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Bay Area Must Reconsider Its Hispanic Heritage

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Bay area must rediscover its Latin heritage

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Author: HARRY VANDEN

When I first moved to the Tampa Bay area some two decades ago, I was delighted to learn of its Latin heritage. Having just spent two years in Peru as a Fulbright Scholar and employee of the Peruvian government, it was fun to find a place in the United States where I could use Spanish and where Jose Marti had been a local celebrity.

But, as several of us started to develop Latin American Studies at the University of South Florida, we soon found that it was a rather low priority. Yet, as I explored Ybor City and West Tampa, I was delighted to learn of the richness and diversity of the Latin community and the strength of ties to Cuba, Spain and Latin America.

My wife Vera Vanden and I had worked with Latino communities in Philadelphia and New York before we came to Tampa. In fact, we had always been able to get jobs easily because of our ability to work in Spanish and our knowledge of Latin America.

My wife found it strange that most of the social service agencies she contacted in Tampa were not particularly interested in her ability to provide service in Spanish or to understand the nuances of the Latino culture. Most of the agencies just did not see Latinos as an important component of their population.

Caption: PHOTO
Harry Vanden <FILED: VANDEN, HARRY>
Memo: HISPANIC VOICES .QUE PASA?

About the writer Harry Vanden is director of The Caribbean & Latin American Studies Center at USF, where he teaches courses in political science, international studies, and Latin American affairs. An 18-year veteran at USF, Vanden helped jump-start the USF Latino Association, a faculty-student committee intended to assist and promote USF's Latino presence. He is also past president of the Southeastern Council on Latin American Studies, a statewide educational, nonprofit organization.

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