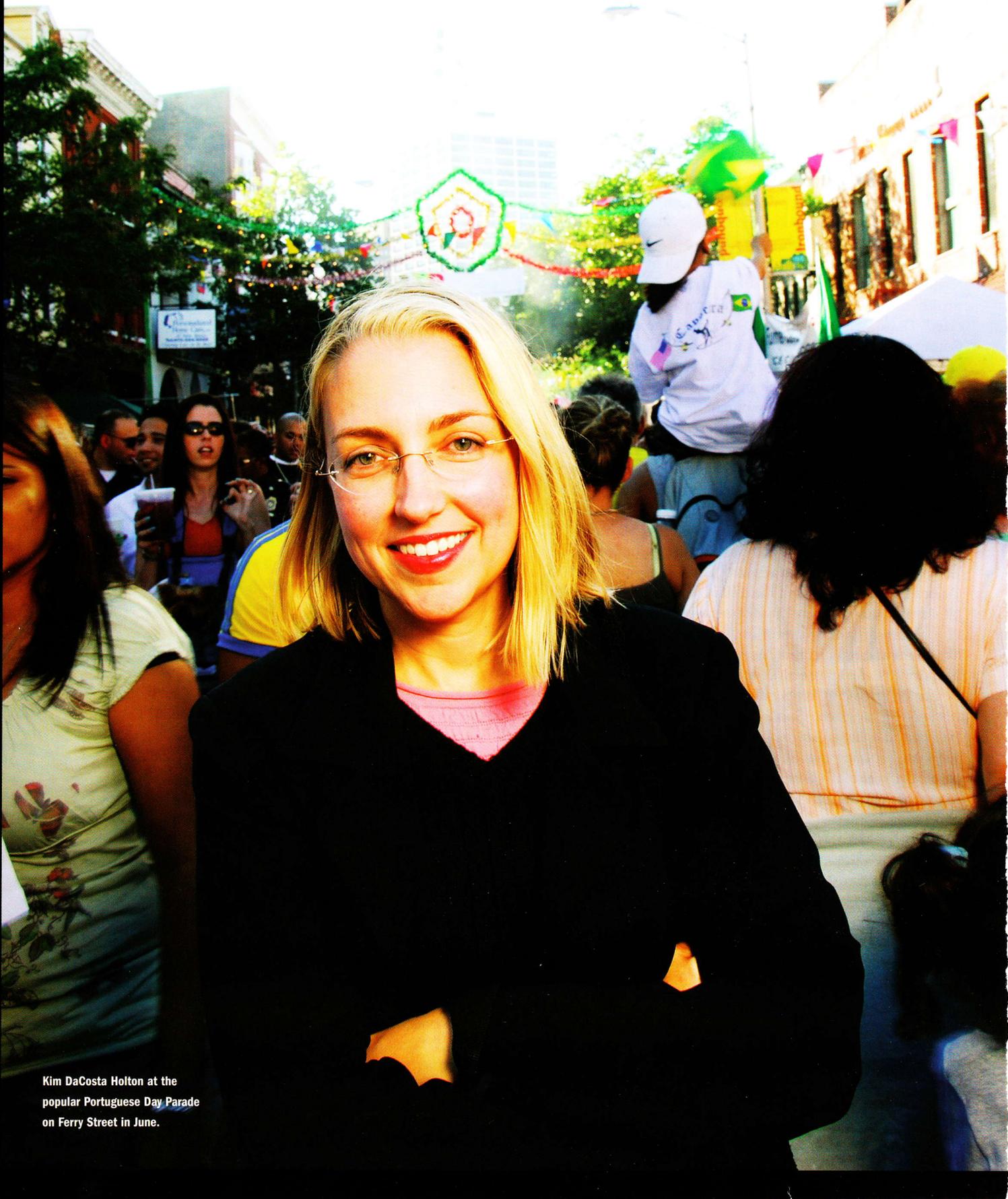


GRANDE PARADA DO DIA DE PORTUGAL
EM NEWARK
DOMINGO DIA 11 DE JUNHO INICIO: AS 3.00PM
Com a Participação De Mais De 150 Representações



Kim DaCosta Holton at the popular Portuguese Day Parade on Ferry Street in June.

