At several points in its nearly 250-year history, Pittsburgh has risen to dominate the world stage, thanks, in large part, to the brawn and brains of immigrants. Now, in the struggle to break out of a two-decades-long economic decline, a local foundation is trying to change the region’s unenviable position as one of the least ethnically and racially diverse in the country.

By Jeffery Fraser

Joel Garcia snuggles with wife, Lourdes, across from sons, 9-year-old Luis and 14-year-old twins Jose and Enrique, on the porch of their Allentown home. Joel, a Mexican native, used the Hispanic Latino Center to help him settle in Pittsburgh.
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immigrants was a key to attracting and retaining the skills and labor they offered.

The stakes remain high. Unless the bleeding of working-age residents is stanched and the workforce expanded, the region is expected to run out of enough workers to satisfy even modest labor market growth. More specifically, job growth and retirements over the next 10 years will demand from the region an estimated 125,000 more workers than it has to offer, according to a 2002 study by Duquesne University’s Center for Competitive Workforce Development.

Such trends can be lethal to efforts to recruit new businesses and retain homegrown startups. Few companies are eager to relocate to an airtight job market in which the only way to get employees is to steal them from someone else. And a shortage of workers prevents young firms from expanding, reducing western Pennsylvania to a successful incubator of companies that go elsewhere to realize their full potential.

Many of the region’s employers are already under stress. In 2002, when everyone was feeling the sting of recession, 90 percent of the employers surveyed by Duquesne University reported that skilled production jobs were “somewhat or very difficult” to fill, and 54 percent said the same about unskilled production jobs.

If immigrants are a solution, it is no mystery what draws them: jobs, support, family and friends, and a quality of life better than what they’ve known top the list.

Unskilled, low-skilled and entry-level jobs account for the most openings in the region, and many immigrants are willing to work them, even those paying under $8 an hour, says Eugene V. Matta, executive director of the Hispanic Latino Center, Inc., which was started with a seed grant from the Endowments in 2001.

In fact, Matta says, many of the job seekers who contact the North Side nonprofit are Hispanic men and women looking for a second job as part of a process of moving gradually up the economic ladder, and not staying put on one of the lower rungs. “There are families who between the mother and father have four jobs. They like the money. They live well. They buy homes, cars. They send their kids to school. They are well dressed, well fed. They have never had that before.”

The Hispanic Latino Center’s Workforce Solutions program connects immigrants looking for work to more than...

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100 employers with jobs to offer, counsels and supports them when they enter the workplace and, in partnership with Goodwill Industries and Jewish Family & Children’s Service, trains them to work in the high-demand fields of the moment—bilingual customer service, data entry, hospitality and general labor.

Other services include help with housing, referrals for legal assistance and a volunteer-driven survey project to draw a more accurate profile of the region’s Hispanic population and its scope, needs and aspirations.

Joel Garcia, a native of Mexico, turned to the Hispanic Latino Center for help finding a job when he arrived in Pittsburgh during the winter of 2002. The 36-year-old permanent legal resident uprooted his wife and three children from San Diego to establish a nondenominational Christian church to serve a small but growing Hispanic community in Pittsburgh’s southern neighborhoods.

By day, Garcia works construction. At night, he tends to his ministry. Steady work and Pittsburgh’s affordable real estate market enabled him to buy a three-story home in the city’s Allentown section last year. “My first calling is a minister,” he says. “I took a challenge, sold everything, paid our debts and moved here with just a little to get by. And, once again, we started from the bottom up.”

Ana Paula Carvalho telephoned the Hispanic Latino Center in distress only weeks after starting her dream career. In August 2001, she was denied permission to work and forced to abandon her first class as an instructor of Portuguese at the University of Pittsburgh. Carvalho, a Brazilian, had entered the United States in 1994 as a student with her Brazilian husband. Seven years later, divorced and remarried to a West Virginia–born Regent Square resident, she learned that her immigration status was still tied to her ex-husband’s and required her to return to Brazil. She needed a lawyer but the private immigration lawyers she consulted were too pricey for the suddenly unemployed and bewildered teacher. The Hispanic Latino Center referred her to Jewish Family & Children’s Service, whose staff attorneys help immigrants for a nominal fee.

