



Boston Neighborhoods

WATERFRONT

Touring in tongues

A guide firm's mission proves to be anything but quixotic

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The 91-degree August morning doesn't alter Rafael Torres's energy level. Squinting in the bright sun, he calls out, "Tours in Spanish?" while offering brochures to Boston Harbor tourists.

"I love to do tours," he said. "If I have 40 people it's even better."

The 51-year-old native of Colombia developed an interest in tourism after 20 years of working for such organizations such as La Alianza Hispana and the YMCA. He started asking local tour companies if they wanted a bilingual guide, but, "They weren't interested," he said.

Torres wasn't discouraged; "I knew there had to be a market for other languages." In 1989, he trained as a New England Aquarium volunteer, guiding Spanish speakers through.

"I did my own survey," he said. "I talked to people and asked them if they'd like to do a tour in Spanish." After quite a number of affirmatives, he took the plunge. "I quit my job, sold my car, and started doing tours."

In 1991 Torres established Don Quijote Tours. His wife Maria Christina and daughter Emily coordinate operations out of an office in Quincy, where the family lives. Their ticket booth, staffed by Torres's nephew Felipe Cardenas, sits among the T-shirt carts and tourist information counters outside the Aquarium.

The company has grown to a fleet of six vehi-



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/WENDY MAEDA

A Don Quijote Tours bus prepares to depart from the New England Aquarium.

cles, offering three-hour tours of Boston and Cambridge in Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese.

"I went to San Francisco and did a tour in English, but I didn't get the details," said Alicia Quiroz of Ecuador, one of Torres's recent customers. "I get much more from this."

During one excursion, Torres stopped at MIT and offered this perspective to his clients:

"To those of you from other countries, you can see there's no trash, no army, no police. It's nice to study here," he said, to a nodding group. "In the US we're closed to [appreciating this because] we have so many opportunities."

Getting off the bus with his tour in Copley

Square, Torres pointed out the Boston Public Library and announced that "It has one of the best collections of Latin American texts in the country, including works of Jose Martí and Simon Bolívar."

Torres, who maintains his own library of books on local history, often tailors information to his clientele's background and quizzes his passengers. "In 1971 a Colombian won the Boston Marathon. What was his name?" (Alvaro Mejia).

In the mid-'90s, Don Quijote served about 60,000 clients annually, including visitors like the royal family of Spain and the governor of Sao Paulo, Brazil. But beginning last year, Torres could feel the decline in international visitors to Boston.

"People don't want to go to the airports. They're tired of it," he said, referring to increased security. He shelved the Spanish-language tourist magazine *Vea Boston* that he launched last summer in order to focus on maintaining his business.

One way he's kept Don Quijote going is through trips beyond Boston for local Spanish-speakers. He travels as far as Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Washington, D.C., but also goes on excursions to local sites like Plymouth Rock, the mansions of Newport, and the witch museums in Salem.

"When we go to Salem people think we're going to see witches flying around on brooms!" he said, laughing.