

New England Newspaper of the Year

The Standard-Times

SERVING THE SOUTHCOAST COMMUNITY

the new immigrants

They are tired and poor and yearning for opportunity when they arrive at the doorsteps of New Bedford's fish plants desperate for work. They have journeyed thousands of miles from their homes in Central America to join relatives and friends who came before them and settled in the triple-decker neighborhoods of the North End and South End. Many entered this country illegally after failing to qualify for tourist or immigrant visas. They left behind grinding poverty, high unemployment, violent crime — and parents, wives, husbands and children. They huddled in crowded buses, hid in car trunks and truck beds, slept in cold mountains, forded rushing rivers and marched through hot deserts to get to the United States.

Over the past two decades, a wave of Central American immigrants has washed into New Bedford, bringing eager, non-English speaking workers who both enrich and complicate the local landscape. Immigrant advocates estimate that there are 6,000 to 8,000 Central Americans living in New Bedford, as many as 70 percent illegally. Most were born in Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras. They have lived quietly in the shadows, largely invisible except for weekend soccer games and the daily commute by foot and bicycle to the city's fish plants. But, over a year ago, they were thrust into the limelight when federal immigration agents raided the Michael Bianco Inc. factory on March 6, 2007. The raid netted 361 illegal workers, mainly women and men from Central America who were sewing backpacks and vests for the U.S. military while their children were in school or at home with baby sitters.

In the days and weeks following the raid, New Bedford became a microcosm for the national immigration crisis. The raid coincided with a congressional effort to enact new immigration law and a months-long Standard-Times investigation of this city's newest wave of immigrants. The Bianco raid provided a doorway into this private Latino community as workers emerged from the shadows to tell their personal stories and lobby for immigration reform. They invited Standard-Times reporters and photographers into their homes, churches and neighborhoods to attend family celebrations and cultural festivals.

Our investigation has included interviews with advocates on both sides of the immigration debate as well as policy makers, religious leaders, elected officials, academics, researchers, business owners, waterfront workers and law enforcement officials. It culminated with a two-week reporting trip to Guatemala's Quiche region — home to most of New Bedford's 3,000 to 5,000 Guatemalan immigrants — which allowed us to witness firsthand what drives so many migrants to the United States and how wages they send home are affecting the country. Over the next four days, we will present these and other findings in the pages of this newspaper and in videos, slideshows and interactive graphics.

NEWS

Violence, natural disasters, poverty drives Central American exodus

BECKY W. EVANS

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The crowd applauds speakers at a reception of the Centro Comunitario de Trabajadores (Community Workers Center) held at St. Anthony's Church in New Bedford. The program featured a testimonial from a former Michael Bianco Factory worker who was one of the 361 people taken into custody by agents of the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency during a raid at the factory nine years ago on March 6, 2007. DAVID W. OLIVEIRA/STANDARD-TIMES SPECIAL/SCMG *Standard-Times*

Unimaginably brutal conflicts, devastating earthquakes and deadly hurricanes in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras sparked a wave of emigration from Central America to the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Economic conditions created by globalization have sustained the flow, and today, more than 2 million Central American immigrants live in the United States.

Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans are among the fastest-growing Central American groups in Massachusetts, according to a 2003 report by the UMass Boston Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy. The total state population of these three groups measured 34,944 persons in the 2000 census, a 98 percent increase since 1990. The report describes these groups as predominantly undocumented immigrants with low levels of education and a solid work ethic.

New Bedford's Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran immigrants are mostly young men and women of working age, usually in their 20s and 30s. Some are single; others are married with

young children. Multiple families might live together in one apartment to spread the cost of rent and utilities. The money they save, \$200 to \$500 per month, is wired to family members in Central America, who rely on it to pay school fees, build houses and buy food, clothing and medicine. However, according to a recent poll by the Inter-American Development Bank, fewer immigrants are sending money home to Latin America due to the U.S. economic slowdown and the harsher climate against immigration.

For those who can send money home, the added income at least doubles what most Central American families can earn in a year. In 2006, the gross national income per capita — the average income a person in a country is earning — was \$2,590 in Guatemala, \$2,680 in El Salvador and \$1,270 in Honduras, according to the World Bank, an international development agency. For comparison, the gross national income per capita in the United States was \$44,710.

About 30 percent of the city's Central American workers have legal status, while the remainder are illegal immigrants. The undocumented workers typically land jobs in seafood processing, light manufacturing, construction, landscaping and other local industries. They find work through temporary employment agencies and with the help of family connections — and fraudulent government identification documents. (Workers told The Standard-Times they paid \$125 to \$200 for fake documents, including a Social Security card and a permanent resident card, or green card.) They earn around \$7 per hour and rarely receive health insurance, vacation and other benefits. Many walk or bike to work since they lack a valid Social Security number needed to obtain a state driver's license.

When they are not working, Central American immigrants spend time at home with their families, play soccer in city parks and attend church services and community events. New Bedford police say they are more likely to be crime victims than to commit crimes. Some adults attend English as a second language class in the evenings after work. Those who are undocumented keep out of the public eye as much as possible due to the government's recent crackdown on illegal immigrants. It's as if they all have a bull's-eye painted on their back.

New Bedford has long been an immigrant city. But unlike today's Central American immigrants, those who came to the city before the 1920s came legally because there were few restrictions on immigration. The first settlers of non-British origins arrived in New Bedford in large numbers during the early part of the 19th century. Like the tide, immigration has come in waves ever since. And like the tide, capturing the exact nature of those waves is as much art as science.

According to the "Statistics and Volumes of the Massachusetts Census" kept at the New Bedford Free Public Library, the Irish were the first non-British settlers to come to the city in sizeable numbers. They settled in the West End and had established their first parish, St. Mary's, by the 1830s. The Irish remained the largest immigrant group for the rest of the 19th century, though many British immigrants — including some who came by way of Ireland — also came to the city during that time.

Starting in the 1870s, French Canadians arrived in significant numbers and by the turn of the 20th century, they had emerged as the largest immigrant group in New Bedford. The French Canadians came from both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Acadia) and Quebec. They settled

in the city's North and South Ends in the areas around St. Anthony of Padua Church on Acushnet Avenue, where the Sacred Heart Nursing Home stands today on Summer Street, and Brock Avenue.

While Portuguese whalers, as well as cod and mackerel fishermen, were present in the city as early as the 1850s, significant Azorean migration to New Bedford started several decades later, with the Madeirans arriving in the decades after that. The number of foreign-born Portuguese (which included Cape Verdeans in 19th century statistics) rose steadily and topped 15,000 in 1915, before declining when the United States instituted its first quota laws in 1921, according to the city's genealogist, Paul Cyr. A second wave of Portuguese immigrants came to the city during the 1960s and 1970s, after a volcanic eruption in the Azores. A wave of immigrants from mainland Portugal also came at this time as the dictatorial regime of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar wound down.

