

July 4, 2006

In Queens, It's the Glorious 4th, and 6th, and 16th, and 25th...



By [MICHELLE O'DONNELL](#)

Independence Day is celebrated once a year in most of America. In Queens, the most ethnically diverse county in the nation, where an estimated 44 percent of the 2.2 million residents are foreign born, it is celebrated again and again and again.

On March 25, Astoria was aflutter with blue and white flags, commemorating the 185th anniversary of the beginning of the Greek war of independence from the Ottoman Empire. The next day, Bangladeshi immigrants from Woodside to Bayside marked Bangladesh's secession from Pakistan. And on May 5, Mexicans across the borough loudly celebrated a national holiday that has come to eclipse the country's actual Independence Day of Sept. 16.

Then there are May 26 (Guyana), Aug. 6 (Bolivia and Jamaica), Aug. 24

(Ukraine) and Sept. 1 (Uzbekistan), to name a few, all observed with that bittersweet mix of homesickness and pride that is the lot of even the most enthusiastic new American.

But July 4 is different. It is a day that looks forward, not back. The aroma of hamburgers hissing on a grill awakens no Old World memory, the swells of "America the Beautiful" no tinge of the past, just a fresh start. And, in an era of cellphones and satellite television that strengthen links to native countries, many say they welcome the day as one when they can exchange their more complex identities borne from straddling two cultures, for just one.

"On the Fourth of July, you forget your country," said Martha Mariño, 48, of Jackson Heights, who moved to the United States 16 years ago from Bolivia. "You only feel American. You feel more here."

Roy Ramdayal, a livery cab driver who moved to Richmond Hill from Guyana in 1990, agreed. "Now we are over here and got to think about over here," said Mr. Ramdayal, 49, firmly, wearing a Yankees cap and a gray T-shirt with the Manhattan skyline, as he swiveled on a worn vinyl stool waiting for a fare outside the Little Guyana Taxi Service on 129th Street.

Not long ago, two flags hung side by side outside Mr. Ramdayal's house on 128th Street. But recently the Guyanese flag fell and he carried it inside, leaving only the American flag. Mr. Ramdayal said he was not sure if he would re-hang the flag from Guyana, whose independence he recalled being won when he was 9.

"We had a good celebration and enjoyed it at first, but then the politics came in," he said. "It was a disaster." Crime was high in Guyana, he said, and he appreciated the sense of security in the United States.

Along Woodside Avenue on a recent sultry afternoon, Dilruba Bashar, 36, a homemaker from Bangladesh, said she, too, was happy to escape the higher crime rate of her native country seven years ago. Still, she and her

husband, Khairul, who manages a Duane Reade on Northern Boulevard, celebrated the Independence Days of both Bangladesh and the United States, as well as Dec. 16, Victory Day in Bangladesh, and have tried to pass both cultures on to their daughter, Tasfia, 6.

In years past, Mrs. Bashar prepared a traditional chicken dish — using salt, curry, onion, cinnamon, cardamom and bay leaf — for a Fourth of July picnic in Astoria Park. This year, as Mr. Bashar had to work, she would stay home.

A few blocks away, Engracia Fuentes, who moved to Woodside from Mexico, offered her 3-year-old daughter, Michelle, respite from the heat with an orange-flavored drink, and considered the Fourth of July barbecue they would share with 35 friends and family members in Prospect Park. It will feature pasta, salad and hamburgers.

The Mexican food, she said, was for Cinco de Mayo.

Under the elevated train tracks, Ann Gill of Rockaway Beach waited for a friend after the dentist. Mrs. Gill, a retired secretary with a gold Celtic Claddagh ring glinting on her hand, grew up nearby, the daughter of poor Irish immigrants who embraced American culture fiercely.

"There was nobody more patriotic," Mrs. Gill said, recalling the red, white and blue dress her mother donned every July 4.

Browsing the stalls along Roosevelt Avenue, Shajeda Aktar, 21, dressed head to toe in a lilac-colored veil, tunic and flowing pants, said she planned to observe the holiday by taking in the fireworks. In her halting English, she said she was now indelibly American, a fact driven home to her when she visited relatives in Bangladesh who noted her more open manner and louder speech and referred to her as the American.

"I'm kind of different," she said.

In Ridgewood, Lesya Musievska pushed her son, Nicholas, 3, along Myrtle Avenue. Mrs. Musievska, 30, who moved here six years ago from

Ukraine, had no plans to celebrate the Fourth of July, as she had in years past. While she and her husband have prospered here, she said she still felt more Ukrainian than American, though her mother, who lives in Ukraine, often tells her she is now an American.

"My mother tells me I have to stay here, now I'm different," said Mrs. Musievska, who works as a bank teller. "When I get citizenship, I'll try to bring her here."

That had been the dream of Ms. Mariño, the hardware store owner in Jackson Heights. But her mother died when Ms. Mariño was three months shy of earning the resident status that would have allowed her to travel to Bolivia and return to Queens.

Standing behind the counter, framed by the wall full of tacks and nails and cords that she sold to propel herself solidly into America's middle class, Ms. Mariño remembered her mother, who had encouraged her to move to the United States and build a new life.

"I feel more American than Bolivian because here in this country I found tranquillity," she said.