
November 25, 2007

The Chicken and Rice Man

By ADAM B. ELLICK

EVERY weekday, starting as early as 7 in the morning and continuing until 7 at night, weary-looking men dressed in threadbare jackets and worn running shoes gather at the corner of Roosevelt Avenue and 73rd Street in Jackson Heights, Queens, under the gloomy shadow of the el.

Swiveling their heads as if watching a tennis match, the men scan each passing car, in the hope that a driver will stop and offer up \$100 in exchange for a 10-hour day of grueling labor on a construction or demolition project on Long Island.

But offers of work are few these days, and competition for jobs is intense. As winter approaches, a man can easily spend the entire day shivering and desperately hungry, because these day laborers, many of them from Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America, are not only poor immigrants in need of work; many are also homeless, or nearly.

“We come here to look for work,” said a 47-year-old Ecuadorean named Carlos Suarez as he hugged a cheap leopard-print comforter that serves as his bed. “There is none. What can we do?”

Mr. Suarez says that he has sometimes gone days without eating and has on occasion survived only on bread. But for the past three months, he has eaten at least one hot meal a day, thanks to a former illegal immigrant who, with the help of his mother, has become a guardian angel for these workers.

The man, Jorge Muñoz, is an elfin 43-year-old who goes by the nickname Colombia, a reference to the country from which he emigrated 21 years ago.

Every night around 9:30, he arrives at the intersection from his home in Woodhaven, driving a white pickup truck laden with enough home-cooked fare to feed the dozens of day laborers who congregate there.

For many New Yorkers, Thanksgiving is a weekend to indulge in a brief stint of volunteerism at a church or soup kitchen. For Mr. Muñoz, the holiday is just another night devoted to feeding his unofficial flock.

“Every single night, Jorge is here,” said one worker, his leathery face peering out from a hooded sweatshirt. “Doesn’t matter. Rain, thunderstorm, lightning. He do that from his good will, you know.”

“He feeds everybody, make the stomach happy,” the worker added. “He’s an angel.”

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When Mr. Muñoz’s truck pulled in, several workers pressed their faces to the tinted windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of dinner. Hopping into the back of the truck, Mr. Muñoz began untying steaming containers filled with hot chocolate and foil-covered trays of homemade barbecued chicken. As the workers accepted Styrofoam containers stuffed with hearty portions of chicken and rice, they thanked him as respectfully as if he were a parent, never mind that the 5-foot-2 Mr. Muñoz, with his buzz cut and boyish grin, could pass for 20-something.

“God bless you,” one burly worker said as he dug into his meal. “I haven’t eaten in three days.”

Mr. Muñoz replied with a smile, “You can eat here every day at 9:30.”

The relationship between Mr. Muñoz and many of the men he feeds is personal. “Uribe, you want more coffee?” he asked as he saw a familiar face. “Simon, do you want seconds on this pasta?”

In a way, Mr. Muñoz seems to need these men as much as they need him. His unofficial meal program gives meaning and focus to his life. He is as eager to help his motley clientele as they are to be helped.

“I know these people are waiting for me,” he said of the emotions that fuel his quixotic and perhaps obsessive crusade. “And I worry about them. You have to see their smile, man. That’s the way I get paid.”

Big Heart, Special Tamales

The operation through which these workers have been fed without charge began three years ago and is financed mainly from the \$600 a week Mr. Muñoz earns driving a school bus.

His life revolves almost entirely around preparing and serving the meals. All the cooking is done in the small house with gray vinyl siding where he lives with his 66-year-old mother, Doris Zapata, and his sister, Luz, who works for the [Social Security Administration](#).

He telephones home from the road a dozen times a day to plan the menus. He has few friends, and no hobbies.

“I haven’t seen a movie in two years,” Mr. Muñoz said one afternoon in his kitchen as he boiled milk for hot chocolate. “But sometimes I listen to music when I’m driving.”

His sister described the situation more bluntly. “He got no life,” she said, looking awkwardly away from her brother as she stirred a boiling pot of lentils. “But he got a big heart. He really does.”

Mr. Muñoz also has stamina. Every morning he gets up at 4:45 to assess his inventory of food, which is made available in part with the help of friends and acquaintances. He doesn’t have to go far.

A mammoth freezer that occupies nearly half the dining room is stocked with cooked meats and vegetables that he collects twice a week from Colombian acquaintances who work in the food industry on Long Island, but whose names Mr. Muñoz will not disclose so as not to jeopardize their jobs. The dining room table is laden with boxes of fresh but slightly wounded bagels and rolls donated weekly by Monteforte, an Italian bakery in Richmond Hill. From Tia Betty Mexica Bakery and Tortilleria in Woodhaven come bulging bags of sweet breads.

“One day Jorge just came in and asked for extra food for his guys,” said Tomas Gutierrez, owner of Tia Betty. “Tortillas, breads — last week we made special tamales for his guys.”

Mr. Muñoz’s porch is walled with bulk-size bottles of ketchup and mayonnaise, and the living room is littered with the bounty from his weekly trips to Costco: 15 bags of spaghetti, six cans of tomato sauce, and boxes of plastic containers in front of the television. Mr. Muñoz says he has not watched the television in more than a year.

A Family’s Tortured Journey

Although Ms. Zapata does not help deliver meals, she is an equal partner in her son’s operation, and her involvement is born in part from her own experiences.

