

## BUSINESS BOOM FOR STATE'S HISPANICS



JOE MAHONEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

### Daniel Rodriguez, *Rockfish Graphix*

As president of Rockfish Graphix LLC based in Richmond, Rodriguez is among a growing number of Hispanics who own businesses.

# American dream made in Virginia

Latest census data indicate 19,000 Hispanic-owned firms are operating in state

**BY JEFFREY KELLEY**  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

A Chevy van and \$533.

It was all Roger E. Ortega Sr. needed. "That's what I opened the doors with," said the Denver native, a second-generation Mexican-American who founded underground utility firm OCS of Virginia Inc. in 1982.

Today, Ortega owns a Powhatan County company that has expanded from performing electrical work into laying utility lines and fiber-optic and television cables. The firm has about 50 employees.

"You go where the work is and you give your best," Ortega said yesterday. He notes his late father used to tell him, "When you play you play, when you work you work."

And for Hispanics, similar credos are paying off.

Virginia eclipsed the national average growth rate for Hispanic-owned companies, the number of firms rising 39 percent from 1997 to 2002, according to a report released yesterday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The national growth rate was 31 percent, the report said. That's three-times the national average for all American companies.

"It's not surprising to us," Michel Zajur, president and chief executive of the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said

### Hispanic businesses

A report released yesterday by the U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanic-owned businesses as firms in which Hispanics own 51 percent or more of the stock or equity of the company. The data compared information from 1997 to 2002. Among the report's findings:

**Virginia's ranking:** With an increase of 39 percent, the state ranked ninth in growth of Hispanic-owned businesses.

**Laborers rule:** Nearly three in 10 Hispanic-owned firms were in construction or other service-related industries.

**Ownership up:** Hispanics owned nearly 7 percent of all businesses in 2002, up from about 6 percent in 1997.

**Sales:** 29,184 Hispanic-owned firms generated sales of \$1 million or more in 2002.

COMPILED BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEE **BUSINESSES**, PAGE A7 ►



### Eugenia Lockett

*Real estate agent*

When Lockett came here from Mexico City 10 years ago, she had to learn a host of different rules and regulations — such idiosyncrasies as when to pay taxes and how to get a driver's license.

2002, BRUCE PARKER/TIMES-DISPATCH



### Roger E. Ortega Sr.

*OCS of Virginia Inc.*

Ortega owns a Powhatan County company that has expanded from performing electrical work into laying utility lines and fiber-optic and television cables. The firm has about 50 employees.

2002, LINDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

## Businesses

— FROM PAGE A1

of the growth. "I see it happen every day."

Nationwide, there were nearly 1.6 million Hispanic-owned businesses in 2002, generating roughly \$222 billion in revenue. Just under 19,000 of the firms were in Virginia that year, the report said.

While many startup or small companies face normal business challenges, Zajur notes some Hispanics must conquer additional hurdles.

They may understand English, but "they're not able to express themselves, or they come from different countries and they're learning for the first time how to do business here in the U.S.," said Zajur, whose group works to promote and educate Hispanic businesses.

In addition to learning English, "it's a language of knowing where to go, how to do business here."

Take Eugenia Lockett, who

moved here from Mexico City 10 years ago to sell real estate.

In addition to adjusting to the business climate, she had to learn a host of different rules and regulations — idiosyncrasies such as when to pay taxes and how to get a driver's license.

"There are things that Americans grow up with that they suppose everyone knows," said Lockett, who is a ReMax broker. "When you come as a businessperson into this country, not only do you face business challenges, but you have to learn the American way."

Though Rockfish Graphix LLC is registered as a minority firm with the Virginia Department of Minority Business Enterprise, President Daniel Rodriguez said the designation doesn't necessarily make a difference when bidding for state work.

No matter a person's race, the state still takes the lowest bidder, he said. But the competition is something he appreciates.

"For me, I try to give the best service I can," said the Virginia

Commonwealth University graduate.

"There's definitely more opportunity" for Hispanics in America, said Rodriguez, 29, who came to the U.S. from Venezuela a decade ago. "Life here, you're able to do a lot more. Down there, I'd probably still be living with my parents."

Rodriguez believes all firms should pay close attention to the fast-growing Hispanic demographic, the largest minority in the country, representing about 13 percent of the population.

More than 332,000 Hispanics live in Virginia, or about 4.7 percent of the state population, according to the Census Bureau.

Businesses must adapt to the group "just because there's so many Hispanics coming into the country," Rodriguez said. "If you have a multilingual business, every day it becomes more and more valuable."

• Contact staff writer Jeffrey Kelley at [jkelly@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jkelly@timesdispatch.com) or (804) 649-6348.