Teaching the IRONBOUND

Kim DaCosta Holton takes me—and her Rutgers–Newark students—
through one of America’s most intriguing communities

by Bill Glovin

photography by Peter Murphy

The tranquil afternoon of the men with worn, creased faces lining the bar is disrupted by a group of eager college students and me as we shuffle past for a mid-afternoon tour of the Sport Club Portuguese. The Sambuca and Sagres beer bottles, the soccer trophies and pool tables all add to the atmosphere of the old club, which has hosted Portuguese Nobel Prize winners and prime ministers since its founding in 1921. Each fall Kim DaCosta Holton makes the club a stop on a walking tour for the course Oral History of Newark’s Ironbound so that her students—mostly young Portuguese students whose parents and grandparents migrated to the Ironbound—can see for themselves the important link between the club’s old-world traditions like soccer and Sambuca and new-world sensibilities such as karaoke and literary group meetings.

I feel like a modern day Magellan or da Gama as I tag along and join the circle as Holton—an assistant professor of classical and modern languages who’s coordinated Portuguese and Lusophone World Studies for the

department since 2000—gathers everyone for a quick history lesson at the head of Ferry Street, the Ironbound’s bustling commercial spine. I move in closer to hear her above the rumbling engines of delivery trucks dropping off fresh linens to restaurants and flour to bakeries. Holton, an urban ethnographer with her own family roots in the neighborhood (see “The Ironbound’s Swiss Miss,” page 39), explains that the Ironbound got its name from the rail lines built in the 1830s, when Germans, Lithuanians, Italians, and Poles came looking for work. Old-timers, she adds, also refer to the area as “Down Neck” for the way the neighborhood, lying south of the Passaic River, pushes the river into a neck-like curve. Starting around 1910, a steadily growing number of Portuguese—

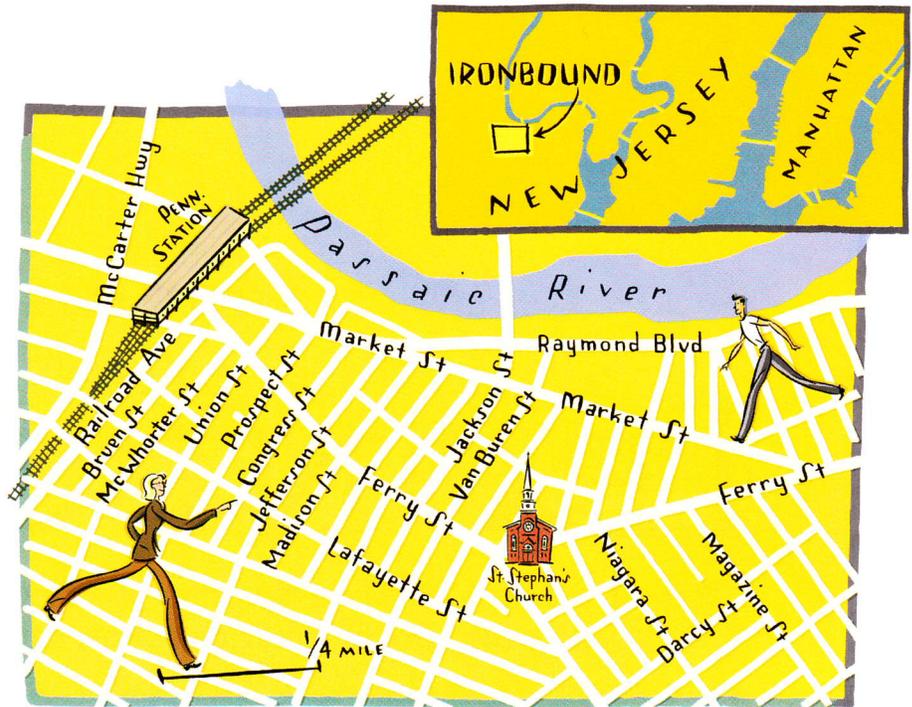
and to a lesser extent Galician Spaniards—came to find jobs in local factories and at nearby ports.

