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Immigrants Work Toward a Brighter Day Much has changed over the last century, but not aspirations



Washington -- My great-aunt Anna came to this country at the turn of the last century. She spoke half a dozen languages because she was from Istanbul, Turkey, the melting pot spanning East and West.

She landed a job as a translator at Macy's in New York City, where she stood behind a desk helping immigrants who didn't speak English do their shopping. Eventually, she saved up enough to send for her parents and five siblings. The youngest was Fredda, my grandmother.

Almost a hundred years later, a similar scene is unfolding in service jobs around Washington. This time, it's the shoppers who speak English and many of the workers who don't. Nowhere is this multicultural community more evident than in the shoe department at the Tysons Corner Nordstrom.

Here are salespeople from Korea, China, South America, Africa -- all well-dressed and waiting on customers who don't blink at paying \$200 for a pair of shoes. That's more than the yearly wage that some of these salespeople would earn back home.

The U.S. Census tells us that our society is becoming ever more diverse. It's common all over Washington to find people working behind counters and at gas stations struggling to speak the language.

I think about my grandparents: All four landed on these shores in their youth, not speaking English, with no skills and no safety net.

One of my grandmothers never went to school and was always ashamed she couldn't really read or write. One grandfather, who sold junk, walked with a limp because he'd wounded himself rather than serve in the czar's army. None of them assimilated, but they passed their dreams on to the next generation.

My grandmother Fredda dropped out of school in fifth grade, but both of her children went to college. My aunt became a teacher, my father a journalist. Her five grandchildren got college educations, too. Today, they are a social worker, a physical therapist, an emergency room nurse and two journalists -- my sister and me.

When Fredda died at 82, hundreds paid their respects at her funeral.

I tell my children that those who came here from other countries deserve all the respect and help we can give them. They're the next generation of taxpayers -- teachers, doctors, lawyers. They're also our neighbors.

The language skills that helped my great-aunt Anna survive weren't passed down to me. I know only a few words in French, Spanish, Greek and Italian.

But my admiration remains strong for those who stand behind counters, their feet probably sore after so many hours. Their English may not be perfect, but they're working for a brighter day just as hard as my grandparents did.

(Judi Hasson is a Washington journalist. This article first appeared in The Washingtonian magazine in January 2003.)

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