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Latin Toronto's ambassador to the mainstream

Roberto Hausman chats up beauties and dignitaries on his groundbreaking English-language TV show

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When Roberto Hausman first arrived in Toronto from Uruguay in 1973, he despaired of ever penetrating the white, Anglo-Saxon business elite that ran the city.

The best he could get was a factory job putting together modular windows. He sold Ecuadorean wall hangings and what he calls "Starsky and Hutch" belted woollen cardigans door-to-door.

"I was a real immigrant," Mr. Hausman, 51, says. "I was taunted in factories -- 'You lousy immigrant from South America, can't you speak English?' " Now, 30 years later, Mr. Hausman embodies the immigrant-made-good story. This past April, he launched a show called *Latin Life* -- Toronto's first English-language television show devoted to showcasing Latino culture. Airing Saturday mornings, it launches a new season this week.

The low-budget, self-financed show covers topics ranging from art, food and fashion to Latin American politics, but the common thread is the charismatic Mr. Hausman. Each week, he takes a camera into the field to interview Latina beauty queens, celebrated chefs (reporting in one episode that "*Latin Life* is enjoying this meal!") and ambassadors. He sometimes dons a tux while on assignment.

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"The time [is] ripe to showcase the incredible Latin culture and accomplishments in the Latino community," says Mr. Hausman, dapper in a dark suit and pink dress shirt. "We have grown from a community of janitors and factory workers to a community of entrepreneurs, engineers, doctors and professionals."

Before launching the show, Mr. Hausman spent 20 years running the Canadian Law Enforcement Training College, which he founded in the mid-1980s. The college helps young people complete the courses necessary to become police officers and law-enforcement agents, and emphasizes community service and training in issues in diversity. Last year, he became president of the Canadian Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

The country's Hispanic community now numbers between 700,000 and 900,000, with a recent influx of immigrants from Colombia, Mexico and Argentina. Last year alone, 19,362 immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean arrived in Canada, a dramatic increase compared with four years ago. In the last municipal election, Toronto elected its first Hispanic councillor, Cesar Palacio, who was born in Ecuador.

Many of the new immigrants are fleeing political instability as well as searching for economic opportunities for their families, bringing their money and expertise with them. More than half of all Hispanic immigrants settle in Ontario, mostly in the Greater Toronto Area.

Mr. Hausman aims to bridge the Latino community and mainstream Canadian culture, which is why his show is in English, not Spanish. "I didn't want my show to be a little Hispanic one on a multicultural channel," he says. "I want to feel part of the mainstream." The show has featured a range of Latino entertainers -- from the salsa band Caché to Plan C, a pop-jazz-rock-Latin group -- and covers fiestas such as the Toronto Hispano-American Film Festival.

However, Mr. Hausman points out that *Latin Life* deliberately blends politics with the lighter material. He has interviewed the president of the Dominican Republic, Cuba's foreign minister, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and several Latin American ambassadors and consuls-general.

The show receives no government grants, but is increasingly attractive to advertisers, he says. "Thirty years ago, the ethnic communities were dominated by Italians and Portuguese. But today, there are a lot more diverse communities -- South Asian, Russians and Hispanics -- growing in leaps and bounds."

Mr. Hausman, who also sings in a band called Roberto's Latin Sounds, lets out a whoop of laughter before adding this final thought: "Canadians love Latin culture. . . . I think the appeal is that we are full of life and passion, which is something a northern climate neutralizes. We help Canadian blood flow more freely instead of being frozen."

Latin Life airs Saturdays at 8:30 a.m. on A-Channel.

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