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Immigrants maneuver beyond politics to work in KC

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Wind whips through the steel skeleton beneath the Kansas City bridge, traffic rumbling above. One slip from the 10-inch beam and a man could easily fall and die, cracking his legs or skull on the jumble of weed-covered rocks 30 feet below.

Sergio and Miguel Caballero — brothers here illegally from Mexico and, as such, unwitting players in the growing debate over immigration, national security and jobs — sling their backpacks filled with clothes over their shoulders, step onto the narrow beams and, buffeted by the wind, walk it with the ease of cats.

"We live under the bridge," Sergio had said through a translator, and agreed to take visitors there.

Beneath the bridge, the brown Missouri River swirls just as controversy swirls around the 8 million to 10 million illegal immigrants currently living in the United States and the thousands more who pour in every year.

Recently a Washington immigration reform group called FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform) announced it would sue to block a new Kansas law signed last month that allows the children of illegal immigrants to pay in-state college tuition rates.

Other lawmakers in Congress support the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act allowing children of illegal immigrants to seek legal residency and college aid. Still others push the Clear Law Enforcement for Criminal Alien Removal (CLEAR) Act giving local police the federal authority to arrest illegal immigrants. Others want illegal immigrants to have legal driver's licenses. Others don't.

In January, members of President Bush's own party criticized him for saying illegal aliens should be granted "guest worker" status under certain conditions. Anti-immigration forces bashed him for giving too much. Pro-immigration forces bashed him for not giving enough.

Those opposed to undocumented workers in America point out that the presence of illegal immigrants is unlawful, a law that should be enforced. They argue that in a post-9/11 world, illegals could present a security risk, increase crime or put additional burdens on our social, health and law enforcement services. Their presence may also jeopardize the chance for legal immigrants to come here.

The more sympathetic argue that illegals are working at jobs others don't want and that they pay taxes, spend money and, for the most part, are decent and law-abiding.

The Caballero brothers, meanwhile, don't think about the politics. They think about their children.

They think about their wives and homes 1,300 miles away in Adolfo Lopez Mateos in the shadow of the Sierra Madre.

"Every thought revolves around my family. Every night before I go to bed, every morning when I wake," Sergio said of his wife, Mireya, and children: Sayra, 16, Marisol, 13, Sergio, 5, and Joselin, 2.

For Miguel, he said, it is dedication to his wife, Lourdes, and his daughters, Judith, 15, and Jasmin, 8, that has, for 10 years, prompted him and his brother to enter the United States illegally.

In Mexico, according to a recent study, the average salary is \$4 a day. Here, workers expect \$9 or \$10 an hour, up to \$100 a day, nearly a

month's salary in Mexico. So for eight months every year, from March until it turns cold in November, they come.

They weed. They paint. They asphalt. They shingle Americans' roofs. And, for their families, they live a life few may ever have imagined.

Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty-five.

When Sergio and Miguel said they lived under the bridge, it seemed reasonable to assume they lived in a small tent or makeshift shelter hidden in the brush.

But step by step they continue to walk out along the crossbeams toward the center of the bridge, climbing higher.

At 34, Sergio is younger. It was his thinking in March that guided him and Miguel — 41, tall, gaunt and quiet with a Mephistophelean goatee — over the desert and past the armed guards at the U.S. border.

Three times they tried this year. Three times they were turned back, becoming part of the nearly 1 million captures the U.S. Border Patrol logs each year. Then, one night, they hopped the wire fence at Palomas into New Mexico.

For three days, the Caballeros trudged at night, dodging police and rattlesnakes, in the New Mexican desert sand. By day they hid in the weak shadow of mesquite trees until, 33 miles from the border, they hit the rail lines in Deming, N.M.

"Coal cars," Sergio explained. That's where they hid for days as the trains roared north, squeezing into recesses near the cars' couplers, until they saw the blinking lights of the WDAF-TV transmission tower. Then they jumped.

Through the years, the brothers have worked in New Mexico, Texas, and Nebraska. But for the past seven years they have come to Kansas City. Here, they say, the work is plentiful. If they are hurt or get sick, they can try Truman hospital. Otherwise, they work without a social safety net.

Now 60 feet out along the beam, Sergio and Miguel stop. They stand poised 30 feet off the ground.

At their feet, where massive V-shaped trusses join the girders, are large openings, square holes, 32 inches deep. Squatting into a hole and looking down the length of the girders, one finds a long, dry hollow space protected on all sides by steel.

Sergio and Miguel don't live under the bridge, they live *in* it, cocooned in rectangular berths, 12 feet long, 22 inches wide at the shoulder with 2 feet of space above their faces. Light filters into the entry hole. A tarp keeps out the rain. Inside each space, the brothers have piled their belongings: blankets, pillows (Miguel's is covered in a Yosemite Sam pillowcase), old sleeping bags, jackets, foam rubber for a mattress, work boots, blue jeans, ball caps, underclothes, scissors, portable razors, small bottles of vitamins, shaving cream, deodorant, cologne, toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs.

