

Celebrating heritage, Living for Acceptance



Maria and Jesus Vega attend St. Michael's Church, Rochester, where they found a supportive church community after moving to Rochester from Puerto Rico in 1989. Greg Francis/Staff photographer

day of Holy Week as well. Some of these religious traditions are carried over to the United States. For instance, the Vegas are currently volunteering their time to carry out a Puerto Rican custom: Along with their parents and other families, Maria and Jesus are visiting parishioners' homes throughout October for group rosary recitations. Although Ricardo said such cultural traditions are good to maintain, he also encourages his Hispanic friends to mesh with the larger community around them. "I tell them to learn the language if they want to stay here. That's the main thing toward getting a good job," Ricardo said. "Stick with your dream, and try and blend in with the people around you," Danny agreed. Maria and Jesus attempt to reach their dreams even though they must contend with the crime that comes from living in the inner city. They said they are invited almost daily to drink alcohol, do drugs, join gangs or steal cars. "There's a lot of distractions. We need to take care of business," Maria said.

Both Maria and Jesus attend Monroe Community College. Jesus said that gaining a degree and entering a professional career will help break down the stereotypes. "My biggest goal is not only to make my parents proud, but also Hispanics," he said. Ideally, Maria Rivera said, Hispanics should be judged in American society by their achievements, not cultural backgrounds. "We're just people. There's nothing different," said Maria, 17, from St. Francis of Assisi Church in Auburn. Meanwhile, Maria's twin sister Erica remarked that Hispanics shouldn't "be set aside, like, 'You're Spanish so you're over there.'" Neither should Hispanic teens make

prejudgments about Americans, Hoylan said. "I do have friends who have Hispanic backgrounds, but I don't make a special effort to find them," she remarked. "It's whoever I click with."

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