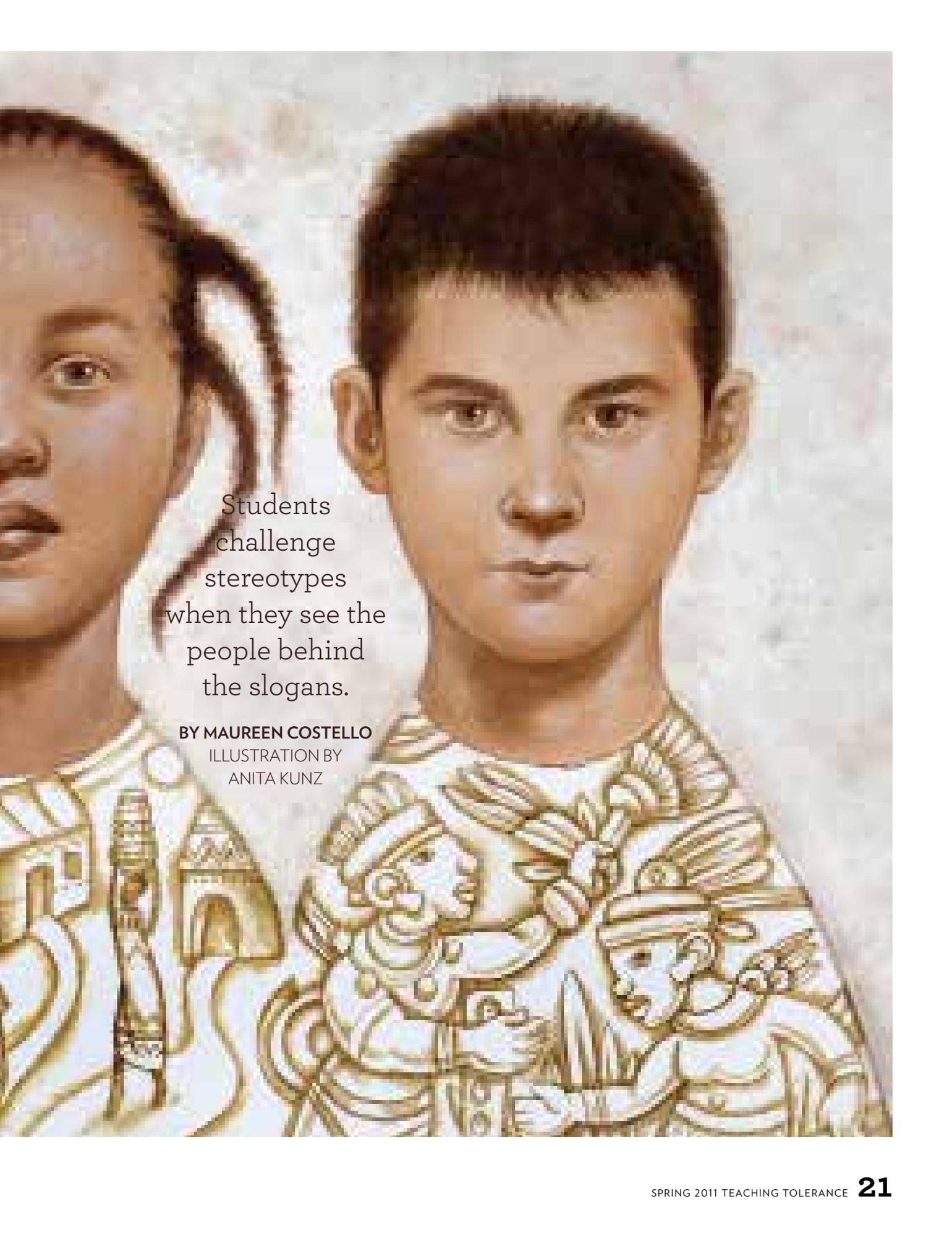




THE HUMAN FACE OF IMMIGRATION





Students
challenge
stereotypes
when they see the
people behind
the slogans.

