



The Taco Mayor

Overcoming Anti-Immigrant Politics in Connecticut

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“I might have tacos when I go home, I’m not quite sure yet.”

Out of context, the statement sounds innocuous enough, like a lazy status update on Facebook. But these are the words East Haven Mayor Joseph Maturo expressed on January 24 when—in the wake of the FBI’s arrest of four local police officers for allegedly executing a consistent campaign of brutality and harassment toward Latinos—a TV reporter asked what he would do for his town’s Latino community.

A video of the fumbling mayor’s “taco comment” went viral. An online campaign led to the delivery of 450 tacos to Maturo two days after the debacle. The insensitive and confused remark struck a match and illuminated the town of East Haven, Conn., population 29,257, for the rest of the nation to puzzle over. What violence lurks in this quiet suburb of New Haven, and what can be done about it?

Latinos accounted for more than half of the nation’s growth in the last decade, and across places as far flung as East Haven and Phoenix, the frictions caused by such a dramatic demographic shift is causing a national debate on our country’s future. When Arizona’s harsh anti-illegal immigration law, **SB 1070**, caused a national furor in 2010, it put a spotlight on the tensions bubbling in new immigrant gateways across the country. While some companies and organizations boycotted Arizona in protest of the law, other state legislatures, such as Alabama’s, drafted **even stronger bills** they hoped would cause unauthorized immigrants to “self-deport.”

The influx of Latino immigrants into East Haven is a reflection of what happened in many other small cities around the U.S., particularly in the northeast, over the past decade. Drove continued to arrive in major gateways like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but many were also immigrating to small cities and suburbs around the country, which had never seen such a high percentage of Latino growth. Some areas embraced their new residents, while others reacted with violence. East Haven is a small arena, but the events here can be read as a cautionary tale for municipalities facing a similar change in color.

IT’S HARD TO FIND A TACO IN EAST HAVEN

Herman Zuniga came to the United States for love. When he was 20, he was happy in Sucúa, in the state of Morona Santiago, in Ecuador. He loved his small town, with its soccer field, church and town hall. It was a cattle-rearing area, and he lived on a farm with his father, traveling to his job with a highway construction company and thinking about university. But one day he went to see his girlfriend, Carmen, and she told him she was moving to the United States to join her father.



Herman Zuniga never considered himself an activist until police attacked him in his East Haven home and he spoke out.

“And you know, love is love,” Zuniga smiled, 24 years later, sitting in the back room of Los Amigos grocery store in East Haven. “I dropped my job, I collected money and I fly to JFK airport with her. Since then we’re here.”

Zuniga, now 48, is a gentle, wiry man. At 5’5” and 130 pounds, he wears metal-framed glasses temporarily mended with scotch tape. His eyes easily tear up with emotion, yet his sentimentality is tempered by a penchant for silly jokes. Flipping through his iPhone photo album to show off pictures of his younger son’s trip to Penn State, where he’ll be attending college next year, he easily erupted in giggles.

When he arrived in Washington Heights in 1988, Zuniga worked in construction, living in the shadows among thousands of other undocumented immigrants in the city. After his first son was born, he and Carmen, whom he had married, decided to move to Clinton, Conn., to raise their blossoming family. “It’s country, woods, lakes, water. I come from a town that is surrounded by four rivers, and there’s nothing more beautiful than to live around trees,” he said, explaining his decision to leave New York City. In Connecticut, he found carpentry work easily, his wife started a cleaning business and their second son was born. Eventually Carmen received legal residency through family members, and finally, after 17 years of life in the U.S., was

able to sponsor Zuniga. At his hearing in Hartford, the judge commended Zuniga for living in the U.S. for so long, paying taxes and having no trouble with the law (with the exception of staying in the country illegally), not even a traffic violation. Zuniga is currently a legal resident of the U.S., though he is not yet a citizen.

