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## American dream forged by experience; [All Edition]

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

Family is a driving force behind immigrants' hard work, [Juan M. Pichardo] said. He recalled how his mother, also an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, worked in textile and jewelry factories to support him and his two sisters. Be it fulfilling your parents' hopes for you, or paving the way for brothers and sisters to live their own American dreams, or helping your children succeed, Pichardo said, "family is what keeps us moving."

The panel, sponsored by International Institute Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, drew about 75 onlookers. It is part of a four-day community event on the American dream. Earlier events included a speech by Junot Diaz, a Dominican immigrant and the author of an award-winning collection of short stories, and a screening of a film on immigrant teenagers from Egypt, Honduras, Somalia and Vietnam, and discussion with the filmmaker, Debbie Mintz Brodsky.

The event continues today at 7 p.m. with a reader's theater production by Living Literature at Tazza Caffè, 250 Westminster St. The program, "Pursuit of Happiness: What is the American Dream?" will include readings from works by Toni Cade Bambara, Sandra Cisneros, Allen Ginsberg, Langston Hughes, Frank McCourt, Dwight Okita, R.A. Sasaka, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

**Full Text** (750 words)

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\* Immigrants to the United States realize that their dreams continue to evolve, even years after they've arrived.

\* \* \*

PROVIDENCE - At first, Mike Chea's American dream was simply a life removed from war and killing.

Then, he dreamed of expressing himself in English, but that dream soon changed to include getting an education and a good job.

Now, the dream is to provide for his family, giving his children the support they need to achieve even more than he has.

In Cambodia, where Chea had lived until he was 10, "when we think of America, we think of heaven," he said last night at a panel discussion that explored today's American dream. "Now, I know America really is not heaven. It's a beautiful country, but you really have to work to be successful in this country."

Meeting at the International Institute Rhode Island, in Providence, participants in the panel -- titled "What Exactly Is the American Dream?" -- agreed that their dreams evolved in the years after they came to America.

"Once you reach a goal, there are other goals to set," said the panel's moderator, state Sen. Juan M. Pichardo, D-Providence.

State Rep. Grace Diaz, D-Providence, recalled how she arrived in this country 15 years ago with \$40 and two dresses.

"In my mind was -- I don't have to worry about bringing money or something, because we'll have everything there," she said. "The reality was totally different than the dream I had in my country."

Diaz, who is originally from the Dominican Republic, was a quick study. She started with English lessons, then got a job as a bartender, then enrolled in a nursing assistant program at the Community College of Rhode Island.

Diaz applied for state jobs 84 times before she was hired, she said last night. She recalled how she would show up every Monday morning at 8:30, so consistently that the employees said they felt as if she already worked there.

Eventually, she got not one job offer but two. People told her, "How lucky you are!" Diaz, who is believed to be the first Dominican-American woman elected to a state office in the United States, remembered. She would tell them, "I'm not lucky. I'm persistent."

At the same time, Diaz was navigating the bureaucracy of naturalization and sponsoring her mother's immigration. Once her mother arrived, Diaz started a home daycare business to provide employment for her mother.

Family is a driving force behind immigrants' hard work, Pichardo said. He recalled how his mother, also an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, worked in textile and jewelry factories to support him and his two sisters. Be it fulfilling your parents' hopes for you, or paving the way for brothers and sisters to live their own American dreams, or helping your children succeed, Pichardo said, "family is what keeps us moving."

Chea, who is now 29 and works as director of interpreting services for International Institute Rhode Island, spoke of advocating for his son when a teacher wanted to place him in English as a Second Language classes and characterized his son as "retarded."

"They just assume that because his last name is Chea, he doesn't speak English, when he was born in the United States," said Chea, who lives in East Greenwich. "I know my son. My son is very smart."

Despite years spent in the United States, the panelists said they still sometimes felt like outsiders, particularly when struggling with language.

"I feel, sometimes, like people look at me like I have two heads," said Bash Sasa, who emigrated from Syria in 1984 at the age of 20 and now owns a Johnston-based general-contracting business with his two brothers.

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