

A Tale of Two Cultures As Familiarity Grows, Fears Ebb Day Laborers Find Hope in Palisades Park

**By Elizabeth Llorente
The Record
August 24, 1998**

*Part Three
Part 1 available in The Authentic Voice*

Tolerance came slowly for the men and boys who wait, day after day, in the doorways along Columbia and Broad avenues. They are day laborers, most of them from Guatemala's poorest villages; illegal immigrants hoping a contractor will pick them up for long hours of hard, low-paying work.

Four years ago, Palisades Park churned with resentment over their presence. The sight of the slight, rugged men with high, Maya cheekbones drew double takes from passers-by. They spoke a different language, seemed to stare too long at young women. And there were too many of them, too suddenly, in the borough's most visible hub.

Everywhere from diners to council meetings, residents and business owners complained about the laborers. Some felt sure the men would commit crimes, make the town dangerous. But attitudes have changed over time and doors have opened.

The Knights of Columbus chapter allows them to study English in its meeting hall. Shopkeepers on the block nod hello. The tenants' organization is helping them fight unscrupulous landlords. The owner of a fishing supply shop occasionally gives them cigars because some of them have become his customers.

This small working-class borough of 15,000 people, once predominantly Italian-American, has learned to live with the Guatemalan descendants of the Maya Indians.

"People jump to conclusions," said Dan Reimann, who opened The Outdoorsmen fishing store five years ago. "Then, when nothing happens, they forget about it. The perception and the reality were very far apart. I've gotten to know some who work very hard. I can't be against people who want to work hard."



A beauty parlor provides shade in Palisades park as Guatemalan workers wait for work. (Photo: ABC News/ Nightline)

The adjustment to the immigrants occurred slowly, almost subliminally. The reasons vary. For one thing, the local leadership changed, from one that echoed the anger and fears in town to one that challenged them.

For another, the rise in crime never happened. And the realization took hold that the Guatemalans worked the worst jobs and the longest hours. In the scorching summer sun, in the torrential spring rain, in the blustery winter cold, they stood on the corners each day, hoping for work.



Immigrants from Guatemala wait on Palisades Park corner for casual labor jobs. (Photo: ABC News/Nightline)

New Jersey's immigrant population, more than 1 million strong, is the nation's fifth-largest - and its most diverse. But, until recently, day laborers were a rarity in North Jersey. Now, Bergen County alone has upward of 500 day laborers, most of them illegal aliens who live in the area and get jobs building homes, mowing lawns, laying tile.

To understand the transformation of Palisades Park is to understand how chain migration arrives in a small town, forging an unlikely bridge between two places that are thousands of miles apart, both geographically and

culturally.

And in the case of the Guatemalans, it is to understand how time and familiarity can quell suspicion and stereotypes, and how the shadowy stranger one day becomes a fellow human being, a father or son in need of work to feed his family back home.

To be sure, the new attitude in town is not an embrace. The crowd of day laborers waiting for work can swell to 200 some days.

Many people, including Reimann, still consider it an eyesore. And, like most Americans anywhere, Reimann and many others here firmly oppose illegal immigration.

But those factors have lessened in prominence, becoming balanced by a once-unthinkable sympathy.

Over time, the hazy jumble of humanity that Reimann often passed without acknowledgment has crystallized into distinct personalities, genial eyes that greet his every day. He tells of the guy who drinks too much, but causes no trouble. And of the ones who like fishing and have added to his business.

"I've seen them every day for a few years," Reimann said. "You learn to deal with it, live with it. They're not harmful. It's tough in some other countries. It must be difficult for them. I feel sorry for them sometimes."

No one knows who, but in the late 1980s, someone introduced the words "Palisades Park" to the Guatemalan hinterlands.

The borough was talked up as a place where other countrymen had settled, where hard-working men could find jobs. It was a place where an illegal immigrant could hide in the shadows of immigration law while openly standing on a heavily traveled avenue, awaiting a job. In the squalor of the highlands, Palisades Park became a star to which many hitched their dreams.

In Guatemala, where per-capita income averages \$900 a year and life expectancy is about 50 years, these peasants are the poorest and most vulnerable. "When I came in 1988, there were less than 10 of us," said Rocaël Valdez, 38, a mestizo from El Quiché province who won political asylum in 1996 and now holds a regular job. "Little by little, it grew into a bunch of Guatemalans, mostly indigenous."

Most of the men rent in town, many of them living in the apartments just above the stores they cluster in front of as they wait for work.

A few come from Fairview, Cliffside Park, and Hudson County to Palisades Park, which gets contractors from as far away as South Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.

The immigrants patronize local businesses, albeit for small-change items such as coffee and cigarettes. And they've formed a support network, lending one another money when one can't find work or falls ill, and sharing the despair - sometimes over too much beer - of the illegal immigrant's nomadic life.