Zuniga commuted from Clinton to work at a lumberyard based in East Haven for a decade. There was plenty of work in the area's booming housing market, and the Zunigas were doing well. Eventually Herman quit working by the hour and started his own contracting business in East Haven, giving him a sense of permanence. "This opened our mind, if we can do this, why can't we buy a house?" he recalled. Coming home from work one day, he noticed a real estate sign for a house. Shortly thereafter, he bought the property and moved his family to East Haven in 2002.

Zuniga wasn't the only Ecuadorian moving to East Haven. Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population jumped from 4.4 percent of the town to 10.3 percent, most of it Ecuadorian. Many of these immigrants, like Zuniga, worked in the construction industry. Word spread like wildfire back home, particularly in the province where Zuniga is from, Morona-Santiago, and neighboring Azuay, about the opportunities in Connecticut.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s Ecuador suffered a severe economic crisis, and thousands of people started migrating out of the country looking for work. Earlier generations of Ecuadorian immigrants had moved to immigrant hubs like New York City, but this time many were arriving directly in Greater New Haven. The network grew rapidly, and young people arrived eager to work, some sponsored by relatives, some undocumented. No matter their status, they found jobs building houses, removing trees and working in kitchens all over Connecticut and the New York metropolitan area.

The Ecuadorian community grew so large — 40,000 estimated in New England — that Ecuador opened a Consulate in New Haven in 2008. The **2010 Census** counted 3,012 Latinos in East Haven, an increase of 1,784 individuals in ten years, while the town as a whole grew by only 1,068 people. In addition, many Ecuadorians also live in a New Haven Census tract adjoining East Haven. The changing face of the population was impossible to miss, particularly on Main Street, where Ecuadorian entrepreneurs were opening mom-and-pop shops. The new businesses brought life back to an area that had suffered in the late 1990s, leaving storefronts shuttered and empty.

The immigrants in East Haven opened stores to serve their burgeoning enclave. Groceries with Ecuadorian flags in the window sold staples like milk, bread and eggs, and an assortment of Latin American products to the community. They were shops

with names like “Los Amigos,” where I spoke to Zuniga, that sold calling cards, offered money transfer to Ecuador and package sending services. An Ecuadorian bar and restaurant, Barra’s Cafe, served Ecuadorian specialties like *ceviche* and *chaulafan*, a type of fried rice — but no tacos.

One thing that bothered the Ecuadorians in East Haven so much about their mayor’s comment is that there’s nowhere in town to even get tacos. They are not part of Ecuadorian cuisine. If you want a taco, you have to go to the Taco Bell in nearby Branford or across the river to a Mexican restaurant in New Haven. Did the mayor not even know that they were Ecuadorian?

THE TROUBLE ON MAIN STREET

As in many old American towns, Main Street is the commercial strip of East Haven, the only direct way for traffic to get from one end to the other. The east end of Main Street tells of the town’s colonial history, of the old gristmill and the first Iron Works in the state of Connecticut, built in 1655. Winding down Main Street past the Old Stone Church, built in 1774, and town hall, the modern era creeps in. Rite Aid, Dunkin’ Donuts, Stop & Shop, auto repair, pizza and sub sandwich joints. The Ecuadorian-owned businesses are clustered on the west side of Main Street, near a McDonalds, and the border with New Haven. Along the way, 1950s-era single-family homes, wooden and with green lawns out front, line the street.

East Haven is an inner-ring suburb of New Haven, and for many years has been a destination for New Haven families looking for a quieter area, a patch of green and a white picket fence. Originally part of New Haven, the town got its independence in 1875. With a median income of \$59,918, East Haven is the kind of middle-class town where people work hard to afford a single-family home and decent schools for their children.

In the early 20th century, the New Haven area saw wave of Italian immigration, and still today, almost half of East Haven identifies as having Italian heritage. It’s an overwhelmingly white town — 82.6 percent as of the 2010 census — and has long held a reputation for prejudice in the area.

