

Azorean Immigrants – The Keelson of Rhode Island Hospital

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ABSTRACT

Portuguese and Azorean immigrants make up 0.4% of the United States population, but they comprise over 6% of the population of Rhode Island. A vast number of Azorean immigrants in this region have made immense contributions to our medical community and the local cultural identity. Within Rhode Island Hospital (RIH), the roles held by staff who are Azorean immigrants are critical in maximizing the quality of care and efficiency of a large academic medical center. To properly illustrate their contributions, we highlight the experiences of four Azorean immigrants with decades of experience at RIH. Much like how the keelson is a structural member that provides continuity and connects the bow stem, frames, and transom to hold a whaleboat or wooden vessel together, these stalwart employees have long done similarly for Rhode Island's only tertiary care center.

KEYWORDS: Azorean immigrants, Rhode Island Hospital, keelson

the patient expressed an immediate sense of comfort from Ana's presence. After the patient's emergency operation, Ana continued to check in with the patient, their conversations veering from the trauma that introduced them to their shared heritage. In their native language of Portuguese, Ana and the patient discussed his upbringing, his children, and his grandchildren, offering a continued sense of connection in the face of a terrifying situation that often leaves patients in similar circumstances feeling isolated.

While the connection made between two strangers from a small nine-island archipelago may seem miraculous, the large population of Azorean immigrants in Rhode Island make such encounters routine. Portuguese and Azorean immigrants make up 0.4% of the US population, but they comprise over 6% of the population of Rhode Island, the greatest percentage of any state.¹ In East Providence, greater than 40% of the population are Portuguese or Azorean.² The United States experienced several waves of Azorean immigration starting in the mid- to late-19th century. Southern New England, specifically Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, became home to the greatest proportion of Azorean immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout her time working as a certified surgical technologist at RIH, Ana Costa has cared for numerous trauma patients. "You see people at their worst," she said. However, she added, "I feel very proud of what I do. I feel very grateful to be able to do what I do." She went on to share one of her most poignant memories from her time at RIH when a Portuguese-speaking trauma patient arrived in the operating room. The patient quickly connected with Ana as they learned that they were from the same area in the Azores, and Ana remained by his side to translate for English-speaking care team members. Despite his uncertain and anxiety-provoking circumstances,



Map of the Azores, an autonomous region of Portugal, composed of nine volcanic islands. The administrative capital is in Ponta Delgada. [ISTOCK, PETER HERMES FURIAN]



Wood skiff built by Dr. Andrew H. Stephen and his wife in Providence.

The Azorean archipelago has an endless maritime history based in fishing, whaling, tourism, and boatbuilding. A key structural component of the traditional Azorean whaleboat is its longitudinal keelson, a structure that provides strength and reinforcement on harsh seas. While the keelson of most boats is located in the bilge and covered by a deck, the keelson in authentic Azorean whaleboats remains uncovered. Only 63 authentic Azorean whaleboats still exist, and three are preserved by the Azorean Maritime Heritage Society (AMHS) in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a reflection of local commitment to education and fostering Azorean culture and tradition.² Community efforts to celebrate Azorean culture are fueled by the large local Azorean population in Rhode Island and surrounding communities, including Fall River and New Bedford.

The vast number of Azorean immigrants in this region have made immense contributions to our medical community and the local cultural identity. Within RIH, the roles held by staff who are Azorean immigrants are critical in maximizing the quality of care and efficiency of a large academic medical center. To properly illustrate their contributions in this narrative, we highlight the experiences of four Azorean immigrants with decades of experience at RIH. Much like how the keelson is a structural member that provides continuity and connects the bowstem, frames, and transom to hold a whaleboat together, these stalwart employees have long done similarly for Rhode Island's only tertiary care center.

ROLES AT RIH AND JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES

ANA COSTA works closely with all members of the interdisciplinary surgical teams caring for trauma patients who present on her overnight shifts as a certified surgical technologist. Ana started at RIH more than eight years ago and has been working night shifts since her daughter was born. She acknowledges that working nights, especially when the trauma volume is significant, can take a toll, but she relishes the moments when she can build meaningful connections and offer comfort to patients.

Ana was five years old when her parents used their savings to move with her and five of her siblings from Vila Franca do Campo to the United States in 1982. Once they arrived, they joined Ana's sister and uncle in Fall River, Massachusetts. Southern New England became their new home, and nearly her whole family remains in the area today. Ana graduated from the New England Institute of Technology and has worked as a surgical technologist for 18 years. The last eight years of her career have been at RIH.

