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Struggling to Rise in Suburbs Where Failing Means Fitting In

By JASON DePARLE

LANGLEY PARK, Md. — Class at the youth center had just let out, and a gaggle of teenagers moved toward the door, turning saggy pants and ring tones thrumming with reggaetón hits into adolescent statements of Latino cool.

Some had rap sheets, and some had babies. Some had gang tattoos. Most had immigrant parents with menial jobs who survived on sweat and worry. They were children of the Washington suburbs, but the poverty and violence around them rivaled that of urban cores. Jesselyn Bercian paused to rub the belly of a pregnant staff member.

“I’m not very happy with my job right now,” Jesselyn told her.

An American-born daughter of Salvadoran immigrants, Jesselyn was 19 years old with a smooth face and a friendly air; her MySpace name was Gigglez. But she had an eighth-grade education, a gang history and an ex-boyfriend in prison for murder. Off the streets though not free of them, she was studying for a high school equivalency diploma and working at the mall.

“My boss is always complaining about me,” she said.

The staff member, Nancy Morning, recognized the affliction: teenager with attitude. “You’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing,” she said.

“I haven’t gotten fired yet,” Jesselyn said.

“You need higher goals than ‘I ain’t



Jesselyn Bercian with Erik Ortiz, then her fiancé, by a memorial to three victims of a deadly shooting near where she was working.

been fired yet,’ ” Ms. Morning said. “I want you to be great. Elevate!”

About one in four youths in the United States are immigrants or children of one, and most appear to be elevating fine: working, studying and advancing at rates comparable to nonimmigrant peers. But a troubled minority offers cause for alarm.

Raised in blighted neighborhoods, alienated from parents and school, disheartened by the prospect of dead-end jobs, these youths risk joining what some scholars have warned could be a “rainbow underclass.”

The Latin American Youth Center, whose Maryland branch Jesselyn sought help from, can be thought of prosaically as a social services agency or more grandly as a modern settlement house — kin to the centers of immigrant aid that arose more than a

century ago. If these poorest families are to succeed, as many previous ones did, their progress may depend in part on the efforts of such groups.

The problems of young people like Jesselyn are sometimes called failures of assimilation. But they can also be seen as assimilation to the wrong things: crime, drugs and self-fulfilling prophecies of racial defeat.

As Jesselyn tells it, she assimilated to the surrounding values of gangsta rap. Writing in her eighth-grade yearbook, she celebrated friends as “my nigger!” and labeled enemies “crackers,” “bamma” and “whyte.”

“If you’re Hispanic, people already expect you to steal, to fight, to be rude, to be ghetto,” Jesselyn said. “If everyone thinks wrong of you, eventually you’re going to start thinking wrong about yourself.”

In the past, the work of helping immigrant families largely occurred in established gateways, cities like New York or Chicago with mature safety nets. Today's immigrants are widely dispersed, often in places that are unused to their presence and unprepared to meet their needs.

Nationwide, about half of immigrants live in the suburbs, including more than 40 percent of the immigrant poor, according to Audrey Singer and Jill H. Wilson of the Brookings Institution. Many live in places that did little to promote immigrant mobility even in good times; now, vanishing jobs and strained safety nets increase the risk of downward assimilation.

Like similar groups nationwide, the youth center is struggling to serve teenagers who are increasingly suburban and increasingly disadvantaged. It has decades of experience in the District of Columbia, but its expansion to the Maryland suburbs three years ago was unexpectedly difficult. The troubles of youths ran deep, money was hard to raise, programs that worked well in the city were hard to replicate.

Relationships between blacks and Latinos proved so sensitive that the center felt forced to strip the words "Latin American" from its suburban affiliate's name.

"There was a sense of, 'What have we gotten ourselves into?'" said Luisa Montero, the group's Maryland director.

Ms. Morning, a jobs counselor, sometimes felt the same. A week after she urged Jesselyn to try harder, the teenager appeared at her door.

"Did you address your attitude?" Ms. Morning asked.

"I don't have an attitude," Jesselyn said, adding that she had reconciled with her boss.

"She was driving you hard because she sees your potential," Ms. Morning said.

No one was surprised a few days later when Jesselyn walked off the job.

A Generational Strain

A windowless room with rummage-sale décor does not typically draw teenagers on a Saturday morning. But a dozen yawning girls roused themselves for what Ms. Morning called her "No Más" class, six weekly sessions of free-wheeling talk.

While their concerns echoed those of teenagers everywhere — romance, parties, parental conflicts — the girls' immigrant roots showed. One wondered whether Martin Luther King Jr. would have sided with illegal immigrants. Another boasted of the Spanish cursing she had given someone who called her a "black wannabe."



Nancy Morning, seated, was Jesselyn Bercian's jobs counselor at the Maryland Multicultural Youth Centers and challenged her to set higher goals.