It is difficult to trace the Cape Verdean migration to New Bedford, although some whalers from the island nation arrived in the mid-19th century along with those from other Portuguese colonies. The 19th- and early 20th-century censuses did not distinguish between the Portuguese or the black migrations (between American-born African-Americans and Cape Verdeans).

By 1855, there was a sizeable African-American population in New Bedford — just shy of 1,400 — composed of freed Southern slaves, the descendants of northern slaves and a sprinkling of Cape Verdeans. A substantial stream of Cape Verdean immigrants, however, came to the city in the last two decades of the 19th century after droughts on the islands. The migration continued into the early decades of the 20th century, before resuming after the 1960s. Many found work in the local cranberry industry.

In the 1895 national census, the first significant migrations to New Bedford from Poland, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire are recorded in the state census. The city's Jewish immigrants arrived at this time, but because the census did not identify religion, it is difficult to discern the Catholic nationals from the Jewish ones, Mr. Cyr said.

Significant Greek and Lebanese immigration to New Bedford is first recorded in 1905 and for the next several decades; smaller numbers of Scandinavians came as far back as the 1850s, and in steady but comparatively small numbers after that. The Newfoundland Irish, in the same manner, began arriving in small numbers in the 1880s and in steady but comparatively small numbers after that.

The 1970s and 1980s brought large numbers of Puerto Ricans to New Bedford. The Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 had granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Rican citizens. Dominicans and Haitians were the next immigrants to arrive in New Bedford.

The past two decades, New Bedford has attracted a mix of foreign immigrants, among them Central Americans, Brazilians, Mexicans, West Africans, Ecuadorans and others. Immigrant advocates say the majority are undocumented workers, who either crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally or flew to the country and overstayed a tourist, student or work visa. Central

Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras make up the largest group of New Bedford's new immigrants.

U.S. immigration during the past two decades has differed from earlier European migrations, which had distinct beginning and end dates. In "The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader" (Routledge, 2005), the editors characterize recent immigration as "an ongoing flow" of diverse populations from Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean "that ever replenishes the immigrant stock of the nation." They identify the drivers of the new immigration as globalization, family reunification, the ease of mass transportation, instant access to information about job openings and the high demand for immigrant labor in the post-industrial economy.

One factor that sets the region's Central Americans apart from previous generations of immigrants is the undocumented status of many of them. This illegal identity brings both limitations and opportunities "in regards to work, housing, public services and education," according to the 2003 report by the UMass Boston group. It also causes a "cauldron of stresses in relationship to family stability and psychosocial well-being," according to the report.

The commonality between immigrant groups of the past and present is that both found their way to New Bedford through family networks, a process known as "chain migration." In many cases, the first immigrant to land a job and secure housing in the city sent word back to family members in another state or country. His relatives later joined him in New Bedford and relied on his knowledge of the city to find work.

During the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans fled to North America to escape their country's bloody civil war, which lasted from 1960 to 1996. Guatemalans settled in small communities around the United States, including New Jersey and Rhode Island in the Northeast.

U.S. foreign policy interests in Central America made it difficult for many Guatemalans and Salvadorans to receive political asylum in this country at that time. From 1984 to 1990, for example, the United States granted asylum to 25 percent of the 48,000 asylum applicants from Nicaragua, compared with only 2.6 percent of the 45,000 claims from Salvadorans and 1.8 percent of the 9,500 claims from Guatemalans, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank known as MPI.

"Most observers attribute this discrepancy to the U.S. policy of supporting anti-communist activity," according to an MPI report. "In the late 1980s, Nicaraguans were fleeing communist oppression, while the United States was supporting the Salvadoran government against a Marxist insurgency."

The first Guatemalans to come to New Bedford arrived in the late 1980s from Providence. Anibal Lucas, director of the New Bedford advocacy group Organization Maya K'iche, said the first Guatemalan Mayan who came to New Bedford found a job at F&B Rubberized tire recycling. He was followed by other Mayan immigrants from Providence who were hired to work at the city's fish processing plants. By the mid- to late 1990s, New Bedford had become a

direct destination for migrants from Guatemala, said Corinn Williams, executive director of the Community Economic Development Center of Southeastern Massachusetts.

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Among the city's new Central American immigrants, Guatemalans are more likely to be undocumented because they have had few opportunities to apply for a special type of legal immigration status available to some Salvadorans and Hondurans. Temporary protected status, or TPS, allows certain immigrants to live and work legally and temporarily in the United States, whether or not they entered the country legally.

The Secretary of Homeland Security can grant TPS to foreigners who are temporarily unable to return to their home country due to an ongoing armed conflict or an environmental disaster. Those who receive TPS must periodically apply for extensions. They are not eligible for permanent legal status and must return to their home country when TPS expires. Hondurans received TPS in 1998 following Hurricane Mitch. Salvadorans were granted TPS following the earthquakes in 2001. TPS extensions have been granted for both countries. Guatemalans, meanwhile, have not been granted TPS in connection with Hurricane Stan, which ravaged the country in 2005.

Some of New Bedford's Central American immigrants who came illegally to the United States have since gained permanent legal status or citizenship through a variety of avenues such as claiming political asylum, getting married to a U.S. citizen or being sponsored by an employer. "Little by little, people are making it through" the system, Ms. Williams said. And they are staying connected to their home countries. "People who have citizenship go home because they have the freedom to travel," she said. "They stay connected. They go back and visit their grandkids."

Few illegal immigrants return home to Central America to visit relatives, since it would mean having to cross the border illegally to get back inside the United States. Instead, they keep in touch with friends and family using cell phones and video conferencing technology.

As for what the future holds for those illegal immigrants, Ms. Williams says it depends if, when and how Congress and the next U.S. president choose to reform the country's immigration policy. If illegal immigrants are given amnesty and allowed to keep working in the United States, they will likely follow the same path as the country's earlier immigrant groups.

"Either it's optimism or inevitability, but I don't think the Latino community is immune from assimilation," she said. "History catches up with any immigrant group. The strengths (Central Americans) are coming with are incredible. There is some real potential for infusing vitality into a local community like New Bedford and also the country."

Mayor Scott W. Lang says all immigrants who came to New Bedford during the past 100 years have "added tremendous vitality to the city."

"The strength of New Bedford is its multiculturalism and diversity. We celebrate so many different religious holidays and cultural festivals."

As for the specific cultural contributions of New Bedford's Central American immigrants, Mayor Lang said they are difficult to measure when such a large portion of the community must live in the shadows.

"Central American culture in any city is going to be very interesting ... but until you get around the (illegal) immigration issue, you really don't get to those discussions," he said.

NEWS

Deported after raid, 20-year-old makes the best of it in Guatemala

BECKY W. EVANS

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Gaspar Francisco Lopez Suar, one of the 361 illegal immigrants detained during the raid on the Michael Bianco plant last March 6, was deported back to his hometown of Potrero Viejo, Guatemala. *Standard-Times*

POTRERO VIEJO, Guatemala — A framed, pink certificate from New Bedford Public Schools sits on the small nightstand beside the single bed Gaspar Francisco Lopez Suar, 20, shares with his 10-year-old brother.

