

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR – What are your roots?



Debbie Z. Harwell, Editor.

I am descended from immigrants, and most likely, so are you unless you have indigenous roots.

On my maternal side, I am a sixth-generation American. My great-great-great-grandparents, mostly of English and Irish descent, arrived in the colonial period. They settled in Virginia and relocated to Georgia before eventually staying in Texas. My ancestors

included people who fought in the Revolutionary War as well as for the Confederacy, and multiple Methodist ministers named for John Wesley.

My paternal grandparents left their home in Slovenia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and traveled to Havre, where they boarded the *Provance* to New York in 1912. They settled in a Slovenian community in Pittsburgh, and although Eastern Europeans received criticism for taking Americans' jobs, my grandfather found work with the Pennsylvania Railroad. My father was born in Pittsburgh and served in World War II. The only one of the Zerjav children to leave home after the war, he married my mother and they opened a record shop in Houston.

Immigration is a hot topic these days – hot, as in top of mind; and hot, as in it gets people's blood boiling. And why is that, when all of us except those with indigenous roots are descendants of immigrants? How many generations back do you have to go to be a legitimate American citizen? How many years in residency is long enough that you can feel safe that you will not be deported or refused reentry if you visit your family outside the United States?

Immigrants frequently get blamed for being a drain on the economy and stealing "our" jobs, but the statistics in our region paint a different picture, as reported in the 2025 Houston Area Survey by the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University. People in the metropolitan area have increasingly embraced its heterogeneity and seen immigrants as assets. When residents of Harris, Fort Bend, and Montgomery Counties were asked this year if they thought immigrants contribute more to the economy than they take, 71 percent agreed. When asked about undocumented residents specifically, the overall positive response remained high at 61 percent. Further, the Houston Area Survey noted "72 percent rejected the idea that the Houston area would be better off if all undocumented immigrants were deported." Another 2025 Kinder survey found 70

percent of respondents wanted the government to offer pathways to citizenship.

Houstonians have good reason to feel this way. A 2024 report by the American Immigration Council, found the 1.7 million immigrants in the region earned \$66.5 billion in 2021 and contributed \$11.1 billion in federal taxes and \$5.2 billion to state and local taxes. Their spending power represented \$50.2 billion or 26.7 percent of the Houston economy. The Baker Institute for Public Policy at Rice in *Undocumented Immigrants in Texas* found undocumented individuals contributed \$2.4 billion to Texas through sales tax, school property taxes, utilities, and the lottery in 2018; they cost the state \$2 billion in services, leaving a net gain to the state of \$420.9 million.

Immigrants in Houston tend to occupy jobs in construction, agriculture, services, manufacturing, and hospitality, often doing difficult, dirty, and dangerous physical labor. Beyond that, they also make up 41.9 percent of all entrepreneurs in the area, producing \$4.4 billion in revenue. The reality is that the loss of immigrants could be devastating to our economy, but it goes beyond dollars. Stories abound of immigrants who have improved the lives of others by sharing their culture or taking action in emergencies, for example.

The articles in this magazine look at three community institutions – the Houston Saengerbund, Old Chinatown, and the Frida Festival – to show the positive impact ethnic cultural and economic institutions have had from the 1880s to today. It examines the personal stories of Ana Eigler, a Latinx Sephardic Jewish woman and social worker; Dima Suki, a professor at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and member of the Lebanese community; Lizbeth Oritz, a Mexican American artist and founder of the Frida Festival; and Veronica Fahys, a Slovenian Argentinian American immigration attorney. Some of these women came to Houston on their own, while others came with their spouse or parents. All the stories focus on people who arrived with hopes for a better life and contributed to making Houston a welcoming, thriving, and empathetic community.

Houston has historically been a magnet for immigrants seeking jobs. It has welcomed immigrants who made the city's growth possible and benefited from what they had to offer at all points on the spectrum, economically and culturally. Thus, it is no wonder Houston has earned the designation as a place "where the local is global."

At the Center for Public History, we train students to research and preserve the stories of Houston's past because we believe history matters in our community, and everyone's stories deserve to be told. 🇺🇸