The Saez Velez family migrated to New York City from Ciales, Puerto Rico in 1955. They were amongst the first large group of Spanish speakers in the city, and had to work with their neighbors to create a community. Ramonita and her sons, Andy and José, had a huge presence in the Lower East Side, and helped a lot of people. As children, the Velez boys helped their teachers, neighbors, Jewish synagogues, their mother, and the tenants of 103 Orchard Street! While the Puerto Rican community faced discrimination, they persevered and pushed for bilingual education and cultural preservation.

**José Velez’s 3rd Grade Class Portrait**

José Velez (second row, third from the right) is pictured in his 1959 class portrait from P.S. 42. One aspect of diversity in the classroom that José remembers was language — not everyone in school grew up speaking English.

**Questions for Student Exploration**

- In what ways is this class portrait similar or different to your class portraits today?
- José remembered that many of his peers did not grow up speaking English — how might this affect their experience in school?

**Oral History: Memory from José About Helping His Mom**

In this audio clip from July 2014, José Velez remembers some of the chores he had as a child. In particular, he talks about how important it was to help his mother who was often times working hard in a Garment Factory. Students can connect to José’s story by thinking about their own responsibilities and chores.

**Questions for Student Exploration**

- What does Mrs. Saez teach her sons to do?
- How does their work help the family?
- Do you have any responsibilities or chores at home or in the classroom? What are they?
**Comprehension Questions**

- Why aren’t Mrs. Saez, José, and Andy immigrants?
- How could you describe the Lower East Side in the 1960s?
- What type of job did Mrs. Saez get in the Lower East Side? How did she get this job?
- What was difficult for Andy and José when they started school?
- How did José and Andy help their mother as children?
- How did Mrs. Saez decorate her home when she moved in 1964?

**Your Turn / Thinking Questions**

- Why do you think many Puerto Rican families wanted their children to keep their Spanish language and add English as their second language?
- What do you think Andy and José learned from their mother?
- What ways did Puerto Ricans stay connected to Puerto Rico after moving to New York?

**ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE**

- What might be some of the positive things about living in a place with people of cultures and languages that are different from your own? What might some of the challenges be?
- Do you speak a language other than English? What are some advantages of speaking more than one language? What is difficult about speaking more than one language?
- What do you think Andy and José learned from their mother? How does that compare to what you learn from the people that take care of you?

**About your experience**

- What might be some of the positive things about living in a place with people of cultures and languages that are different from your own? What might some of the challenges be?
- Do you speak a language other than English? What are some advantages of speaking more than one language? What is difficult about speaking more than one language?
- What do you think Andy and José learned from their mother? How does that compare to what you learn from the people that take care of you?

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**Writing Activities**

Imagine you are José on your first day of school in New York City. You are in 2nd grade and you don’t speak the same language as the teachers and many of the other students. Pretend you are José coming home at the end of the day and are writing a diary entry. Talk about.

- **Set the scene:** How did you get to school? What did you see when you got there? Who was your teacher? What were they like? What was your first class?
- What feelings did you have on your first day?
- What were the difficult parts and the good parts of your first day?
- Who could help you?
WRITE ACTIVITIES

What are you still wondering?

How is the apartment different from what you remember in Italy?

What do you enjoy about your life in the United States?

What is difficult for you about your life in the United States?

Identify a challenge for the Saez Velez family. How did the Saez Velez family try to solve this problem? Use an example from the text or the primary sources to support your response.

GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MIGRANT</th>
<th>(n.) a person who moves from one place to another, generally referring to movement within a country.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ETHNICALLY DIVERSE</td>
<td>(adj.) a mixture of people from a lot of different cultures, religions, and races.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DISCRIMINATION</td>
<td>(n.) when groups of people are treated differently based on unfair judgements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIAS</td>
<td>(n.) a strong point of view or opinion, often times negative or exaggerated; prejudice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BODEGA</td>
<td>(n.) a small store that sells food and snacks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BILINGUAL</td>
<td>(adj.) having the ability to speak two languages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOFRITO</td>
<td>(n.) a mixture of vegetables and spices that provide flavor to a dish; often used in Latin American cooking and some European cuisines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABBATH</td>
<td>(n.) the Jewish day of rest, starting Friday night and lasting until Saturday night every week.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CATHOLIC</td>
<td>(adj.) a word that describes a person or a practice that relates to the religion of Catholicism.</td>
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The Saez Velezes

From the Island of Puerto Rico to New York City

Ramonita Rivera Saez moved to the Lower East Side of New York City from the island of Puerto Rico in 1955 with her two sons, Andy and José, who were seven and six years old. They were migrants, not immigrants, since Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, and Puerto Rican people are U.S. citizens. Puerto Rico is a warm and tropical island near Florida. People in Puerto Rico speak Spanish. Andy, José, and their mom moved to New York at the same time as many other Puerto Ricans did, often for better jobs and better pay.

The Lower East Side of the 1960s

The Lower East Side of New York was a very racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood when the Saez Velez family arrived. People from Puerto Rico shared hallways, streets, and schools with people from Jewish, Chinese, Italian, and Black American backgrounds. The neighborhood had many immigrants, but also many people who were born in the United States. This time period brought many people who weren’t white into New York City, and many Puerto Ricans experienced discrimination because of their language and skin color. Although Puerto Ricans are United States citizens, many people did not give them the respect they gave to other American citizens. These biases made it more difficult for them to take advantage of the job and educational opportunities they came to New York to find. Many Puerto Ricans moved to the Lower East Side, pronouncing it “Loisaida” in their Spanish accents — and the nickname became a popular way for others to refer to the neighborhood as well.

