

Vibrant Village Quietened As Salvadorans Go North

Migrants to U.S, Including D.C. Area, Support Children, Elderly Left Back Home

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PIEDRAS BLANCAS, El Salvador -- It was just past noon, yet the only sign of life in the main square of this remote eastern village was an elderly man swinging in a hammock on his porch.

There was a time, Jose Nieve-Reyes Rubio, 70, explained in a gravelly voice, when the plaza would have been packed with vendors and customers by this hour, their shouts ringing through the air as they bought and sold food, clothing and every imaginable kind of trinket.

"But that was more than 10 years ago," he said as he settled back into his hammock. "Before everyone left for the States."

Today, like villages across El Salvador, Piedras Blancas has been nearly emptied of its working-age inhabitants. Left behind are children and grandparents who live on money that relatives send from such previously unheard of places as "Manassas, Virginia," "Houston, Texas," and simply "Maryland" -- the catchall term by which people here refer to a host of Washington area suburbs.

Although exact figures are difficult to determine, the director of the village school, who has tracked the student population for two decades, estimates that more than 3,500 Piedras Blancas natives, or about 40 percent of the population, live in the United States.

In the fourth-grade class, where teacher Roney Ramirez was giving a social studies lesson on a recent afternoon, 17 of the 21 students have at least one parent abroad.

"What does the agricultural sector in our area consist of?" Ramirez, 26, asked the children.

"Farming and cattle raising!" they shouted back with the certainty born of growing up where families have lived off the land for generations.

"How many of you plan to remain here and become farmers when you grow up?" Ramirez asked. No one raised a hand.

"Well, who is going to cultivate the land then?" Ramirez asked with a chuckle.

"Um, our grandparents?" said one student to an eruption of giggles.

A plump girl with long, curly hair grinned and jumped out of her seat for the umpteenth time that day.

Ramirez shot her a warning look. Josselin Mendez, 10, is one of four students whose parents are both in the United States. Lately, she has become so convinced that she will be joining them soon that she can't seem to concentrate on school.

"I try to tell her that what she learns here can serve her over there," Ramirez said afterward. "But she doesn't really take it in. Her mind is so focused on over there that it's as though she's left already."

Asked during recess whether this was the case, Mendez gave a sheepish smile and nodded. Then, as her classmates pressed around, she launched into an excited description of Manassas, where her father has worked as a construction worker for the past 9 1/2 years.

"My parents say it's cold," she said, "and the houses are built a totally different way than here."

Mendez's maternal grandmother, Ana Matilde Lazo, 52, who has cared for the girl since she was 18 months old, said Mendez didn't always feel this way.

"When Josselin was little, I'd call to her, 'Come to the phone to talk to your mother.' And Josselin would answer, 'She's not my mother. You are,' " Lazo said in her home later that afternoon. Even today, Mendez reserves "Mama" for her grandmother, calling her biological mother Mama Nilita -- a variation on her mother's first name.

About three years ago, several of Mendez's friends in Piedras Blancas were sent for by their parents in the United States.

Around the same time, a family friend brought the oldest of three children born to Mendez's parents in Virginia to Piedras Blancas for a visit so that Mendez could meet her little sister. "Ever since then, Josselin has had it in her mind that she's going to Manassas," Lazo said.

Like so many Piedras Blancas migrants, Mendez's parents sneaked into the United States illegally. Now they have temporary work permits granted to Salvadorans following an earthquake in 2001. But they still cannot legally return to El Salvador to visit or bring their daughter to the United States.

Mendez is hardly the only child in Ramirez's class who misses a parent in the United States. There is Jacquelyn Vasquez, 8, a wisp of a girl who has worn a T-shirt printed with a photograph of her mother so many times that the image is as faded as the memory of her mother's departure for Houston. There is sweet, painfully quiet Alex Salmeron, 9, who appears cared for and loved by the family friend who has watched him for his parents since his grandmother died, but who Ramirez worries is "somehow not happy."

Manuel Canales, 42, the school's director, said the impact of so many absent parents is reflected in the poor performance of his students. More than 10 percent are repeating a grade this year. And last year that figure was 15 percent.

"Believe me," said Canales, leaning across his desk for emphasis. "Teaching in a place like this is very hard, very arduous work."

But he is sympathetic to parents who believe the best way to provide for their children is to leave them while they go in search of better-paying jobs abroad.

In Pasaquina, the municipality to which Piedras Blancas belongs, more than half of all households get money from the United States. They receive an average of nearly \$200 a month, according to government statistics -- a substantial sum where the minimum wage is \$3 a day.

To walk the streets of the village is to be struck by the changes that the cash infusion has wrought. Set among golden, sunbaked hills and the white boulders that give Piedras Blancas its name, "White Rocks," the village is at least an hour's bumpy drive from the nearest asphalt road. Yet over the past six years, many streets in the village have been paved -- to the delight of residents who used to hold handkerchiefs to their faces against the dust every time vehicles rumbled by.

Farmers who once slept in huts of mud and sticks have built spacious, if modest, houses of cement block painted in bright hues of orange and turquoise. On the main square, near a gleaming whitewashed church, stands a two-story community center with glass windowpanes where children receive computer training several times a week.

The center, which was inaugurated last year by Salvadoran President Elias Antonio Saca, is one of more than a dozen projects, along with the village's roads, that were at least partially funded with \$125,000 raised by a charitable association of Piedras Blancas natives in the United States.

Still, for all the improvements, the village's most noticeable feature is the silence that has fallen over it ever since an economic downturn, caused by El Salvador's civil war during the 1980s, prompted the first massive wave of migration.

During the day, the stillness is interrupted only by the chirp of crickets and the soft footfall of an occasional stray dog. In the evenings, a street corner that old-timers say once echoed with the cries of dozens of men playing soccer matches after work is now the site of a subdued card game played by a few farmhands from neighboring Nicaragua and Honduras -- who have taken over some of the jobs left by the Salvadoran men who have departed.

One of the few remaining native sons, Ramirez, the teacher, has been able to stay thanks only to the financial sponsorship of older siblings in Houston.

That achievement has been bittersweet. The youngest of six children born to an impoverished fruit and animal trader, Ramirez said his oldest brother was just as studious, but was forced to leave school after ninth grade to support the family.

"He stuck it out as long as he could -- even going to school with shoes that were falling apart," Ramirez said wistfully. "He would have made a great lawyer."

Last year, shortly after getting his teaching degree, Ramirez was thrilled to land a position teaching in Piedras Blancas. "But so many people have left that I never run into any of my childhood friends here," he said. "It's almost like I'm not working in my home town."