Since being deported to Guatemala in early September, the former Michael Bianco Inc. employee has become the head of his household, which includes his brother, a 95-year-old grandfather, and four sisters, ages 12 to 19. His father and an older brother live illegally in New Bedford. His mother died two months after his father immigrated to New Bedford in 1999.

The Mayan family lives in a one-story cement house perched on a hillside in a rural Guatemalan village, or *aldea*. Peeping chicks scurry across the backyard patio, which overlooks a pine-forested valley.

Mr. Lopez (his father's surname) has worked hard to tidy up the homestead. He built a wooden staircase connecting the patio to the outhouse. He constructed a pipeline to divert dirty dishwater

that would otherwise drain into the corn and bean crops that feed the family. He also planted a patch of suburban green grass, an unlikely sight in this dusty countryside.

"I want to make my house like one in the United States," he said.

Mr. Lopez, who entered the United States illegally in 2004, learned to speak English during night school and summer school classes at New Bedford High School. In the summer of 2006, his perfect attendance earned him the certificate displayed on his night stand. But only a year later, he was behind bars at the Port Isabel Detention Center in Los Fresnos, Texas.

On March 6, 2007, Mr. Lopez was one of 361 illegal workers caught by U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement agents who raided the Michael Bianco, Inc. leather factory in New Bedford. He began sewing military backpacks at the factory in December 2004. Six months into the job, he was promoted to supervisor. He earned \$7.75 per hour and worked a double shift, though he said he did not receive overtime pay.

Mr. Lopez says he is haunted by images from the raid.

"That day was like the end of the world for me," he said, closing his eyes and running his thin hands nervously through his short, black hair.

He recalls watching a pregnant woman crawl across the floor as a mob of illegal workers raced to the back of the factory looking for an escape. Mr. Lopez stopped to give the woman some water from his backpack. An ICE agent asked whether he had legal documents, but he didn't. Three years earlier, he had paid a friend of a friend \$300 for fake identification papers.

After the raid, Mr. Lopez and his older brother were handcuffed with the other factory workers (many of them women with young children left behind at school or daycare) and taken by bus to Fort Devens for processing. Mr. Lopez remembers a cold night in which he slept on a small cot, filling out paperwork; he had no access to a lawyer. The next morning, he, his brother and many of the detainees were flown to Texas. Their hands and feet were placed in cuffs during the flight, he said.

"I'm OK with how they treated us if I had gotten into a crime like drugs ... but I'm only working," he said. "My crime, it was crossing the border only. I don't have any bad record in the United States."

During his six months at the Texas detention center, Mr. Lopez shared a room with 75 men and slept in a bunk bed. To pass the time, he made drawings and studied the Bible. He also fought to stay in the country.

"I saw in the United States I had more chances than here," he said from his home in Guatemala.

Mr. Lopez hired a Providence lawyer, who in turn hired a Texas lawyer to represent him. In the end, Mr. Lopez said he had to fight the case on his own. He said he received letters of support

from Our Lady of Guadalupe at Saint James Church and from his English teacher, former New Bedford Mayor George Rogers.

Sitting on the concrete patio floor, Mr. Lopez takes out a thick file folder filled with documents related to his arrest and deportation. He pulls out a letter from Mr. Rogers and hands it to a reporter.

In the letter, Mr. Rogers writes that Mr. Lopez *"was one of my best students. It would be a shame if he is not allowed to return home and continue to work towards his goal of citizenship and economic progress."*

In the end, Mr. Lopez failed to win his case. After six months in prison, he opted for voluntary deportation.

"Jail is very hard," he said. "A lot of people signed the paper, even me. I signed it in the end."

Mr. Lopez, his brother, and a neighbor from the same village were deported by plane to Guatemala on Sept. 7, 2007. They faced two hours of questioning at the Guatemala City airport before they were allowed to walk away with whatever clothing and money were in their possession on the day of the Bianco raid.

The brothers hitched a ride back to their village with a bus-driver friend who works in Guatemala City. Mr. Lopez decided to remain in his village home to care for his siblings, while his brother opted to return to New Bedford another harrowing journey across the Mexico and United States borders.

"I made a decision that if they deported me, it is because God permitted it," Mr. Lopez said. "And I decided that if God was permitting that to happen to me, it was OK. I would stay here and go back to school and try to give 100 percent in school. Maybe I will go on with my education and be somebody in medicine. If I can be a doctor, maybe I will apply for a visa to go to the United States again, but legal."

Since January, Mr. Lopez has been attending high school-level nursing classes. He worries that he might not have enough money to pay for college and pursue a degree in medicine.

Standing on the patio in a gray T-shirt and black jeans, he gazes out across the valley. A rooster crows from a nearby yard.

"It is pretty, yes, but the economic situation in my country is bad. They do not pay you enough."

NEWS

Deportations to Guatemala on the rise

BECKY W. EVANS

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Ilda Susana Hernandez, 11, Sofia Luiz Jimon, center, and Juliana Rodriguez Garcia all cook the days lunch. Sofia's sister Viviana Luiz de Hernandez, 26 was a Bianco employee and then was deported back to Xicalcal, Guatemala. *Standard-Times*

Planeloads of deportees arrived in Guatemala from the United States nearly every week in 2007 as the Bush Administration stepped up enforcement activity against the country's estimated 12 million illegal immigrants.

"Every week four to five flights arrive," Ricardo Falla, a Jesuit priest and Guatemalan anthropologist, told a group of Guatemalan immigrants who gathered in the basement of New Bedford's St. Killian's Church in November.

"Hundreds and hundreds of people are being deported," he said.

The actual numbers are in the tens of thousands. The International Organization for Migration estimates that nearly 25,000 Guatemalan citizens were deported by air from the United States in 2007. The estimate marks a 255 percent increase from 2004, when 7,029 Guatemalans, including

200 children, were deported by air from the United States. The number of deportations increased to 11,512 in 2005 and to 18,302 in 2006.

Victor Garcia was deported to Guatemala in September 2007 — six months after he was caught in a federal immigration raid at the Michael Bianco Inc. leather factory in New Bedford's South End. While he sewed backpacks and vests for U.S. troops overseas, the illegal immigrant didn't worry much about being deported.

"I was thinking of having a job, earning some money and coming back again," he said.

"In the past, they only deported people who were criminals," said his sister-in-law, Estela.

Since returning to Guatemala, Victor has been unable to find a job to support his wife and four children. He needs to earn \$5,000 to complete their half-built house.

Ana Gutierrez Castro, a teacher and business owner who lives in Guatemala, is helping the Rev. Falla research the impact of deportation on Guatemalan migrants. She has found that many struggle with depression and alcoholism as they try to readjust to their lives in Guatemala.

