

Where hope lives

Big Top beckons carnival community; bureaucracy blocks the way

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By Kevin Sieff/The Brownsville Herald

TLAPACOYAN, Mexico --- Atop a hill just outside of this small city in Veracruz, between patches of banana and coffee plants that grow wild in the tropics of southern Mexico, a church stands unfinished. There is rubble strewn on the concrete altar. Two cinderblocks take the place of pews.

If not for a man kneeling in the half-light that fills the church in the early morning, the building might appear abandoned.

The lone parishioner, Pablo Juarez Mendoza - square-jawed, solemn, in his mid-30s - wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of a brightly colored Ferris wheel, advertising a carnival in Tempe, Ariz., that has long since passed. Inside of the skeletal gray building, the graphic is a striking incongruity.

But in Tlapacoyan, from which thousands of men and women leave annually to work for circuses and carnivals throughout the United States, the unfinished church and the American amusement industry have become inextricably linked.

For more than 30 years, the industry has recruited a growing portion of its workforce from Tlapacoyan, a city of 72,000. Unskilled workers cross the border for the season then return home, under the temporary work visa program known as H-2B. In 2007, almost a third of all carnival workers in the U.S. were *Tlapacoyanos*.

Every year they pour millions of dollars in remittances into the local economy, funding houses, small businesses, and, thanks to Juarez's fund raising effort, the first stage of the church's construction. But in September, when the Congressional Hispanic Caucus blocked voting on legislation that would have allowed employers to rehire foreign workers, Tlapacoyan's economy was paralyzed. The caucus is withholding its approval in an attempt to galvanize support for comprehensive immigration reform.

As a result, the government will issue only 33,000 visas for winter workers and 33,000 visas for summer workers in 2008. Last year, more than 120,000 foreign workers entered the country on H-2B visas.

The 66,000-visa quota means that only a fraction of *Tlapacoyanos* will have access to the seasonal jobs that some have held for more than 25 years. Businesses in the city have closed, unemployment has skyrocketed and encroaching trees and vines have all but overtaken the dilapidated church, in which Juarez now prays silently for his old job assembling and disassembling carnival rides.

"It's hard because if you want to build something, your own house or whatever, you have to go to USA," he said in English learned during his seven years of touring America with Ray Cammack Shows. "Without work there, we can't make nothing. We can't even build our own houses."

Last year, Juarez made \$450 a week working at livestock shows around Texas and state fairs in California. In Tlapacoyan, where the average wage is approximately \$50 per week, he can't find employment. The city's decades-long



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Jose Herrera's wife, Ana, slices papaya for her husband's breakfast. Herrera, who worked at carnivals in Massachusetts for several years before the reduction of available H-2B visas, leaves his home in Tlapacoyan to seek scarce day labor.

dependence on temporary American jobs has shaped the local labor market. Now that those jobs are no longer available to Mexican workers, even low-paying employment is scarce in Tlapacoyan.

By the time Juarez leaves the church, a small group has gathered under the building's concrete cornice. Together, the men tell the story of a city whose bus drivers, armed guards, and coffee farmers all lead double lives under the American big top, or beneath the fluorescent glow of the Ferris wheel.

It's a surreal tale of place, but it's also the story of a city now paralyzed by a seemingly minor legislative action, a political calculation that has crippled not only Tlapacoyan, but also the circuses and carnivals to which *Tlapacoyanos* have longstanding ties.

Caught in the headlights

At 5 a.m., two hours before the sun will appear over Veracruz's lush hills, the streets of downtown Tlapacoyan are lined with men looking for work. They are here every morning, 400 of them, waiting to be picked up by banana and coffee farmers in trucks that rattle as they approach the crowd. Out of darkness, headlights illuminate their faces.

They are young and old, college graduates and primary school dropouts. Last year they were selling cotton candy in Iowa, assembling merry-go-rounds in Massachusetts. Now, waiting on the dimly lit street, they wear shirts with the logos of their former employers. There are embroidered clowns and elephants. There are names like "Interstate Amusements" and "Jolly Shows."

Today, in Tlapacoyan, just over half of them will be recruited to work. The lucky ones will make less than \$10 for 10 hours of work.