In 1997, an East Haven cop chased an unarmed black man named Malik Jones out of the town, across the border into New Haven and then shot him dead at close range in his car. That incident immediately became a firebrand for civil rights activists in the area and the town was the subject of litigation for over a decade. The recent U.S. Department of Justice [report on the East Haven Police Department](#) — the report that

led to the arrests which precipitated Mayor Joseph Maturo’s infamous taco comment — accused the town of failing to remedy “an extensive history of past discrimination that it has failed to meaningfully address or remedy.”

For East Haven’s new Latinos, the trouble started around the same time as the recession took the air out of Connecticut’s housing bubble.

My Country Store, owned by an Ecuadorian couple, quickly became a hub for the new community. The shop has a constant stream of Latin American customers buying calling cards, sending money to their families abroad and stocking their pantries. On a Saturday morning this February, the mood was light. The cashier, Monica Oleas, seemed to know every customer. “*Como le va? Digame,*” she’d ask, and the clients stopped to joke and catch up on news.



Latino immigrants have revived neighborhoods in East Haven and New Haven.

Four years ago, Oleas said, the atmosphere was one of anxiety and terror. Then, local policemen would lurk outside and harass customers who drove out of the store’s parking lot, issuing tickets, demanding registration, and shouting racial slurs at them to get out of town. “We lost customers, people didn’t want to come to East Haven, it

became almost like a ghost town,” Oleas said in Spanish. “There weren’t people here, no customers either, everyone was fearful.”

In chilling detail, the DOJ report on East Haven documents the behavior of the four local police officers indicted. The police were disproportionately stopping Latinos for alleged traffic violations and other charges outside the groceries, in the parking lot of an Ecuadorian restaurant and bar, and driving through town. Sometimes, officers would assault Latinos with excessive force when they were handcuffed. They used pepper spray, their fists and their feet, and wrote false reports to cover up the wrongful arrests.

“The practices of the EHPD constitute a pattern or practice of discriminatory policy,” the authors of the DOJ report wrote. “Our investigation revealed that Latinos are subjected to disparate treatment, and that the impact on Latinos can only be explained by intentional bias.” That discriminatory policing, the federal report said, violates the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The DOJ also expressed concern that police forms for reporting crimes were only in English, and only one member of the 50-uniformed officers in the East Haven police department spoke fluent Spanish.

Numerous Latino interviewees told me that police would show up at their homes after allegedly receiving a generic complaint call referring to loud noise, or a pet left outside. On February 21, 2007, Herman Zuniga says the police arrived unexpectedly at his house, allegedly because his son had called the station, which Zuniga says never happened.

“The policeman improperly goes in my living room, handcuffed me, punched me in the belly, punched me in the face, dragged me like a piece of meat into the street in front of my wife. My younger kid at that time was 15, and my older kid was 19. That was one point in my life that I said ‘why?’ I don’t understand why,” Zuniga said, shaking his head. He couldn’t believe that an officer who had sworn to protect and serve the community would treat him so.

Zuniga took off his glasses and looked at me directly. “They hit me in the face, they broke my nose,” he said. That’s when I noticed his nose was a little crooked.

Father James Manship, the priest at St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church in New Haven, frequented by the area’s growing Latino community, kept hearing the stories. He decided to step in on behalf of his parishioners and try to document the encounters between Latinos and the police. In 2009, while **videotaping** police removing expired license plates hung as decoration at My Country Store, Father Manship was arrested. The priest said he was trying to document the systematic campaign of threats, racial profiling and discrimination against Latinos in East Haven. In the police report, the officers said they felt “unsafe.”

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The mayor seemed to be lumping all the diverse cultures of Latin America into one generic appetizer.
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On the Sunday following his arrest, Father Manship asked parishioners who had been subject to abuse to come forward and make a statement. About 100 spoke up. The next month, the **Worker and Immigrant Rights Advocacy Clinic** at Yale Law School stepped in and filed a civil rights complaint, which led to the Department of Justice investigation.