"Girl, you know your Spanish is no good," Ms. Morning said.

"My cuss words are!"

Then, jaws dropped when Ms. Morning disclosed that she had once had a sexually transmitted disease; her point was that no one is immune.

"I always thought S.T.D.'s was like for trashy people," one girl said.

"Does she really keep it this real?" another asked.

Although Ms. Morning describes herself as a "Puerto Rican chick from Brooklyn," her story is more complex. Her father vanished early, and her mother remarried a police officer; a talent search program for minorities took her to the elite Nightingale-Bamford School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. At 28, she saw the teenagers' struggles as her own, and her successes as potentially theirs.

"I love Nancy," Jesselyn said.

A posting on a jobs Web site called Idealist.org brought Ms. Morning to Langley Park. A tangle of strip malls and traffic jams 10 miles from the Capitol, the area sprang to life in the 1950s as a cheap white suburb; it drew blacks fleeing the city in the 1970s, and became a haven in the 1980s for Salvadorans escaping poverty and civil war.

Now nearly two-thirds Latino and foreign-born, it has the aesthetics of suburban sprawl and the aura of Central America. Laundromats double as money-transfer stores. Jobless men drink and sleep in the sun. There is no city government, few community leaders, and little community.

Part of what sets the area apart is the

strain between immigrant parents and their Americanizing children, who wince at their accents and dirty jobs. Langley Park is an immigrant neighborhood where it is an insult to be called an immigrant. Teenagers call the rough-looking newcomers "hinchos," or "hicks."

"Hinchos try to look black, but they're not as good at it as we are," said Jesselyn's 14-year-old brother, Victor Jr.

Weak parental authority abets strong gangs. The dominant force in many young lives is Mara Salvatrucha-13, or MS-13, which is known for its violence and international reach. But there are scores of lesser cliques — Street Thug Criminals, Sexy but Stupid — that strive to live up to their name.

Jesselyn's father, Victor Bercian Sr., was 18 when he slipped across the Mexican border in 1984 and joined two brothers in Langley Park who got him hired on their construction job. Her mother, Edith Grenados, came three years later to work as a maid. They soon married and both became legal residents; Mr. Bercian learned English and acquired citizenship. By the time their third child arrived, he had a union job as a painter, a \$112,000 townhouse and an immigrant's storybook faith.

"You can achieve what you want here," he said.

As a Latino schoolgirl in a rough neighborhood, Jesselyn felt otherwise. She struggled with reading, and her academic progress was slow. Her mother, who does not speak English, felt frustrated she could not help. Setbacks reinforced Jesselyn's vague sense that Latinos were destined to fail. Report cards noted potential but warned that she was too eager for the approval of

peers, a description she accepts.

“I wanted to be known,” she said. “I wanted to have trillions of friends.”

Sixth grade brought the thrill of renown when she beat up an older girl. Seventh grade brought an arrest when she was caught smuggling a knife into school. She joined a clique called Locas Till Death and hung out at drunken “skipping parties” instead of going to class.

Though she tried her best to act her worst, Jesselyn never fully took to her gangster identity. She joined a Pentecostal church. She gave money to people on the street. But when friends said she was too nice, she worked to prove them wrong. “I had this bad reputation I had to live up to,” she said.

Jesselyn dropped out in the ninth grade and followed friends into a group they called Puras Vatas Locas — Pure Crazy Gangsters. Crinkled snapshots show them as 15-year-olds, swilling vodka and flashing gang signs. They look more campy than menacing, a gang spoof more than a gang.

But a thin line separated posed depravity from the real thing. That fall, an MS-13 crew lured two teenage girls to a Langley Park cemetery, killed one and left the other for dead. The survivor identified the young man who buried a knife in her chest as Jesus Canales, who before he joined the gang had been Jesselyn’s boyfriend.

Risks of Long-Term Poverty

The violence was startling, but immigrant gangs have a long history: Irish, Italian and Jewish gangsters spread urban mayhem a century before MS-13. Yet, as today’s optimists point out, each of the previous ethnic groups came to be seen as an assimilation success.

On average, children of immigrants today are progressing well, with levels of earnings and education similar to peers whose parents are native born. Concerns about downward mobility mostly focus on the children of the least-educated immigrants, particularly poor Mexicans and Central Americans who account for more than a third of today’s second generation.

Some scholars predict that they will follow poor Italians, who rose more slowly than other groups but rose nonetheless. Others worry that

they may repeat the experience of poor African-Americans, with a significant minority mired in long-term poverty and social disorder.

The most prominent warnings have come from Alejandro Portes of Princeton and Rubén G. Rumbaut of the University of California, Irvine, the sociologists who coined the phrase “rainbow underclass.”