"It's very sad to see them in my community," she said. "They arrive and have lost everything. They feel like they didn't achieve their goals."

Most deportees talk little about their experience in the United States and the "dehumanizing" manner in which they were caught and deported, she said. They stick to themselves and their families and do not integrate with the larger community.

"Many people who return don't know how to tell what they feel," she said. "It is not easy to tell their story. When they are drunk is when they talk about the situation."

Some deportees return to Guatemala only to leave again for the United States. "It can be even worse if they get brought back or come home a second time," she said.

Rev. Falla is studying the 5 percent of migrants who return voluntarily to Guatemala from the United States. He calls them "living remittances." Just like monetary remittances (wages sent home by migrants), they have the power to do good or evil, he said. Those who return to Guatemala have often gained self-confidence from their journey to the United States and the experience of living abroad. When they return home, they can use that empowerment in one of two ways. "They can be agents of transformation in their communities, for better or worse," Rev. Falla said.

Some migrants will get involved in political parties and other groups that are fighting for social change, he said. Others may join gangs and become involved in drug-trafficking or people smuggling.

NEWS

In a remote Guatemalan village, links to New Bedford abound

BECKY W. EVANS

Published 11:00 p.m. ET March 5, 2008



Pablo Hernandez, 22, worked at Bianco for a year before the raid and was then deported. Behind him is his brother Filiberto, 26, on his motorcycle in the remote village of Xicalcal. Filiberto's wife Viviana voluntarily returned to Guatemala after the raid with their son Jeffery Abraham Hernandez, 2, who was born in New Bedford. *Standard-Times*

XICALCAL, Guatemala — In a remote, highland village in rural Guatemala, families are still reeling from a U.S. immigration raid that took place thousands of miles from their home. Eleven residents returned to the small Mayan village of Xicalcal (SHEE'-kawl-kawl) in September after being deported from the United States. They had entered the country illegally and found work sewing at the Michael Bianco Inc. factory in New Bedford.

A year after U.S. immigration agents seized 361 undocumented Bianco workers, some families in Xicalcal are adjusting to the joys and hardships associated with the return of their loved ones. Others are waiting to learn the fate of relatives who face deportation hearings in Texas or Massachusetts.

Viviana and Filiberto Hernandez have chosen to raise their 2-year-old son in one of Guatemala's poorest regions even though the child is a U.S. citizen. It was a difficult choice, but one the

parents say is necessary to keep their family together. Jeffrey Abram Hernandez was born in the United States shortly after his parents settled in New Bedford in 2005. Relatives already living in the city helped the couple acquire fake documents and land jobs in the fishing and landscaping industries. After a year, they were hired at the Bianco factory.

The parents were separated the day of the raid. Immigration agents released Viviana to care for Jeffrey. Filiberto, meanwhile, was taken to Fort Devens for processing and later flown to a Texas detention facility. When Viviana discusses their separation with a reporter, her chocolate brown eyes swell with tears. Filiberto says nothing, but tears slide easily down his face. "It felt like they took away half of my life, half of my heart," Viviana says in Spanish.

While her husband sat in jail, Viviana struggled to pay rent and utility bills for their New Bedford apartment. She was prohibited from working while fighting her case in immigration court. Once a week, Filiberto would call his wife from prison to discuss their uncertain future.

Four months after the raid, Viviana opted for voluntary deportation. "I was afraid I would lose my son if they caught me again," she says. She and Jeffrey returned to Xicalcal to live with Filiberto's family. They waited three months for Filiberto to join them.

The family now lives with Filiberto's mother, sisters and brothers in a newly built house financed by Filiberto's father, who works in a New Bedford fish house. Since returning to Xicalcal, Filiberto has been unable to find a job. He says he dreams of returning to New Bedford, where he could earn enough money to build his own house in Xicalcal.

If anyone returns to the United States, it should be Jeffrey, Viviana says. "Someday he will go back and fight for his rights."

Estela Garcia is tired of waiting for her husband Sabino to be released from detention in Texas. She has children to feed, corn to plant and firewood to gather. And she doesn't have any money. "We are a poor family," she says in Spanish. "We don't have anything." As she speaks with a reporter through an interpreter, her three boys run around the adobe house and climb trees in the yard. They are barefoot and wear worn-out clothing stained with dirt.

Sabino Garcia Garcia has spent the past year at Port Isabel Detention Center in Los Fresnos, Texas. His three brothers were released from the same prison in September and deported to Guatemala. Two of the brothers are living in Xicalcal and a third has already returned illegally to New Bedford.

Mrs. Garcia doesn't understand why her husband is still in jail, the last worker from the Bianco raid still behind bars. She looks for answers in a letter that he wrote to her from prison on Dec. 7, 2007. "*The reason for this letter is to ask you to forgive me because I don't send any money because I'm still in jail,*" Mr. Garcia writes in Spanish. "*I feel very sad thinking of you and my sons.*"

He writes that a Boston lawyer is trying to help him get out of jail. He mentions telling the lawyer that if he comes back to Guatemala he may be killed. Mrs. Garcia explains that her husband is in danger because of a family dispute over a money scam. While she waits for her husband, she is doing her best to feed her children and keep them in school. "Education is the most important thing in life," she says, noting that she was too poor to attend school herself.

Though public school is free, parents are asked to pay dues that Mrs. Garcia can't afford. She scrapes together what she can to buy shoes and clothing for her boys to wear to school. Instead of lunch money, she gives them fruit.

Pedro Garcia Garcia is once again working in the fields of Guatemala. He makes about \$6 per day, a little more than average in Guatemala, but still a far cry from the \$7 per hour he was paid while sewing military backpacks and vests at the Bianco factory.

Mr. Garcia says he would return illegally to New Bedford if he could afford it. But he doesn't have \$4,000 to pay a guide, or coyote, to accompany him on the long, treacherous journey through Guatemala, Mexico and across the U.S.-Mexico border. Although he worked in New Bedford for four years, Mr. Garcia says he has no savings. He spent all of his money helping his three brothers illegally immigrate to the United States. All four brothers were caught in the Bianco raid. "Now I don't have anything," he says.

Mr. Garcia's father died when he was a boy, leaving his mother to raise a daughter and four sons. She sold two cows to buy the property where the family now lives in an adobe house. The small, one-story house has a kitchen and two bedrooms. The floors are made of dirt and the small windows have neither glass nor screens. When he lived in New Bedford, Mr. Garcia says his dream was to make enough money to build a better house for his family in Xicalcal. "That never happened," he says. "I couldn't make that dream."

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Pedro Ruiz Gomez is happy to be reunited with his four children and his mother. He is back working at his small convenience store, which sells bottled water, candy and bags of chips. But he misses his wife, who is still living in New Bedford.

