

Toiling in the Fields of Migrant Education

Mariano Sanchez roves the fertile farm lands of Yadkin County in a 1967 Chevrolet Belair—its unmuffled engine roaring throatily and the windows rolled down for ventilation. His students call the car “Granny” and tease him that it has a 4-55 air conditioner.¹ “It consumes too much gasoline, but they don’t build them like this anymore,” says Sanchez, patting the dash proudly. “This is already a classic. Pretty soon it will be a collector’s item.”

A semi-retired broadcast journalist who spent his career with Voice of America, Sanchez wears at least two hats for the Yadkin County Schools. He is a teaching assistant who helps students learn conversational English—and he

is migrant parent involvement coordinator. It is this latter responsibility that has Sanchez touring this western Piedmont county, knocking on the doors of ramshackle mobile homes, taking down information, and doing his best to solve problems for a burgeoning population of economic refugees from Mexico.

These Mexican nationals officially comprise 1.27 percent of the Yadkin County population, or 388 citizens among a county population of 30,488. According to census data, they are settling into a large county full of largely white small towns where nearly 90 percent of the residents are native North Carolinians.²

Many of these newcomers originally came to Yadkin County for seasonal work in the tobacco fields, and have since taken low-wage jobs in factories and chicken-processing plants. Others learned of jobs in North Carolina through word of mouth from relatives who had settled here. Currently, the Yadkin schools have 138 Hispanic students—2.9 percent of total enrollment and more than triple the state average of .7 percent.

Sanchez engages the transmission and gives Granny the gas. The engine roars and the car wheels out of the parking lot of Yadkinville School. He passes slowly through downtown Yadkinville, the county seat, population 2,525. On the outskirts of the town, Sanchez pulls into City View Trailer Park, a collection of some 50 old mobile homes arranged along a dirt drive in angled rows like ribs along the backbone of a fish.

“In this trailer live the parents of an eighth grader who dropped out to have a baby,” says Sanchez as he pulls up in front of one of the trailers. He says the girl is a good example of



Rosalia Cristobal with her niece, Nora Nely, and her husband, Cliserio

how Hispanics without a hint of English get shunted into classrooms where they don't have a chance to succeed. "They put kids into classrooms socially instead of by learning skills," says Sanchez. "She had no idea what was going on around her, and so she got frustrated." Sanchez knocks on the door of the trailer, but no one answers.

He heads to the trailer next door, the home of another family with two children in the Yadkin County Schools. The family isn't home, but another family that shares the same single-wide trailer is. They are Cliserio Cristobal, 26, and his wife, Rosalia Cristobal, 22. They speak not a word of English, but respond warmly to Sanchez's rapid-fire Spanish and offer a welcome.

The door opens on a living room furnished with a sofa, an upholstered chair, and three kitchen chairs of padded vinyl on stainless steel tubing. A worn and cracked sheet of vinyl flooring serves as the living room carpet. Three cloths bearing the likeness of the Virgin of Guadalupe, matron saint of Mexico, serve as curtains. These are crowned with a garland of clear Christmas lights. "They love to keep that up all year round," says Sanchez, indicating the lights. He says it helps to keep the spirit of Christmas alive.

With Sanchez serving as translator, the Cristobals' story comes out. Cliserio does most of the talking while Rosalia feeds a bottle to her two-month-old niece. The trailer rents for \$260 a month, which is divided between the two families, Cliserio explains. The Cristobals earn \$229 each per week packaging chicken at the Tyson Foods plant in North Wilkesboro.

They consider themselves quite fortunate except for one small thing. When they left Mexico in 1992, they had to leave their two children behind with family. Cliserio gets up from his armchair and picks up a postal money order from the table beneath the window across the room. The money order totals \$200. He is sending the money home to Mexico, where it will buy about three weeks' worth of groceries.

The Cristobals dream of bringing their

children to America, but they say this would be expensive and difficult. Still, they cling to this hope. They say they are saddened to be separated from their children, yet happy to be in the United States instead of Mexico. "Here, you live very well," says Cristobal through his interpreter. "Over there you don't live. Here you have a job. You don't have nothing back there."

