

Iowa towns peaceably accommodate immigration

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Five small towns in Iowa may hold a key to where America is going with the recent seismic wave of immigration, says Celeste Lay, assistant professor of political science at Tulane. Lay explores the attitudes of both Latino immigrants and longtime Anglo residents in these towns in her new book, *A Midwestern Mosaic: Immigration and Political Socialization in Rural America* (Temple University Press).



Celeste Lay, assistant professor of political science, writes about the impact of immigration by Latinos into rural Iowa towns. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Perry is one town on which Lay focuses. In 1990, Perry's population was only 1 percent nonwhite. By 2000, almost 25 percent of the population was Latino.

The dramatic change in demographics was at first greeted with misgiving by white Iowans, says [Lay](#).

The immigrants, who are mainly from Mexico and Central America, were initially drawn to Perry to work in a meatpacking plant.

Over time, however, the immigrants put down roots, send their children to the good local schools, buy homes and start small businesses. In 2010, a Latino was appointed to the city council.

“You'll see that people adapt,” says Lay. Stereotypes are broken down eventually as people begin to see diversity as a positive cultural force.



Lay studied the attitudes of Anglo and Latino residents in five small towns.

Lay describes the outpouring of support for an 18-year-old undocumented Latino severely injured in a car accident and later the packed funeral of an Anglo resident who died in the Afghanistan war.

The people of Perry “begin to see all of themselves as one community.”

“When you look at this process over a period of 20 years,” says Lay, “what becomes clear is that there is this initial period of suspicion and some hostility and resentment but that subsides.

“People begin to see, oh, this person is not much different than me. We have the same desires. We both want our kids to succeed. They want to live a peaceable life, just the same way we do.”