

THE JEFFERSON JOURNAL

...a commentary from

THE THOMAS JEFFERSON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Immigrants Add to our State's Economy

By Michael W. Thompson

6/28/2017 -- Virginia is honoring our immigrants with a well-deserved “Immigrant Heritage Month” as declared by Governor Terry McAuliffe.

With that in mind, I want to review some important facts and figures about the impact our immigrants have here in Virginia and then highlight a couple of them.

Virginia has about 900,000 people who were foreign born – just over 11% of our population. The number immigrants moving into Virginia grew by almost 58% between 2000 and 2010, and continues to grow today.

And the immigrant population is a large part of any economic growth we will see in the future. You see, 17.5% of the business owners in Virginia are immigrants. Over \$3 billion in business income is generated by these businesses. And between 2006 and 2010 almost 54,000 new businesses were formed by our immigrant neighbors.

So as we debate what to do with our immigration policies in this country, let's remember that legal immigration is a huge positive in our country and we need to keep that in mind. What to do with the illegal residents in our society is going to be debated over the coming months and we need to figure this out in a rational and reasonable and firm manner.

In the meantime, I want to highlight three Virginians who were either born in foreign countries or their parents were born overseas.

Mohammad Siddique Sheikh came to the United States from Pakistan 50 years ago with \$10 in his pocket. Through hard work, focus and determination he has built a conglomerate of wide-ranging business the anchor of which are more than a dozen gas stations. He is one who believes in giving back to his community. He was appointed by Governor Bob McDonnell to the Board of Visitors of George Mason University, Virginia's largest institution of higher learning. He has served on a number of state and Fairfax County community boards and commissions and was recently appointed as a board member of BB&T Bank, nationwide. Believing the influence that many can have when banding together, he established the Pakistan American Business Association which has thousands of members who are successful business leaders.

Raul “Danny” Vargas is a noted business and community leader, media commentator, and marketing/public relations professional. His mother came to the States from Puerto Rico and Danny grew up on the streets of New York City. His mother worked long and hard and now, thanks to her dedication and love, Vargas is now a well-respected and noted business and community leader. He has been an executive at AOL, France Telecom, Global One and

Raytheon. And he was appointed by Virginia's Governor as Chair of the Virginia Board of Workforce Development. He was Chairman of the Dulles Chamber of Commerce, the first Hispanic to chair a mainstream Chamber in Virginia. Vargas ran for the House of Delegates as the Republican standard bearer. This second generation American citizen is an example of why immigration is so important to our nation.

Puneet Ahluwalia came to the U.S. from India in 1990. He worked long and hard and learned about real estate investments. He built a successful mortgage loan business catering to the broad citizenship of Northern Virginia but with a real focus on the immigrant population – helping folks who, like him, came to this country looking for freedom and financial security. That business was a casualty of the housing crisis in 2008. Using his networking capabilities and his love for public policy issues and the political rivalry here in America, he is now working full time as a political consultant in Washington DC working our partnerships with overseas companies and organizations that want to do good works by combining American financial support with those who are trying to help people in South Asia better their lives. He was recently elected to the State Central Committee of the Virginia Republican Party. Puneet Ahluwalia is truly a proud American citizen.

Let's remember that although we face a necessary and difficult discussion about those "illegal residents" who came to this country unlawfully, most came here for the same reasons as those legal immigrants. They came to provide a better life for themselves and their families.

Soon we are going to have a robust debate on immigration reform when Congress finally decides to take up this important issue. Let's have that debate in reasonable manner looking at the entire immigration policies of this country. And we should calmly discuss who we want to come to this country, what these folks can do to build our economy over the long haul.

-30-

Michael Thompson is the President of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy and can be reached at info@thomasjeffersoninst.org.