

Can Immigration Loosen Our Rustbelt?

BY: TERRY PARRIS JR., 5/14/2009



According to comedian George Carlin -- rest his soul -- there are [seven dirty words](#) that are just too inappropriate for the American public airwaves. Yet, if you peruse the list you'll see that the word "immigration" is nowhere in sight.

Of course not, right? Well, not always.

"(The Midwest) doesn't come out and talk about immigration. It's the dirty 'I' word here," Richard Herman, a Cleveland immigration lawyer, author, and Rustbelt activist says. "There's this 'us vs. them' mentality. 'Why spend resources on them?'-argument. But it's not about that. Immigration is a resource for our country. It's not a dirty word. There is a lack of appreciation for immigrants here in the Midwest."

A strange attitude for a country that was founded by immigrants, developed by immigrants, and is now a land of -- essentially -- immigrants.



Herman's peers consider him a "guru" when it comes to all things immigration. He's currently whipping off pages to a book entitled *Immigrant, Inc: Why Immigrants Are Driving the New Economy (and how they will save the American worker)*. He also runs a blog -- [Immigrant Inc.](#) -- dealing with the same issues. So, as they say, he's knee deep in it.

Herman begins to rattle off a slew of statistics. Things like: Nationally, immigrants are filing patents at twice the rate of native-born residents. And the United States Small Business Administration found that immigrants are 30 percent more likely to start a business than Americans. And foreign-born entrepreneurs founded 50 percent of Silicon Valley businesses. And a quarter of all the doctors in the nation were born outside the United States. In short, he says, "Immigration is and will be a major component of new innovation, new entrepreneurship, and new jobs."

So why is it a dirty word?

The consensus is that the Midwest has been hit hardest by economic strife, more so than the coasts. Economically, the region has been in decline for decades, mainly due to manufacturing job losses. This has resulted in smaller, older, and poorer communities. Outsiders are often viewed as competition for what few jobs are left. People have become more insular, Herman says, as resources -- he's talking money and jobs -- become scarcer. "The Rustbelt has taken body blows," he adds. "This hit reinforces that 'us vs. them' mindset."

Yet Herman and groups from Philadelphia to Detroit are trying to get people to realize how important immigrants are to the region, to job growth, to

entrepreneurship and innovation. Numerous studies and programs are popping up to determine how to attract, retain, and promote immigrants and all the good that they bring from their motherlands. Strategies are bandied about, data is being collected, and that "dirty 'I' word" is inching its way onto the radar of civic and policy leaders.

Last year Herman hit the web with his ideas and started a campaign to lobby chamber executives from Chicago to Pittsburgh about immigration as a source of job creation in the new economy. Eventually, Herman says, ears started to perk up and cities like Columbus and Youngstown, who have seen job and population losses like the Detroit area, started viewing immigration as a solution to these problems.

But, more importantly, success was achieved when the 30 Chambers of Commerce in the Great Lakes region voted in high-skill immigration attraction as one of the top [five priorities](#) in its jobs and economic transformation agenda.

"This vote put an actual policy on paper and the issue on growing immigration strategies and how (immigration) is not a negative word is now being lobbied in DC," he says.

Global becomes local

In 1915 about 15 percent of the nation's population was foreign-born. Now that number is at 12.5 percent. For Michigan the number barely crosses 6 percent. For Detroit the figures is a little over 10 percent. Even when you look at areas like [Dearborn](#), [Southwest Detroit](#), and [Hamtramck](#) (where as much as 40 percent of the community is foreign-born), those numbers are noticeably small. "For a smart community that wants to grow not only its population but economically, it needs to attract immigrants," Herman says.

Here in Southeast Michigan a study, called Global Detroit, is already underway to address this very issue. It has brought together 25 regional leaders -- Herman, by the way, is one of them -- to discuss, research, develop, and pursue specific strategies to make this area more attractive and welcoming to immigrants. Steve Tobocman, former state rep for Southwest Detroit and managing partner of New Solutions Group, LLC, is overseeing the project funded by the [New Economy Initiative](#), the [Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce](#), and the [Skillman Foundation](#).



