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Christmas story is retold in the saga of KC's day laborers

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By the time the Christmas Eve fiesta wound down, three pigs had been butchered, the heads and feet set aside for a New Year's delicacy to be prepared later.

The man dressed as a rather skinny Santa had returned to his family. A large extended family of volunteers had packed up their microphone, speakers and array of Spanish music CDs and gone on to afternoon services at a midtown church. The little girl who performed Christmas carols on her violin had left with her father.

Even the chief of police, Jim Corwin, had departed, satisfied by a plate of tortillas, fire-roasted pork and a shrimp cocktail soup prepared by a man who was originally from the coastal Mexican city of Veracruz.

The guests of honor — day laborers who either live in or were simply passing through Kansas City — had settled around tables to listen to one man play his guitar. They sang along when they felt moved.

And in those moments, the Christmas story was retold.

The narrators were the two officers assigned to the center, a small office run by the Kansas City Police Department. It is a vestige from when locating police within communities was first embraced.

"You know, I was thinking midway through today that if someone pulled up and offered these guys a job to dig a ditch in this frozen weather for \$9 an hour, two-thirds of them would have left the party to work," said Officer Matt Tomasic.

The way Tomasic calculates it, about 15 percent of the men who pass through the Westside CAN Center are on "walkabout," stragglers shuffling from place to place.

An additional 10 to 15 percent are men who have become disconnected from their families but still retain a desire for purpose.

The majority, upward of 70 percent, are family men scrambling for manual-labor jobs to support wives and children in Mexico and other Latin countries.

Both Tomasic and his partner, Chato Villalobos, are fathers, so the idea of being the designated provider is understood, along with the shame they would feel to fail in that role.

When the men can't find work in the United States, many feel they failed in two countries, Villalobos said.

It is Villalobos who begins the analogy to the Christmas story. Not the one with Santa, reindeer and presents, but the biblical story of Mary and Joseph, in search of a safe place for the soon-to-be-born baby.

It is how he views the men, seeking a place to care for their children. Many move from city to city, often unwanted by the locals. That also has been true in Kansas City, where the term "illegal immigrant" is an accurate one for some of the men, but by no means their best descriptor.

"They're looking for shelter, and they end up in the smallest little place on the West Side," Villalobos said. "We just tell them, 'Hey, it's not much, but it's yours if you need it.' "

Last week, Tomasic left it up to a group of the men to decide how to deal with one man who had showed up drunk. The others banned him from the center for two weeks. He left, apologizing for his alcoholism, saying he had struggled with it for three years.

That is pretty much how the center works, by cooperation and rules.

The men butchered the donated pigs a few days before. A makeshift fire pit, fashioned from a sliced-off barrel and an industrial-size stockpot, was set up under a tarp canopy behind the center. They began cooking at 5 a.m. Christmas Eve.

By midafternoon, a few men still worked, trimming the skin of fat, heating the grease to fry the rinds. With Christmas, there will be little work available. The men planned to share the leftovers for the next several days.

The center does not provide lodging, and the men began making their way to apartments or other places they have found to sleep.

"Adios." "*Feliz Navidad*," a few said as they left.

"It's not that they don't miss their families, or that they love their children any less than I do mine," Tomasic said. "The only difference is I don't have to go to another country to support mine."

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