Two and a half years later, the DOJ filed the scathing report of the East Haven police department's behavior, detailing "biased policing, unconstitutional searches and seizures, and the use of excessive force." Despite the report's weight, the only substantive response to it locally was the **resignation of Leonard Gallo**, who as the chief of police throughout the period investigated was referred to as "Co-Conspirator 1" in the DOJ report and criticized for cultivating a racist police force. (The mayor who preceded Maturo, April Capone Almon, had placed Gallo on administrative leave amid allegations of abuse, and Maturo's choice to **reinstate him as chief** upon his election in the fall of 2011 had irked many in the immigrant community.)

On January 24, 2012, the FBI arrested four East Haven police officers known around town as "Miller's Boys," (a reference to one of the officers, Sgt. John Miller). On that day, Maturo played down the allegations. "I don't think this is a systemic problem in our police department nor within our community," he said. What would he do for the Latino community? Apparently, he might eat tacos. When the Ecuadorians in town heard Maturo's off-hand remark, it reinforced what they had suspected for years: The mayor's complete disregard to the very real abuses they had endured, and an ignorance of who they were as a people. Whether or not it was intentional, the taco comment was offensive to many because the mayor seemed to be lumping all the diverse cultures of Latin America into one generic appetizer.

WHAT DIFFERENCE A RIVER MAKES

New Haven, for the most part, falls on the west side of the Quinnipiac River. The city's Latino community is largely centered in Fair Haven, a neighborhood that has long served as a landing pad for generations of newly arrived immigrants. Puerto Ricans, who started migrating to Connecticut in the 1930s to work on farms and in high numbers after World War II, were the first wave of Latinos to move into the city. In the 1970s, the main Fair Haven drag, Grand Avenue, became the heart of their

community. JUNTA, the oldest Latino community based non-profit organization in the city, was established in 1969 on this street.

But by the time Kica Matos arrived as the Executive Director of JUNTA in 2001, most of the upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans had migrated out of the neighborhood and into the suburbs. Matos, a Puerto Rican herself, walked into a very culturally mixed Fair Haven — of Mexicans, Central American and South American immigrants.

“When I started at JUNTA, one of the things I realized really quickly was that our advocacy was geared towards the Puerto Rican population and not tailored to meet the needs of newly arrived immigrants, many of whom were undocumented,” Matos told me.

The difference in origin had serious implications. Puerto Ricans have U.S. Citizen status, a benefit many of the new migrants didn’t have, particularly those from Mexico. Matos saw the neighborhood’s new residents suffering from housing discrimination, police harassment, wage theft and other exploitation due to their status. Meanwhile, they were afraid of reaching out to the authorities for fear of deportation. In 2005, Matos estimated there were between 3,000-5,000 undocumented immigrants in Fair Haven alone.

Unlike East Haven, “The Elm City” is known for its diversity and welcoming attitude towards immigrants. The city’s population is 129,779, and of that, 27.4 percent is Latino and 35.4 percent black. Even 100 years ago, a third of the city was foreign born. Then it was mostly European immigration. Now it’s overwhelmingly Latino, emblematic of what is happening on a national scale.

The change in New Haven’s demographics was rapid: From 2010, New Haven grew by 6,153 people, a 5 percent increase, but the Latino population itself grew by 9,148 people, or a 35 percent increase. The new arrivals were overwhelmingly coming for jobs: They worked in New Haven kitchens, on construction sites, in delis and shoveling snow — and soon enough, in businesses that served other immigrants.

Alberto Bustos, 61, opened an income tax filing business on Grand Avenue about 20 years ago. Spanish talk shows play on the TV for customers to watch while they wait, and one wall is covered with tiles with the flags of Latin American countries. The Peruvian immigrant came to the U.S. 30 years ago, joining five relatives. Now he is part of a huge clan of 200.

When Bustos opened his business in the 1990s, in his words, Grand Avenue was “dead.” There were boarded up buildings, hardly any pedestrians and a lot of crime. “Now... there’s a lot of traffic, a lot of Spanish people opening business,” he said. “They push the business, we need them, the Spanish community, to move our businesses.” A walk down Grand Avenue confirms his observation; the street is a

bustling thoroughfare of supermarkets with Latin American names and products, barbershops, tacquerias and bakeries. Hardly one storefront is empty.