In class, I learned that the Ironbound’s Portuguese population boomed in the 1960s and 1970s due to a flight from the mother country triggered by the fascist regime of António de Oliveira Salazar and a poor economy, as well as relaxed immigration laws in the United States. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, a wave of Brazilians followed



and, more recently, Mexicans, Ecuadorians, and other Spanish-speaking groups have joined them. Today, 65 percent of the neighborhood's population of 45,000 is foreign born. Of the foreign-born residents, 38 percent are Portuguese, 32 percent are from Spanish-speaking countries, and 21 percent are Brazilian. "Half of the foreign-born population has been here less than 15 years, which means that the demographics here are constantly shifting," says Carol Johnston, director of special projects for the Ironbound Community Corporation.

We pass two important neighborhood icons a few steps from one another. The *Igreja Assembleia de Deus* church, built in 1848, is a metaphor for the evolving neighborhood. Originally a Dutch Reformed church, then Catholic, later a cultural center, the church today has a Brazilian congregation. We head next to Iberia, a well-known Portuguese restaurant whose facade is dressed with large, wooden wine barrels and Portuguese flags. Pausing at the corner of Ferry and Prospect streets, I hear locals chatting in Portuguese as they stop off at banks and travel agencies that cater to Portuguese and Brazilian clientele.



Back on Prospect Street, I notice that the sight of the Luis de Camões School, offering Portuguese history and language classes and sponsored by the Sport Club Portuguese, makes some of Holton's students wince as memories of long hours at parental-mandated after-school programs flood back. These students are all too familiar with the "Codfish Curtain," the cultural border between the Ironbound and the world beyond that some of the older, often insular generation stay behind, anxious to hang on to their Portuguese ways. "Some Portuguese parents force-feed their kids language and culture classes, which at times causes resentment," says Holton, 40. "In some cases, this dynamic has been an obstacle to convincing heritage students to major in Portuguese studies."

We follow Holton as she turns left onto Lafayette Street, a main artery that runs parallel to Ferry. On the opposite corner is Seabra's, a large Portuguese supermarket. Holton explains that Seabra, Rodrigues, and Coutinho—the names of influential Ironbound families—are unknown to most outsiders. That anonymity also applies to many other facets of the district. "Immigration scholars and the American press tend to ignore the Ironbound because of the language barrier," she contends. "It is also a mix of two very different cultures, the Portuguese and the Brazilians, so it defies ethnic and even cultural categorization. Anglos tend to identify most Portuguese as Hispanic and many Brazilians as black. But the reality is that Portuguese are Europeans with a long history of ethnic mixture, while Brazilians are Latin Americans who come from a society with a much more fluid notion of race, compared to the polarized U.S. definitions of black and white."

Starting around 1910, a steadily growing number of Portuguese came to find jobs in local factories and at nearby ports.

The narrow, clean side streets near Ferry Street are home to mostly small apartment buildings built of brick and two- and three-family houses clad in aluminum siding. Grass is rare but sycamore trees dot the densely built neighborhood. After I pick up on the local method for finding parking where there is none—people park in front of hydrants and double-park everywhere else—Holton points out that the popular restaurants all offer parking, and homeowners lucky enough to have driveways call them "paved gold."

