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Thousands watch LI's Puerto Rican/Hispanic Day parade



BY LAURA RIVERA |
laura.rivera@newsday.com
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A woman performs along with her group representing Colombia during the 43rd annual Adelante's Puerto Rican Hispanic Day Parade in Brentwood. (Ana P. Gutierrez, Newsday / June 7, 2009)

The schoolgirls, clad in folkloric costumes, were giddy to debut their dance in the Adelante Puerto Rican/Hispanic Day parade, which drew thousands to the sidewalks along Brentwood's Fifth Avenue Sunday.

As Meilyn Lopez sashayed in an orange skirt and peasant blouse, a speaker on the back of a pickup truck blared salsa star Marc Anthony's version of "Preciosa."

The song is an unofficial anthem for the island commonwealth, written by composer and World War I veteran Rafael Hernandez long after he had left its shores: "I will be Puerto Rican no matter where I go."

Most of the students in the procession aren't Puerto Rican, said Maria Mendoza, a bilingual educator in the Brentwood district, where more than 60 percent of students are Hispanic. Lopez, 11, came from Honduras when she was 5. But the song's message rings true all the same, Mendoza tells the group: "He's singing to his country and you can sing to yours."

The Puerto Rican enclave established in Brentwood in the 1940s has evolved into a diverse Hispanic community comprising many nationalities.

Puerto Ricans are still the biggest group among Hispanics in Islip Town, making up about 35 percent of the Hispanic population. Salvadorans are 17 percent and Dominicans are 7 percent of that population.

That diversity was on display at the 43rd edition of the annual parade Sunday, where the Long Island Ecuadorean Civil and Cultural Club marched for the first time.

"It's an honor to be a part of this parade," said member Fabian Moncayo, walking ahead of a flatbed truck with two beauty queens and a sculpture of a Galapagos giant tortoise. "We are all united as a Hispanic community." Also marching for Ecuador was Joselo Lucero, whose brother Marcelo Lucero was fatally stabbed in Patchogue last year in a case being tried as a hate crime.

Local politicians, along with members of civil service, business and professional associations, waved from convertibles or floats, and the Suffolk Police marched, playing bagpipes and drums. Motorcyclists representing the only segregated Hispanic unit in Army history, the 65th, called the Borinqueneers, roared past, led by a Korean War veteran.