The couple worked at the Bianco factory together. Both were flown to a Texas detention facility following the raid. Mrs. Ruiz was released from the prison after paying \$5,000 in bond money that she borrowed from a relative. She returned to New Bedford and is working part-time as she fights to stay in the country.

Mr. Gomez, who was unable to be freed on bond, was deported to Guatemala after six months in prison. "Now I'm taking care of the kids and doing the cooking," he says. He talks with his wife once every two weeks. They have decided that if she wins her case, she will stay in the United States to earn money needed to pay off the family's debts. Mr. Gomez says he has no plans to return to New Bedford. "I don't want to cross the border again."

NEWS

Chapel in Guatemala a testament to civil war horrors

BECKY W. EVANS

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Soldiers from the Guatemalan army invaded Zacualpa in the 1980s and occupied the Espiritu Santo Catholic Church and Monastery. Since named the “Chapel of Martyrdom,” the torture room’s cement walls, stained with faded streaks of blood, are lined with photographs of victims, crosses and rosary beads. *Standard-Times*

ZACUALPA, Guatemala — There is a tiny chapel here that tells the story of why Guatemalans first migrated to the United States.

The chapel is decorated with flowers, rosaries and wooden crosses bearing the names of residents from this Mayan town who were massacred by government soldiers at the height of Guatemala’s 36-year-long civil war.

Faded blood streaks on the cement walls and a tattered rope dangling from the ceiling offer evidence of the chapel’s former life as a torture chamber.

When the Guatemalan army invaded Zacualpa during the early 1980s, soldiers occupied Espiritu Santo Catholic Church and Monastery. They used the sanctuary and grounds of the 16th century church as a barracks and for torturing suspected insurgents. Dead bodies were thrown down the well.

Thirty years later, the torture room has been renamed the "Chapel of Martyrdom." The walls are lined with black-and-white photographs of the dozens of Catholic bishops, priests, nuns and catechists (lay faith instructors) murdered during the war. Guatemala's migrants often pray in the chapel before beginning their journey to the United States.

"They ask for the martyrs to protect them and to go with them," says Maria Alvarez Lopez, a Franciscan nun who lives at the monastery. "They want that fighting spirit to accompany them."

The first wave of Guatemalan migrants came to North America to flee the civil war that raged in their country for more than 30 years. Today's migrants are fleeing the remnants of that war: poverty and violence.

"Violence is a reality that has substituted (for) war," says Catholic Bishop Mario Alberto Molina of the Diocese of Quiche in Guatemala. "Violence is serious in the capital city and it is serious in (more rural) places like Santa Cruz del Quiche. There is news of unexplained deaths and violent deaths."

Guatemala's murder rates are among the highest in the world. The number of violent deaths totaled 5,885 in 2006, a 60 percent increase from those deaths recorded in 2003, according to a report by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), a research and advisory firm. The EIU blames the escalating violence on poverty, high unemployment, easily accessible firearms, a weak justice system, and a poorly-trained and under-resourced police force.

Youth street gangs, called *maras*, are responsible for an increasing number of robberies, rapes, and murders. Organized crime groups, meanwhile, are involved in drug-trafficking, kidnapping, people-smuggling, money laundering, and other criminal activities.

"There are suggestions that some organized crime groups are linked to officials from the armed forces who were active during the civil war," according to the EIU report.

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala was absorbed in a bloody conflict between military governments, right-wing vigilante groups and leftist guerillas. By the end of the war, more than 200,000 civilians — mostly Mayan indigenous peoples — were dead or missing. Many were victims of arbitrary execution, torture, rape, and other human rights violations and acts of violence.

The roots of the conflict lay in a land controversy between indigenous peasant farmers and large landowners such as U.S.-owned banana exporter United Fruit Co. Since the 1800s, the farmers had been kicked off their land and forced to work on large cotton, sugar cane, and coffee plantations.

The leftist governments of Juan Jose Arevlo (1945-51) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-54) brought social and agrarian reforms aimed at redistributing land, increasing indigenous rights, and stimulating the economy. When Mr. Arbenz passed a law allowing the government to confiscate portions of plantations and redistribute them to landless farmers, he faced strong opposition from United Fruit and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower. In 1954, he was ousted by a U.S.-backed military coup.

Mr. Arbenz was succeeded by a string of military presidents who reversed land reform measures and made voting dependent on literacy, thereby excluding about 75 percent of the population. In the 1960s, civil war erupted as left-wing guerilla groups formed in opposition to the military governments.

The violence peaked during the one-year presidency of military dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-83). He stepped up counter-insurgency campaigns in Mayan villages in an effort to exterminate anyone believed to be linked with the guerilla movement. Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans fled to Mexico, the United States, and Canada to escape the war.

Due to its support for the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador, the U.S. government under the Reagan administration denied the applications of many Guatemalans and Salvadorans who applied for political asylum during the 1980s. Thousands of political asylum seekers were arrested at the U.S.-Mexico border and deported. The passage of the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act allowed some Guatemalans and Salvadorans whose applications were rejected to reapply for political asylum. The law resulted from a class-action settlement between the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and religious groups and refugee advocates.

During the presidency of Gen. Ríos Montt, there were at least 100 massacres in the Quiché region of Guatemala, where most of New Bedford's Mayan immigrants were born. Hundreds of villages were destroyed, including the fields that had been collectively farmed and harvested.

An estimated 1,500 people from Zacualpa and its surrounding villages died in the massacres. A 31-year-old resident says she remembers soldiers hanging people from the branches of the giant Ceiba tree, which still stands in the town plaza. She was 5 years old at the time.

She said soldiers brought her father into the torture chamber after suspecting he was a guerrilla. Her father, who was not a guerilla, was saved from execution by a friend who miraculously convinced the soldiers of his innocence.

Zacualpa was one of several towns studied by the Commission for Historical Clarification to prove that acts of genocide were committed during the civil war. The commission was established through the Accord of Oslo on June 23, 1994, to clarify the human rights violations and acts of violence connected with the war. It concluded that the state and related paramilitary groups were responsible for 93 percent of the violations, including 92 percent of the arbitrary executions and 91 percent of forced disappearances.

The civil war victims included men, women and children from all social classes, according to the commission's report. They were workers, professionals, church members, politicians, peasants, students and academics. The vast majority were Mayans.

The fighting between the government and the guerrillas ended with the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, which was brokered by the United Nations. The guerrillas were demobilized and the state's armed forces reduced in size by one-third. The agreement contained an ambitious blueprint for political, social and economic reforms that addressed the rights of the Mayans.

Many of the reforms related to indigenous rights, women, health care and education have yet to be achieved.

"The long-range accords that implied the transformation of the political structures and of Guatemalan society, those accords have not been touched," Bishop Molina said. "Why? Too many interests involved, and many prejudices."

The slow pace of social and political reform has allowed criminals to evade punishment.

"Neither the police nor the judiciary have been able to respond effectively to the rise in violent crime, which in turn has led to vigilante 'justice' and public lynching of suspects," according to the EIU report.