Day labor is nothing new in Tlapacoyan, but because of the freeze on H-2B visas, which allow non-agricultural workers who are sponsored by employers to enter the United States for one season, men with U.S. jobs last March have since joined the ranks of the already-saturated labor market. Local officials estimate that this influx of job seekers has increased the city's unemployment rate by more than 25 percent.

"Last year I made enough to send \$280 home to my family every week," Jose Herrera said, waiting under a flickering streetlight. For several years, he assembled and disassembled carnival rides, a job to which his callused hands attest.

"Now, I can only find work two days a week. I bring my family \$20 every seven days."

At 8 a.m., four hours after Herrera's wife cut slices of papaya for her husband's breakfast in their one-room home; he is still waiting for work.

"Here's a man, a hard worker, whose former American employers need him desperately," said Jim Judkins, the founder of JKJ Workforce, who recruits workers from Tlapacoyan on behalf of American circuses and carnivals. "And instead he's stuck here - waiting for low-paying work that he can't always secure."

It wasn't always like this. When Carson & Barnes Circus began recruiting workers from Tlapacoyan in the 1970s, there was effectively no cap on the number of seasonal guest workers. American politicians paid little attention when about 100 workers made the trip from Veracruz to Hugo, Okla., or, as it's nicknamed, "Circus City, USA." From Hugo, they traveled to five ring circuses throughout the United States.

It was the beginning, Judkins says, of a beautiful binational relationship.

Judkins dropped out of college to join Carson & Barnes in 1977. When he founded his own company, Circus Chimera in 1998, he returned to Tlapacoyan to find workers. Soon his colleagues were asking for help to do the same.

"Where are you getting these guys from?" they asked him. "Tlapacoyan," he told them. In the region's native Nahuatl language, the word means "a place of cleansing." In circus and carnival industries, it has come to mean a solution to a crippling labor shortage.

But to officials in Tlapacoyan, who watched 3,500 residents leave for the U.S. last year, the relationship between their city and the American amusement industry is as much a curse as it is a blessing.

"What are we supposed to do here?" asked Silvio Mendoza, a city commissioner. "We don't want to lose our youngest, strongest workers to American jobs, but we don't have the capacity to generate needed employment in Tlapacoyan."

With the current freeze on H-2B visas - which are designed to ease labor shortages in the United States - the city is now seeing just how debilitating its dependence on American jobs has become.

"We've noticed a large increase in people without jobs, people without incomes," said Emilio Lozada Hernandez, the city manager. "Much less money is coming into Tlapacoyan, and that phenomenon affects everyone."

Outside of the unfinished church, Oswar Garcia - short, stocky, his thick brown hair neatly gelled back - sits on the hood of his red Toyota hatchback.

Garcia, who has a college degree in business administration, earns \$40 dollars a week driving a taxi in Tlapacoyan. The job and the wage, he says, are belittling. "I can only take this for so much longer," he remarks, his expression souring.

"If I can't get a visa in the next two months," he says, "I'm going to the United States anyway. I don't care how I have to get there, legally or illegally. Walking, swimming, flying."

He turns around to inspect the car.

"If I sell it, I can afford to pay a coyote."

Like many *Tlapacoyanos* now waiting on visas, Garcia speaks concretely of his desperation. His parents both have diabetes, but the family can't afford treatment without the income that Garcia has provided for the last two years by working at Reithoffer Shows. He inherited his job with Reithoffer from his father who, now 65, has become too weak to do the heavy lifting the job requires.

"I'll stay in the U.S. for three or four years," he said. "Maybe I'll live with some relatives there."

Most workers in Tlapacoyan express a willingness to wait until the visa situation is remedied before seeking American jobs illegally. But for those like Garcia, men and women with families in critical need, even a temporary delay is untenable.

It's a question of simple math, Garcia says. Forty dollars a week is not enough to pay for his parents' treatment. An American salary, even if it's below minimum wage and paid under the table, would likely be sufficient.

But as Garcia makes clear, crossing into the United States illegally implies a commitment to stay for several years before returning to Tlapacoyan. For most former circus and carnival workers, who have young families, the commitment isn't feasible.

"My daughter is here. My parents are here," said Anayeli Avila Mendez, who has worked for Casey's Rides in Kentucky for two years. "I'm not moving anywhere."

