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Guatemalan Mayans Settle In S. Florida

By Vanessa Petit February 1, 2004

Antonio Silvestre fled Guatemala's poverty and civil strife in the early 1980s and was among the first Maya Indians to settle in this small farming town northwest of West Palm Beach.

Nearly two decades later, thousands of Mayans have quietly built communities in Indiantown and other parts in southeastern Florida. Many work in landscaping, construction or golf course maintenance in well-to-do communities. Since most are illegal immigrants who move around frequently, they go largely unnoticed.

"The Americans didn't know where we came from. We are short, with dark skin, dark hair, and we speak

a language they never heard before," said Silvestre, who now teaches at a school for migrant children.

The first migrants who arrived in Indiantown in the early 1980s sent word back home to families and friends about the abundance of work in the cattle ranches, citrus groves and winter vegetable farms.

The community grew and, through chain migration, became a hub for other Mayan migrants who sought to escape poverty and civil strife in their home country.

Silvestre, a Jacaltec Mayan, ended up in Indiantown in 1981 after being contacted by a Roman Catholic priest who was trying to help other Guatemalan Mayans who were trying to get to the United States.

"I was studying in the university and was working to achieve reforms for our Indian communities. We were called subversives, leftists, by government forces," Silvestre said. "I had to leave Guatemala without giving it much thought. I was afraid for my life."

He first worked as a translator since he spoke his native Indian language, Spanish and English. More than 20 recognized Mayan languages are spoken in Guatemala. Spanish is taught, in many cases, as a distant second language, if at all. English is rarely spoken.

Hope Rural School in Indiantown was founded in the early 1980s by the Rev. Frank O'Laughlin, a Catholic priest, to educate children of migrant farmworkers, mostly from Guatemala and Mexico, and to try to break the cycle of poverty that goes along with working in the fields. The school has about 100 students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

"We teach them in English, but they maintain their Indian language at home," said Silvestre, who teaches physical education at the school. "In the end, if we are lucky, they will leave here speaking English, Kanjobal and Spanish."

While many Mayans still arrive in Indiantown, many newcomers have dispersed throughout southeastern Florida, creating communities that, in turn, attract

more migrants. Many work in Jupiter, West Palm Beach and Lake Worth.

Four years ago, Jacaltec Mayan Mario Gervacio Quinones, 37, left his wife and four children in their home town of Jacaltenango in Guatemala's jagged highlands after returning empty-handed from an annual coffee-picking exodus to the country's southern coast. He now lives in Jupiter, where he has been working in landscaping and gardening ever since. He earns $9 to $11 an hour. He sends money home to his family in Guatemala's highlands and dreams of returning someday.

"My family depended on the coffee harvest, but with most of the coffee plantations bankrupt, I was forced to come to the U.S. for economic reasons. I feel at home in Jupiter; there are many Jacaltecos," he said, referring to the large community of Maya Indians who live in Jupiter and come from the same town in Guatemala.

The journey to Florida is dangerous and not always successful. The Mayans must pay multiple smugglers

called "coyotes" to sneak them across borders to Florida. They are usually charged upward of $3,000 for the trip with no guarantee they will arrive safely.

It took Quinones 18 days to reach Jupiter, about 16 miles north of West Palm Beach. "I'd rather not remember the journey. It was a scary experience, but the risks were worth it."

Guatemala is slightly smaller than Tennessee and borders Honduras, Belize, El Salvador and Mexico. Of its 14 million people, half are of Mayan descent while the rest are Spanish-speaking non-Mayan, or Ladino.

Brutal military governments dragged Guatemala through 36 years of civil war between U.S.-backed military forces and growing leftist movements. More than 100,000 people were either massacred or disappeared, and another 1 million were left homeless. Hundreds of thousands of Mayans suffered the brunt of the repression. More than 400 Mayan villages were destroyed.

Tim Steigenga, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, has worked with the growing

Guatemalan Mayan community in Jupiter for the past three years.

"At first, they were leaving Guatemala because of the civil war. Now they are leaving because of poverty and lack of opportunities," he said. "They are seeking some way of making a living out of desperation."

It is difficult to determine how many Guatemalan Mayans live in Florida, because most are illegal immigrants and their numbers fluctuate during harvest times, expanding from October to May.

Only a handful of applicants attained legal status through political asylum cases in the 1980s. "They try to steer clear from civil authorities, because they fear deportation," Steigenga said.

In 2000, the Census Bureau estimated that there were 28,650 Guatemalans in South Florida, but this number fails to distinguish Guatemalan Mayans from non-Mayans.

"It may serve them well to adopt a certain identity in different locations," Steigenga said. He explained that they can be mistaken as being Mexicans or from any other Central American country and may not clarify that they are, in fact, Guatemalan Mayans.

In Lake Worth, about seven miles north of West Palm Beach, a sizable Mayan community has emerged. At the Guatemalan-Maya Center, two women wait to be helped by a worker who speaks their native Kanjobal. One of the women carries her baby in the traditional Guatemalan rebozo, which is a colorful shawl tied around her shoulders. She goes to the center to get help with almost all her daily needs. She does not speak English.

These modern-day Maya Indians struggle to preserve their ancestral culture in a country that rarely notices their existence.

"One of the reasons for creating the center was to create a connection between the Mayan community and the Americans," said Lucio Perez, the center's director.

Kindergartners, most from Guatemalan-Mayan families, line up during physical education class at the school founded for families of migrant farmworkers. Antonio Silvestre, who fled Guatemala's poverty and civil strife in the early 1980s, works with fourth-graders at the Hope Rural School in Indiantown, Fla.

news releases, other documents

The order raised concerns that the Trump administration was trying to influence distribution of their findings, and USDA officials scrambled to clarify the memo.