Despite the economic opportunities and New Haven's reputation as a friendly city for immigrants, Matos and others working with the city's newcomers saw major problems. One of the worst was crime; it is difficult for undocumented workers to open bank accounts and as a result, many leave job sites with large sums of cash, which makes them targets for robberies. Often, robberies would happen, and go unreported, because the undocumented immigrants were afraid of the police. And when the undocumented did interact with the police, it was often frustrating on both ends because immigrants' lack of identification stymied the system.

John Jairo Lugo, a Colombian immigrant in his forties who has lived in New Haven since 1991, was one of the people who, like Matos, recognized the need for the city's immigrants to speak up. Lugo has curly black hair, sad eyes and a weathered face that shows a lifelong commitment to standing up for the oppressed. He speaks slowly and listens patiently, traits that served him well in his former job as a court mediator. Lugo fled Colombia in 1986 in fear for his life. His student activism against human rights abuses of political prisoners was raising the ire of the government, and people he knew were disappearing. Lugo never intended to stay in the United States, but making his way by land to the Canadian border, he was stopped by U.S. immigration authorities and sent to a detention center. There he was advised to apply for political asylum, which he received two years later. In 2003, he helped establish **Unidad Latina en Accion**, a grassroots organization that supports immigrant worker's rights and police accountability in New Haven.

On a cold day in February, Lugo gave me a tour of Fair Haven in his beat-up car. On our way to a small new grocery catering to Latinos, Lugo slowed down and pointed to a corner. An undocumented Mexican immigrant, Manuel Santiago, was stabbed to death there in October of 2006, minutes after cashing a paycheck.

"He got killed because for a long time, the criminals in this neighborhood they used to see the immigrants as walking ATMs," Lugo said. "So basically if you assault, if you rob an immigrant, you always find money on them."

The tragedy of Manuel Santiago's death motivated City Hall to listen to the activists' demands. JUNTA and Unidad developed a number of policy proposals to improve the safety of New Haven's newest residents. One of these proposals was the **Elm City Resident Card**, a municipal photo ID that could be used to open bank accounts, so immigrants wouldn't have to stuff their mattresses with cash. It also gave them a way to pay parking tickets, interact with police and use other public amenities, including local libraries.



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Albert Salgado was able to open a bank account using an ID card available to all residents of New Haven.

Essentially, the card means that all residents of New Haven, regardless of immigration status, can use the public services and agencies offered by the city. To further improve access, organizations pushed for the translation of local government documents and forms into Spanish.

New Haven Mayor John DeStefano, Jr., was willing to introduce these policies because to him, the immigrant-led growth was a boon. He saw the influx of immigrants to Fair Haven bringing new life to abandoned streets. In 2007, his administration recruited Kica Matos to oversee the creation of the Elm City Resident ID card and other initiatives as the Deputy Mayor and Administrator of Community Services. When City Hall announced the resident card, DeStefano spoke passionately, saying the card would lend “a fundamental acknowledgement of an individual’s worth and dignity, by giving a name to those among us.”

“Not to name them by a stereotype, not to name them by a prejudice, not to name them by an ignorance, but rather to call our neighbors by their own name,” the Mayor said.

It was five years ago that DeStefano promised the cards would make the city safer and allow residents to better engage with local government and infrastructure. By now, the city has issued almost 11,000 cards, to what city officials and immigrant advocates call very positive results. The New Haven Board of Aldermen is even considering a proposal now to expand the scope of the card to allow debit purchases. Critics, on the other hand, say the card sanctions illegal immigration and has drawn more unauthorized immigrants to the city.

