

## Making it in America – A Dominican Immigrant’s Story

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In spite of the chilly late September rain, the door to Hernandez Hardware was propped open, inviting residents of Sunset Park, Brooklyn to come in. Throughout the afternoon, Pablo Sierra shook hands with the many customers he knew and greeted everyone with a smile, switching from Spanish to English when necessary to help someone find a tool, duct tape or switch cover he needed. After school finished for the day, his pregnant wife brought in their two children, a girl of 8 and a boy of 5, who ran to hug their father, giggling as he gave them each a kiss.

Sierra’s stability and ease with his surroundings belie a past of difficult economic circumstances and an illegal journey from the Dominican Republic (D.R.) to the United States. In 1994, he boarded a ship in his home city of Santo Domingo that smuggled immigrants to the U.S.

“I was 24, had a degree in architecture, and owned a wood-working shop, but business was bad. I had sisters living in New York, so I decided to move there. I was a young man, so I knew I had a chance of making it,” he explains, “but I couldn’t get a visa, so I went for the ship.”

Sierra spent four days hiding in the hull of the ship with a change of clothes, some water, bread and cheese and \$105.

According to the City University of New York (CUNY) Dominican Studies Institute, the Dominican population in New York rose from about 333,000 to 555,000 from 1990-2000. These figures do not include illegal immigrants, whose numbers may match those documented. Similar to the majority of Dominican immigrants in the U.S., Sierra came to New York with the plan of making quick money and moving back to the D.R. with his fortune.

Recalling his first encounter with an American after arriving safely in Miami, Sierra said, “I couldn’t believe it. Right when I got there, someone asked *me* for money! I thought to myself, ‘if this guy is asking me for money, how am I going to end up?’”

He immediately bought a bus ticket to New York City. After changing buses three times, getting out in Manhattan and navigating the New York City subway system, he arrived at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Street and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue stop in Sunset Park three days later and called his sisters.

In many ways, Sierra is atypical of many Dominican immigrants in New York, who come to work in the garment manufacturing industry. According to a 2000 CUNY-Columbia University report on the Socioeconomic Profile of Dominicans in New York, the overall educational attainment of Dominicans in the U.S. is among the lowest in the country; 49 percent 25 years of age or older had not completed high school, and only 10.6 percent had completed college (compared to the American population; less than 20 percent did not finish high school, and 24.4 percent graduated from college).

With his background in architecture and woodworking, Sierra found a job as a clerk and shelf-stocker at Hernandez Hardware around the corner from his sisters' one-bedroom apartment. In 1998, while working two additional jobs, he began a two-year associate degree at the Institute of Design and Construction in Brooklyn. Upon finishing, he became a partner of the hardware store and later the solo owner when the man who hired him retired four years ago.

At 35, Sierra owns Hernandez Hardware and a townhouse up the street. His children are enrolled in Brooklyn public schools and a baby is on the way.

What about his plans to return to his mother country with his fortune? Sierra has visited his family in the D.R. many times but about returning permanently, he said, "You always want to go back. You want to relive those feelings; then you go back and see that place and it doesn't offer you anything."

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reports that the D.R. faces hardship not seen in the country since the early 1990s. Serious economic and political crises including three failed banks, a government fiscal crisis, a currency that has lost half of its value and government corruption and cronyism have directly affected vital government services such as health, education and justice. Its annual GDP per capita is \$6300 (compared to \$40,100 in the U.S.) and 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

Sierra described the current situation in the D.R. as "horrible."

"Dominicans have to work for themselves," he said. "The government doesn't care; politicians don't care. People there don't care about politics either."

He blames the U.S. as well: "The U.S. is not working to help out people in the D.R. It's just 3,000 miles south, but America does nothing. They know that we will keep coming to work here. One day, the situation in the D.R. will haunt the U.S."

Nevertheless, Sierra considers himself American in a "business sense" and is more interested in American politics than Dominican. He commended Mayor Bloomberg for "making the city cleaner and safer."

"In fact," he said, "living in New York is a luxury in itself."

Reflecting on his decision to immigrate and raise his children in the U.S., Sierra affirmed that he had no regrets. "You leave your lifestyle and your memories from growing up. You lose those things you can't buy with money," he said about the costs of leaving. "But at the same time," he added, "you gain a lot. In this country, you can get whatever you want as long as you work for it."