

Intro

Forget about the New York you know. In the next few minutes, you're about to explore a land of invisible treasures, accompanied by people who work hard to make a living out of our trash. They call themselves canners, and they collect empty cans and bottles on the streets. Once their shopping carts are full, they redeem their collection and they get five cents a piece.

This is Francesca Berardi, an Italian journalist who worked with a group of canners for more than a year. I'm sharing intimate details about their stories and some names have been changed to protect their identities. The canners I worked with all go to the same redemption center, Sure We Can, located in the concrete heart of Brooklyn.

Ambi: Pedro speaks to himself, drawing his journey across Central America on a map

Francesca: Pedro sits in a container at Sure We Can. He holds a pen, absorbed in thought, staring at a map of Central America. He's retracing a desperate journey he went on a decade ago to come to the States.

The 32 by 24 inch map is outdated, and Pedro can't find a Mexican highway he walked along. Still, he can remember how it sounded to be there.

Pedro: Pedro makes the sound of cars and horns. I didn't care...I was walking on the fastest route.

Francesca: On June 7th, 2008, Pedro left his home in El Salvador and started walking in the direction of the United States border. He had to leave - he says - because in El Salvador he would have died in fewer than five years, either killed by someone or a bottle of guaro. He was 48 at the time. For his journey, Pedro had 13 dollars in his pocket, and two rules. The first was not to talk to people, as human interactions could be dangerous and jeopardize his mission. The second was to walk 30 kilometres - the equivalent of 18.6 miles- each day.

Francesca: How did you know that were 30 kilometres?

Pedro: I was counting my steps.

Francesca: He knew it would take 125 steps to cover 100 metres, and that's how he counted.

Ambi: Francesca and Pedro are counting

Francesca: Pedro maintained his discipline, apart for the time when he caught a train near Oaxaca, Mexico and rode for 35 miles. Then he had to get off and start walking again.

Francesca: Is because the ticket was too expensive?

Pedro: oh no, no! You don't buy tickets, anything, you just grab the train while it's moving and then hold on for your life [eh eh]

Francesca: After covering 1,500 miles on foot, sleeping on the streets, and showering with rainwater, Pedro made another exception.

It was August 21st, the last day of his journey.

A truck driver offered him a ride for a few miles across the desert, until they saw the border. Pedro got out of the truck, his dirty clothes glued to his skin and a small backpack hanging from his tired shoulders. His eyes darted all around, as he walked along the path designated for trucks and trailers.

Pedro: Every step I took I was expecting someone to say "hey what are you doing here"

Francesca: No one asked, and Pedro accomplished his mission. He felt - he says - a mix of feelings: proud, excited, scared. Most importantly, alive. Now the memory of these emotions of his arrival in the U.S. overlap with those felt during the journey... most of that time, he was so exhausted he thought he would not make it.

Pedro: I was in Mexico, I think 700-600 km from the United States, and I said this is it, I was exhausted, I was completely empty.

Francesca: At other times, he got some encouraging signs, like the time he took a break among the trees, near San Lorenzo, in the State of Veracruz.

Pedro: Well the truth is that I was going to take a leak, I was peeing and then I said, there's a flag, an American flag, all dirty...I said...it that's mean anything...now I'm going to take it with me, I folded it and I think I still have it.

Francesca: Pedro says the flag is somewhere in the shelter where he's been living since 2008. He shares the small basement of a Catholic charity organization with eight, sometimes ten other people. They are all men and committed to working and staying sober. In fact, Pedro stopped drinking and works non-stop every day, sorting soda bottles. Sometimes listening to music.

Ambi: Sounds of music and bottles.

Francesca: He says his life is quite boring and repetitive, but he keeps his mind active in two ways-

One - By reading books, any book he can get his hands on. Now he's reading Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale.

Two- by making very special glasses.

Pedro: The human eye can move only in 8 directions, horizontal, vertical and then the other two, the diagonals, and that's all the movement in the eye.. if you limit that intake of information, just to one part of the whole spectrum, then you can change your point of view.

Francesca: Most of the glasses are made with metal wire and carved cardboard lenses. Pedro cuts the cardboard in all sorts of shapes - crosses, zigzag lines, parallel lines, holes...on the weekends, he usually wears glasses with big empty frames that help expand his field of vision.

Pedro: The limit is your imagination.

Francesca: The way Pedro designs and uses his glasses sounds like a poetic metaphor for resilience. No matter how hard, boring, or frustrating your life is, you can always wear lenses that help you look at it differently.

In fact his glasses were key also to overcome fears and fatigue during his journey across the Mexican desert.

Pedro: By that time I was feeling my steps you know, inside my body, I was feeling the bones and everything...

Francesca: More than for his body, he was worried for his mental survival. He had the impression that someone, or a shadow, was chasing him. Then he built lenses that could narrow his view and change his perspective.

Pedro: And it was not like a miracle, but I really felt the difference. It was not like a gained strength... if you find a way to get a distraction, not to keep thinking about walking and walking walking and walking..

Francesca: Now all that Pedro wants is to live a quiet life. He gave up his dream to become a millionaire engineer, but he still dreams of meeting the woman who reminds him of his first love in El Salvador.

Pedro: It's true, I dream about Emma Watson, Do you know Emma Watson? - I dream about Emma Watson..[laughs]