

English As A Foreign Language

Feeling like an intruder at home

by Linda Wasson

All I wanted was some chocolate chips to bake cookies. At the corner bodega I could not find them on the shelf. I asked the clerk, who spoke a little English. He spoke in Spanish to another man, who brought me cocoa. No, that wasn't what I wanted. More discussions in Spanish. Then Chips Ahoy were proffered. No, but close. We went on a few minutes, and they were trying so hard I couldn't just say "Forget it." I was touched by how hard we were all trying to communicate. But finally I left, thanking the men profusely for their effort, shaking my head at what seems to be all too often the ultimate end of such an encounter.

That's life in Inwood today. I like living here. It's a quiet, family neighborhood situated among beautiful parks that spill over in summer with Little Leagues, families, lovers, skaters, older people out for a stroll. Everywhere you can hear the rhythms of Latin music — salsa, meringue and Mexican ballads — emanating from open

Linda Wasson is a writer who has lived in New York for 12 years. This article appeared in the New York Times May 4, 1997 and is reprinted by permission.

win-dows, cars, and even impromptu concerts on street corners.

Inwood is a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, but lower rents and bigger, better-maintained apartments have attracted many non-Spanish-speaking people in recent years, including me.

"The necessity of learning English is not something anyone who wants to live in this country can afford to give up on."

Raised in Texas, I am at home with Inwood's Spanish culture, though my Spanish is limited. But I often feel like an intruder in my own neighborhood as more Spanish-only businesses open, like restaurants that display menus only in Spanish, whose employees speak only Spanish, and don't even bother to advertise anything in English. I would be more than happy to try these restaurants and other businesses, and bring in friends, but do not always feel welcome as a single non-Spanish woman.

Once a friend came for dinner and as she was leaving, suggested we go for an ice cream cone. Having just moved into the neighborhood, I wasn't sure what was where, and we

proceeded to walk down Dyckman Street. We entered a local restaurant, expected to be seated, but a man abruptly stopped us at the door. When we told him (in English) we were looking for ice cream, he scowled at us and, in a harsh tone, said something in Spanish that we didn't understand.

Business can be difficult to conduct at one of those little stores with a public fax machine. Employees rarely understand English, and it becomes comical as I hold up pages I want to send. Eventually the faxes go through, albeit with some effort, and again I shrug it off.

But the real eye-opener was when I stopped at the local McDonald's one evening. I gave my order to a young woman and she just stared. No "Can I take your order?" Nothing. Thinking she didn't hear me, I spoke again, a little louder, and she walked over to one of the other employees, whispered something, and he came back and asked for my order. I gave it to him, disbelieving what happened next: he had to translate it into Spanish for her. This young woman — she couldn't be a day over 18 — couldn't speak a word of English. And here she was in the United States working at a McDonald's, of all places.

It is difficult to discuss publicly the necessity of being able to communicate in a common language because

some people misinterpret such discussion as xenophobic. Many people, myself included, seem fearful, even intimidated, at requiring English on a more sophisticated scale, even as we struggle to coexist, as I do, in our own neighborhoods.

The necessity of learning English is not something anyone who wants to live in this country, whether born here or not, can afford to give up on. Inwood is a small window on the United States of tomorrow — composed of individuals who

shared a culture from a different place and gathered to form a community. Reality makes it essential to breach the language barrier, or risk forever being isolated, economically, politically and culturally.

TSC