‘What home means’: COVID-19 exposed fault lines in one Midwestern city

Grand Island, Neb. — Carlos Barcenas has spent much of his life trying to make a place for himself here.

He arrived in 1994, a child from Guerrero, Mexico, after his father took over as pastor of a local church. He didn’t speak English. At first, he mostly listened.

Over time, he learned the language and found ways to participate. He painted over graffiti on highway overpasses. He began writing letters to the editor. He got involved at church, then in the schools. Years later, he would serve on the school board and volunteer for a COVID-19 vaccine trial.

He got the placebo.

For a long time, that slow accumulation — learning, contributing, showing up — made Grand Island feel like home.

Then the pandemic hit.

As the virus spread through the city, Barcenas began to notice something else surfacing alongside it — a sharper edge in how people talked about one another, a dividing line that hadn’t felt quite so visible before.

“It became an ‘us versus them,’” he said.

The shift has left him unsettled in a place he still calls “near and dear” — and asking a question he hadn’t expected to revisit after more than two decades here: what does home mean?

You can see the divide in the geography of the city.

Downtown Grand Island splits, in effect, into two. On one side of the train tracks is Railside, a redeveloped district with breweries and boutiques. On the other is Fourth Street, a stretch of immigrant-owned businesses — grocery stores, clothing shops, restaurants — less polished, but just as vital.

“Grand Island has two downtowns,” one labor organizer said.

For some residents, the difference is mostly aesthetic. For others, it reflects something deeper — a separation not just of space, but of familiarity.

Cesar Rafael, who owns a store on Fourth Street, remembers a former boss refusing to go there, dismissing it as “ghetto.” Rafael’s mother had a business on that same street.

Those underlying tensions became harder to ignore when COVID-19 arrived.

The outbreak at the JBS meatpacking plant — where hundreds of workers tested positive — quickly became the center of attention. Many of those workers were immigrants. Many lived in multigenerational households. Many could not afford to stay home.

Barcenas began to notice how those facts were interpreted.

The language of the pandemic — "essential" and "non-essential" — seemed, at times, to map onto something else.

"People say, 'Well, they should have just stayed home,'" he said. "But then you had people saying, 'I have to go to work. I cannot afford not to feed my family.'"

Health officials never determined exactly how the virus entered the community. But the visibility of the outbreak, and the demographics of the workforce, meant blame settled unevenly.

"It went racist really fast," a local pastor said.

The tension didn't always take the form of open confrontation.

Sometimes it showed up in smaller ways — in who people avoided at the grocery store, or in the tone of online comments that cast a broad "they" over entire groups of residents.

Miguel Estevez, a local therapist, said many of his clients — especially those who had contracted COVID — described not just the physical toll of the illness, but the social one.

They felt watched. Judged. At times, blamed.

"It was a little bit of hypocrisy," he said. "You're essential, but also, stay away."

None of this emerged in a vacuum.

Grand Island has been changing for decades — during the same years Barcenas was learning the language, building a life and, piece by piece, coming to feel that he belonged.

Immigration has fueled the city's growth even as other rural communities have stagnated or shrunk. In 1990, only a small share of Hall County residents were nonwhite or Latino. Today, roughly 30% of Grand Island's population is Hispanic,

and about 15% of residents are foreign-born. In the public schools, a majority of students are children of color.

Demographers expect much of Nebraska to look more like Grand Island in the decades ahead.

That change has brought both vitality and strain.

Sociologists describe places like Grand Island as following a “segmented” path of integration — where some children of immigrants move into higher-paying jobs and positions of influence, while many others remain in lower-wage work, often in the same industries that first drew their families here.

City leaders have tried to ease that transition. Schools have expanded translation services for families who speak dozens of languages. Community groups have worked to connect new arrivals with longer-established residents. Health providers have experimented with outreach beyond traditional clinical settings.

In some ways, those efforts have worked. Compared to the 1990s, when researchers found more overt hostility and fewer support systems, Grand Island is more connected, more aware of itself as a diverse community.

But the progress has been uneven — and incomplete.

Hispanic residents remain significantly more likely to live in poverty than white residents. They are less likely to graduate from high school or earn college degrees. And they are more likely to work in jobs — like meatpacking — that continued through the pandemic, even as other parts of the economy shut down.

In the early months, that imbalance showed up starkly.

At one local church, the congregation is split roughly evenly between white and Hispanic members. But during a devastating stretch last spring, every member who died from COVID-19 was Latino.

By the fall, infections had spread more broadly across the community. But the memory of those early losses lingered.

“They do a lot of jobs that a lot of Anglo-Americans don’t want to do,” the church’s pastor said.

Recognizing that — fully — would be a start.

For Barcenas, the question is less about statistics than about belonging.

He has spent decades building a life here — learning the language, raising a family, contributing where he could. None of that has changed.

What has changed, he said, is a heightened awareness of how quickly those bonds can fray.

How easily people can be sorted into categories. How fragile the sense of shared community can be under stress.

Grand Island is still home. He is clear about that.

But now, when he uses that word, it carries a question with it — one he hadn't expected to ask after all these years.

What, exactly, does it mean to belong?