

Undaunted Hope:

A story of optimism

One man's drive to provide for his family leads him on a journey of civil war, hard work, and dreams.

STORY

LAUREN FOX

PHOTOS

DAVID MEHR

ILLUSTRATION

MEGAN GEX

NICK STOKES

Standing in the shadow of the bus station in his pristine white T-shirt, plaid shorts, and Reebok sneakers, Cesar Mejia appeared to be just another Eugene wanderer. But as he turned his face toward the streetlight, the deep crevices in his skin were illuminated, and it became clear he had been traveling much longer than the other riders exiting the bus behind him.

He wandered over to sit and unfold his story, but each step seemed to carry a heavy regret. He seemed surprised at the offer of a handshake and looked skeptical as if he were waiting for something traumatic to unfold. As his anxiety subsided, tears streamed down his leathery skin as he revealed his reasons for coming to the United States.

"My story is very long, and it is very sad," he said through a translator. "I wish I could say it ends well,

"I have faith in the economy in the United States. Things will get better here, life will bounce back to normal here. The United States is resilient."

Cesar Mejia

but I am afraid I am still working toward a happy ending."

Nearly as compelling as his reasons for leaving El



Fields and orchards provide many illegal immigrants, such as Mejia, opportunities to earn an income.

Salvador were his reasons for staying in the United States, when so many Americans were furious over bailouts, lost mortgages, and diminishing credit scores.

Mejia's undaunted faith in U.S. economic buoyancy is not unprecedented. According to the Center for Immigration Studies, Mejia is one of 11.2 million illegal immigrants living in the United States. Despite the economic hardship he has experienced since the recession began, including difficulty finding jobs and coping with diminishing wages, Mejia

is surprisingly confident the American dream is not an idealistic fantasy, but indeed a reality.

"I have faith in the economy in the United States. Things will get better here, life will bounce back

to normal here," he said. "The United States is resilient."

Civil war and bloodshed

Mejia came to the United States in 2004 from El Salvador after he said rebel gangs made it impossible for him to make a living in the wake of civil war. The gangs threatened him and demanded part of his profit as a street vendor. His life as a salesman had been Mejia's attempt to move ahead in his country professionally, and he was discouraged his plan failed so miserably despite his work ethic.

"I knew I needed to go somewhere, where dreams meant something," he said.

He grew up as a Catholic peasant in the 1970s and participated in campesino protests against fraudulent elections in 1972 and 1977. In response

to the protests, the Salvadoran government began sending death squads armed with machetes and AK-47s into the fields where he worked. Mejia said he was terrified.

"They would come and just started killing people, anyone they thought disagreed with them: women, children, students, Catholics, and men. It didn't matter; they just kept on killing," he said.

The civil war raged for 12 years while the Salvadoran government fought against Salvadoran leftist rebel group, the FMLN guerrillas.

Immigration and the decaying economy

Even after the peace accords of 1992, Mejia said that the country was in shambles. There was no land available to farm, and the crumbling economy proved an impossible climate for him to make a living. He lived in constant fear that war could return. Left with few options, Mejia said goodbye to his wife and five children and left to find work in the United States in the spring of 2004.

When he arrived, Mejia had less than \$500 and was overwhelmed with the prospect of starting life over again in a foreign place. Mejia moved to Oregon after he heard about the many job opportunities and the Latin American support programs the state had to offer. He did his best to find any work he could get, which ranged from odd jobs such as laying grass seed in Linn County to motel cleaning and maintenance to construction.

Bob Daynes, a spokesperson for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said illegal immigrants are used by industries because they will work for less, and that immigrants take jobs that have wages many working-class Americans can't afford to do.

"Everything from big business to mom-and-pop shops have become dependent on foreign workers at the exclusion of everyone else," Daynes said.

Daynes argues that by making jobs available to illegal immigrants, the country invites the poorest and least educated to drain social services that are supposed to be used to help American citizens who are in need. Daynes said that in economic hardship, it is unfair to have illegal immigrants draining the state's resources.

"The cost of immigrants to the state of Oregon is estimated to be about \$270 million. However, their social impact is even more. Immigrants cost taxpayers an estimated \$479 million in a range of things from healthcare to education to incarceration," he said.

Jobs for immigrants increasingly sparse

Although the recession in Lane County has contributed to an unemployment rate of 12.1 percent, B.J. Bennet, co-owner of Ziniker Orchards in Creswell, is happy to have immigrants to hire and is convinced they provide a service to the country that too many Americans overlook.

Bennet and her husband hire a few migrant workers each fall to help with her walnut crop. They pay \$150 a day for workers who work eight to 12-hour days on the small, 12-acre farm. The Bennets started hiring immigrants years ago because they were the only ones willing to take on the backbreaking job.

"We are so grateful that we have found such wonderful workers," she said. "You couldn't get a white boy out there on their hands and knees picking walnuts during the coldest and rainiest days of the year."

Because of the small size of their farm, Bennet said it is likely that the immigrants might only work two or three days before they leave the farm and move on to the next job.

"We don't ask for papers, we just let them work, pay them and let them be on their way," she said. "We are just so happy to reward such good people with some extra money."

Francisco Lopez, the director of CAUSA, an Oregon grassroots immigrant rights organization, said in the recession, jobs such as the ones

The Illegal Immigrant

How many are in Oregon?

- About 170,000 persons as of 2007*
- About 125,000 to 175,000 persons as of 2005**
- About 90,000 persons as of January 2000***
- About 33,000 persons in 1996****

Other Oregon facts

- Refugee admission: 14,124 (1997 - 2006)***
- Total population (both illegal and legal): 3,747,455****
- Projected 2050 population: 6,322,147*
- 2004 medical treatment costs for illegal aliens: \$2,055,490*
- 2004 education costs for treating illegal aliens: \$401,800,000*
- Compensation costs for incarceration of "undocumented aliens" who are serving time for a felony conviction or at least two misdemeanors:

- '99: \$7,629,422	- '00: \$4,972,603
- '01: \$6,814,968	- '02: \$6,528,641
- '03: \$3,128,216	- '04: \$1,341,763

* The Federation For American Immigration Reform

** The Pew Hispanic Center

*** INS/DHS Estimate (now dissolved into the Dept. of Homeland Security)

**** The Census Bureau

available at Ziniker Orchards are getting more difficult to find, but it has not been extreme enough to send illegal immigrants packing.

"It doesn't matter how bad things get in the U.S. Most immigrants can find support from family, churches, or the government. Having less in the United States beats looking for food in garbage cans or spending your days asking for quarters," he said. "Immigrants believe in the American dream. They know that if they work hard enough now, their children will be able to go to college and make a better life for themselves later."

Mejia agreed that the living conditions in the United States are much better than El Salvador's. Even when he had to travel as far as Texas from Oregon to try to find work in the winter months, he said he would never return home because of the economy.

"When I first laid my foot onto American soil I breathed easier," he said.

El Salvador's Civil War