Religious leaders say that many Guatemalans who survived the civil war still suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. The war is a topic that they discuss infrequently and in safe company, said Tomas Ventura, a priest at Santo Tomas Catholic Church in Chichicastenango.

"The wounds from the civil war are still fresh," Father Ventura said. "It is something in their hearts that they still think about."

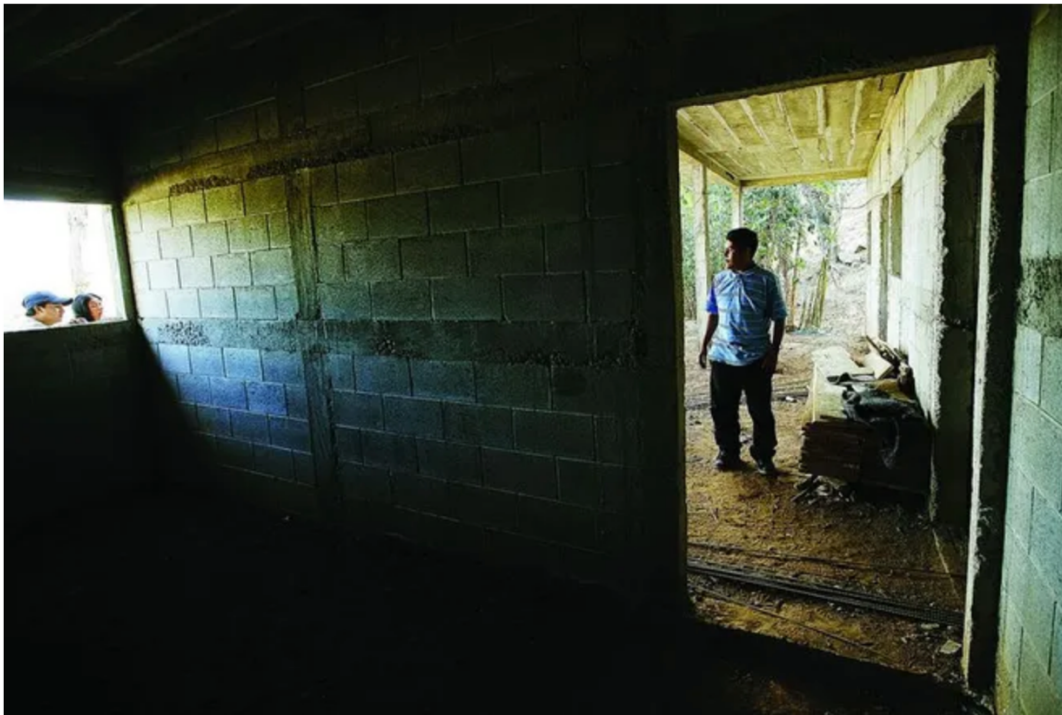
Even in New Bedford, civil war memories continue to haunt Guatemalan immigrants. When federal immigration officials raided Michael Bianco Inc. on March 6, 2007, helicopters hovered over the South End leather factory, terrifying some workers who associated the sounds with deadly helicopter raids carried out by the Guatemalan army, said the Rev. Marc Fallon of Catholic Social Services, who ministers to the city's Mayan immigrants.

"For our parishioners, for our neighbors, for our colleagues who were children during Central America's civil wars, a helicopter means a barbarous army — and death," he said.

Wages earned in Whaling City transform Guatemalan village

BECKY W. EVANS

Published 12:00 a.m. ET June 29, 2008 | Updated 6:38 p.m. ET June 27, 2008



Victor Garcia, one of the detainees of the 2007 immigration raid on the Michael Bianco factory in the South End of New Bedford, finds himself back in his hometown of Xicalcal, Guatemala, with wife, Juana Ruiz Garcia, and two daughters, Brenda Marivel Garcia and twin Lidia Yanette Garcia. *Standard-Times*

XICALCAL, Guatemala — The story of immigration in 2008 is playing out in this rural village, where concrete houses, financed by an influx of U.S. dollars, are springing up from the cornfields.

Most residents of the tiny village can name a close relative who lives in New Bedford. Wages earned in the Whaling City's fish plants and factories are helping families in Xicalcal (CHEE'-kawl-kawl) build larger homes with tiled roofs, glass windows and metal doors. Their smaller, more traditional houses are constructed of adobe bricks and have open windows and doorways.

In another village, all 16 members of the Josefa-Calel family live in the middle of the woods. Pigs, puppies, chicks, and turkeys wander beneath the scraggly shrubs and trees that serve as drying racks and closets for the family's wardrobe of second-hand clothing. Meals are cooked over an open fire in a small hut made of corn stalks. Similar huts scattered around the property offer rickety beds with thin mattresses and worn blankets.

Less than 200 yards from the wooded compound, a neighboring family has built a three-story house from brick and concrete. A spiral staircase winds up the side of the house. A car is parked in the driveway and secured by a locked gate. Both villages are located in the northwest highlands of Quiche, one of Guatemala's poorest provinces and the region that most of New Bedford's Guatemalan immigrants call home.

According to the development group World Bank, about 56 percent of all Guatemalans (76 percent of indigenous groups) lived in poverty in 2000, while 16 percent lived in extreme poverty. Adults on average had 5.4 years of schooling, and indigenous people had 1.9 years. Life expectancy, malnutrition and infant and mortality rates were weak compared to other middle-income countries.

In Quiche, 85 percent of the population is indigenous, mainly of Mayan descent. Eighty-two percent of the region's population lives in rural areas, some of which lack basic infrastructure services such as water, electricity, health and sanitation. Two-thirds of the population is illiterate. Adolescents who graduate from primary school, which lasts for six years, have few opportunities to advance their education. Jobs are scarce, and those who are employed work mainly on small farms that grow corn and other produce.

"There are very few opportunities here," says Rene Patal Lopez, acting director for CARE-Guatemala, an international humanitarian organization.

Mr. Patel, who grew up poor himself, says a typical impoverished family in Quiche lives in a two-room house on a small plot of land planted with corn and bean crops. There is likely a father, mother and seven to eight children. The father has about three to four years of schooling and makes about \$4 per day working in the fields. To supplement his income, the children might drop out of school and find work.

To escape Guatemala's crushing poverty, high unemployment and violent crime, many Quiche residents are migrating to New Bedford, Providence and other U.S. cities with growing Central American populations. An estimated 1.4 million Guatemalans (11 percent of the population) live in the United States, as many as 60 percent illegally. Immigration advocates estimate that there are 3,000 to 5,000 Guatemalans, mostly Mayan immigrants, living in New Bedford.

"A lot of them choose to go to the U.S. because they have contacts there who call them and say they can get jobs," says Lucia Tecum Lindo, a student at a law school in Santa Cruz del Quiche, capital of the Quiche province.

