Adapting to local Hispanic culture easy for some

A native of El Centro, Sedalia Sanders said learning Spanish came naturally to her. In exchange for her help teaching her classmates to speak better English, they in return helped her acquire Spanish at an early age.

"It was mutual and it was very easy," Sanders said.

It was also a very natural thing to do considering the environment Sanders, now mayor of El Centro, grew up in.

Although Hispanics have been present in the county since its founding, in recent years their visibility and influence has been climbing as their numbers grow.

While he wouldn’t go as far as saying that the Hispanic culture is the dominant culture in the Valley, it certainly is “one of the most obvious,” said Carlos Herrera, history professor at San Diego State University-Imperial Valley campus.

Among residents of the Valley one can also find “slight variations” in regard to how attuned they are to the Mexican culture, Herrera said, noting that someone from the Northend may not be as familiar with the cultural nuances and traditions as someone from Calexico.

Americans, who historically have made numerous demands on immigrants to adapt and assimilate, are increasingly finding themselves adapting to the Latino population, which represents potential customers and voters, Herrera said.

For Sanders, who has traveled extensively, being exposed to a different culture comes as a blessing.

Whether it is along the Gulf Coast, Midwest, or some urban metropolis, such exposure "broadens our opportunities for cross-cultural experiences," she said.

In her case, gaining a better understanding of the local Mexican culture stemmed from an interest in getting to know her classmates, co-workers and neighbors.

"It was almost like osmosis," Sanders said of the cultural insights she has gained over the years.

Nor does she feel that her African-American roots have been "displaced" in any way.

"I find that (my values) are shared among all the people I come in contact with," Sanders said.