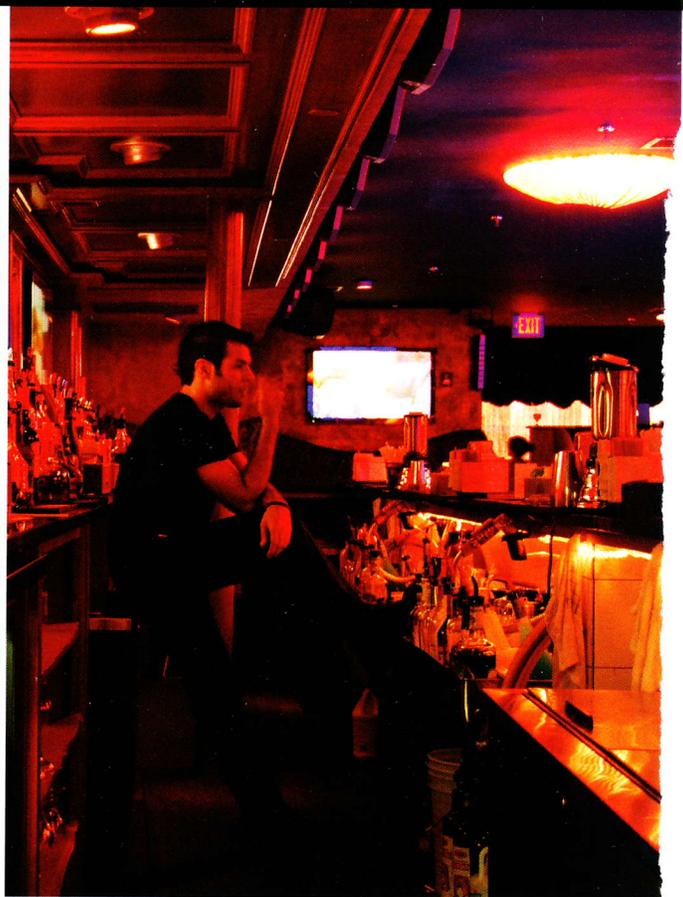


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES LAISH



The Ironbound offers social clubs where members come to watch soccer, mingle, and reconnect with their culture, and Brazilian and Portuguese delicacies that are difficult to find anywhere else.





Space is at a premium in the Ironbound; buildings and people coexist in close quarters.





We make our way to the Congress Street home of a Portuguese-speaking couple to see a backyard that's pure Ironbound: part urban-Newark, part Mediterranean. Against a backdrop of neighbors' clotheslines draped with

laundry and the towering glass exteriors of the nearby Gateway buildings, the couple's garden is dominated by a flourishing grape arbor that bathes their concrete patio in shade; the other half of the yard is devoted to tomatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, and parsley. The garden's success belies the danger that lies underground. "I worry about people growing fruit-bearing plants in the Ironbound given the industrial history of this area, and the number of factories that were torn down and replaced by housing over time," Holton tells the students. "But these gardens are a very important part of Portuguese culture and show an attempt to recreate the pleasures of rural life in the city."

Our walking tour winds down at the popular Riviera Bakery on Ferry Street, where *pasteis de nata* (custard tarts) and American pastries sit side by side. One student asks for *papo-secos*, the popular Portuguese bread rolls, but the woman behind the counter tells him that they are always

sold out by the afternoon. Another asks why another large bakery on the opposite corner has no sign. Holton explains that the bakery, owned by the Coutinho family, has been a fixture in the community for years. "The signs are mainly for tourists," says Holton. "People in this community just know."

Holton and I later brave the traffic in my car to see more of the four square miles that make up the neighborhood. Ferry Street looks bustling to me, but Holton points out that there is considerably more traffic on Saturdays, when the Portuguese who have moved away for better schools and open space return to shop and bank; she comes from her home in

Codfish Curtain: the cultural border between the Ironbound and the world beyond.

Montclair with her two small children to buy the Portuguese cheeses, salted cod, and blood sausage that she can't find anywhere else.

On Jefferson Street, we pull over to take a closer look at a style of architecture that Holton calls "modified

The Ironbound's Swiss Miss

HER VIEW OF THE IRONBOUND IS TIED TO A HOST OF INFLUENCES



Kim DaCosta Holton's Oral History of the Ironbound course has made her a fixture in the community—and a leading authority on all things Ironbound. "Kim has come to many of our meetings and encourages students and faculty to get involved," says Gloria de Melo, an Ironbound resident who works for the airline TAP Portugal and runs a literary group that meets monthly. "She is more Portuguese at heart than many natives and is always looking out for the community's best interests."

Holton has her own family ties to the Ironbound, which date back to 1924, when the man she called "Vovô," her late Portuguese grandfather on her mother's side, stowed away on a boat in Brazil bound for New York City. He worked in the Ironbound for 10 years as a carpenter before moving to a Portuguese neighborhood in East Providence, Rhode Island, and marrying Beatrice, Holton's feisty, now 92-year-old Portuguese grandmother. "I spent a lot of time with my grandparents growing up; they were a big influence," says Holton. Beatrice still makes two of her granddaughter's favorite desserts: *leite creme* and *arroz doce*.

