

Car rear-ends bus,  
sending 3 to hospital  
in critical condition  
Page 3

# WISCONSIN

Kane: Book shows  
richness of Latino  
community in state  
Page 3

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## Rich layers of state's Latino community highlighted in book

*Please do not ask me whether I speak Mexican.*

*Mexican is not a language. It is a culture, a people from the country of Mexico.*

*... While we all share a common heritage and similar past, our histories are all unique and different. Just by traveling throughout our countries you will notice that while we all speak a common language we look very different.*

*Some may have dominant native or indigenous features, while others more of a European look and still others with African features.*

*We are mulatto and mestizo, black and white and yes, all Hispanic. But our pride and the key to who we are comes in our differences.*

*"Wee-Cohn-Sahn!" by Ed Gomez, from the anthology "I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin"*

Chances are, that small excerpt from a new anthology taught you more about Latino culture than you've learned in a lifetime of eating at Mexican restaurants.

Don't be ashamed; one thing I've learned about the racial and ethnic difficulties that regularly crop up in America is that they're usually based on ignorance.

We don't know each other, particularly black and white. When you add brown to the equation, it gets even more complicated.

An old friend, Oscar Mireles, called to tell me about "I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin," the second volume of a book of essays, fiction and poetry published by 30 Latino writers who work and live in Wisconsin.

Mireles, whom I know from his community activist days in Milwaukee but is now based in Madison, was excited about the project. He served as editor, as well as contributing several pieces.

A published poet and a father who wants his children to understand their rich cultural background, Mireles came up with the title from his experiences reading his own poetry in community workshops in Milwaukee during the 1980s, where reaction from the audience was usually one of surprise: "I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin!"

The 1999 volume was published



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with various grants from local arts foundations and the Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission. Mireles is proud of the book, which features work from more writers and poets from a variety of backgrounds, including Venezuelan, Cuban, Puerto Rican and, yes, Mexican.

"I didn't know..." is a cultural smorgasbord, as writers tell stories about their experiences growing up in Wisconsin. (Many call people of Spanish origin Hispanic; most of my friends prefer Latino. This semantic battle is very similar to the way some insist on African-American while others are content with black.)

There are other similarities between Latino and African-American culture, particularly the consistent battle against stereotyping.

For many in Milwaukee, the strongest image of Latinos on the south side is gang-bangers, illegal immigrants and poverty. Nationally, some of the biggest issues facing this country involve immigration, bilingual education and the growing political impact of previously unempowered populations.

The stories in "I didn't know..." reflect all of this, but it doesn't read like a litany of discrimination or violence. Rather, it's a celebration of familial love and connections.

Some of the pieces are written in Spanish, although most are in English. There's a story about attending a cockfight, a poem about seeking American citizenship, a charming account of a young girl translating for her grandmother who wants to buy beauty products.

Mireles includes his own amus-

ing poem, "Elvis Presley was a Chicano," which suggests, because Presley was "a dancer, a ladies man and (he) always won the girl that hated him in the beginning of the movie, he had to be a Latin lover or something, even Valentino and Sinatra had a little Italian in them."

Most U.S. census figures predict Latinos will be the dominant minority in the 21st century, but any blanket labeling of this incredibly diverse group doesn't begin to scratch the surface. In Milwaukee, many Latino communities on the south side share the same daunting social problems of violence, poverty and drugs as African-Americans on the north side.

But just as every African-American isn't poor or uneducated or violent, the same stereotyping is even more inaccurate when it comes to those of Spanish descent.

One of the things Mireles and I used to talk about was the intriguing dynamics of race as it regards Latino culture.

Had I been born in Cuba or Brazil or Puerto Rico, or any number of countries with a large influx of African slaves, I probably would not consider myself "black" as much as Latino.

I'd look exactly the same as I do now, but my culture would be different.

"I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin" should be required reading for anyone looking to learn more about the changing face of America and the groups who contribute to that transformation.

It may even convince you that we have much more in common than we think.

Or, to quote from Gomez's essay again: "Perhaps the more we learn about one another the more we can appreciate the beauty of humanity expressed in many languages and styles."

"Oh, and by the way, while I'm not Mexican, I love their salsa!" Copies of "I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin" are available at the Woodland Pattern Book Center, 720 E. Locust St.

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