

Their Own World

Hard times in Seattle for working poor

BY TODD MATTHEWS, ALL PHOTOS BY ERIK CASTRO

Earlier this year, Seattle photographer Erik Castro trekked into Belltown — namely Western Avenue below the Alaskan Way Viaduct — with nothing but his camera and his curiosity. Several months later, and with dozens of spent film rolls, he walked away with what is arguably the most complete and thorough collection of photographs documenting Seattle's Hispanic migrant workers — day laborers who gather each morning, searching for work.

"Those workers are not going to be there in ten years," said Castro. "Development will displace those workers."

Castro's photos depict tenuous lives lived hard, and reflect a sharp contrast of hope and despair. One photograph depicts a cluster of workers chasing after a single contractor's truck; another boasts the glowing smile of a worker piling into the passenger seat of a pick-up, his peers clearly envious of the man having found day labor; a third depicts a man holding a bucket and mop, negotiating with the driver of a brand new Jaguar automobile. While inspecting the photographs, it is difficult to remember that these are photographs of Seattle, Washington — not an impoverished nation.

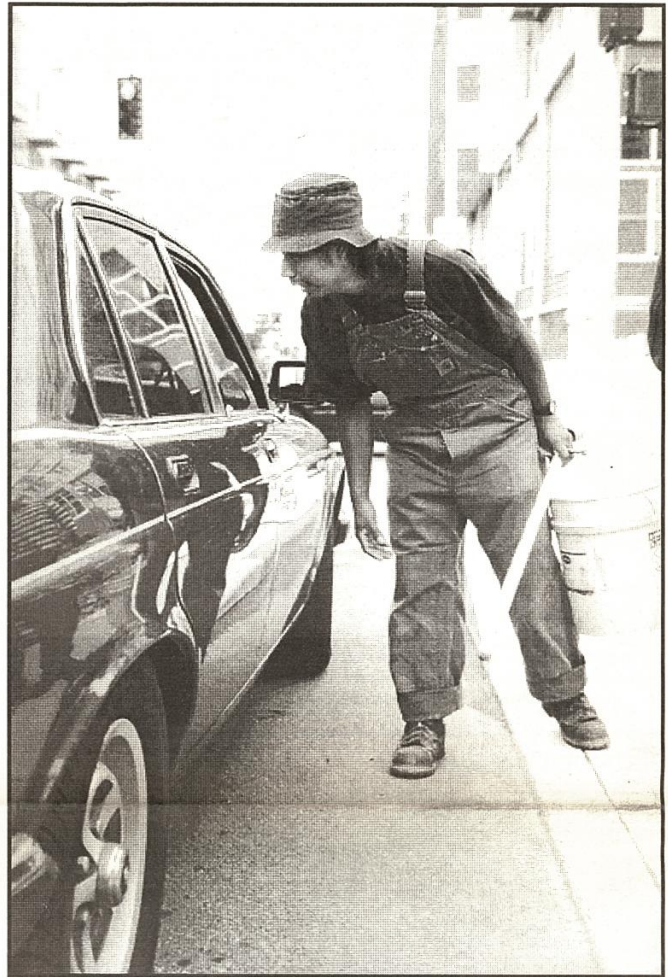
Initially, the workers were wary of Castro. "Many thought I worked for the INS," Castro explained. After awhile, though, they opened up to him, and grew comfortable with his daily presence. Castro spent two months documenting the area. He arrived at 6:00 a.m. with the workers, and photographed their constant struggle to net the interest and attention of passing vehicles carrying potential employers. At noon, he would follow them to the Millionair Club, where the laborers would take advantage of the daily free lunch.

While some Belltown business owners, residents, and visitors complain that the migrant workers are a nuisance and a threat, Castro grew to respect the workers, and the hard lives they lead. He never saw any fighting among workers and passersby. Nor did he see any general trouble. "The cops stopped only once in two months," Castro said. "I never saw [the migrants] hassle anyone," he added. "They're wrapped up in their own world. They're just trying to find work."

Castro has been a photographer for nearly ten years, and is presently working on a project with his father — documenting an old Texas mining town. "It is now a ghost town," he explained. "My father is writing about the town's history, and I am taking the photographs for a museum that will be built in that town."

