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A TEMPORARY LIFE

Low wages, strong backs

One reporter's experience starting at the bottom

KYE-RYUNG LEE/Herald News

Tom Meagher gets a call on Main Avenue in Passaic. He could not afford a cell phone on the budget he maintained for this story.

Today I face the clock. Standing on an assembly line in a warehouse in Mount Olive, I wear safety goggles and stack boxes full of Euphoria perfume on a wooden pallet as they come off the conveyor belt. Women in white lab coats scurry around downstairs, pulling bottles randomly off the line to test them in the quality assurance room.

Folding or stacking or filling these boxes I am a cog in the production wheel, repeating motions that get my bit of the work done. Yesterday, it was open box, pull out bag, pull box from bag, pivot. Today it's fold, stack, slide. Everybody is interchangeable, especially temps like me.

My feet are tired from standing, but even worse is today's spot on the line: I'm directly in front of the clock. I don't think I can watch eight hours drag by, second by second. I keep my head down and force myself to fold 50 boxes before I look up again. When I do, it's only five minutes later. OK then, I'll do 100 boxes.

This job pays $8 an hour. That's nearly $3 more than I made last week stacking boxes of foam padding at a factory in Moonachie. This is temp work in the "light industrial" sector: warehouses and boxes and hours that stretch forever for dollars that don't.

I'm a newspaper reporter, though nobody in this warehouse knows it. I'm three weeks into a monthlong project aimed at showing what life is like for people starting over in Passaic County: the thousands of new immigrants who arrive each year, or people who've lost jobs. What kind of work and housing exist for those who need both, fast? This is my assignment: Find a job and a place to live and write about the experience.

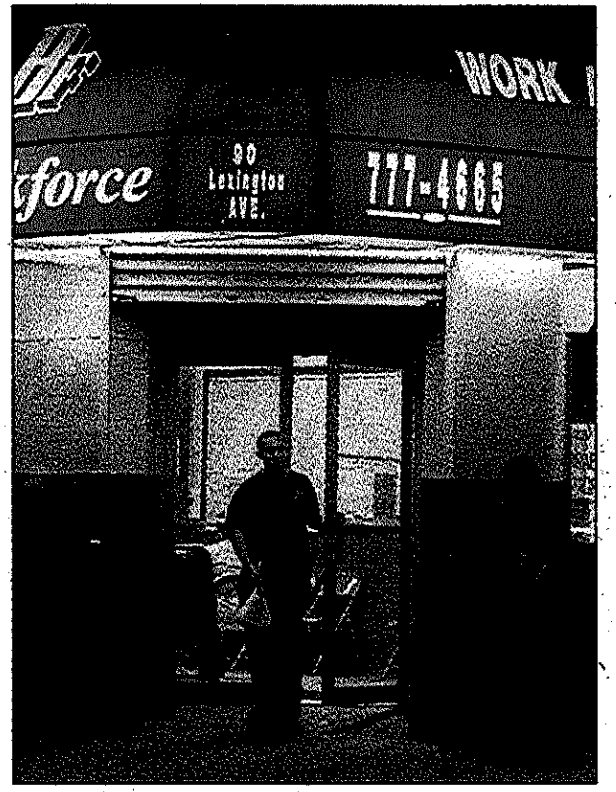
Last year, 85,069 Passaic County residents – 17 percent of the county's population – lived below the federal poverty line, as compared with 722,300 – 8.5 percent – statewide. Legal Services of New Jersey's Poverty Research Institute estimates that a single person living in Passaic County needs to make $9.64 an hour to meet all his or her needs. Can I do that?

My experience won't be a perfect example of the temp life. I'm white, American-born, English-speaking and college-educated. I have health insurance through North Jersey Media Group, which owns the Herald News. I know if things get bad, I can go home. That's hardly the profile of most people in this situation. Still, I hope this project will illuminate the lives and challenges of those who come here, seeking a future, and those, born here, who struggle to live near the poverty line.

As a reporter, I make about $33,000. Like everyone I know, I work really hard just to scrape by. In the days before this assignment starts, I'm nervous and excited.

Please see **WORKING**, A8

For a month, reporter Tom Meagher lived and worked as a low-wage laborer to record life among the county's working poor. This is his story.