There's no question the controversial card had a tumultuous beginning — two days after New Haven's city government approved the plan, federal agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement conducted a series of raids and took 32 immigrants into custody, which the mayor and plaintiffs in a subsequent civil rights lawsuit viewed as retaliation against the city. This past February, during the aftermath of the East Haven taco debacle, 11 of those New Haven residents whose homes had been raided **reached a settlement with the federal government.**

New Haven's ID card was the first of its kind in the country, and over the past five years it has become a model for similar cards in at least six other cities across the country with growing immigrant populations, including **San Francisco, Oakland** and **Trenton**. No in-depth studies have been conducted into the success of these programs in increasing public safety, but anecdotal evidence from immigrants in New Haven who possess the card indicate it is, indeed, helping people engage in civic life.

Alberto Salgado, a Mexican immigrant from Tlaxcala who works as a butcher in a supermarket on Grand Avenue and received his card in February, echoed the mayor's remarks. "It's a good ID because it validates you, anywhere you go, from stores, to parks, hospitals. More than anything, it's to identify who you are, so they'd know that you're a good 'citizen,' a quiet person, that supports and participates," he said, displaying his card while Mexican music streamed through the supermarket. A few doors down from the supermarket where Salgado works is a branch of Start Community Bank (the mayor is on the board), where the Elm City resident card is accepted as a primary form of ID. Cardholders can open bank accounts and take out loans for which they otherwise, without the ID, would not be eligible.

According to Matos and Lugo, in the early 2000s, the relationship between New Haven's police department and its growing Latino community was a far cry from that of East Haven, but it wasn't perfect either. Immigrants were not only afraid the police would turn them over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, they also reported a number of incidents of harassment and brutality, as well as a generalized sense that police did not understand the struggle of immigrants, particularly around access to driver's licenses. In response, the advocates decided to host a series of

dialogues between the New Haven police department and the immigrant community, attended by hundreds of immigrants and the Chief of Police.

“That was really the beginning of the strengthening relations between the immigrants and the police department because the immigrants realized that the police were not the enemy,” Matos said. The police department supported the creation of the Elm City Resident Card, and in 2006 the mayor issued a general order to the police department directing officers not to inquire about immigration status on routine calls. “If victims aren’t comfortable talking to police, we can’t ensure and maintain civil neighborhoods,” said DeStefano. This indication that the city was not interested in enforcing federal immigration policy, Matos said, was the most powerful message the police could send to the immigrant community.

“There weren’t people here, no customers either, everyone was fearful.”

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The immigrants I interviewed in New Haven all said it was a good place to live. Lugo attributes that both to fact that the immigrant community was willing to speak up and advocate for themselves, and that “we have an administration that is open to hear what these new communities have to say.”

In his most radical embrace of non-citizens yet, DeStefano **proposed in December** to allow non-citizen residents of New Haven the right to vote in municipal elections, as has been the case in Maryland’s Takoma Park for 20 years. Non-citizen voting, however, is controversial on all levels of government. Chicago is one city that allows non-citizens to vote in school board elections, but similar efforts to open school boards to non-citizen parents in other cities have failed in recent years. A spokesperson for DeStefano’s office told me the proposal was “a recognition of who we are as a city—to the number of undocumented immigrants here, to the foreign students at Yale, to the refugees.”



Anti-immigrant protestors made their presence known at a “unity march” organized by immigrants-rights advocates in East Haven.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

It was those “sanctuary” policies, so derided by some in East Haven, that earned New Haven an award from The National League of Cities in 2007. In 2011, the national organization granted New Haven another award for its success in public safety and police outreach.

Ricardo Gambetta, manager of the immigration integration programs at the League of Cities believes that the future of urban America depends on the way immigrants are woven into the fabric. “Almost every city in America is going through a huge change in demographics,” he said. “Our cities are becoming more international, more diverse and it’s very important for cities to try to integrate their immigrant communities.”

The role of a municipal government and its police force is to protect and serve its citizens. As a Latino population boom shifts demographics in towns and cities across the nation, those authorities must keep up with the pace of change.

When I asked Gambetta about his advice for the mayor of East Haven, he suggested that Maturro replicate some of the efforts across the river in New Haven. “Not everything is perfect in New Haven, but they have made great process in the last few years,” he said. In particular, Gambetta suggested that the East Haven police department provide training for its officers on cultural competency, build a more diverse force that reflects the town’s new population and build partnerships with immigrants on community policing and crime prevention efforts.