The man she called "Vovô" stowed away on a boat in Brazil bound for New York City.

At Northwestern University, Holton majored in performance studies but also studied cultural anthropology, in part to better understand the Portuguese side of her heritage. After earning her bachelor's degree, she moved to Lisbon for three years, taking a job teaching English and perfecting her Portuguese language skills. She returned to the United States to attend graduate school at Northwestern, married her husband, Tim Raphael (an assistant professor of theater at Rutgers-Newark), and returned to Lisbon when she received a grant to conduct her dissertation research in the mid-1990s. There, she and Raphael became active in local theater.

At a reading of her new book, *Performing Folklore: Ranchos Folclóricos from Lisbon to Newark* (Indiana University Press, 2005), Holton warms up the audience with a self-effacing remark about her blondness: "I'm the Swiss miss of Portuguese studies." Her new book, and her understanding of the Ironbound, has also been enriched by the oral histories, photographs, and videos gathered by her students as a course requirement. Says Holton, "My students have helped me feel like I'm part of the community, which is the best way to truly understand it."—BG

Mediterranean.” The style, typical of the many streets that are lined with new construction, features stucco walls, low-pitched terra-cotta roofs, balconies, and ornate, black window grilles. I notice that the facades of many houses have tiles—*azulejos*—of Our Lady of Fátima. Holton explains that Portuguese Catholics worship the Virgin Mary as “Our Lady of Fátima,” believing that she appeared to three shepherd children near Fátima, Portugal, in 1917. My impression that these tiles—installed to bring good luck—are in abundant supply turns out to be correct; one of Holton’s students took an inventory and counted hundreds of them.

Holton points out that homeowners **lucky** enough to have driveways call them **“paved gold.”**

Holton says that there is a very good chance that Portuguese is the language of choice in these homes. While the 2000 U.S. census found New Jersey to have the fourth largest Portuguese population in the nation, it also

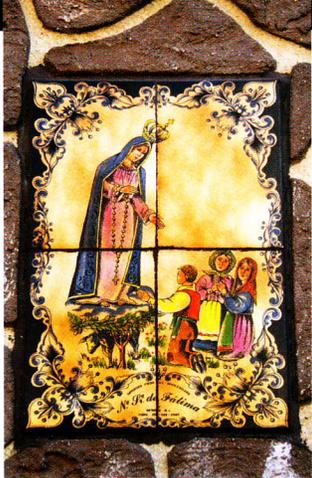
revealed that it has the highest percentage of Portuguese immigrants who have retained Portuguese as their primary language. At a reading at the Newark Public Library in the Ironbound for her new book on Portuguese folklore, Holton asks the audience why families continue to cling to their language, as well as to Portuguese music and dance. I hear one middle-aged woman blurt out, “To keep tradition alive!” while a younger person suggests that “it’s a way for our parents to keep tabs on us, since many of them work long hours.” Another young woman gets a chuckle with this telling observation: “Our parents hope folklore will help us find a Portuguese mate!”

Our tour continues down Van Buren Street, home to East Side High School, the alma mater of many of Holton’s students who have confirmed for her a colleague’s findings that social clustering exists between Brazilians, Portuguese, and African Americans. Holton believes it is partly due to cultural differences: Brazilian students are considered urban and hip, while Portuguese students are viewed as more insular and rural. “The Ironbound is a community in which subtle conflict exists against a larger backdrop of everyday cooperation and collaboration,” says Holton. “With every passing year that the Portuguese and Brazilians live together in the Ironbound, there are more incidences of