BY MAUREEN COSTELLO

ILLUSTRATION BY
ANITA KUNZ

“So,” Mindi Rappaport asks the eighth-graders in her English class, “What’s going on these days with immigration? How do you feel about it?” ¶ The students, in the leafy and historic town of Ridgefield, Conn., jump in eagerly to talk about what they know and what they’ve heard. It’s not long before their consensus is clear: Legal immigrants are good, model residents; “illegals” are very bad. ¶ You can’t blame them for reaching that conclusion. After all, immigration has returned to the front burner of American politics. Last year, Arizona passed a series of laws hostile to immigrants. Thousands of Facebook users became fans of pages asserting, “This is America, I

don’t want to press one for English,” and the term “anchor baby” entered our vocabulary (*see No. 9 in “10 Myths About Immigration,” p. 29*).

In the past, nativists opposed immigration, period. The sharp distinction between “legal” and “illegal” immigrants emerged fairly recently, according to immigration historian David Reimers, a professor of history at New York University. “Basically, by the mid-90s ‘legal’ immigration was no longer an issue,” he says. “The hot-button issue became the undocumented immigrants.”

That makes immigration a powder keg for teachers. It’s a deeply important part of American history, a part of nearly everyone’s family legacy and present in almost every community. Many educators agree that concentrating on the power of personal stories helps students see how today’s immigrants are not that different from those in the past.

A Nation of Immigrants

Most people living in the United States are here because someone in the last 400 years came here from somewhere else. Immigrant experiences are naturally strong for first-

and second-generation immigrant families. But Reimer says that memories and language skills typically tend to fade by the third generation. It’s hard to understand the immigrant experience if your family has forgotten it. And forgetting, as Reimer suggests, has long been a part of assimilation.

Mindi Rappaport’s classroom—which we’ll return to later—is filled with students whose families have lost track of their roots. But across the country, in another eighth-grade English classroom, sit students whose immigration experience is firsthand.

Welcome to Dale Rosine’s class at Grace Yokley Middle School in Ontario, Calif. From time to time, Rosine sees new immigrants arrive in her class. When they first get there, she says, they are uncomfortable and afraid.

Sixty percent of Ontario’s population is Latino, with many people tracing their U.S. roots back to the 19th century. Like the rest of Southern California, Ontario is a divided camp when it comes to immigration. While unauthorized immigration is a hot political issue, the immigrants are a part of the fabric of life, with a cultural heritage shared by most residents. “Many people understand the reasons people come,



[while] others are frustrated with the process,” Rosine says, adding that right now, “It has lots to do with economics.”

Rosine worries about her students. “Some of the students from Mexico talk about the way they feel disrespected and second-rate in society,” she says. “They see what their parents go through, what lies ahead, and what’s going to be available to them.”

“Some of them are really in pain,” she says.

The Family Heritage Project

Rosine was determined to use the students’ own experiences as a guide.

Her “Family Heritage” project aims to connect students—all of them—to their family backgrounds while promoting diversity and understanding in the classroom. “I look at students who see themselves as not smart, not worthwhile,” she says. “I try to build on what they can do and raise the expectations they have for themselves.”

She begins with the play *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She and her students discuss prejudice, oppression and Anne’s statement that “In spite of everything, I still believe that

Under Rosine’s guidance, students ask family members about their cultural heritage and the challenges they had to overcome. The students ask questions like, “Who came here [to the United States or to California] first?” and “What difficulties did they face?”

Two Poetic Views of Immigration

people are really good at heart.”

Halfway through the play, Rosine outlines the project. It calls for students to conduct family research, but not the “family tree” assignment, which experts warn can be painful for children who are adopted or fostered or whose families are separated. For children in those situations, Rosine suggests that they “choose the family who you see as family.”

Under Rosine’s guidance, students ask family members about their cultural heritage and the challenges they had to overcome. The students ask questions like, “Who came here [to the United States or to California] first?” and “What difficulties did they face?” Her students build a cultural identity for themselves as well as a family history of resilience.

Sometimes, Rosine admits, there’s reluctance from children whose families say, “Oh, we don’t know anything” about their origins. But a story usually emerges.

Rosine is after a real story, not just a cultural bazaar. She encourages her students to find out about the oppression and prejudice buried in the family history, and to ask elders to talk about the family’s hardships and worries. Some of her immigrant students talk about what it’s like to come over the border, she says, and they give voice to “the feeling of desperation and the fear of being deported.” Others, from all over the world, relate how their families were separated for years while one member in the United States worked to arrange for the others to come.

She’s had Japanese-American students who have told the story of their families being sent to internment camps, and African-American students who learned about their ancestors leaving the South.