Eventually, Castro would like to gather his collection of day labor photographs in a book for publication. He knows that, when Belltown's gentrification is finished, the day laborers that presently collect under the Viaduct will be displaced. "Those areas make a city interesting," Castro argues. "When you get rid of those areas, you get rid of a city's character." □

Real Change August 15, 1999 www.realchange.org



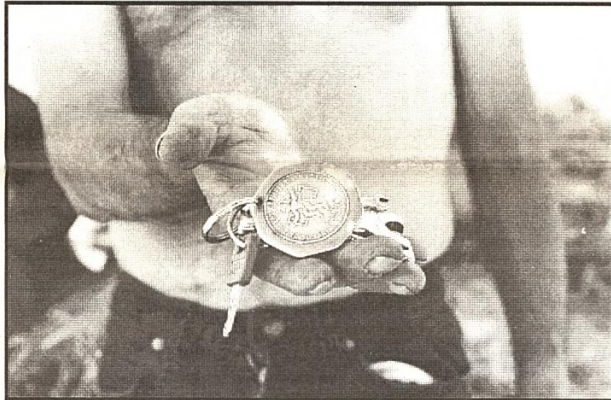
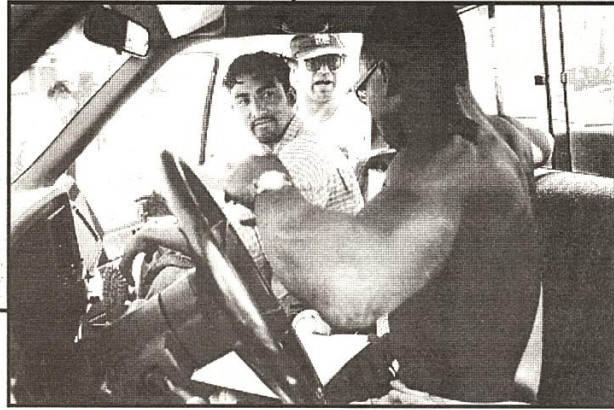
WORKER WITH BROOM AND BUCKET NEGOTIATES WITH MAN IN JAGUAR.



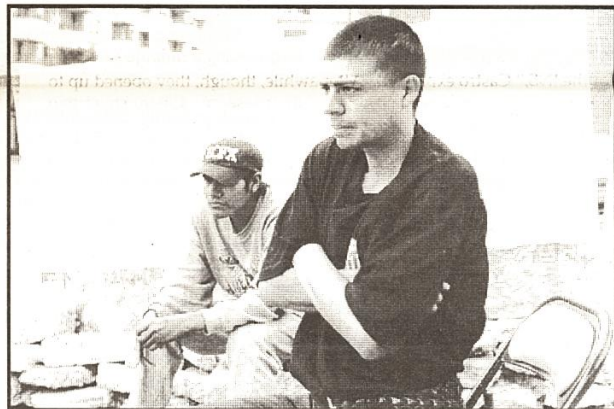
JAMIE, HEADING CASA LATINA'S WORK DISPATCH PROGRAM, IS SHOWN NEGOTIATING WITH EMPLOYER.



HAND WAVING &
FAST-TALKING PAY OFF
FOR THIS YOUNG WORKER.



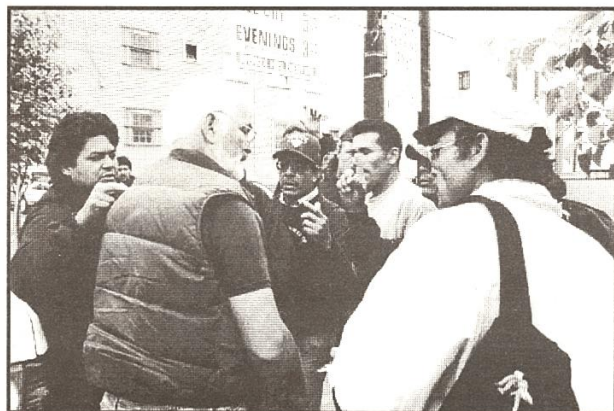
FRANCISCO PROUDLY SHOWS OFF HIS
LUCKY KEY-CHAIN.



COLD & TIRED, CLAUDIO IN FOREGROUND
WAITS PATIENTLY FOR WORK.



ALBERTO & UMBERTO SHARE
A FEW MOMENTS READING THEIR
FAVORITE BIBLE PASSAGES.



CHOOSING TWO WORKERS FROM THIS CROWD
PROVIDES A CHALLENGING TASK FOR THIS EMPLOYER.