

OPPORTUNITY



Cape offers better life for immigrants

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TOP: Glenroy Burke at his restaurant Jerk Cafe along Route 28 in South Yarmouth on Oct. 26. Burke immigrated to Cape Cod from Jamaica. CAPE COD TIMES/STEVE HEASLIP

During his early childhood, Glenroy Burke's world consisted of his family's two-bedroom house in a rural, impoverished district of northeastern Jamaica, the school he attended two days a week and the fruit farm his family worked. There were 11 people crowded into the little house. No electricity. No running water. • Until his family moved to a larger town — Port Antonio — when he was 6, this was the only life Burke had ever imagined to exist. But that innocent perspective changed when he started noticing the lifestyles led by the tourists who came through his new hometown. • "That's how I knew there was a better life," he said. "That's when I realized people are living at a better standard than my family. I went to my mother and I said, 'Mother, it seems like they have lots of money. I want to cook for them when I grow up.'"

See OPPORTUNITY, Page 4A

Opportunity

Continued from Page 1A

Fast forward to 2022. Burke, also known as "Chef Shrimpy," is the owner-chef of The Jerk Cafe in South Yarmouth, living his American dream that started forming back in Port Antonio.

Arriving on Cape Cod from Jamaica in 1997 through the H-2B visa program, a federal program that allows foreign workers the chance to fill temporary nonagricultural jobs in the United States, Burke worked hard for many years to find his success, starting out as a dishwasher and marina technician.

His story of immigrating to Cape Cod is one of countless others, some already filled with chapters, others only just beginning.

Cape Cod's ongoing immigration story

Before New York was settled on as a home for the Statue of Liberty, Boston was briefly considered. But the colossal statue — which became a welcoming beacon for immigrants from all corners of the earth — also could easily have fit right in on Cape Cod.

One of the first places in the U.S. to have received immigrants from across the sea, the Cape continues to draw destiny seekers from far and wide. For some, it becomes a new home, while for others it is a landing spot — like Provincetown was for the English separatists (the Pilgrims) before they moved on to establish Plymouth Colony.

Today's voyagers are coming mostly for economic reasons, not the primarily religious reasons that brought Europeans in the 17th century. These days, immigrants are mostly arriving on the Cape and islands from Central and South America and the Caribbean islands, though the Cape is also seeing a fair number of people from eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East and Africa.

"The Hispanic and Latino population is pretty widespread here," said Caronanne Procaccini, director of client self-sufficiency at the Community Action Committee of Cape Cod & Islands, in Hyannis, whose role includes oversight of the organization's Immigration Resource Center.

The nonprofit, established in 1965, has operated its Immigration Resource

Center since 2016, providing free legal counsel and assistance for immigrants and their families, offering citizenship classes, and helping immigrants become citizens.

Many immigrants initially arrive to join the Cape's considerable summer hospitality-related workforce, coming through the H-2B visa program, as Burke did, or the U.S. State Department's J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program. Others follow family and friends.

According to the 2020 census, population diversity on the Cape and Islands has steadily increased over the past 12 years, largely in the aforementioned Hispanic and Latino population groups. Sarah Colvin, communications manager at the Cape Cod Commission, the regional land-use planning, economic development, and regulatory agency, said the greatest growth is seen in the Mid-Cape.

"The American Community Survey (ACS) 2020 five-year estimate shows a 42% increase in the Latino population from the 2010 ACS five-year estimate, with a significant increase from Ecuador," she said, citing the Commission's Data Cape Cod website.

One of the largest groups of immigrants who have made their way here are Brazilians, said Immigration Resource Center Coordinator Stephanie Souza, saying they have tended to settle in the Mid-Cape.

The Caribbean has also produced a steady number of immigrants to the Cape and Islands in recent years, most notably from Jamaica. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data, the number of people from Jamaica coming to work in the United States increased by 84% between 2011 and 2021 — an increase mirrored on the Cape.

Burke said he has watched it happen, and often interacts with fellow Jamaicans.

"There's a lot of people still coming here from Jamaica," he said. "It's all about the economic prosperity, how can they better their lives for themselves and their family."

The Haitian community is seeing current growth as well, Souza said.

"For most of the people who come here, there are people from their ethnic group already here," said Procaccini, adding that "a lot of people who come here to visit decide to stay because of family and friends."

And because so many come from

coastal communities, she said, "the Cape is kind of a natural attraction ... They come because they really believe they can build a better life, and eventually they get to a point where they can own a business and buy property."

Many also relocate to escape gang violence, political upheaval, and war, in their native countries. Souza said some people are now coming to the Cape from Ukraine, as well as Bulgaria.

Immigrants come to Cape Cod in search of opportunity

Burke said he ended up in the United States "because of economical prosperity. ... Growing up in Jamaica there was not the opportunity, and what I wanted was to live in a country that would offer me opportunity to succeed."

In 1992, he went to work on a cruise ship, which would take him off his island home for the first time. Then he learned about the H-2B program and about the availability of jobs at Harwich's Wequassett Resort and Golf Club.