"To have a strong Detroit, a strong Southeast Michigan, immigrants are a necessary component," Tobocman says. "We need a welcome mat for these citizens, housing services, and employer services. We're thinking on what some of these out-of-the-box strategies could be for immigration growth."

Global Detroit began in March of this year and Tobocman says they've already discussed dozens upon dozens of strategies, some of which have already been implemented in other states. Ideas like welcoming centers for new Michiganders, internship programs to retain foreign students after college graduation, or a regional center that pools foreign investment (of \$500k or more) for local development -- which would create American jobs -- in return for a visa (called the [EB-5](#)).

As Southeast Michigan stands now, and for most of the Rustbelt for that matter, there aren't any honest to

goodness strategies in place. Efforts haven't gotten past a welcome center in Detroit's [Mexicantown](#) and one recently instituted in [Philadelphia](#). These centers give new immigrants soft landings into communities and urban areas, plugging them in as much as possible.

But even simpler efforts can be made. "Attraction can be as simple as having a version of your web site translated into another language," Herman says. Both of the aforementioned centers provide a Spanish language option on their sites.

There is also a program in Philly called [One Big Campus](#) that treats the city -- as it says -- like one big campus. Within the program is an international student component that has helped recruit foreign students online. But useful data for implementing this strategy is only now being gathered.

"I'm pleased to see Detroit's progress on this through Global Detroit and Tobocman's work," Herman said. "[Pittsburgh](#) has also started in on the immigrant talk. The mayor (Luke Ravenstahl) has brought together thinkers and workers to get together and talk. These are the first steps."

Herman believes that there needs to be a strong coalition between Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh to really get a push for immigrant attraction going. "It's such a political topic. We can't do it individually, it needs to be a collaborative effort, more than one voice," he says.

For us, there are two lighthouses that attract immigrants to Southeast Michigan. The first being the attractiveness of higher education within the state's universities, mainly Wayne State, Michigan State, and the University of Michigan. But, a bigger driver, right now, is family. It's called chain migration.

"The community itself is what brings the Arabs here," says Ahmad Chebbani, chairman of the board for the [American Arab Chamber of Commerce](#). "There is security here. For instance 20,000 Iraqi immigrants were brought to the states during the Iraqi war and placed throughout the country and within a few days they all ended up here in Dearborn. 20,000 of them."

Dearborn's community, because it's so dense with Arab Americans and Arab immigrants, has, in some ways, been able to weather the financial crisis. There's an attraction for people on the outside, as well as within the



community itself.

"We've been semi-excluded from the major economic hit," he says. "We have a sub-economy here in Dearborn. There is a lot of buying local, keeping the money in the community. And we're also a tourist attraction. People come here for Arabic food and Arabic products."

Yet Dearborn doesn't have a formal strategy for attraction beyond its accidental community ties. To have a strategy, Chebbani says, there has to be jobs, a lot of jobs. "There aren't a lot of resources right now and that is forcing us to think," he explains. "It's time to think and rethink what we can do that with immigration."

And that's what Herman, Tobocman, Global Detroit, and an army of other activist and officials are trying to do right now.

"We think we have answers to some of these questions," Herman says. "But we lack funding and we lack leadership. We need someone on the government level to say, 'Let's make this happen.'"

And if it doesn't happen here, it'll happen somewhere else.

"Who is going to invent the green industry? Is it going to be like Silicon Valley was, where 50 percent of the business startups were foreign-born founders? Most likely, yes, and immigration is going to be a huge component within the green industry market," Herman explains. "And if we don't harness this, these immigrants will go to Canada, 'cause it's a lot easier to get there."

Beyond business, job growth and economic stimulation -- if you haven't been sold on the benefits of immigration -- what about the simple idea of sharing the idea of the American Dream with people who want it? In a world that becomes more and more connected, the positive experiences of immigrants to our country could be a highly effective PR campaign for winning the hearts and minds of those who remain overseas.

"We need to take care of immigrants on merely a human aspect," Chebbani says. "But it's too political. It's too republican and democrat. Where's the humanism in that? This is not a political issue; it's a human issue. It's an American issue."

Terry Parris Jr. is the utility infielder for Metromode and its sister publications Concentrate and Model D. His previous feature for Metromode was [A Better Set Of Building Blocks](#).