ZELIA (ZEE) MEDEIROS is a fixture at the Ambulatory Patient Center (APC) and works in environmental services at RIH. Members of the trauma surgery staff and chief residents who take in-hospital overnight calls know Zee well from her work on the floor of the surgical and anesthesia academic offices. Faculty and staff shared how, in addition to her typical job duties, Zee points staff to leftovers in the kitchen and lets colleagues into their offices when they have locked themselves out. One surgeon even recalled a time when Zee gifted him a large container of delicious rice pudding that she made herself. While Zee's contributions to the community and culture of RIH are far-reaching, her colleagues shared that her love for her hometown of Vila Franca contributes most significantly to Zee's passion. Vila Franca is approximately a 30-minute drive from Ponta Delgada, the capital of Sao Miguel Island. Zee has long encouraged her colleagues to visit Sao Miguel and her hometown to taste the award-winning queijadas, a baked dessert made with flour, eggs, milk, and sugar, and to swim in the circular pool formed by the islet of Vila Franca.

Zee came to Rhode Island in 1976 when she was 15 years old with her parents and six siblings. Upon arriving, she lived in East Providence where her father's family was settled before moving to Providence. She started working part time in environmental services at RIH in 1986 while she raised three children. Not long after starting, Zee began working the second shift from 4 p.m. to midnight and has continued with that schedule for 36 years. Soon, she will be adding to her schedule as she begins taking care of her 11-week-old grandchild two days per week while her daughter teaches at Rhode Island College.

MARIA MEDEIROS is a Transplant Clinic Coordinator and played a crucial role in building the kidney transplant research division. She has also collaborated with physicians

in the Lifespan Cancer Institute at Rhode Island Hospital to further the study of immunotherapies and genomic approaches to cancer treatment. In 2020, Maria's tremendous contributions were recognized when she was named Nurse Researcher of the Year by *Rhode Island Monthly*.²

Maria came to East Providence in 1972 when she was eight years old with her mother and sister from Praia do Norte on the island

of Faial, where she was born. In 1957 and 1958, Faial suffered devastating eruptions of the Capelinhos volcano on the western coast of the island. These events destroyed hundreds of homes, rendering much of the island's land non-arable, and resulted in thousands of Azoreans immigrating to the United States. Her father came to the United States less than one year before the rest of the family to seek economic opportunities. In 1988, she began at RIH as a part of her work-study time during her junior year of nursing school. She subsequently transitioned into a nursing position, caring for orthopedic, neurosurgery, trauma, and plastic surgery patients. Maria also worked with the colleagues in her department to open a neurology and neurosurgery ward. She then transitioned to working in the surgical intensive care unit (SICU). Throughout her time working in the SICU, Maria experienced a strong sense of camaraderie with her colleagues. In fact, when she transitioned to working in the outpatient surgery department while doing some additional inpatient per diem nursing, she found herself missing the atmosphere and culture of the hospital. Over the last 20 years, Maria underwent a change in the direction of her career as she began a new role as a research nurse, ultimately culminating in her new role. Maria describes a tremendous satisfaction from such a varied career at RIH that has combined so many years of clinical and academic challenges.

ZORAIDA BARBOSA currently works in the kitchen at RIH, but she previously worked in the housekeeping department for 20 years. Her job in the kitchen started with washing dishes, but she quickly took on additional responsibilities, leading to the expansion of her role.

Zoraida moved to Rhode Island from Nordeste, a municipality on the island of São Miguel, in 1978, when she was just 12 years old. She came to the United States with her parents and four siblings after they heard about the opportunities afforded to family members who came to Providence. "My parents wanted to give us a better life here," Zoraida explained. While establishing their new life in the United States, Zoraida was immediately enrolled in the Nathan



Retro travel plate plaque with Azores tagline, sea and sailing ship. [ISTOCK, SEAMARTINI]

Bishop Middle School. Later, in 1989, while she was working at Dunkin' Donuts, she became engaged and decided to search for new employment opportunities. After hearing that her youngest brother was working part time at RIH, she applied and began her initial position in housekeeping. Today, Zoraida continues to work in the kitchen, her husband is retired, and she has two adult children, a daughter who is 30 years old and a son who is 34 years old.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS TO AZOREAN CULTURE