About 18 million youths 17 or younger are immigrants or the children of immigrants. In an interview, Mr. Portes estimated that as many as 20 percent face elevated chances of long-term poverty — suggesting a risk pool of more than 3.5 million. While he predicts that only a minority of that group will experience the depth of disadvantage implied by the word “underclass,” he says their numbers are large enough to warrant policymakers’ concern.

“Most children of immigrants are doing well,” Mr. Portes said. “But a sizable minority is certainly left behind and in danger of downward assimilation.”

Mr. Portes and Mr. Rumbaut contend that today’s generation faces a bigger challenge than in the past. Good jobs require more education, often a college degree. Unlike their European predecessors, the majority of today’s immigrants come from Asia, Africa and Latin America, which some analysts say could make them more vulnerable to persistent discrimination. And while previous immigration was mostly legal, today millions of children have parents who live marginalized lives as illegal residents.

In addition, the scholars say, a seductive youth culture encourages poor teenagers to denigrate work and school and find valor in violence. Unwilling to take bad jobs, unable to get good ones, teenagers like Jesselyn often seek satisfaction in the streets.

“I’m not going to scrub someone’s toilet,” she said.

Though “assimilation” and “upward mobility” are often used as synonyms, Mr. Portes and Mr. Rumbaut emphasize that they are not the same thing. Some groups move up by resisting assimilation; they study and work in ethnic enclaves. Others assimilate to values and behaviors of the American ghetto.



Jesselyn Bercian, left, at home with her father, Victor Sr., her mother, Edith, her brother, Victor Jr., and her sister, Lauren.

That is what Jesselyn said she and other poor, streetwise Salvadorans had done: followed the example of poor streetwise blacks.

“They’re like a role model,” she said. “We’re a lot like them.”

Sometimes she said that both groups simply react to the same forces of poverty and prejudice. (“We’ve lived the same thing.”) But she also talked of consciously imitating what she sees as the strengths of poor blacks. (“They don’t let themselves get pushed around.”)

Either way, she saw herself behind a color line, with success beyond her reach.

“I thought the American dream was just meant for white people,” she said. “The big house with the two beautiful kids, the dream car, and the dream career — when the hell you hear a Spanish has that?”

A few months after her 16th birthday, Jesselyn found a new boyfriend, Erik Ortiz, and sensed her friends growing jealous. Soon, her gang friends jumped her.

Cut off from the friends she considered family, Jesselyn spent three years drifting among church, short-lived jobs and bouts of depression. Then she heard about a youth center that helped high school dropouts earn General Educational Development diplomas, or G.E.D.’s. On the application, Jesselyn wrote that she had been lying awake, “thinking of what a disaster I had become.”

Special Suburban Troubles

“Can you pass the drug test?”

Jesselyn was across the hall, mulling geometry, while Ms. Morning, the jobs counselor, yelled

into her speakerphone. A teenager had called to say that she had aced a job interview. Only a urine test separated her from a paycheck.

“I need help,” the girl said. “I was dealing with some stuff and trying to feel better.”

“My first advice to you is to stop smoking weed,” Ms. Morning said.

Her next bit of advice was metabolic. “Drink and pee!”

“The drug test is like the final step, baby girl,” she said. “I’m so proud of you!”

The Latin American Youth Center has been pairing mentors and teenagers since 1968. Once a humble storefront affair, it now serves 4,000 youths a year, with 150 employees and a charismatic leader, Lori Kaplan.

As gentrification pushed clients to the suburbs in the early 2000s, the center saw the need to follow. Its Washington neighborhood, Columbia Heights, is a services bazaar, with legal aid, shelters, clinics, day care centers and gyms. The Langley Park safety net is so threadbare that the Catholic church meets in an elementary school.

Suburban youths seemed especially troubled, with weaker families and stronger gangs. Langley Park attracts a lot of “sequential migration,” in which mothers come first and children follow years later, with and without legal permission, furious at having been abandoned. (The center generally does not ask youths about their immigration status.)

In Prince George’s County, which is two-thirds blacks, racial conflict cost the center a new headquarters. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington offered

to build a \$12 million services complex, with a church, a clinic and a gym, and rent-free space for the youth center. But the proposed site was occupied by a foundering Boys and Girls Club with a mostly black clientele. The deal collapsed when a club leader protested that Latinos were trampling the rights of black youths.

In 2006, when the youth group finally opened its Maryland branch, it had a de-Latinized name — the Maryland Multicultural Youth Centers — and a cramped office suite invisible from the road. Among its first programs was a G.E.D. class with a part-time teacher and no curriculum; the pass rate, less than 20 percent, made center officials wince. When Jesselyn arrived last spring, both she and the center were trying to get back on track.

Standing Out From the Start

Technically, the topic was math, but a truce between warring reggaeton barons had students talking. The teacher, Claudia Vasquez, asked how black rap had influenced Latino music.