“It’s a community issue, not just an immigrant issue, so the whole community should be involved,” Gambetta said. He attributed the success of the immigrant integration project in New Haven to its broad base of support: The private sector, the public school system, faith-based organizations and immigrant groups all worked together to make the reforms happen.

The newly energized East Haven activists are not asking for an East Haven Resident ID card or a general order like exist in New Haven. They acknowledge that what works for one city may not work in a different town. “The main thing we’re asking for East Haven is to open up to a dialogue, and through the dialogue we will see the best things to start implementing in the city of East Haven,” said Lugo.

Gambetta warned that the successful integration of immigrants, particularly if they feel isolated from local authorities, is not likely to occur organically. “Somebody has to be the host, somebody has to be the leader, and because immigration is important for mayors and city officials, most of the time the city has to take the role and lead by example and use the leadership from city hall,” Gambetta said.

It’s unclear if the right person for that job is Joseph Maturo. Zuniga does not think so. I contacted the East Haven Mayor’s office to ask what steps they were taking to integrate the Ecuadorian community into the town, but they declined to comment.

It’s not surprising, then, that about a week after the FBI arrests of the officers and the mayor’s subsequent taco comment, the organization Community of Immigrants of East Haven (CIEH) was formed. The immigrants met in the back room of Los Amigos Grocery, meeting at night to discuss how to end the police’s racial profiling and how to respond to the mayor’s dismissive comments. Within a short time, 160 people had joined the organization, and Zuniga was elected president.

The group delivered a letter to Maturo’s town hall in March with a set of demands, at the top of which was the mayor’s resignation. The mayor was on vacation, and as of yet has not responded to the letter. Upon his return, Maturo announced that an annual **Latino Expo**, usually held in Hartford, would be hosted in May in East Haven. Zuniga crashed the press conference and hand-delivered another copy of CIEH’s demands.

In Zuniga’s eyes, the Latino Expo is a good thing but no substitute for working with the community on the day-to-day issues that determine quality of life for Latinos in East Haven. Maturo, he said, was trying to use the expo as leverage, more of a media stunt than really engaging with the Latino community. The mayor, he said, had not even consulted with the Community Immigrants of East Haven about the Latino Expo. “It’s a real issue that we have a mayor that doesn’t want to listen to us,” Zuniga said.

Across the river in New Haven, Puerto Ricans have gradually made their way into the political establishment of the city. Their success, and the cycle of immigrant history in the U.S., provides some optimism for the future of the Ecuadorian community in East Haven. And even if the mayor isn’t reaching out to his immigrant constituents, activists say dialogue is beginning among town residents. When John Jairo Lugo attended a police commission meeting in East Haven in February, he left hopeful after speaking with an older Italian immigrant..



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The Community of Immigrants of East Haven organized a “Unity March” to connect the city’s Latino population with the rest of the town, following the controversy over Mayor Maturro’s taco comment.

“...She said, ‘you know what, I agree with your struggle, because when I moved here from Italy to East Haven...I was facing the same situation with the Irish descendants. What’s happening to you guys is the same thing that happened to me a long time ago,’” he recalled. The difference between East Haven and New Haven, Lugo said, really comes down to one thing: The New Haven administration was open to dialogue. “[DeStefano] is also the son of an immigrant and he feels like these new immigrants are not much different than the old immigrants that came from Italy, so that’s one of the good things we have in the city, that we have an administration that is willing to hear us,” he said.

EQUAL RIGHTS, ‘YES!’ TACOS, ‘NO!’

Herman Zuniga had never been an activist. After the incident at his house, he went to court, but eventually gave up on his case. He resumed his life, but it was at Saint Rose of Lima, Father Manship’s church, that Zuniga was motivated to take a stand.

After the mayor's taco comment rippled through the community, Zuniga heard about a meeting of local Latino business leaders.