“If you don’t have a lot of money and want to talk to someone who understands the whole bureaucratic process and the things you are going through in your personal life, it’s hard,” Carvalho says. “When I couldn’t work anymore, I didn’t...

“Many people in my country have the illusion that whoever comes to America becomes a millionaire right away. They don’t understand how hard it can be just to earn a dollar.” — Stan Musak
know what to do. I started getting depressed. And then to deal with someone who listens and understands a little bit about your culture, it helps a lot.”

Within three months, she was back in the classroom, her immigration problems resolved by Jewish Family & Children’s Service attorneys, who also helped her apply to become a permanent legal resident. She continues to teach at the university and is expecting her first child.

Jewish Family & Children’s Service, which receives annual support from the Endowments, provides a range of immigration services, including help preparing foreign-born residents for naturalization and refugee services, such as job readiness and housing assistance and medical case management. The Squirrel Hill–based nonprofit’s Pittsburgh Regional Immigrant Assistance Center is the only U.S. Department of Justice–accredited program in the region providing expert legal and immigration aid to foreign-born newcomers of limited means who otherwise cannot afford it.

“There is nowhere else for people to turn,” says Linda Ehrenreich, associate executive director, Jewish Family & Children’s Service. “This is a critical component in making the region a more welcoming place for people and helping them petition to bring their relatives over and to go to work legally.”

The Service has long been successful in resettling refugees and immigrants in and around Pittsburgh. Of the 2,200 Russian and Bosnian refugees it helped to relocate, 95 percent are employed, 75 percent own homes and 85 percent continue to live in the region.

For an immigrant who makes it to Pittsburgh high on hopes and dreams but short on money or contacts, Endowments-funded nonprofit groups offer services that can make the difference in a person’s ability to put down roots. There are lawyers who will dispense legal advice for a nominal fee; there is information on the next available English-as-a-Second-Language class, there are prep sessions on how to shine during a job interview.

“My first Christmas here was a homesick time. It was cold in my apartment. No family. And all I had to eat was soup in a bag,” says Stan Musak, a Jewish Family & Children’s Service client.

The 33-year-old left Slovakia for Pittsburgh in 1998 looking for adventure and a job as a mechanical engineer in America. He underestimated the language barrier and could land only spotty, low-paying work. “Many people in my country have the illusion that whoever comes to America becomes a millionaire right away. They don’t understand how hard it can be just to earn a dollar.”

Musak’s prospects improved after language classes raised his English-speaking skills. Today, he is a Federal Express supervisor and full U.S. citizen. He is the owner of a modest brick house in Castle Shanon, a southern Pittsburgh suburb where he lives with his wife, Blanka, a Czech Republic native who has applied to be a permanent U.S. resident.

“From our experience, people want to feel good about being here and want to encourage others to come here,” says Schuyler Foerster, president of the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh. “It is not only important that the Ph.D. working at Seagate [Technologies, a Pittsburgh-based world leader in production of computer hardware and software] feels comfortable, but also that his wife feels comfortable living in a neighborhood here.”

Guillermo Campana couldn’t agree more. Raised in Chile, educated in Brazil and transferred to Pittsburgh in 1996 by PPG Industries as market development manager of its Chlor-Alkali and Derivative Chemical Group, Campana has become such an advocate of western Pennsylvania, its people and quality of life that he plans to retire here, some 5,000 miles away from his native land.

“It is most important when you are coming to another country that your wife and family like it,” says Campana, who lives in Wexford, the suburb at Allegheny County’s northern border. “Because if they are not happy, there is no way you will set roots. My wife and my daughters found very good friends. We have very good neighbors. The schools helped my daughters, who spoke Spanish, Portuguese and German, but not English. These things this country has offered my family make us very proud.”

Recently, support from the Endowments has helped the World Affairs Council, another longtime grantee, organize the region’s international communities and make them more visible. Its Web site, globalpittsburgh.org, profiles 50 international communities in the region, offers the world a glimpse of life in western Pennsylvania and stands as a portal to essential information for immigrants and employers alike.

“It is important that we become more international and welcome international residents,” says the Endowments’ Kelley. “Because if we pull up the drawbridge, all we do is shrink and go away.”