Guatemalan immigrants who find jobs at New Bedford seafood processing plants, landscaping businesses and factories send a portion of their wages — \$200 to \$500 per month — back home. The additional income doubles what the average Guatemalan earns in a year. Their families rely on the money, known as remittances, to cover everyday expenses for food, clothing, education and medical care. A large portion of remittances is spent on improving housing conditions.

"Their dream is to buy land where you can stay and nobody can take you away," says Quiche resident and librarian Alba Estrada, referring to the chronic displacement the Maya have suffered

since the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in 1521. (The Maya trace their ancestry to the ancient Mayan civilization, which flourished in Central America from A.D. 250 to A.D. 900.)

Following the Spanish conquest, large landowners seized property from the Maya and forced them to farm the land. In the 1800s and early 1900s, Maya who lived in Guatemala's northwestern highlands spent most of the spring and summer months working on coastal sugar cane, tobacco, coffee and banana plantations, many owned by foreign corporations, such as U.S.-owned United Fruit Co. In the winter, they would return to their villages to cultivate their own bean and corn crops.

This internal migration pattern continues today for some poor Guatemalans. Others have chosen instead to migrate across international borders. "Migration has always been part of indigenous life," says Ricardo Falla, a Jesuit priest and Guatemalan anthropologist.

Victor Garcia Garcia left Xicalcal for the United States in 2004. His wife, Juana, and their four children stayed behind. "There are no jobs," he says matter-of-factly, explaining why he took his chances and immigrated illegally to the United States. Victor and Juana met in Guatemala City while sewing jeans and other apparel at a Guatemala-owned factory, known as a maquiladora or maquila, that assembles imported materials for export. After marrying, the couple moved to Xicalcal to live with Juana's parents in their small farm house. Juana's father gave them a small patch of land to build their own house, but Victor could not find a job to pay for the construction.

With the help of his older brother who lived in New Bedford, Victor paid thousands of dollars for a guide, known as a coyote, to help him travel illegally through Mexico and across the border to the United States. He planned to stay for five years, just long enough, he says, to build his dream house in Xicalcal.

After finding work sewing military backpacks at the Michael Bianco Inc. leather factory in New Bedford, Victor began sending Juana \$400 to \$600 every month to pay for housing construction. Juana kept busy raising their children and supervising four masons hired to do the cement work. The payments stopped when Victor was caught by immigration agents during a federal raid at the Bianco plant on March 6, 2007. He spent six months in a Texas prison before being deported.

Today, Victor is once again living with his in-laws in Xicalcal. Juana says she is happy to have her husband home to "help take care of the children." But Victor misses working in the United States. He wears a grim expression while giving a reporter a tour of his half-built home. He says he needs \$5,000 to complete the construction. To raise that sum working five days per week in Xicalcal, where he would make about \$4 per day, he will need to work for at least five years. If he were still working 40-hour weeks in New Bedford and being paid \$7 per hour, he could earn that amount in about five months.

Since there are few jobs in Xicalcal, Victor is considering returning to Guatemala City — about a five-hour bus ride away — to work at another maquila, where he might earn \$6 to \$8 per day.

"Little by little, I will raise enough money to finish my house," he said.

NEWS

Brothers' lives diverge after years in U.S.

BECKY W. EVANS

Published 12:00 a.m. ET July 1, 2008 | Updated 2:53 p.m. ET June 30, 2008



Maria Osorio Garcia offers some comfort to her son Cirilo Garcia, 29, who lost his leg in a motorcycle accident in Zacualpa, Guatemala. *Standard-Times*

ZACUALPA, Guatemala — Two brothers who immigrated together to the United States more than a decade ago now live worlds apart. One is a legal U.S. resident who lives in Providence and works for a Rehoboth cement company. The other, who never received a chance at earning legal status, is recovering from a motorcycle accident in their hometown of Zacualpa.

Jorge and Cirilo Garcia, 27 and 29 respectively, spent their childhood with seven siblings and their parents in this large Mayan town tucked in the mountains of Guatemala's northwest highlands. When they weren't in school, the boys helped their farmer father raise tomatoes. But like many who live in Guatemala's Quiche region, poverty forced them to migrate to the United States in their late teen years.

"I wanted to keep studying, but my father couldn't afford to help us," Jorge said.

In 1997, the brothers left Zacualpa with 45 others to join relatives who were living and working in Providence. Highlights from their harrowing 31-day journey through Guatemala, Mexico and the United States include hiding in a box for six hours in the back of a pickup truck, illegally crossing the Mexico-Arizona border through the mountains, and walking across the Arizona desert for 12 hours during the middle of the night, when it was so cold their water bottles froze.

When they arrived in Providence, Jorge and Cirilo were reunited with their older brother and sister, two uncles, and other relatives who came many years before them and helped pay for their journey. Jorge says he and other Guatemalan immigrants often refer to Providence as "Little Zacualpa" because there are so many people from the town where he grew up.

The brothers first found work in New Bedford. Friends helped them acquire fake identification documents and jobs at a city fish processing plant. But the company only hired them to work about 10 hours per week, not enough to cover their living expenses and allow them to send money back to Guatemala to support their parents and siblings.

"It was tough in the beginning," Jorge says. "It was tough to get a job." The brothers eventually found full-time employment at a Providence poultry plant. That's when their paths began to diverge. Cirilo injured his hand while loading boxes filled with ice and had to leave the job. He later found work as a cook for the Ninety Nine restaurant chain.

Jorge continued to work at the poultry plant. He took English-as-a-second-language classes for two years at the Community College of Rhode Island. Learning English "helped me a lot at my job," he said. "I got more money."

The plant offered to sponsor him and about 20 other undocumented employees for legal permanent resident status. It was a gamble, Jorge says, because the application process could lead to deportation or imprisonment depending on an investigation by immigration officials. Only 12 of the workers took the chance. "I decided to do it since I never had any problems with the police," Jorge said. "They investigated me and I did fine. ... When they called me to immigration for an interview, I was nervous. They asked me all these questions and then they said, 'Welcome to the United States.'"

Jorge received his green card in March 2005 and a month later, he flew home to Zacualpa to see his family for the first time in eight years. The green card allows him to travel back and forth between Guatemala and the United States, but if he leaves the country for more than six months he will lose his eligibility to become a U.S. citizen in 2010.

Jorge worked at the poultry plant for a year after earning his green card. He took a new job at a Seekonk machine shop, which he recently left for a higher-paying job at the Rehoboth cement company.

Cirilo, meanwhile, worked as a Ninety Nine cook for eight years. A year and a half ago, he decided to return to Guatemala because he missed his family. He bought a small truck and started his own moving company.

On New Year's Day of 2008, he went to visit friends who live outside of Zacualpa. He rode the motorcycle that he and Jorge had purchased together. On the way to his friend's home, Cirilo was struck by an oncoming pickup truck as it passed a car on a winding, narrow road. His left leg was badly injured and had to be amputated.