The Record documented changes in Palisades Park. (Photo: ABC News, Nightline)

"We know they have problems with depression and drinking," said Blanca Molina of the American Friends Service Committee. "But they just turn to each other. They're reluctant to bring their troubles to us."

Gaspar Rodriguez, at 38 one of the oldest, said: "People from the fields, that is all we are. We rely on our people and God for help."

The men's self-imposed isolation - coupled with their illegal status - makes them vulnerable.

Contractors often refuse to pay them for a day's work; others stall, telling them to wait for payment that never comes. A good week of day labor means about \$200; a bad one, \$50.

Domingo Mehija, whose earnings help feed his five children in Guatemala, said he was still owed \$1,000 for more than a month's work. "It was hard to see the contractor get a check for \$26,000 for the work we did, but that he won't pay us for," Mehija said bitterly.

Ironically, the men say, contractors who exploit them are often immigrants themselves. "The Americans are usually good to you," said a 17-year-old who, like many others, declined to give his name for fear of deportation. "They pay what they tell you they'll pay, and sometimes they even provide lunch and coffee. But the others, it's different.

"The few who land regular jobs -- whether scrubbing toilets or waiting on tables, whether treated badly or well -- consider themselves privileged. One 26-year-old man who finally found steady work in a factory said his three months as a day laborer had been "maddening."

"The days that you have work, it's fine," said the man, who declined to give his name. "But when you don't, depressing things fill your mind. You think about your decision to take these chances. You think about your family back home, how you're failing them. It's not for ourselves that we come."

Eddie "Babs" Babkewicz, a 79-year-old retired subway conductor, looks at the men on the corners and wonders who's asleep at the switch at U.S. borders.

Residents and borough officials used to flood the Immigration and Naturalization Service office in Newark with pleas to come get the men and deport them. But the local INS office has only about 15 agents working full-time to investigate illegal immigrants - estimated at about 200,000 in New Jersey. There is the constitutional issue, too, of walking up to foreign-looking people and demanding proof of their status, said Lynn Durko, an INS spokeswoman.

"Immigration is out of control in this country," said Babkewicz, who has heard talk that some of the laborers are illegal. "Out of control."

But when he looks at them, he also sees something else: a connection to his own life. Like many longtime borough residents, Babkewicz - whose parents were factory workers - knows all about hard labor and harder times.

"The Guatemalans remind me of the desperation I saw during the Depression," Babkewicz said. "People would spend an entire day on a sidewalk, trying to sell a bunch of apples. Anything for a little money, anything to survive."

For Councilman Joseph Testa, the Guatemalans evoke images of his immigrant father, whose Italian heritage met with disdain in the largely German-Slavic town of Guttenberg. "My father wanted to work, badly, like the Guatemalans," Testa said. "He'd come home aggravated because they wouldn't hire him. It's because he was Italian, I'd say. There were hardly any around [then]. He dug ditches, he worked hard manual labor, like these men from Latin America."

Brother David Russo, the head of the borough's tenants' association, occasionally dispenses holy bread to the laborers, as well as coats in the winter. He also tries to help them cross the cultural divide.

Members of his tenants' group drop by the corners to encourage the men to attend their meetings."

Some landlords and building superintendents might try to take advantage of them," said Guido Urena, a pediatrician and a group member. "One super threatened to call immigration on them if they didn't do what he said."

Others also are helping the men navigate their surroundings.

Every Thursday for two years, some of the laborers have been studying English at the Knights of Columbus hall. Despite a long day of work and limited literacy in their own tongue, many attend, determined to learn even one new word. The classes, which rely on volunteer teachers, are on hiatus and will return in September.

It's a far cry from the climate in Palisades Park just a few years ago.

That's when the men, whose numbers began to grow steadily in the early 1990s, were seen as the worst thing to befall the town.

William Maresca, who then was mayor, contrasted "all these men who are here, alone," with the "law-abiding, churchgoing families of the borough."

Then came ordinances apparently aimed at running the men out. The borough enforced laws that banned loitering, limited single-room occupancy dwellings to one person, and

prohibited would-be employers from stopping their vehicles along the road to hire laborers.

The police, in particular, enforced the new regulations vigorously. They removed workers from contractors' vehicles. They ticketed the employers for such minor infractions as illegal parking and failure to wear a seat belt.

Some residents, business owners, and immigration advocates alleged that police sometimes used excessive force against the men.

"I saw police shove them, beat them with their sticks," said Inchol Yon, a Korean immigrant who owns a computer store on Broad Avenue. "It was just terrible. They were just waiting for work to feed their families. It stopped. You don't see that anymore."

Prompted by human rights advocates, a few of the men stood up for themselves, despite an inherent fear of organizing - a potentially deadly activity in Guatemala. They stood outside police headquarters holding signs: "We want to work in peace. We're all humans."

Nearly 100 residents counterdemonstrated, shouting: "Do they have papers?" and "Why don't they speak English?"

But soon, a new mayor entered the scene, Susan McGinley Spohn, and things began to change.