Ana has not returned to the Azores since arriving in the United States, and Zoraida has not returned to the islands in 30 years. However, Zee and Maria each visit their loved ones on the islands every two years. "I want to see what's out there, see what I left behind," Zee explained. Even as Zee re-experiences the island today, she cannot help but reminisce about her childhood there. Her typical day when visiting the island consists of a walk on the beach, picnics with friends and family, relaxing with tea in the afternoon, and getting ice cream late at night near the magnificent church of Nossa Senhora da Paz. As she takes her walks on the beach not far from the islet of Vila Franca, she thinks back to the times, years ago, when she and her siblings took the same route to wave to their father while he worked. Her time outside and with loved ones is motivated by her drive to experience what her life could have resembled if she stayed. Similarly, Maria spends her time in the Azores with her sister, cousins, and nephew who have not left. The local food and low-stress environment even serve as a temporary cure to Maria's nagging heartburn.

While Zoraida has not returned to the Azores in 30 years, her desire to make the journey remains. "I miss my country," she shared. "I miss the atmosphere, the air, the green, the flowers, [and] the food." While her family came to the United States in search of economic opportunities, she knows several members of her community who have

returned to the islands. Though she has physically remained in Rhode Island, she envies the slower pace of the lives of her friends in the Azores. As she thinks about her future, she is committed to continuing to prioritize her family and happiness, tenets of her Azorean culture, by maximizing her time spent with her five-year-old granddaughter.

Similarly, while Ana has not returned to the Azores since arriving in the United States, she maintains the connection to her culture through her relationship with her five-year-old daughter, Giana. Raising Giana has also inspired Ana to reflect on her few memories of Vila Franca. She fondly recalls the sugary pacifier candies that her mother would bring back from the carnival and hide under her pillow. While many of her memories of her childhood are fond, she also describes the financial challenges that her family faced leading up to their journey to the United States. She remembers the ingredients her mother used to make a bean soup to last the family for a whole week and the orange that she would receive every Christmas, the only treat her parents could afford. She has deep gratitude to her parents for the sacrifices it took to leave, coming to the United States without knowing how to speak English and with limited financial means. Now, in the United States, Ana is thankful for the opportunities that she can give to her daughter, and the chance to participate in their culture together. When Giana recently began singing the alphabet in Portuguese during her bath time, Ana was filled with pride. She looks forward to continuing to speak with Giana in Portuguese and watching her upcoming Portuguese folklore dance lessons.

Despite their different ties to the Azorean islands, Zee, Maria, Zoraida, and Ana all reflected on the importance of local cuisine in maintaining their connection to Azorean culture and fostering new connections at RIH and in their personal lives. When Zee returns to the islands, a local fisherman routinely brings her family octopus, clams, and limpets. In the United States, she continues to source fresh seafood to prepare her favorite dishes. Her specialties include authentic classics such as bacalhau and grilled octopus. Zoraida also loves to recreate dishes from the islands with limpets, cooked with garlic, butter, peppers, among her favorites. Ana continues to buy her hometown's famous queijadas from her local bakery. The ability to find all the products and ingredients central to Azorean cuisine can be credited to the large Azorean population. In fact, Ana's brother, the only sibling to leave New England, does not have the same access to cultural delicacies, so Ana regularly sends care packages of Portuguese cheese and other specialties to his home in Florida.

FOSTERING CONNECTION

When speaking about the responsibilities of her job, Zoraida said, "It is what it is. We all have to work." However, she lit up when sharing about the part of her role that brings her the most joy: her co-workers. Given the large number of Azorean staff at RIH, she has the opportunity to speak Portuguese, connect with, and learn from colleagues of diverse backgrounds. Ana made similar remarks about the connections she made with Azorean colleagues and coworkers from other backgrounds. "It was like a family," Ana said as she thought back to her day shift colleagues. She went on to describe how the other surgical technologists, nurses, and other members of the care teams also connected over food, sitting down together to share a group meal when possible.

Despite their varying experiences immigrating, maintaining ties to the Azores, and practicing their culture in the United States, Zee, Maria, Zoraida, and Ana demonstrate common ground in their ability to create a sense of community among RIH staff and patients. Because of the wide range in their roles and responsibilities at RIH, their contributions impact the experience of patients and staff in innumerable ways. Like the keelson of the traditional whaling boat, they provide reinforcement and continuity throughout the hospital to enable the delivery of high-quality care to patients in Rhode Island and surrounding communities.

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