Avila now operates a small convenience store out of her home. The business' meager profits are barely enough to support her 13-month-old daughter, Sylvia, whose father she met and "quickly fell in love with" at a carnival near Lexington. She hasn't seen him since.

"We need the money so badly," she said. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to move away from Tlapacoyan. This is my home."

In Tlapacoyan, the trope of Avila's story is well worn. In the city and its outskirts, aside from those who planning to immigrate illegally, there is a single shared sentiment: *Espero*. The word's double meaning could hardly be more apt, it says both "I am waiting," and "I am hoping."

'What went wrong?'

High in the hills outside of Tlapacoyan, Robert Ortiz is waiting to finish a day of picking coffee beans. In the early morning, he began with the plants outside of his small patch of land, weaving his way into a valley, where the green and red beans hang from leafy trees like tiny Christmas lights.

In late February, an electrical fire consumed his wooden home. The house - a one-room, plywood building - was rebuilt, but Ortiz lost everything except his passport. If the visa situation is solved, he says, it might be the one thing he needs to replace lost belongings.

In the meantime, Ortiz collect several hundred pounds of beans per week, for which he will be paid just under \$70, 20 percent of what he earned last year with Rockwell Amusements.

Ortiz disappears quietly under wide banana leaves, where the most noticeable indication of his presence is the sound coffee beans make when he drops them into a straw sack. But the work and the isolation only make Ortiz more curious. Like his former co-workers, he wonders: "what went wrong with the visas this year?"

"Have you heard anything?" men ask each other at downtown bars, or places where they've convened to look for work.

Even when there is no progress, they suggest hypotheses, spewing rumors that touch on everything from American politics to racist conspiracies.

"I hear a Mexican man killed an American girl, and the authorities are holding us responsible," one says.

"I hear it has something to do with the presidential election," another suggests.

Occasionally, Judkins tries to explain the H-2B program's congressional stalemate to his workers. He doesn't get into the specifics --- the exemption for returning workers that expired in September 2007 or the larger goals of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. Even a cursory explanation doesn't quell rumors. For some, like Pablo Juarez Mendoza, it only incites anger.

"We're being hurt so the government can deal with illegals?" he asks. "They're probably just sitting on their asses, but we want to work, legally."

God's work, great and small

In Judkins' Tlapacoyan office, 3,000 visa applications spill onto a wooden bench, each with a photo, a resume, and an address in Tlapacoyan. Another 2,000 identical applications fill a file cabinet in a neighboring room.

In early morning, a line sometimes 10 people long, forms outside of the office, where circus and carnival schedules are posted. People ask about departure dates, visa regulations and the status of the H-2B program. Almost always, Judkins' office workers deliver the bad news: no visas yet.

Only feet from where the line forms, Judkins' phone rings incessantly. Circus and carnival owners from all over the country want to know when they will have their workers. Some are contemplating shutting down for the year. Others tell him they will soon have no choice but to hire undocumented workers.

While Judkins explains the current state of negotiations to a client from Oklahoma, the voice of one of the men outside becomes audible. "Do you know when the visas are coming?" he asks. The answer is muffled.

In Oklahoma, a man needs workers. In Tlapacoyan, a man needs work. Both conversations continue.

Since September, JKJ Workforce's Mexico office, a phone call away from Washington and a short drive from Juarez's unfinished church, has occupied the place where the two crises converge.

In December, when a large group of temporary workers from Tlapacoyan finished their stint of work with American carnivals, their families marched through the city, only several blocks away from Judkins' office, in what has come to be known as the "*Misa de Emigrantes*," the "Mass of the Emigrants."

The image touches on the surreal: a procession of Mexican carnival workers marching through a city built with remittances. A priest dipped an olive branch in water and waved it in front of the crowd, thanking God for their safe return. They marched with flowers and portraits of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. They played five-string *vihuelas* and violins.

But when the procession arrived at the city's main cathedral, the hundreds of H-2B workers and their families didn't fit into the building's long nave. Some were left outside, where they heard the priest's words echo into an open plaza, "It was God who enabled you to work, and enabled you to return to a healthy family."

Months later, with no work and no church to accommodate the overflow of returned workers, Juarez remembers the words.

"This time last year I was working in Houston," he said. "Now I'm back in Tlapacoyan and what can I do? I can wait. I can keep knocking on the door."