

Our changing America

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) March 26, 2021



The recent tragic events in Atlanta have had me thinking about a consulting assignment I undertook in the region about 15 years ago.

The Atlanta Regional Commission, the regional planning entity with responsibility for a 10-county metro area, was assessing the area's growing diversity. Atlanta had been selected to host the 1996 Olympic Games. That designation set off a flurry of construction activity to accommodate the various venues for athletic contests and the ceremonial events.

The construction boom in turn generated an influx of workers. Many of them were job seekers, often of Hispanic origin, from other parts of the United States. They were then supplemented by others coming from Mexico and Central America. Before long, the Atlanta region had become a magnet for immigration from all corners — the Caribbean, Africa, South Asia, East Asia and the Middle East.

The assignment, working with my team of graduate students that I had assembled from Georgia State University's Department of Anthropology and Geography, was to document the new immigrant and refugee communities that had, by the mid-2000s, become an integral part of the Atlanta region. The work, organized in what ultimately became a series of 20 *Global Atlanta Snapshots*, presented the statistics – but more importantly, the stories – of these new members of the community.

The *Snapshots* accounted for the various reasons the newcomers left their home countries – wars, famine, natural disasters as well opportunities for higher education or economic advancement. They also provided some insights into the cultures and traditions the immigrants brought to their new homes. And, where they lived and how they earned their living, the struggles and the occasional triumphs were all part of the documentation.

Signs of change

Greater Atlanta's demographic change was evident in many ways. The great diversity in this new Atlanta was perhaps most vividly on display while traveling along Buford Highway, a thoroughfare heading northeast from the city, traversing Fulton, DeKalb and Gwinnett counties. That seven-lane highway, with no median strip, is the spine of a community consisting of apartment complexes, suburban neighborhoods and myriad shopping centers.

It is in those retail centers that you see the signs, side-by-side, signaling Korean, Mexican, Chinese and Vietnamese eating places and service establishments. You might also see shops opened by members of the Indian, Bangladeshi, Somali or Ethiopian communities.

Another sign of the changing times confronted me when I visited Grady Hospital, the public hospital in central Atlanta serving many of the city's immigrant communities. I had a chance to see a count of interpreter services required over a recent year. Scores of languages were represented; Spanish, unsurprisingly headed the list, but Urdu and Amharic were also near the top.

As noted, the ARC *Snapshots* reported the struggles, but also the triumphs, as people gained their footing in American society. Using just one example, we learned of the experience of Ms. K, who arrived from South Korea with her husband.

In her early days in Atlanta, she worked in nursing. But after a while, as K drove the Buford Highway corridor she noticed all the new residential development taking place there. She decided to enter the real estate industry full time. She worked briefly for Century 21, then joined Re/Max, finding a core of clients from the community of her home country.

Soon after she joined Re/Max she received Top Sales Associate Awards, climbed to top rankings for Re/Max of Georgia throughout the 1990s, and in the year 2000 was awarded the highest honor in the Re/Max organization.

Making contributions

There were numerous examples of people from different communities making significant contributions as New Americans. There was F, who came as a child from Cuba in Operation Pedro Pan, became a pilot in the U.S. Air Force and later a senior executive at Delta Air Lines. Others came to this country for college or graduate degrees and are now making their contributions in the technology industry.

America is changing. Baltimore and the greater region have been shaped by waves of European immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries. Our region was further changed by the thousands of African-Americans who left the Jim Crow South during the Great Migration.

Baltimore has not been a magnet for international migration to the same extent as other parts of Maryland or the nation, but that, too, is changing. The full extent of the reshaped mosaic of peoples here will become clearer as the details of the 2020 Census become available.

Immigration is an integral part of the American story and should be an essential part of American history studies. *E pluribus unum.*

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