Was the Saez Velez family part of a community? While Puerto Rican migrants had struggles, they also built a strong community and made many contributions to the neighborhood. They started clubs, churches, community gardens, and restaurants that served Puerto Rican food. Ramonita socialized with neighbors, bought what she needed at bodegas, or corner stores, and worshiped at St. Teresa’s Catholic Church. Andy and José joined the Boy Scouts, played with the other children in Forsyth Park, and went to school at P.S. 42 which was just a few blocks away. Through a connection in the community,
Ramonita found a job sewing clothes in a factory in the neighborhood. Like many other women from Puerto Rico, she was already skilled at sewing and that helped her find a job. At the factory she worked with many other women from Puerto Rico, speaking Spanish with each other. That part was easy, but Ramonita had a hard time communicating with her boss who only spoke a few words of Spanish.

**YOUR TURN** Do you ever hear people talking about immigrants moving to the United States today? What do you hear?

### Going to School

The brothers had a similar problem communicating with others while at school. They didn’t speak English when they first arrived, and everything at school was in English. They had to learn a new language and learn all of their other subjects at the same time. When a letter came home from the school, Ramonita sometimes thought the boys were in trouble because she couldn’t read what the letter said. For many years, teachers and government officials expected children of immigrants and migrants to focus on learning English and to not use their first language, which was the language their family spoke, the language of their culture. Many Puerto Rican parents felt that their children, as U.S. citizens, had the same rights as any other U.S. citizen. They prioritized education, and they wanted their children to keep their Spanish language and learn English as well. Puerto Rican parents started pushing to have bilingual education programs in New York City schools, which created classes where children who spoke Spanish could learn subjects in their first language while also learning English. Today these programs exist in many schools, in many languages, not only Spanish.

**YOUR TURN** Why do you think many Puerto Rican families wanted their children to keep their Spanish language and add English as their second language?

Do you speak a language other than English? What are some advantages of speaking more than one language? What is difficult about speaking more than one language?

Both Andy and José had other responsibilities, too, because their mom was a single parent and worked long hours at the factory. When they arrived home from school every afternoon, they needed to turn on the stove to cook beans for dinner. When Ramonita arrived home, she finished the dinner with rice, meat, and sofrito, a sauce of tomatoes, sweet peppers, garlic, and onion that many Puerto Ricans cook.
The boys also did more than their homework and chores. They were always looking for ways to earn money for themselves and their mom. They sold flower seeds to neighbors and ran errands for their teachers at P.S. 42. They also helped their Jewish neighbors with small tasks on the weekends, as the Jewish religion forbids work on the Sabbath. José also found items that people discarded and sold them at a local flea market.

**YOUR TURN** What do you think Andy and José learned from their mother? How does that compare to what you learn from the people that take care of you?

### 103 Orchard Street

In the year 1964, Ramonita, Andy, and José moved into a new apartment at 103 Orchard Street with their stepfather, Mr. Saez. The apartment here was bigger than their previous apartments, so there was space to invite family and friends for parties on Sundays. Ramonita loved music and dancing, and the home was always filled with music. If you were visiting, you would smell coffee brewing, garlic for that night’s dinner, and the smell of flowers from the many plants growing in the apartment. The home was beautifully decorated with reminders of Puerto Rico — plants, brightly printed wallpaper, and symbols of the Catholic religion. Ramonita used her sewing skills to sew curtains, and the family also purchased a TV. That way they could watch shows on the two channels that broadcast programs in Spanish, and they could watch TV in English too.

Like many Puerto Ricans, Ramonita, José, and Andy travelled back to Puerto Rico often. Because they were U.S. citizens they didn’t need to worry about immigration documents when traveling. They went back to visit family and keep their ties to their homeland. This was unlike what happened for many immigrant groups, who moved to New York and couldn’t go back to their home country.

**YOUR TURN** What ways did Puerto Ricans stay connected to Puerto Rico after moving to New York?

Puerto Ricans like Ramonita and her family made a big impact on New York City — they fought for their rights to education and created new opportunities for their own children and others to be educated in their first languages. They made green spaces and gardens out of spaces that people had abandoned. They worked hard, supported each other through difficulties like discrimination, and formed communities that are still strong in New York City today.
José Velez (second row, third from the right) in his 1959 class portrait from his school P.S. 42. José remembers that not everyone in school grew up speaking English.
In oral history, José Velez remembers some of the chores he had as a child. He talks about how important it was to help his mother who was often times working hard in a Garment Factory.

Interview with José Velez, July 2014

And my mother would work a lot, believe me, a lot. And before she left in the morning my brother and I... we had to keep a schedule. She will just get the beans, add the little water, that actually softens them up, so when we came from school, we switch on the burner very low, and either I or my brother, and when my mother came home from work — 4:00 or 4:30 — the beans would be done. And clean the table. And if we burned the beans, we’d be in trouble.
Ramonita Rivera Saez and her two sons, Andy and José, migrated to New York City from the island of Puerto Rico, a territory of the U.S. in the Caribbean Sea.
A photograph from a street on the Lower East Side in the 1960s. The Saez Velez family lived amongst people from Jewish, Chinese, Italian, and Black American backgrounds.
Mrs. Ramonita Saez on the day of her son Andy’s wedding in her living room in 1969.