“Do you think we imitate each other?” she asked, to a room of nodding heads.

Instead of glorifying street violence, Ms. Vasquez said, she wished more Latino stars would sing about positive things, as Bob Marley did. “Those songs were meant to create a revolution — to fight what’s holding you back,” she said. Why not sing about going to college?

“Who’s going to listen to that?” one student asked.

She moved on to Tupac, the slain rapper who had street cred but still knew “how to talk when you’re with the white man.” Then she discovered no one had done the math assignment.

“Do the work!” she yelled.

Some snickered. Some looked

bored. Jesselyn did the overdue homework and alone got it right.

In a class of disaffected youths, she stood out from start; she was friendly, focused and filled with plans. One classmate said he hoped to become an “assassin.” Jesselyn said she hoped to dine at the Eiffel Tower and become a social worker.

She reached out on MySpace to end old feuds. She put in a dozen job applications, and worked, however briefly, at the mall. She returned to her Pentecostal church and wept when the preacher promised she would be saved. And after years of sworn enmity, she made up with Chunky, Pooh Bear and Nena, the girls who had jumped her.

Jesselyn saw the renewed friendship as the show of a forgiving heart. But around them, she started partying more. She skipped class and took pains to curse and act jaded. “They say, ‘You talk like a white girl,’” she said.

Erik, whom she now called her fiancé, also seemed uneasy at times with Jesselyn’s ambitions. A laid-off dishwasher who left school in the ninth grade, he complained — jokingly, he said — that Jesselyn would go to college and leave him.

They were at a thrift store one day when they spotted Erik’s cousin Joker, a teenager who had run away from home and boasted about joining MS-13. Jesselyn had urged him to quit, but he was wearing gang colors. The next day he was stabbed to death, in what the police have called a feud with a rival gang.

“I told him to stay out of the streets,” she fumed as she left his funeral.

One day, Jesselyn arrived in class eager to share a story she had written called “El Romance.”

Ms. Vasquez cut her off. “Fix your grammar,” she said.

It was hardly the worst blow

Jesselyn had suffered, but for a moment it felt that way. She was stalking out of the building — and in her mind, the program — when Ms. Morning caught up with her.

“Ohhh, she makes me so mad,” Jesselyn said. “If I talk about it, I’m going to cry!”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong,” Ms. Morning said.

Jesselyn vented. Ms. Morning listened. Then she told Jesselyn she did not have to leave to protest; instead, she could talk to Ms. Vasquez’s boss. When Jesselyn did, on her way back to class, she even leavened her complaint with a kind word for Ms. Vasquez.

“She wants the best for us,” she said.

In youth center jargon, Ms. Morning had provided “connectivity”— she got Jesselyn to stick around. The center has found that the youths who do best join multiple programs after bonding with someone on the staff. With a line of teenagers crowding her door, Ms. Morning was connectivity personified. But she was also battling an occupational hazard: incipient disillusionment.

In college she had told an adviser, “I could live on passion alone.” Now with a salary of \$38,000 and a baby on the way, she skipped meals and defaulted on her student loans. One student physically threatened her. Another stole her cellphone.

Ms. Morning told her boss she needed support and criticized the management of the office. Her boss put a note in her personnel file, faulting her attitude.

Ms. Morning was on maternity leave when the G.E.D. class ended. Of the 22 students who started, five did well enough to earn referrals to the real test. Jesselyn was among them, though barely. With her math score failing, the center took pains to offer her a month of tutoring.

She overslept the first day.

Self-Made Problems

In a different world, someone like Ms. Morning would have sounded the gong — roused her with a lecture or a picture of the Eiffel Tower. But Ms. Morning was on her leave and soon resigned to look for a better-paying job. No one from the center called. Jesselyn never went for tutoring.

This was a problem of her own making, like many that had come before. It would be easy to lose faith in her efforts; she could be unsteady, immature, slower to work than to dream. Still, she was making an effort to overcome her mistakes, in a place where most people just compound them. If that was not yet a significant achievement, it was at least the start of one.

Unprepared for the G.E.D. exam, Jesselyn broke up with Erik and fell into a funk. By the time they got back together, the test was in the graders’ hands.

Awaiting the results, Jesselyn got a job in a furniture store that overlooks an eerie Langley Park shrine, a makeshift memorial to a triple homicide. Three rough crosses rise from the spot where, a few years back, three sleeping immigrants had their throats slashed.

One night, Jesselyn walked home past the drunks who sleep there and updated her MySpace page. She had been partying again with Chunky and Nena. She had missed several meetings the youth center scheduled to talk about financial aid. But she posted a picture of the Eiffel Tower and boasted of her plan to start community college this year.

Soon after, a notice arrived, and it filled her soft face with a grin.

“Congratulations on achieving the Maryland diploma,” it said.

Percentage of the foreign-born population in the suburbs