Jorge is sitting with Cirilo in a hot, dark bedroom at their parents' small home in Zacualpa. An American movie, dubbed in Spanish, plays on the large-screen TV in the corner. The walls are covered with half-deflated balloons and posters scrawled with messages of hope and healing. Some are taken from the Bible: "For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, 'Do not fear; I will help you,'" *Isaiah 41:13*.

Cirilo sits on his bed with a blanket wrapped around the stub of his amputated leg. Both of his hands are wrapped in bandages. His mother and younger sister, dressed in colorful Mayan skirts, hover around him, taking his temperature, helping him drink a glass of water and reapplying his bandages. "I had a different life a month ago," he said.

Jorge sits on a stool next to the bed. He and his oldest brother, Victor, flew from Providence to Guatemala as soon as they heard about Cirilo's accident. A few years ago, both had missed the chance to say goodbye to their youngest brother, Augusto, who died in Guatemala from an infection related to a leg injury he sustained in a soccer game. He, too, had to have his leg amputated.

Jorge has extended his stay in Zacualpa by a few weeks to spend more time with Cirilo. He says he is also enjoying reconnecting with childhood friends. "This is my hometown," he said. "I like it better than anywhere." But he says he will return to the United States to work and pursue his opportunity for citizenship. In Providence, he shares an apartment with his younger brother, Juan, in a house owned by Victor, his oldest brother. His oldest sister, Juana, also owns a house in Providence.

The siblings call home to Guatemala at least once a week. Every few months, they send \$300 to a bank account in Zacualpa, which they set up for their parents. The money has helped pay for food and goods as well as college tuition for their sister, Cecilia. Jorge says his mother, Maria, refuses to stop working and is reluctant to use her children's money. "She wants us to have a good life here," he said. "She still works."

The 53-year-old wakes up every day at 3 a.m. to make "atol," a traditional hot drink made of rice and milk, which she sells in the park. She also earns money serving lunch to school children.

Looking at Cirilo, Jorge says he is glad his brother will be staying in Guatemala. "He's the only man here," he said. "My father and mother are old. I'm glad he's here to take care of my parents."

When asked about his uncertain future, Cirilo says it is difficult to compare life in Guatemala with life in Providence. "Life is totally different," he said. "Here I can live free and there is less pressure to pay the bills every month ... but there are not the same opportunities here."

NEWS

For some, opportunity is found in homeland

BECKY W. EVANS

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Casimiro Pixcar Gonzalez, who lived in New Bedford between 1995 and 2000, before deciding to immigrate back to his hometown of Chinique in Guatemala helps customers at one of his two stores in town. Mr. Gonzalez owns an internet cafe and a school supply store just off the small towns square. *Standard-Times*

CHINIQUE, Guatemala — Casimiro Pixcar Gonzalez, 38, is the unofficial mayor of Chinique. Everybody in the small Guatemalan town knows the soft-spoken man with the friendly smile. On a hot weekday afternoon, he can be found working at his small Internet cafe or selling notebooks, pencils, and other school supplies at his stationery store.

He says he makes enough money to get by, though not nearly as much as he could in the United States. He knows first-hand that U.S. hourly wages are double to triple what most Guatemalans can earn in a day. A decade ago, he could be found cutting fish in a New Bedford fish house or offloading groundfish and scallops from local fishing vessels. "I did everything," he said of his work in the city's fishing industry.

Higher wages were not enough to keep him in the United States. The stress of being an illegal immigrant grew on him. After five years in New Bedford, he bought a plane ticket and returned to his native Guatemala.

"There was a lot of pressure," he said. "Immigration people, they torture you mentally ... you feel that they are all around you. The life of the illegal person is different than what you read about."

When young men from Chinique ask Mr. Pixcar about migrating to the United States, he advises them against it. "It's difficult, but we have to work for this country to be better," he said during an interview in Guatemala. "The problem is that many people talk about how the United States is better. We have to change that mentality. In reality, the same opportunities are here, but you have to look and work for them. We have to change the system, so that one day it will be better here."

In the neighboring town of Chiche, Alba Estrada, 40, works as the director of a small library that is trying to increase literacy among children and adults. Part of the library's mission is to empower young people to stay in Guatemala.

"It's difficult, but we have to work for this country to be better," he said during an interview in Guatemala. "The problem is that many people talk about how the United States is better. We have to change that mentality. In reality, the same opportunities are here, but you have to look and work for them. We have to change the system, so that one day it will be better here."

"We are teaching little boys to change their mentality," Ms. Estrada said. "We want them to know that they can reach their dreams in Guatemala, so they don't think they have to go to the United States."

Migration pressure is high in Chiche, where about 75 percent of families have relatives living in the United States, mainly in Providence. But with deportations increasing in recent years, some residents are starting to think twice about joining their relatives. "People are now more realistic," Ms. Estrada said. "They recognize that there are a lot of opportunities here."

On a Saturday afternoon in the town of Chichicastenango, three young women crowd around a single computer, working on a homework assignment. The women, who are enrolled in an associate's degree program, are studying to become bilingual secretaries who speak both English and Spanish. They hope to find jobs at companies when they graduate. The women say they are optimistic about their country's future.

"Many of us are studying for a better future," 18-year-old Magda says. "Things are going to change."

For Mr. Pixcar, the decision to migrate to New Bedford in 1995 was based on the lack of jobs in Guatemala and the idea that life in the United States would be easy. "When you are there you see that things are different."

He recalled arriving in New Bedford and not being able to order food at McDonald's because he didn't know how to speak or read English. He went on to study English and geology, but found it was difficult to balance both school and work. In the end, the hardest obstacle for Mr. Pixcar to overcome was the constant fear of being caught by immigration agents.

Twice, he hired a lawyer to investigate whether he was eligible for legal status, but he wasn't. In 2000, he returned home to Chinique.

Eight years later, he says his life is better in Guatemala than it was in the United States. The bachelor owns his own house and a small piece of land. He can walk around town and eat lunch at restaurants without looking over his shoulder.

He does not plan on returning to the United States.

"Life has shown me that we have to work in our country."

LETTER: Newspaper should be congratulated for awards

Staff Writer Standard-Times

Published 12:00 a.m. ET March 19, 2009



Newspaper should be congratulated for awards

Congratulations to The Standard-Times for being named Newspaper of the Year in its circulation group by the New England Newspaper Association (S-T, March 14). It is a well-deserved honor at a critical time.

The Standard-Times brought us the New Immigrants project, an insightful series on our 6-8,000 Central American neighbors by reporters Becky Evans and Jack Spillane and photographer Peter Pereira. This series also won a prize. I don't personally know many immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras despite their numbers, so I was glad to learn of them through the newspaper.

That's what the local newspaper does — it expands our neighborhoods and perspectives, introduces us to new people — their successes, struggles, failures, aspirations.

I hope readers will join me in congratulating The Standard-Times on its achievement.

Maeve Hickok

New Bedford