Niagara saw a 37 percent increase, and Buffalo now has 27,519 Latino residents.

"There are a lot more brisk start-ups, up and down Niagara Street," Santiago said. "From City Hall to Busti, you'll see 85 to 100 businesses, and a lot of them are owned by Latinos."

Impacto by Mery, a Dominican hair salon, opened in May 2011 on Niagara Street. The stylists use the same techniques and natural products used in their native Dominican Republic to straighten hair. And women flock to the Impacto and other Dominican shops for the healthier and fuller look attained by the process.

El Indio Botanica, a Latino-owned spiritualist store, specializes in religious statues, ritualistic oils, candles and powdered incense associated with Santeria -- a syncretic religion that merges traditional African and Catholic beliefs.

Santeria originated in Latin American, and has been practiced by Luis Vasquez's family for generations. But when he arrived in Buffalo in 2003 from Puerto Rico, there were no stores that sold supplies for ceremonies and prayers, so he and his wife would travel to Rochester or New York City. They got tired of the driving and opened El Indio seven years ago.

"We got a good response from the community because a lot of people were driving to New York and Rochester too, and they don't have to now," Vasquez said. "We even have people driving from Jamestown and Pennsylvania to us because we're the closest store to them."

Becoming global

While mainstream businesses may provide some goods and services favored by immigrants, they aren't aware of the specific cultural needs and tend to have limited brands and inventory or none at all.

Local supermarkets carry limited selection of Indian spices and a couple of brands and smaller sizes basmati rice. But rice, along with naan, is a staple for South Asians, who season their dishes with at least four different herbs and spices.

"We need more spices; we like our food to have more flavor," Patel said.

So Spice Bazaar carries 20 different brands of rice and aisles of exotic spices, like fresh curry and turmeric.

South Asian women covet well-shaped eyebrows and perfect them with an ancient Indian hair removal technique using cotton thread. But there was no full-service salon in the area, offering the service. So Ghulam Sario, a Pakistani, opened Brow Studio 7 in the Galleria Mall two years ago.

"Indian and Pakistani women are so happy we're here because before they had to travel to Toronto or other cities," he said. His salon is one of three that has opened in the past two years in the Galleria and Boulevard Mall.

The Mohamed family started Hatimy Market in 2005 after longing for Somali staples, like white corn flour and spice tea, and halal goat and other meats slaughtered by a method that abides with Muslim beliefs.

When more and more Burmese and Nepalese started shopping there, they expanded their product lines with things like chanachun mix and puffed rice balls. Hatimy even hired a Nepali to communicate and attract more customers.

"We saw that population was growing and wanted to better serve them," said Abukar Mohamed, a manager at the store. "The changes in the community have evolved our store and business, for sure."

In the beginning, Patel's customers were Indian, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi, but now white Americans drop in for Indian beer, spices and help with recipes.

Brow Studio 7 has a lot of South Asian clients, including many who travel from Ontario, but most of its clients are Americans.

Dipirro said it's common and desirable for these businesses to widen their base as they grow and evolve, bolstering the region's cultural awareness and diversity, "increasing our quality of life. It makes us what we hope to be, a global hub."

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