10 Things to Know about the Ironbound

- 1. Ferry Street** was part of the first direct route between Newark and the Hudson River.
- 2. St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church** at the corner of Lafayette and Prospect contains catacombs in the basement that are modeled after the ones in Rome and have **crypts housing wax likenesses of Spanish saints**.
- 3.** Before P. Ballantine & Sons Brewery at Ferry and Freeman streets closed in 1972 and was partly demolished, it was at one time **the largest brewery** in the United States.
- 4.** The Ironbound is set off from downtown Newark by **Penn Station**—dedicated in 1935 as **one of the centerpieces** of the former Pennsylvania Railroad’s train network and built with Indiana limestone and incorporating many fine art deco details.
- 5.** The New Jersey Capoeira Arts Center at 51 Bruen Street teaches *capoeira*, a Brazilian martial art that is based on dance and traces its origins to **secret societies in Bahia and slave revolts on plantations**.
- 6.** After inventing **celluloid**, the product that launched the plastics industry, in 1868, John W. Hyatt founded the Celluloid Corporation of America at the intersection of Ferry, Magazine, Niagara, and Darcy streets. Today, Georgia-Pacific Corporation occupies the plant.
- 7.** A carving of a **Roman chariot carrying a can of Murphy varnish** still stands at the site of the former Murphy Varnish Company on the west side of McWhorter, near Vesey Street. Started in 1865, the once vast operation was the largest of the numerous paint and varnish factories in Newark at the turn of the 20th century.
- 8.** At the corner of Lafayette and Madison streets is a shrine to **Our Lady of Fátima**, the Ironbound’s **most important religious symbol**. The site was once the location of the St. James Roman Catholic Church, the largest church built in Newark prior to the Civil War.
- 9.** *Luso-Americano*, published semiweekly at 66 Union Street and founded in 1928 by a group of Portuguese businessmen, is **one of the oldest and largest Portuguese-language newspapers** in the United States.
- 10.** Annual can’t-miss events include the **Portugal Day Festival and Parade** in June and **Brazilian Independence Day** in early September on Ferry Street.



Portuguese/Brazilian courtships and marriage. The conflicts, which are often invisible to outsiders, are part of a multifaceted picture.”

Holton notices other ethnic and economic changes in the neighborhood. Besides meeting more Mexicans and

Ecuadorians, she sees a greater number of outside influences like African-American step dance groups from high schools outside the Ironbound performing at the popular Portuguese Day Parade in June. And while Portuguese restaurants and businesses still dominate, the Brazilians have brought *churrascaria* restaurants, schools for *capoeira*, and *samba* music into the community.

Meanwhile, the renaissance slowly taking shape in downtown Newark has spilled over into the Ironbound, adding entire blocks of new modified-Mediterranean construction and doubling property values in the last five years. Holton tells me that on one of her recent Saturday excursions, she was sad to learn that a Ferry Street building that housed her favorite fish store and a fruit and vegetable market had closed. “I went into the jewelry store next door and was told the building was being torn down for new luxury apartments,” she says. “The fish store and the market will be sorely missed by the older Portuguese people in the neighborhood.”

More evidence of change comes when we drive past a former chocolate factory that’s been renovated into luxury condos on McWhorter Street and a warehouse converted to lofts that are popular with artists on Union Street. One tenant, Anker West, an artist known for his drawings of historic Newark buildings about to be demolished, has encouraged other artists to move there. Holton believes more artists will be drawn to rehabbed industrial buildings along Railroad Avenue by the convenience of the PATH train and the rent, a fraction of the cost of Manhattan. Says Holton, “A colony of artists is what a lot of people predict for the Ironbound. It has happened to some degree, but it’s a gradual process.”

By the time we make it back to Ferry Street, it’s almost nightfall and patrons of the nearby New Jersey Performing Arts Center, executives and attorneys from downtown, and administrators and faculty from the University Heights district will start to descend upon the dozens of Brazilian and Portuguese restaurants in the neighborhood. Holton takes one last look around before we head back to campus. “With a new arena coming and the political climate shifting, it’s exciting to contemplate what the community will look like in 10 years,” she says. Holton will be watching carefully as the next chapter for the Ironbound unfolds. □

RUTGERS MAGAZINE senior editor Bill Glovin was last seen in the Ironbound ordering mariscada salsa verde.



Students practice the Brazilian martial art of *capoeira* at the New Jersey Capoeira Arts Center.