Spohn stressed dialogue with the laborers and their advocates. On a visit to their English class at the Knights of Columbus hall, she welcomed them as "part of Palisades Park's immigrant tradition." She urged them to dial her home phone number if they had any problems.

"People were afraid of change. They worried about their property values," said Spohn, an advertising executive. "They were afraid of losing the things they'd worked for all their lives."

"She believes discrimination also played a part. "If they had been day laborers from Italy instead of Central America, this town would have had a parade for them down Broad Avenue and celebrated their determination to work."

Soon, other borough officials began speaking of the men as hard workers who stayed out of trouble. A new police chief, John Genovese, offered to talk to them, explaining the Police Department's role and why blocking streets and sidewalks could be a problem.

Spohn lost the mayoralty to Sanford Farber, who has continued a conciliatory treatment of the day laborers.

About the same time borough leaders began to soften their views, other events nudged the Guatemalan situation from the spotlight. Several borough police officers became suspects in a string of burglaries. And the immigration focus began shifting to another new group: the burgeoning Korean population.

"People think it's sad the way these men live," said Farber, who is running for reelection against Spohn. "They've been here for years now. By this time we kind of go along with it."

Police officers, too, have come to their defense. In one instance, for example, after an undocumented laborer reported being robbed by a taxi driver of \$200 - his whole week's earnings - an officer drove the man to the taxi dispatch office in neighboring Hudson County, waited with him until the driver showed up, then arrested the cabby and charged him with robbery. The officer did not report the laborer to immigration authorities.

People wonder aloud: Where do those men come from? Are they legal? How in the world did they end up in Palisades Park? The men, too, harbor curiosity. "Tell us, what do they say about us?"

Francisco Gamez, 22, asked a reporter. As he spoke in Spanish, nearly a dozen other laborers standing on the sidewalk leaned close to hear the answer. Like most other day laborers here, Gamez has little knowledge of the shift in townspeople's attitudes toward him and his countrymen, attitudes so ultimately important in their lives.

The immigrants were largely unaware, too, of the headlines they'd made and the discussions city and county officials held when the town was against them.

The reason is simple: In this densely populated borough surrounded by teeming highways, the men live much as they did in the tribal villages of the Guatemalan highlands. They plod along, one day at a time, building their lives on the margins of society.

Possessions common in even the poorest American homes overwhelm the indigenous who have come to Palisades Park. In the meager walk-up apartment Edwin Cevallos shares with three other men, for example, the telephone, light fixtures, radio, and running water seem futuristic. He learned only here that one end of the telephone is for listening, the other for talking - and that light bulbs come in different sizes and degrees of brightness.

"Until I came here, I got light either through the sun or candles," said Cevallos, who came five years ago, having done field work since he was 10. "A telephone and electricity, it's truly so splendid."

The workers typically have been men in their 20s, but the number of teenagers among them has been increasing. Guatemalans as young as 12 recently have arrived on the corners, the laborers said. Their looks, however, belie their age: Their hands are so toil-worn, their eyes world-weary. And then there is the slump, normally wrought by age.

Many speak an Indian dialect and rudimentary Spanish. Few can read or write, having left school at age 8 or 9, when most of Guatemala's indigenous population begin a life of hard labor, tilling the land.

"By the time we're 10, we've all had to put away the school books to pick up the machete and head for the fields," said an 18-year-old who arrived in Palisades Park from Texas several months ago. "We do all kinds of work, we're not afraid of hard work. Even the youngest of us is a veteran of hard labor."

Many residents would like the county to establish a central work site for day laborers. Some store owners continue to resent the men's waiting around for work, hour after hour, on the sidewalks, and the trash - mostly pizza boxes and empty beer bottles - that they leave behind, in abutting alleys.

Police say a central work site would resolve the disruptions caused by the contractors' vehicles that back up traffic and pose dangers to pedestrians.

But few municipal officials want the site in their town, creating an impasse that helped kill an earlier attempt to develop one. The clamor for the site, say county officials, died along with the bygone scorn over the laborers.

Human rights advocates believe a central job site would help protect the men from contractor exploitation. For now, though, advocates praise what they view as a philosophical rite of passage in Palisades Park regarding the Guatemalans.

Denis Johnston, director of the American Friends Service Committee's immigrant rights program, said: "We've come a long way. We're very happy about the level of acceptance that has gradually developed in the community."

For their part, Guatemalans continue to make the trek from their impoverished homeland to the relative splendor of North Jersey. Triple-digit temperatures this summer have killed dozens of people illegally crossing the Mexican border. Yet, new faces appear on the corners every week.

"How do you get the message to the people in the highlands that life isn't easy here?" Molina asked. "That you find new obstacles - like resentment, contractors who don't pay you, tougher immigration laws? You can't. They come and crash against all these problems and it's so difficult. But even with all that, life is 10 times better here than where they come from."

In the words of Edwin Cevallos, who still marvels over having running water, "To people in the shantytowns, Palisades Park is America."