Miguel keeps a pack of playing cards. Sergio reads Spanish paperback westerns. They have tiny alarm clocks set for 6:15 a.m.

Some illegal immigrants share rooms — five, six, seven to an apartment; others stay at homeless shelters. The Caballeros and a few others live up high in the beams by choice to save money and to stay safe from thieves. They boil in the summer. They bundle in layers when the weather grows colder.

Close to 9 p.m., the sun sets. Sergio lies on his back on a crossbeam, hands laced behind his head. City lights dot the bluff above the river.

Trabajo: Work.

Tonight he has money in his pocket and is happy. He and Miguel each made \$70 landscaping.

Each week the two men try to spend no more than \$40 each. If they must, they bathe in the Missouri River.

The rest of their money, some \$8,000 each over eight months, they wire home by Western Union.

Keeping large amounts of cash can bring big trouble. A few weeks ago, thieves smashed another worker in the head with a board and stole \$600, two weeks' wages.

With his American money, Sergio is adding to a tiny home he has been building. It's not much, he says: a single-story bungalow, two bedrooms, with a stove and refrigerator, no phone. Without the money, he says, he would have no house, and a much smaller family.

"Probably two children, not four," he says.

He hopes tomorrow will be as good as today, in the life where the cycle of finding work and returning to the bridge repeats itself in a seemingly endless pattern.

At 6:15 a.m., the beeping alarm chirps inside the beams. Sergio and Miguel sit up; slowly dress in boots, jeans and work shirts; and emerge from their steel caves. Pigeons flap through the lattice above them. The Caballeros sling backpacks over their shoulders and walk the beams to the end of the bridge, where two 12-speed bikes stand propped against a pile of stones. They bought them for \$15 each at a thrift store. Saves bus fare.

Searing heat or driving rain, they ride them up over the bridge into the Hispanic West Side.

At 7:30 a.m. they coast up to a brick building at 2136 Jefferson St., near the hulking bridge that carries Interstate 35 over Southwest Boulevard. It is the new site for the Westside CAN (Community Action Network) Center.

The center, a nonprofit, has been open since February and is supported by \$7,000 a year from the city, donations, small grants and volunteer help. Since opening it has become the new place for the West Side's undocumented workers to find work and has emerged as a place that is transforming the neighborhood.

A dozen Hispanic men, wannabe workers from 20 to 55 years old, wait outside on the sidewalks and under the bridge, some waiting patiently, others springing at the prospect of day labor.

All day, vehicles from Missouri and Kansas pull up: new and dilapidated pickups laden with buckets and ladders, SUVs, a \$50,000 Hummer H2.

"*Cuantos? Cuantos?*"

"How many? How many?" the men yell, at times swarming potential employers, climbing en masse into the truck beds.

"Cuantos?"

How many men do you need? One? Five? And for what work? Landscaping? Painting? Roofing?

Inside the center, younger, unskilled men peer through the windows and dash through the doors as cars pull up. Older veterans — men known to employers for their talents as carpenters, bricklayers and roofers — hold back. Some work regularly now. Rushing is unseemly to them. Nearly every day employers come to the center and ask for them.

Sergio and Miguel chain their bikes to a signpost, nod to the waiting men, and enter the center to wait for work.

"You're telling me he didn't pay you? How much? A hundred and fifty?" a woman's exasperated voice cuts through the group.

Twenty men chatting in Spanish crowd the center. Except for two small offices, it is a single light-filled room, 30 feet by 30 feet, and painted the color of cantaloupe.

At one end, men sit at two picnic tables. They sip coffee from paper cups and read Spanish-language newspapers. Another sweeps the gray concrete floor. The aroma of scrambled eggs and chilies fills the room. Men cook in an open kitchen.

"If he didn't pay you, get his name. OK? Try to get his name," the woman continues.

Sergio and Miguel settle silently into chairs near the pop machine. They mind their own business as the frustrated worker listens to the woman.

She is Lynda Callon, the stout, no-nonsense director of the CAN Center and its sole full-time employee. Callon is blunt with a veneer of irascibility, but she also possesses a generous heart. The workers know it.

Every week she works 70-plus hours for low pay on behalf of the men and the CAN Center's mission: to improve life on the West Side, to make it a healthier, safer and friendlier neighborhood.

"If you can't get his name, write down a license plate number," Callon tells the distraught worker who has just been stiffed by an employer.

Predatory employers are one of the biggest problems undocumented workers face.

Men will work hours or even weeks at the promise of \$9 or \$10 an hour. When the job is finished, employers give them nothing.

"It happens every day," says Callon, who has worked for the center more than five years. "The employers threaten to turn them into immigration if they complain."

But in some ways the problem is trivial compared with those that used to plague the West Side.

