

Pockets of hope

Nurturing young talent in diverse 'incubators' may improve prospects for minority-owned businesses

By KATE BRAMSON
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There are organizations and places in Rhode Island where people of diverse ethnicities, ages, cultures and backgrounds coexist and collaborate.

New Urban Arts is one. The nationally recognized Providence arts organization offers out-of-school and after-school programs for public school students. Executive Director Jason Yoon says about 90 percent of the students come from low-income families, about 80 percent are students of color, and anywhere from 10 percent to 25 percent identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Yoon, who was born in New York to Korean parents, says his ability to navigate two cultures and two languages has allowed him

to identify with many of the students whom New Urban Arts serves: young people with too much of what he calls "under-maximized talent."

Yoon hears plenty about how important it is for Rhode Island to retain talent, particularly graduates from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design. But he says there's not enough focus on retaining young people of color who have grown up in Rhode Island and have gone to those or other schools.

Among minorities "coming of age" here, Yoon sees plenty of creative, entrepreneurial energy and yet, he says, they're struggling to find work.

He sees Abel Hernandez as a classic example.

Hernandez discovered New Urban Arts as a high

school freshman.

Now 23, Hernandez grew up in the Hartford public housing complex in Providence after moving here from Harlem as a toddler.



Yoon —

New Urban Arts led him to a RISD summer high school program, and ultimately he graduated from RISD in 2011 with an industrial-design degree.

Hernandez works at Nordstrom selling high-end men's clothes, but his passion lies elsewhere — in a company called Spiffy Gents that he's building from scratch. He buys second-hand clothes that he re-creates on his industrial sewing machines into clothing with a modern cut that appeals to young men who want to be fashionable but



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Abel Hernandez, who discovered New Urban Arts in high school, is building a business.



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The Elephant Room on Broad Street in Cranston is a recent addition to the state's minority-owned businesses. Antonio Lopez, his fiancée and family members opened the tea and crepe shop in August. Lopez, 28, left, is proud of his menu's subtle reflection of his Mexican heritage.

can't afford new, higher-end models.

Yoon knows his mentee could have gone anywhere after graduating from RISD, but Hernandez is committed to Rhode Island and raves about the wide array of nonprofits here that focus on bringing together people of different backgrounds — what he calls a "cultural blend of ethnicity."

"You can't put a price on that," Hernandez says, "because you're learning off of each other, and learning is what's going to help us progress at the end of the day. If we stop learning and we stop experimenting, I mean, what's the point of living?"

Yoon, who's leaving Rhode Island soon for a new job in New York, doesn't know whether Hernandez can scale his business — into a multimillion-dollar venture.

"But could he scale it into something with significant social and economic value?" Yoon continues. "I think so. And he is what this city is increasingly looking like."

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A boom in number of Latino businesses

Rhode Island's changing demographics are a key factor in the economic opportunities offered by the minority community.

While the minority population has been growing for decades in Rhode Island, the increase in the Latino population in Providence has risen quickly.

In 2010, there were 67,835 Latinos in Providence, or 38 percent of the city's population, according to the U.S. Census. That represents an increase of 15,689 people since 2000.

Even more remarkable: Latino-owned businesses in the capital city grew from 731 in 1997 to 2,999 in 2007, according to the latest census data.

The diversity within Providence's Latino population sets the city apart from otherwise comparable cities, wrote Kerry Spitzer and Sol Carbonell in an article published by the Federal Reserve Bank this year.

Among the city's largest Latino groups: Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Guatemalans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, Bolivians and Colombians.

In contrast, Spitzer and Carbonell noted that 86 percent of the Latino population in Springfield, Mass., is Puerto Rican.

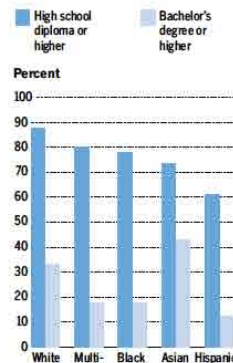
The researchers believe that small Latino businesses in Providence have grown organically, but they believe there's "untapped potential" that could not only help business owners but also boost the economy overall.

"Nationally, Latinos are experiencing more entrepreneurial activity than other groups," they wrote, citing a study by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. "Providence would be well-advised to make Latino entrepreneurship a priority, leveraging its past success and embracing the potential."

KATE BRAMSON

Educational attainment by minority status

A greater percentage of white Rhode Islanders, age 25 and older, have high school diplomas than any other group. But a higher percentage of Asian Rhode Islanders in that age group have bachelor's degrees.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau
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