

Reclaiming a heritage

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Young Portuguese-Americans study their roots

By Sarah Schweitzer, Globe Staff | August 9, 2005



DARTMOUTH -- Growing up in suburban Boston, Valeria Souza learned from an early age that her roots reached back to a place best not spoken of, its ways and language discarded by her family in favor of American habits.

Her heritage remained so until the summer Souza was a teenager working at a doughnut shop. There the other workers spoke a tongue both foreign and beguiling. When she asked what it was, someone, noting her last name, shot back: "Don't you know? You're Portuguese!"

"I'll never forget the way that felt," Souza said. "Like all the air being sucked out of my chest as I realized I didn't even recognize the language. I felt profoundly robbed. How did this piece that is ostensibly a part of me go missing?"

Today, Souza, 25, is fluent in Portuguese after a year living in Portugal and is working on a master's degree in Portuguese literature at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. She is part of the growing number of Portuguese young adults embracing traditions that for years their elders sublimated to established New England cultures.

At the university, which created a Center for Portuguese Studies in 1996, 270 students enrolled in Portuguese language classes last year, compared with 190 five years ago -- excluding continuing education. The number of students majoring in Portuguese studies has increased from 15 to 40 since 2000. Next year, the university plans to offer a doctoral degree in Portuguese studies, and a recent fund-raising drive brought in more than \$1.5 million for the creation of Portuguese-American archives that will house letters, diaries, photographs, videos,

films, and recorded music.

Nationally, Portuguese language study is also on the rise. The number of undergraduates studying Portuguese climbed 21 percent between 1998 and 2002, according a survey by the Modern Language Association.

The treatment of Portuguese as a serious academic focus is a remarkable shift from recent decades in America when the culture was maligned by some outsiders as unsophisticated, even as those within the community assumed it would remain vibrant.

The swelling interest in Portuguese study in Massachusetts coincides with the arrival of Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, who made up one in five immigrants to the state between 2000 and 2003. But scholars note that the trend is explained by more than larger numbers of Portuguese speakers in the region.

There is a hunger, scholars say, among third- and fourth-generation Portuguese to reconnect with a past buried by parents raised in an era when repudiating an immigrant past was the means to success.

"There were many walking wounded -- children of immigrants wounded by their identities and doing their best to escape it," said Frank Sousa, director of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at UMass-Dartmouth.

"Language was very much suppressed. Now, what we have seen is the children and grandchildren assuming the identity with less of a complex about it."

Irish, French-Canadians, and other immigrant groups, too, suffered for their differences in New England. Yet among European immigrants, the Portuguese, with their darker skin and often rural and uneducated backgrounds, stood out. They were threatening to longtime residents as they settled in large numbers and swept up jobs. Multiple waves of Portuguese emigrated in the 19th and 20th centuries to work on fishing vessels and in textile mills, eventually making up more than one-third of the population in Southeastern Massachusetts, where they created vibrant but insular enclaves. Statewide, 280,000 people claimed Portuguese ancestry, according to the 2000 Census.

"There was a fear that they would not assimilate into the American way -- the WASP culture," said Maria da Gloria Mulcahy, a researcher in Portuguese studies at UMass-Dartmouth. "So it was natural that once they could go unnoticed that they would not advertise their origin."

The phenomenon of assimilation, she noted, was most pronounced nationally for all immigrant groups from the 1920s through the 1960s, "when there was a strong anti-immigrant sentiment, and you were expected to be a true American and any hint of being a foreigner could be used against you."

Ann-Catherine Ventura's family was typical. Her great-great-grandparents arrived from Portugal just after 1900, her great-grandfather in the 1920s. Her great-great-grandfather was a stowaway on a whaler, according to family accounts. Her grandparents spoke Portuguese, but not her parents, and not her.

"It wasn't passed down," said Ventura, 24, who grew up in Westport and learned French in high school. "It's as though it was a backdrop to our lives."

Her mother, Carlene Ventura, 57, a native of New Bedford, said that while Portuguese culture flourished -- with Portuguese bakeries, stores, and churches -- status was elusive for the Portuguese. Ventura recalls that her father's godfather, a leading businessman in New Bedford, was denied access to a prestigious club in the late 1950s, because, she says, he was Portuguese.

And so her parents, in subtle but lasting ways, diminished the Portuguese imprint in the Ventura family.

"My parents spoke Portuguese, but only to each other, when they didn't want us to hear something," Carlene Ventura said.

Now that's changed: Ann-Catherine Ventura traveled to Lisbon last fall and spent several months studying there, and this summer, she enrolled in an intensive Portuguese-language class at UMassDartmouth.

Some scholars suggest that Portuguese culture increasingly carries a cachet in the United States because of the improved economy in Portugal, the awarding of the Nobel prize in literature to the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago, the financial success of Portuguese immigrants in the United States, and the growing interest in ethnic culture generally.

Beyond the university, traditional Portuguese feasts in New Bedford and Fall River have seen larger crowds in recent years -- many from non-Portuguese backgrounds.

Interest in Portuguese language classes at UMass-Dartmouth now extends beyond the student body; administrators say they receive inquiries from businesses around the region.

Yet it is the curiosity from within the Portuguese community that scholars say is the predominant factor driving the public emergence of a culture once turned inward and celebrated privately in America.

Nicky Tavares is among those speeding the evolution. The child of Portuguese immigrants, Tavares grew up in a Dallas suburb where she learned little of her parents' homeland or native language. Last year, Tavares, 24, moved to New Bedford to learn Portuguese and photograph the elderly Portuguese community, including her 80-year-old grandmother, a seamstress who speaks little English.

"I had a kind of longing," Tavares said. "A feeling like I missed out on this Portuguese culture by not being raised in the community."

Tavares has since abandoned five years of vegetarianism to eat Portuguese delicacies. She has learned the tradition of tending backyard grapevines. And of keeping two dressers in a bedroom, one topped with religious icons and a shorter one reserved for family photographs. Bedrooms figure largely in her photography: A portrait of her grandmother shows her sitting on a pale pink bedspread, flanked by two dressers.

She has also learned her family's history -- like the story of her grandparents' meeting, relayed by her grandmother, in Portuguese.

"Stories have been swapped for so many generations," she said. "And now I get them."