**¿Dónde está mi gente? 5**

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Arena

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**Intro:** From the KBIA Newsroom in Columbia, I’m Sebastián Martínez Valdivia. In the final installment of the ¿Dónde está mi gente? series, KBIA’s Kassidy Arena tackles how the state’s lack of diversity can affect Missourians on an individual level and redefine Latino identity.

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Throughout my journey to answer the question of ¿Dónde está mi gente?, I literally asked people I met.

Sometimes they answered literally. Like Maria Sanchez in Carthage.

*SANCHEZ1b (:07) “Mi gente está aquí en Carthage. Mi gente está aquí amo a mi gente. Esta comunidad touches my heart.”*

Sometimes they simply agreed with the proposition and repeated it with emphasis. Like Jonathan Verdejo in Columbia.

*VERDEJO1c (:07) “Yeah, everybody pretty much asked themselves that question. When they come over here, it's, yeah.”*

Sometimes, they added to the question. Like Ilsi Palacios in Jefferson City.

*[in Spanish]*

*PALACIOS1b (:14) “What came to my mind when asking where we are, was not just where we are on the geographic map of Missouri, but also how are we going to advance our community in terms of education, access and healthcare.”*

And sometimes, people are still trying to find the answer.

*PEREZ1 (:03) “I want to know where our gente is in Missouri!”*

Like Laura Gutiérrez Pérez. She is relatively new to mid-Missouri. Originally from Mexico City, she moved to Columbia last year from Detroit. The place she grew up, and even attended a Spanish dual language school.

It was pretty easy to pick out her house from her neighbors’. A big sign stood by the door with *bienvenidos* painted on it–or ‘welcome’ in Spanish.

[nat sound of dogs barking, kids running around]

Gutiérrez Pérez quickly wrangled her two dogs, two cats and two children when I walked in.

*PEREZ2 (:10) “I just was really overwhelmed. And I was afraid that I wouldn't find a community here to be a part of because I had been so part of the previous community.”*

The mother of two says a new question she’ll have to ask herself in Missouri is how will she raise her children? Will she teach them Spanish in a place where they wouldn’t have a place to practice outside the house?

[nat sound of kids playing]

She says she’s very aware that the future conversations she’ll have with Zoë and Lillie may be different now that they will grow up in central Missouri–a state with less than five percent of Latinos.

*PEREZ3 (:20) “And just letting them know that they can be themselves and be authentically themselves. And whatever that means. And that obviously, we have a different, we experience our culture in a particular way, because of the way where we grew up. But with them going up away from that kind of same environment, they're going to experience it differently. And that's okay.”*

But sometimes it’s hard to be authentically yourself when you have to explain yourself, says Elijah Brown. He’s Afro-Latino, which means he identifies as both Black and Puerto Rican. And he says he still has to explain himself to many mid-Missourians.

*BROWN1 (:13) “It can get exhausting trying to explain this whole spectrum, this whole intersectionality thing of being Black and being Latino at the same time, because here in Missouri, it's like astrophysics, trying to explain that to some people.”*

In the future, it may not be astrophysics anymore. According to Saint Louis University’s Ness Sandoval. A demographer and sociologist. A note here: most Latinos in the U-S are American-born.

*SANDOVAL1b (:09) “You need to encourage other Americans to move to Missouri. And they happen to be Black Americans, Latino Americans and Asian Americans.”*

Since 2010, [Missouri had one of the largest increases](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/1O6M4PaXncG_rDn5U5JCfHMZr6gL-6lXB/edit?usp=drive_web&ouid=116877558545510805711&rtpof=true) in Latino people living here compared to other Midwestern states. Although it’s still [behind the national growth trend](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/1rTckBa5X0s8Hn3rElRlvqc9g9txwieqLdMUd_ChzJVY/edit), Sandoval says it would benefit the state to make people like Brown and Gutiérrez Pérez feel more at home.

I’m Kassidy Arena, KBIA News, Columbia.