"What are you waiting for? That's what I say to myself." Zuniga was upset at the police treatment of Latinos he felt and saw around him, particularly about the physical brutality. "Because I don't want it to happen to the young kids, they go to the bar, they drink, they come out, okay, they get arrested, okay, take them to jail — but don't touch their bodies!"

This group of leaders eventually became the Community of Immigrants of East Haven, which decided to organize a "unity march" down Main Street on February 25

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"Almost every city in America is going through a huge change in demographics."
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— coincidentally, the same date the Egyptian uprising began last year. The message was: We are here to stay, and we want change.

The day before the march was messy. It had snowed the night before, and new rain turned it into cold slush puddles. But Zuniga was in good spirits, sitting at Los Amigos surrounded by hand-painted signs denouncing police brutality and demanding Maturo's resignation. The group had come to the conclusion that Maturo was so out

of touch and disrespectful of the very people who were putting life back into Main Street that he should resign. But Zuniga said the goal of the march was to connect the immigrant community with the rest of the town. "An understanding, a unity, a call for justice, a call for healing, a call to bring the town back and take that name away, of racial profiling, of [a] racist town," he said.

The morning of the march was bright and clear, the week's slush melted away. As more than 300 adults and children milled in the McDonald's parking lot to rally at the edge of town, an elderly man with a shock of white hair shook his finger from the fast food restaurant. He was a retired barber named Freddy who would not provide his last name. He said he had lived in East Haven for 47 years. "It was a real American town, everybody spoke English, no Spanish signs anywhere, like you see know. See that? Looks like we're in a foreign country, like a third-world banana republic." He called the immigrants criminals because he believed they had entered the country illegally, and said the police were doing their job in arresting them.

As the marchers chanted, "Equal rights, yes! Tacos, no!" down the street, the rest of the town's community came out to watch. A handful of counter protesters showed up

wearing American flags, some holding signs telling the immigrants to go home. Some of the protesters seemed to think that the marchers were Mexican, and that they all had entered the country illegally. Hecklers shouted, “How does hasta la vista sound?” and “Mexicans peeing in my backyard!” Some grumbled, “it’s a national problem,” and others blamed their neighbor, New Haven, and its “sanctuary city” policies, for the troubles in East Haven.

Dolores Listro sat on her porch and watched the march with her family. Like the woman Lugo met, she saw the current situation as history repeating itself, traveling its bumpy road. “The Irish, the Italians, the Jews, the blacks, everybody went through this discrimination when they first came into America and into the local towns,” she said. “The community has to get together with the Latinos and they have to sit down and discuss their differences and settle it. Simple as that.”

As Zuniga led hundreds past the Ecuadorian groceries and Italian-American pizza joints, he raised his voice to be heard above the crowd, and its naysayers.

“I understand what it is to be an American,” he said. “We’re here, we came, we stayed, we’re going to be forever. I’m telling you, we are people of the world and we are here in America. That’s the pride of America: That we are everybody, and we are one, united. The union.”

At the finale of the march, in Margaret Tucker Park in front of the Old Stone Church and kitty-corner from Town Hall, Zuniga addressed the crowd again. “We are here because we are East Haven,” he shouted. This time, his voice rose clearly above the hecklers. >



ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Sarah Kate Kramer is a multimedia journalist based in New York City. She is a regular contributor to WNYC Radio and various public radio programs. Much of Sarah's work focuses on issues facing immigrant communities and she is the editor of Feet in 2 Worlds, a project that brings the work of immigrant journalists to public radio and the web. Sarah is also the creator and producer of "Niche Market," a weekly segment for WNYC that profiles specialty stores in New York City. From 2010-2011 she produced the Next American City podcast, "Metro Matters." In 2009 she received a fellowship from University of Southern California Annenberg with which she produced a two-part radio series about language and cultural barriers facing immigrants in New York City hospitals. An avid traveler, Sarah has spent over a year in Morocco on a Fulbright fellowship, made field recordings in Chile and journeyed across the U.S. as a facilitator for StoryCorps.

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