It's 8 a.m. A quarter mile from the CAN Center, the Royal Liquors parking lot at Southwest Boulevard and Summit Street is quiet.

Five months ago it would have been teeming with undocumented workers. For close to 40 years, the corner had been what the CAN Center now is, the unofficial corner to find day labor.

For years, police say, the 200 or so men who wandered the lot daily also teemed with thieves, drug dealers, drug users and from 30 to 40 hard-core drunks.

They harassed women. They supplied waiting prostitutes with ready money. They urinated and defecated in the streets. Shopowners who complained were intimidated into silence. Tires got slashed, shop windows got smashed, lives were threatened.

Then, in 2000, Kansas City Police Officer Matt Tomasic — a former narcotics officer and son of Wyandotte County Prosecutor Nick Tomasic — became one of two police assigned to the Westside CAN Center.

Seven CAN Centers exist in various neighborhoods. All have police whose goal, like neighborhood beat cops, is to become part of the culture, build trust and maintain order.

“But from a cop perspective, traditional law enforcement was completely ineffective on the West Side,” says Tomasic. “Criminals were camouflaged among the workers.”

Earnest workers and neighbors — intimidated by the crooks or mistrustful of the cops — clammed up to police.

So Tomasic and his then-partners began policing the day workers, identifying and arresting the bad guys. As local cops, with no federal authority to arrest individuals for being in the U.S. illegally, they could only arrest people for felonies or misdemeanors.

Besides, said police media relations officer Capt. Rich Lockhart, “it's not local law enforcement's job to enforce immigration laws. It puts too heavy a load on our resources. And we're trying to build partnerships and trust in the neighborhood. If police are perceived as just throwing people in jail, it's not productive.”

Mass arrests of undocumented aliens are not high on the federal priority list either.

“It's not a productive way to do business,” says Marilu Cabrera, spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “We have limited resources, so we have to put them where they are most effective. Terrorism is our number one focus. After that it's been criminal aliens — felons, gang members, pedophiles. We'll target those people before going to a street corner.”

Tomasic and customs agents began working together to get rid of the criminals and the troublemakers. So far, 50 have been deported.

Meanwhile, Callon and Tomasic worked to create the new center, getting the building (an empty former machine shop) and \$150,000 in renovations donated.

With Callon, Tomasic and his current partner, Officer Eric Goodman, on site, crime and complaints are down. Arrests for disorderly conduct have dropped from 117 in 2001 to seven so far this year. Trespassing and indecent exposure arrests are way down as well.

Instead of running from the police, the workers now report potential criminals.

To men such as Sergio and Miguel, the center is a refuge. On days they don't get work, Callon has them erase graffiti around the neighborhood, pick up trash, mow the lawns of elderly residents, and clean the center.

A few blocks away at Royal Liquors, sales are up, trouble is down, and owner Jim Kasik is ecstatic.

"It's a renaissance," he says, "Unbelievably cleaned up. I've been here 21 years, and every year it just got worse and worse. Now it's the greatest it's been. It's like we're now operating a business on the Country Club Plaza."

To be sure, not everyone is happy with what Callon and Tomasic have achieved.

Nick Hotujac, who helps his wife run Boulevard Truck Rental next door to the center, says he is "opposed to everything they're doing over there."

"Their own Hispanic people didn't even want them on the boulevard," he says. Hotujac doesn't want them around either.

"I can't say truly it has hurt business," he concedes, but he loathes the way the workers congregate.

Joyce Mucci of south Kansas City has made the CAN Center her own cause — videotaping the men, writing letters and speaking to city, state and police officials.

"Believe me, I'm not cold-hearted," Mucci says. But the idea of the police helping illegal aliens in a post-9/11 world galls her.

Illegal immigrants may not take jobs from other people, Mucci argues, but they still cost taxpayers money in law enforcement, health care and social services. They undercut employers who hire legally and diminish the chances for legal immigrants to enter the country.

"I often ask people who call me a racist or xenophobe, I say, 'What would you do if you came home one night and found some strange person sitting in your home? Are you going to cook them a meal? Or are you going to call the cops?'"

All of which makes Tomasic shake his head.

"The majority of these guys obey the law and keep their noses clean. They only want to work."

At 8 a.m., the Caballeros do just that.

It is with a landscaper, a man whom Sergio and Miguel have worked for before — not just this year, but in past years, too.

He is a good man, Sergio says. Trustworthy. Before he was given amnesty, the man's dad had come illegally from Mexico, just like them.

He is sympathetic. He likes the Caballeros. He tells them to call when they are in the country and he will give them work.

They did. And he has.

Now, for the next 11 hours, they work to neaten and trim the lawns of homes in the most southern reaches of Johnson County — raking, clipping, mowing, hauling.

Earlier, Sergio was asked how he hoped people might view him and his brother upon knowing their story, how they would like to be viewed.

Seres humanos, he said.

Human beings.

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