Later, back behind the wheel of Granny, Sanchez scribbles information about the Cristobals' problems in a notebook he carries with him on his rounds. He will get the information to people who might be able to help them, even though their problems have nothing to do with the public schools.

For Sanchez, there is a purpose to this work that goes well beyond the job description. "It's

Isabel Frausto, with son Isaac and daughter Mirian, displays inventory from the family's store.



a ministry," says Sanchez. "I'm doing this for the Lord. The Lord put me here to give me the pleasure of helping people."

In his work with parents, Sanchez stresses the importance of children getting an education, and he stresses the importance of parents being involved in the education of their children. In two years on the job, Sanchez has yet to see a student with a Spanish surname graduate from high school. Too often, he says, they drop out to take low-wage jobs and help put food on the table.

Sanchez is working to change this. "I tell them the longer you stay in school, the better chance and the better opportunity you will have," he says. "I teach them that it's OK to be better than your parents. I want my daughter to be better than me. A high school diploma isn't enough anymore."

When a child is having problems at school, Sanchez says he often finds they are linked to problems at home. "They say, 'My word, Mr. Sanchez, we don't have food on the table. My wife has lost the job,' or 'The portable heater's not working, we have run out of kerosene.'" Sanchez will try to get these problems solved too.

Sanchez visits one more home at City View, where a family has been operating a store out of their mobile home. Here he learns that the store has been closed down because the trailer park is not zoned for business. This gives him more information to scribble in his notebook. Some of the leftover inventory lies on a table by the front door: Mexican-style sweetbreads made in Georgia, and a tray full of mangos. "Somebody must have turned them in," Sanchez laments. "They ran a very nice store."

At another trailer park across town, Alberta Carachure tells Sanchez that her daughter has brought home a paper from school that she cannot read. She ducks into her trailer and comes back clutching a hand-colored scrap of paper. It is an invitation to a Mother's Day Tea at Yadkinville School. Sanchez promises to arrange the transportation.

There is time for one more stop and then Sanchez must pick up his eight-year-old daughter from school. This time it's the Catholic mission, which lies across town in an old farm supply store. Sister Andrea Inkrott works in an

office off the showroom floor, which has been converted to a church for Spanish Mass. Her office is jammed with books and tapes that describe in Spanish various aspects of the Catholic faith. Catholicism, says Inkrott, is ingrained in the Mexican culture. In the summers, when the migrant season is in full bloom, the faithful overflow the showroom and peer in at the service from the parking lot.

Sister Andrea, as she is known in the county, agrees that the Hispanic population in the area is growing rapidly. She doubts that the census captured the full force of the Hispanic influx. "They're very mobile, and they don't speak that much English," she says. "They live in places you don't know where they are. Look in a very poor trailer, in a shack, behind another building, or down a long lane, and that's where you find them."

Some, she says, are in the country illegally, and don't want to risk filling out a government form. Asked how these illegal aliens find work, Sister Andrea offers an ask-no-questions smile. "I'm here for their spiritual needs," she says.

But at present, Sister Andrea is up to her elbows in helping the family that got closed out of its store reopen in a legal location. This involves helping them prepare a credit application to open a business. "He keeps all these numbers in his head," says Sister Andrea of the storekeeper. "It's incredible."

Still, Sister Andrea knows an oral history won't help the man get a loan—particularly not an oral history delivered in Spanish. She has him commit the numbers to paper to improve the prospects. "What I do so much is translate," says Sister Andrea, who spent seven years as a missionary in Mexico. "They have to learn English and will learn English," she says. "But, having been through it myself, I know it's a slow process."

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹For those raised with air-conditioned automobiles, a 4-55 air conditioner is a non-air-conditioned automobile traveling down the highway at 55-miles-per-hour with all four windows rolled down.

²U.S. Census Bureau, *Summary Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics, North Carolina*, Washington, D.C., May 1992, p. 32.