For some of her students, the experience really lowers walls. “When they hear so many kids with different backgrounds, and the difficulties they’ve had, it opens their eyes and makes their own situation seem less personal. They often remark that they thought they were the only

The New Colossus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

– *Emma Lazarus, 1883*

“I try to confront students’ limited perspectives. The big challenge is that they don’t realize they have a limited perspective.”

Unguarded Gates

... Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures of the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.
In street and alley what strange tongues are loud,
Accents of menace alien to our air,
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!
O Liberty, white Goddess! is it well
To leave the gates unguarded? On thy breast
Fold Sorrow's children, soothe the hurts of fate,
Lift the down-trodden, but with hand of steel
Stay those who to thy sacred portals come
To waste the gifts of freedom. Have a care
Lest from thy brow the clustered stars be torn
And trampled in the dust. For so of old
The thronging Goth and Vandal trampled Rome,
And where the temples of the Caesars stood
The lean wolf unmolested made her lair.

— Thomas Bailey Aldrich, 1895

ones who had experienced something until they heard their classmates' stories.”

The project isn't just about oppression, though. When they present their work, students bring in heirlooms or other items that are special to their families. “We've had wonderful artifacts,” Rosine says, “including Hawaiian sculpture, Filipino lanterns and ethnic clothing. We've also had military discharge papers and dog tags, as well as keepsakes that have been handed down for generations.”

As part of their presentations, students have shown pictures of dances and celebrations in which they've participated while visiting their family's country of origin. They have also shared stories they've learned. Often, parents and grandparents come to class for the presentations, which are taped and photographed.

For Rosine, the payoff on the project comes when her students hear the presentations and are amazed to discover that the world is much bigger than they originally believed.

Immigration in a “White-Washed World”

Mindi Rappoport's eighth graders at Ridgefield's East Ridge Middle School don't seem to have much in common with Dale Rosine's students—except for a teacher who wants them to appreciate diversity.

Ridgefield sits just inland from Connecticut's wealthy “gold coast.” Rappoport describes it as an affluent community “with a blue-collar feel.” The students in her English class are mainly white, with “a smattering of ethnic minorities and immigrants.”

“It's a pretty white-washed world,” Rappoport says of the small city of Ridgefield. “I try to confront students' limited perspectives.” The big challenge, she adds, “is that they don't realize they have a limited perspective.”

In Connecticut, essential questions drive the curriculum. Eighth-graders are supposed to focus on the individual and society. Students in this district are challenged to ask, “What are our values and beliefs?” and “How does diversity influence us?” Rappoport's students also grapple with stereotypes and examine “how they affect our ability to learn the truth.”

“If you ask if they have stereotypes, they're not aware of them,” Rappoport explains. Her job, she feels, is to develop habits of self-examination.

A Tale of Two Poems

Like many middle schools, East Ridge embraces a team approach. In the fall, Rappoport and a social studies

Reimers. The biggest obstacle would-be immigrants faced was getting here. Today there are many rules about who may enter the country and stay legally. Under current policy, many students' immigrant ancestors who arrived between 1790 and 1924 would not be allowed in today.

3 THERE'S A WAY TO ENTER THE COUNTRY LEGALLY FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO GET IN LINE.

Ask students if they know the rules to enter the country legally and stay here to work. The simple answer is that there is no "line" for most very poor people with few skills to stand in and gain permanent U.S. residency. Generally, gaining permission to live and work in the United States is limited to people who are (1) highly trained in a skill that is in short supply here, (2) escaping political persecution, or (3) joining close family already here.

4 MY ANCESTORS LEARNED ENGLISH, BUT TODAY'S IMMIGRANTS REFUSE.

Ask students to find out how long it took for their ancestors to stop using their first language. "Earlier immigrant groups held onto their cultures fiercely," notes Reimers. "When the United States entered the First World War [in 1917], there were over 700 German-language newspapers. Yet, German immigration had peaked in the 1870s."

While today's immigrants may speak their first language at home, two-thirds of those older than 5 speak English "well" or "very well" according to research by the independent, nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. And the demand for adult ESL instruction in the United States far outstrips available classes.

