



**WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN** — “Jorge,” 67-year-old migrant worker (above), rarely smiles because he has no teeth and rarely finds work because he is considered too old. He is currently trying to reunite with his family in Utah. (right) A Cuban day laborer recounts the story of his migration to a student from Colorado’s Jefferson County Open School. Teachers from the school flew students to San Diego County to learn about the harsh reality of immigration.



# NO WORK RIGHTS COUNTRY

Story & Photos by Bianca Quilantan, News Editor

**G**hosts haunt the canyons of eastern Chula Vista. At dawn they rise from the fragrant sage and drift toward the rim, in plain sight but invisible.

*Fantasmas* of weathered flesh and sturdy blood amble past the carloads of harried people who seem to see them, but look right through.

It is time to find work—any work. Rough, callused hands worn from a thousand lawns, ten thousand nails and one hundred thousand gallons of sweat wave at drivers pulling into the Home Depot. Few slow down, most do not look. These tired, frail faces wait hopefully under the relentless San Diego sun in front of Home Depots across the county, including Chula Vista, barely two miles from Southwestern College.

Sometimes, though, a car door opens and a hasty negotiation takes place. A day laborer hops in. He has work. Day laborers are Latino migrants who do yard work, construction, moving, demolition and countless other forms of heavy lifting for modest wages, no benefits, and little or no respect. Sometimes they work for days without being paid—or worse. They are strong armed but powerless, free roaming but often treated like slaves.

Border Angels, a human rights organization led by Enrique Morones, visits the laborers and provides sack lunches and clean shirts. Morones said he worries about the men because they are vulnerable and sometimes mistreated.

“We check in on them to make sure they are alright and to let them know there are people who care about them,” he said. “Sometimes they work all day and are not paid. Sometimes they are not adequately fed or given enough to drink.”

Morones was joined recently by teachers and students from Jefferson County Open School in Colorado. Teachers Connie Kowal and Jordan Hopkins flew with a group of their students to the borderlands to see firsthand the realities of immigration.

“We want to take kids to places to see what’s happening, not just read about it,” Kowal said. “There’s nothing in the curriculum about Mexico in terms of refugees and immigrants. It’s as if this issue does not exist.”

Morones said he is looking to create relationships with

technical colleges to find medical help for the laborers. Mostly though, he wants to raise awareness about the workers and tell their stories. Some of the stories are disturbing, like the abuse suffered by “Carlos” (a pseudonym) whose wife recently gave birth to twins in Tijuana. His job in Mexico did not pay enough to feed them, he said. Neither did a recent job in the U.S.

“I worked four days straight for a man that offered me \$40 a day to work in his yard, fix appliances inside his house and other jobs,” Carlos said. “As soon as I finished everything he needed, he dropped me off, didn’t pay me and there was nothing I could do.”

Even though they are virtually homeless and live in encampments in the canyons near the Home Depots, the laborers work hard to keep a clean look so as to not scare away potential customers.

“I cannot smile because I do not have teeth!” said Jorge from Jalisco, who is saving money to reunite with his family in Utah. “But just because I do not have any teeth does not mean I cannot keep a sharp appearance. I take pride in myself to always look good when going to work and the shirts Mr. Morones has given us are great to work in.”

Some laborers are economic refugees, others are fleeing the vicious drug cartel wars in Mexico.

“It has been difficult to support my family with the recent kidnapping and mutilation of my son-in-law,” said Juan from Juarez. “They kidnapped my son-in-law, who at the time was working with drug dealers because money had been tight. Something went wrong and they sent us his severed hand to us in a box.”

Juan lives with his family in the canyon, a less-than-ideal situation, he said, but safe from cartel hit men.

When work opportunities are slow the laborers pass time in good spirits by playing cards, sharing meals and telling stories about their families.

“What I make here in the States in one day is what I would make in (Mexico in) two weeks,” said “Jorge,” 67, who as an older man has trouble attracting jobs.

Day laborers have a code that requires them to look out for one another, a tradition from their homeland. Work is distributed evenly and younger men help older ones.

“Whenever I go seek out laborers to cut my lawn or do heavier yard work, I have noticed that they have paired the older men with the younger ones and have created a type of packaged deal in order to make sure he gets work,” said Edalía Gomez, an Eastlake resident who has hired many of these men to do yard work.

As the sun slips from the sky and the afternoon dissipates into evening, the lucky ones are dropped off near the Home Depot and rejoin their *compadres*. After a full day of clearing brush, painting fences and repairing retaining walls, the workers are once again as ghosts, visible but not shuffling slowly back into the canyons to sleep. With tomorrow’s sun there will be work to do—if they are lucky.



**KASEY THOMAS /STAFF**  
**BUSCAMOS EMPLEADOS** — (top) A migrant worker waits for employment with his compadres at the Mission Gorge Home Depot. (above) A NOW HIRING / BUSCAMOS EMPLEADOS sign hangs outside of the Home Depot on Fairmount Avenue in San Diego, near 10 day laborers desperately waiting for work.