"What I knew was that no distance is too far to travel when one seeks what he wants," he said.

While he explored other parts of the United States, Cape Cod ultimately drew him to it. Here, he married, started a family and earned citizenship. In 2008, Burke opened his restaurant and began earning a reputation as the guy to go to for great Jamaican fare.

"I believe in this life you have to know what you want, and you have to know when you find it," he said. "Life is all about a dream. I found what I was looking for here. I found great economic prosperity from the day I came here."

From Eastern Europe to Eastham: a Cape immigration story

Anastasia Sotnic, co-owner of Casa del Cabo in Eastham, also found what she was looking for when she ventured from her homeland in Eastern Europe.

Like many who have made their way to Cape Cod, her entrée here was through the U.S. State Department's J-1 Visa Exchange Visitor Program in 2008, when she was a student in the Republic of Moldova, formerly part of the Soviet Union.

With its plethora of summer job opportunities in the hospitality realm, there was plenty of work to be had on the Cape, and Sotnic was looking to expand her horizons. She immediately

went to work at Provincetown's Patio American Grill, where she made an impression with the way she presented herself and her work ethic — initially hired as a dishwasher, she was given a try at the hostess stand early on, she said, and remained there for the rest of the season.

Her employers, Joachim Sandbichler and Mark Ferrari, were supportive and welcoming. She was happy to learn about the restaurant business from them as she returned for successive summers, working as a housekeeper in the mornings and going to her hostess job at the Patio American Grill in the evenings. Eventually, she was named general manager at The Patio, and later at Provincetown's Pepe's Wharf after Sandbichler and Ferrari bought it.

Sotnic liked it so much here that she applied for a green card, she said, which she received three years later in the U.S. State Department's Diversity Visa Program green card lottery — a program that randomly selects up to 55,000 applicants each year from countries with low rates of recent immigration to the U.S.

"In 2011, I came back here with the status of U.S. resident," Sotnic said.

By the end of 2017 she was married to Ryan PremDas, a chef she'd met at The Patio who hales from Gainesville, Florida. Both were passionate about the Cape, so they settled down here and started a family.

In June 2021, the couple opened Casa del Cabo — which Sotnic describes as "pan-Latin," in a former restaurant location on Eastham's Main Street.

"We just wanted to see if we can create something on our own," Sotnic said. "Our goal is to make sure we are successful and we make a good meal and be an inviting place in the community."

In some ways, the restaurant is a microcosm of the Cape's immigrant community, with one owner from Eastern Europe, the other from a Hispanic background — PremDas' family has connections to Trinidad and Puerto Rico. Even the restaurant's name reflects this coming together of different cultural backgrounds: Casa del Cabo is Spanish for Cape House; casa is also the Romanian word for "home."

Sotnic said she often counts her blessings and is grateful for the opportunities she was afforded on the Cape.

Opportunity

Continued from Page 4A

"I'm just so lucky to come to the Cape, to pick the job that I picked and get to work there for 13 years and learn," she said.

Sotnic grew up in a "very simple" and strict family.

"My mother, she was always telling me everything I have I'm going to work hard for," Sotnic said. "We couldn't afford many things. ... Coming to the U.S. gave me a good opportunity to just grow."

When she and her husband started their own business, it was with the same outlook that led her to leave Moldova, and him to leave Florida. It's a venture filled with "that energy of a new beginning," she said.

PremDas said he is especially impressed with his wife's journey, and her ability to continue building her American dream while juggling motherhood. This year she became an American citizen.

Cape Cod Immigration in the last century

In the past, the Cape saw significant immigration from Cape Verde, a nation comprised of a group of islands off Senegal, on the west coast of Africa. The nation, once under the control of Portugal, gained its independence in 1975.

Barbara Burgo is curator and one of the co-founders of the Cape Cod Cape Verdean Museum and Cultural Center, which opened last year in Palmbouth in recognition and celebration of the Cape Verdean community and its history here. She said it's difficult to say now how many Cape Verdeans made their way to the Cape and settled here because so many identified themselves as Portuguese in censuses — and some still do.

"In our communities, though, at our dinner tables, we all know who we are," she said.

Burgo is a third-generation Cape Codder. Like so many others before and after them, her grandparents came from Cape Verde in search of better lives. A severe drought and famine in the early 1900s that claimed a quarter of the population spurred thousands to leave, she said.

Arriving on Cape Cod, many by way of Brazil, Cape Verdeans took work with the fishing and whaling fleets here, and also went to work on farms and in service as cooks and cleaners, she said.

"The Wampanoags taught us how to pick cranberries and to start our own bogs," Burgo said. "Some Finnish people came here at the same time, in the late 1800s and early 1900s."

Now, she said, Cape Verdeans who settled here have established themselves in the professional realm, enabling new waves of immigrants to fill the labor roles once primarily held by Cape Verdeans. It's all part of the ever-turning wheel of immigration to Cape Cod that began on Nov. 11, 1620, when the Pilgrims first stepped foot in what is now Provincetown.