5 TODAY'S IMMIGRANTS DON'T WANT TO BLEND IN AND BECOME "AMERICANIZED."

Ask students what it means to blend in to American society. In 2010, about 500,000 immigrants became naturalized citizens. They had to overcome obstacles like getting



WEB EXCLUSIVE

Like these pages? Get a web-exclusive lesson on debunking myths about immigration at www.tolerance.org/activity/immigration-myths.

"The first generation [of immigrants] struggled with English and didn't learn it. The second was bilingual. And the third can't talk to their grandparents."

here, finding a job, overcoming language barriers, paying naturalization fees, dealing with a famously lethargic immigration bureaucracy and taking a written citizenship test. This is not the behavior of people who take becoming American lightly.

The reality is that the typical pattern of assimilation in the United States has remained steady, says Reimers. "The first generation struggled with English and didn't learn it. The second was bilingual. And the third can't talk to their grandparents." If anything, the speed of assimilation is faster today than at any time in our past, mainly because of public education and mass media.

6 IMMIGRANTS TAKE GOOD JOBS FROM AMERICANS.

Ask students what kinds of jobs they think immigrants are taking. According to the Immigration Policy Center, a nonpartisan group, research indicates there is little connection between immigrant labor and unemployment rates of native-born workers. Here in the United States, two trends—better education and an aging population—have resulted in a decrease in the number of Americans willing or available to take low-paying jobs. Between 2000 and 2005, the supply of low-skilled American-born workers slipped by 1.8 million.

To fill the void, employers often hire immigrant workers. One of the consequences, unfortunately, is that it is easier for unscrupulous employers to exploit this labor source and pay immigrants less, not provide benefits and ignore worker-safety laws. On an economic level, Americans benefit from relatively low prices on food and other goods produced by undocumented immigrant labor.

7 UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS BRING CRIME.

Ask students where they heard this. Nationally, since 1994, the violent crime rate has declined 34 percent

and the property crime rate has fallen 26 percent, even as the number of undocumented immigrants has doubled. According to the conservative Americas Majority Foundation, crime rates during the period 1999–2006 were lowest in states with the highest immigration growth rates. During that period the total crime rate fell 14 percent in the 19 top immigration states, compared to only 7 percent in the other 31. Truth is, foreign-born people in America—whether they are naturalized citizens, permanent residents or undocumented—are incarcerated at a much lower rate than native-born Americans, according to the National Institute of Corrections.

8 UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS DON'T PAY TAXES BUT STILL GET BENEFITS.

Ask students what are some ways Americans pay taxes, as in income tax and sales tax. Undocumented immigrants pay taxes every time they buy gas, clothes or new appliances. They also contribute to property taxes—a main source of school funding—when they buy or rent a house, or rent an apartment. The Social Security Administration estimates that half to three-quarters of undocumented immigrants pay federal, state and local taxes, including \$6 billion to \$7 billion in Social Security taxes for benefits they will never get. They can receive schooling and emergency medical care, but not welfare or food stamps.

9 THE UNITED STATES IS BEING OVERRUN BY IMMIGRANTS LIKE NEVER BEFORE.

Ask students why they think this. As a percentage of the U.S. population, the historic high actually came in 1900,

when the foreign-born constituted nearly 20 percent of the population. Today, about 12 percent of the population is foreign-born. Since the start of the recession in 2008, the number of undocumented immigrants coming into the country has actually dropped.

Many people also accuse immigrants of having “anchor babies”—children who allow the whole family to stay. According to the U.S. Constitution, a child born on U.S. soil is automatically an American citizen. That is true. But immigration judges will not keep immigrant parents in the United States just because their children are U.S. citizens. Between 1998 and 2007, the federal government deported about 108,000 foreign-born parents whose children had been born here.

These children must wait until they are 21 before they can petition to allow their parents to join them in the United States. That process is long and difficult. In reality, there is no such thing as an “anchor baby.”

10 ANYONE WHO ENTERS THE COUNTRY ILLEGALLY IS A CRIMINAL.

Ask students whether someone who jaywalks or who doesn't feed a parking meter is a criminal. Explain that only very serious misbehavior is generally considered “criminal” in our legal system. Violations of less serious laws are usually “civil” matters and are tried in civil courts. People accused of crimes are tried in criminal courts and can be imprisoned. Federal immigration law says that unlawful presence in the country is a civil offense and is, therefore, not a crime. The punishment is deportation. However, some states—like Arizona—are trying to criminalize an immigrant's mere presence. ♦