For the first years of her marriage, the family lived in a small city in Colombia. In 1974, her husband was killed when a passing truck sent a rock sailing into his head as he sat on a curb outside the coffee distribution factory where he worked. Although her parents visited monthly bringing food to feed Jorge and Luz, then 9 and 10, the help was not enough.

In 1984, after a decade of struggle, Ms. Zapata left her children with her parents and began the journey that eventually would take her to Bushwick, Brooklyn, where she found work as a live-in nanny, earning \$120 a week.

Over the next two years she saved enough to bring her children to the city — all three are now United States citizens — but the osteoporosis and arthritis that have twisted her hands and hunched her back forced her into retirement seven years ago.

All these experiences have given her particular empathy for the workers her son feeds.

“We were immigrants and we were illegal,” Ms. Zapata said one afternoon as she poured lemon juice into a bowl of rice. “So I imagine that the workers may also be going around in fear, hiding from the police, hiding from [immigration](#).”

Ms. Zapata thinks she understands the feelings that motivate her son, whom she calls Georgie. He always had a good Samaritan side, she said, which was on display when he was just 7 and a man came by their house asking for food.

Ms. Zapata told the visitor they had none. “But Jorge gave him his plate,” she recalled. “I said, ‘Jorge, you have to eat for school.’ And he said, ‘No, I’ll just have bread.’”

‘Guys Are Waiting for Me’

The mission shared by mother and son started three years ago when Colombian acquaintances who work in the food industry mentioned to Mr. Muñoz that excess food was thrown out at their workplaces. One evening around the same time, he noticed the knot of day laborers clustered under the el.

Stopping to talk, he learned that most of them sleep under the bridge across the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway at 69th Street or in the emergency room of Elmhurst Hospital, where they can stay until they are booted out at 5 a.m. To save money, they skimp on meals, and the little money they pocket is immediately wired to destitute relatives back home.

In the beginning, Mr. Muñoz’s commitment to feeding these men was modest. Three nights a week, he stuffed each of eight brown bags with a piece of fruit, a cookie and a juice box, loaded the bags into his truck, and drove to the corner where the men congregated. Word spread, and within a year, Mr. Muñoz and his mother were churning out 15 hot dinners a night. Now they feed several dozen on a single evening.

“Once I started, I can’t go back,” he said as he headed off one recent evening. “Those guys are waiting for me. These guys, they got nothing. They live in the street. They have no family. They have no relatives, nothing. They just wait for me. And I say, ‘O.K., no problem.’”

If It’s Thursday ...

Because donations are sporadic and quantities unpredictable, cooking for a crowd in a kitchen the size of a parking space presents a nightly logistical challenge.

At 3 o’clock one recent afternoon, Ms. Zapata could be found staring dubiously at a tray of cooked, frozen

barbecued chicken that had been donated by one of her son's benefactors. By 4, the chicken had thawed, but she estimated that it would feed only 20 people. Her son, who had just returned from his afternoon bus run, said 30 meals were needed. And so began the nightly process of ad hoc menu revision.

Time was of the essence. Mr. Muñoz tries hard to make sure the workers are fed at the same time every night; otherwise, he fears, he will lose them.

On a calendar pinned to the refrigerator, which bears 10 images of Christ, Ms. Zapata had scribbled the week's menus. Tuesday: baked pork with beans. Wednesday: burgers in barbecue sauce with hash browns. Thursday: pasta with beef.

As if seven nights weren't enough, on Fridays Mr. Muñoz collects donated waffles and pancakes, and he serves Saturday breakfast for 200 workers at seven locations in Queens. For Sunday dinner, on what he describes as his "day off," he and his sister make 40 ham and cheese sandwiches.

This afternoon, Mr. Muñoz and his mother scrutinized the week's menus to figure out what they could scrounge from storage without upending the rest of the week's schedule. After a quick survey of items on the porch, Mr. Muñoz decided on pasta with tuna.

Soon, pots on all four burners on the stove were bubbling with milk, pasta, and white and yellow rice. While waiting for the chicken to warm, Ms. Zapata and her children began sorting bills on a chair in a bedroom; no other space was available. Electricity runs about \$120 a month, and gas \$100 every two months.

According to Mr. Muñoz, the family spends about \$200 a week on the meals.

"If I had a choice," he said, "I'd do a good breakfast with a proper budget. And I'd do lunch, too."

By 5 p.m. he was fading. He slouched against the kitchen wall and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he straightened up, poured his sixth cup of coffee of the day, and served himself a bowl of lentils over buttered rice. This was his dinner, and as the workers do, he ate standing up.

By 8:30, the truck was loaded. "Bye, Mami," Mr. Muñoz said as he gave his mother a kiss. "I love you."

En route, he stopped off at the International Ministerial Church of Jesus Christ in Woodside, as he does every night. When he arrived on the corner, the men lined up in single file in front of the bed of the truck, which functioned as a counter. He handed takeout containers to the men, who almost all returned for seconds. One man stuffed plastic boxes of orange juice into his pockets to tide him over until the next meal. Within 10 minutes, the truck was empty.

Mr. Muñoz tipped over the hot chocolate cooler. "I think there is a little bit left," he announced to one of the workers. "There is a little, brother. You got the last drop."

Hector Peralta, a ponytailed Mexican who came to the United States five years ago, has been eating Mr. Muñoz's dinners for four months. Without them, he said, he would go hungry. "We wouldn't even know what to do," he said. "This is my first meal since yesterday."

Gratitude goes both ways.

"I feel great when I see these guys with their smiling face," Mr. Muñoz said. "Because they got something to eat before they go to sleep."

Ana Toro contributed reporting.