

Pedraja: Celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month at QCC

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Happy Hispanic Heritage Month!

This celebration of Latine heritage started in 1968 as Hispanic Heritage Week under President Lyndon Johnson. Thus, when I was a young Latino in school and college, we had only one week to celebrate the many contributions the Latine community made to this country.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan expanded this commemoration to cover a 30-day period starting on Sept. 15 and ending on Oct. 15, yet even today in many instances, our culture and contributions to this country remain hidden, absent from history books and the media. For instance, although some people think of us as immigrants and recent arrivals, when the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, those of the Latine heritage had already been in this country for over 120 years. Even longer if you consider some of our Indigenous heritage.

Members of Latine heritage lived in the 13 colonies and were military leaders from Spain and Latin America who fought in the Revolutionary War. Today many of Latine heritage continue to fight in defense of this country that they call home.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latine residents make up close to 19% of the U.S. population, making it the second-largest racial or ethnic group. In Worcester, the Latine population is even larger, making up almost 24% of the city's population.

The Latine community continues to help fuel our economy and enrich our nation as athletes, artists, doctors, educators, entertainers, entrepreneurs, scientists, public servants and much more. While we are all familiar with

celebrities who are Latine such as Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jennifer Lopez, we might not realize that Raquel Welch (Jo-Raquel Tejada), Linda Ronstadt and Martin Sheen are Latine. Some of you might have heard of former state Sen. Sonia Rosa Chang-Diaz, but did you know her father, Franklin Chang-Diaz, was a scientist and astronaut who earned a doctorate in physics from MIT?

The many contributions to this country by the Latine community often remain hidden, and Hispanic Heritage Month helps bring them to light, along with a celebration of our culture and heritage.

Understanding the Latine community is also a complex enterprise. We are often an amalgam of cultures, nationalities and races. We can identify as white, Black, brown, Asian, Indigenous or mixed. Our food, music, cultural practices, religion and politics can be quite different. Even the term "Hispanic" is problematic — a term created by the Nixon administration for the census and imposed on us. We often identify with our country of origin but also with terms such as Latino, Latinx or Latine, which can be more gender-inclusive.

At Quinsigamond Community College, our student population mirrors that of our community, with over 22% of our students identifying as Latine. Some have been part of this community for generations, while others are more recent arrivals. They often wonder if they belong in college or if they will be welcomed by our community, but I assure you they do belong in college, and we will continue to do everything in our power to assure their success. As the fastest-growing population in our nation and our community, Latines hold the key to our future. They are our future health care providers, first responders, teachers, business leaders, artists and entrepreneurs.

This year at QCC we are culminating the month-long celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month with a communitywide event featuring award-winning journalist speaker Mariana Atencio.

Atencio is not only a Peabody Award-winning journalist and bestselling author but also an entrepreneur and inspiring storyteller. Her TEDx talk on authenticity "What makes YOU special?" went viral, with over 23 million views, and has been translated into 13 languages. Atencio was also featured in the HBO series "Habla Now" as one of the leaders defining the Latinx experience in the U.S.

In the last decade Atencio worked at Univision and NBC News as an anchor and reporter and has since founded GoLike, a media company named among the 100 most powerful Latina businesses in the U.S. For those interested in true crime, her latest project is an investigative podcast about two women who go missing on a trail, which tackles femicide in Latin America.

Following Atencio's talk there will be an engaging and thought-provoking panel discussion by area Latine leaders, including the program director for health equity and storytelling research at UMass Chan Medical School, Germán Chiriboga; the chief of staff and assistant commissioner of academic policy and student success at the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Elena Quiroz-Livanis; and the director of the Mauricio Gastón Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at UMass Boston, Lorna Rivera.

I hope everyone considers attending this powerful event designed to inspire, educate and motivate. It is only by learning about others' lived experiences that our society can attain a more equitable tomorrow.

Let us collectively not only celebrate Hispanic heritage this month but also work to make our community more welcoming and inclusive for all.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.