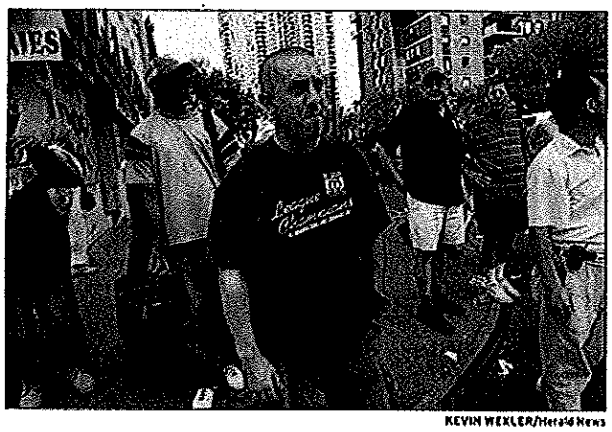
AMY NEWMAN/Herald News

Tom waits for the van ride to a job site one morning before dawn.

Stories by Tom Meagher and Suzanne Travers

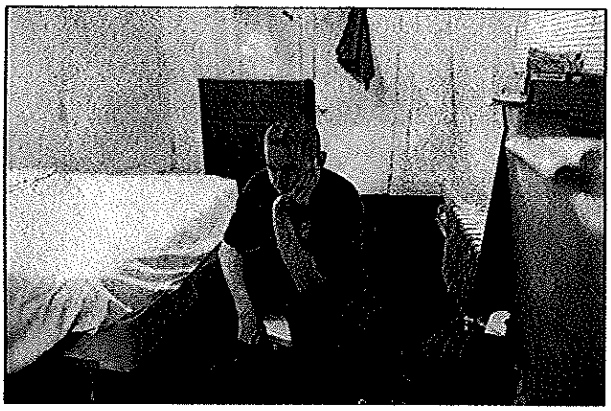
For more photos and stories see our Web site at www.northjersey.com/temporarylife

Workers: Temp jobs offer wages without long-term benefits



KEVIN WEXLER/Herald News

DAY 1: Tom Meagher begins his one-month journey by looking for a bus in Manhattan that will take him to Passaic County to look for work and housing.



ELIZABETH LARA/Herald News

DAY 5: At home, after work on Friday, Tom sits in his room in a rooming house in Passaic.

LESLIE BARBARO/Herald News

DAY 32: Tom walks up New Street to return to the Herald News office on Sept. 1, carrying all his belongings.

Continued from A1

I'm burnt out from months of cranking out stories, and I think that a few weeks at a no-stress job will be just what I need.

I begin on Aug. 1, a Monday. I leave behind my checkbook, my ATM card, my credit card, my cell phone, my car keys, my fiancée and our apartment in Brooklyn. I've got $424 to get started, an amount based on a week's wages at the Poverty Research Institute's self-sufficiency level. I board a jitney shuttle bus in New York City and head for Paterson with a backpack full of clothes. Now I'm depressed to be alone and scared of what's ahead.

I get off on Main Street in South Paterson and go to the library to check the classifieds. There are rooms for rent in Haledon, Clifton and Passaic. I make calls at a payphone across the street. An agency in Fair Lawn will find me a room for a $100 fee, but that's almost a quarter of the money I have right now -- not worth it.

Today is a scorcher, the beginning of a month of a dozen 90-plus-degree days. My backpack weighs about 40 pounds. I lug it down Main Avenue in Clifton. I don't want to waste money on sunblock, but I can feel my skin turning red. As the day goes by, my legs chafe against each other into a stinging rash. I make more calls. People want more money than I've got for a room: One place asks $165 a week, plus a $330 security deposit and $100 for the key.

I don't have a car to check out apartments, and every phone call or jitney ride chips away at my wad of cash. I check out a rooming house in the city of Passaic, then walk to another on Paulison Avenue. The house contains 11 of the 569 licensed rooming house units left in Passaic.

"You welfare? You work?" asks the landlady, Señora Maria Ortega. Work, I tell her. I don't have a job yet, but I'm going to get one.

She shows me a second-floor room. The house is a rambling Victorian. I can see a hint of its past in the bathroom's stained-glass windows. The room she shows me is spacious, spare and worn. A patchwork of brown carpet pieces, woven and shag, covers the floor. There's a faint stench of mold and urine in the hallway, but it's tough to argue with $125 a week.

Señora Maria tells me I seem nice, but I can't have the room until tomorrow.

I take the jitney to see another place. No luck. It's 5 p.m., and I don't know where I'm going to sleep yet.

I start to panic.

I find a payphone and call my fiancée, Ginger, almost in tears. I'm scared and dejected. The heat has sucked the life out of me. I'm sore and sunburned and my legs are so chafed I can hardly walk. I spend $1.79 for dinner at White Castle and start calling hotels. The cheapest costs $70 a night, plus tax. I don't want to risk spending that much for one night when I still have to pay a security deposit.

In the end, I find a place to stay like most people do: through a friend. Ginger's friend's cousin's boyfriend lives in Jersey City and agrees to let me crash on his floor. The cousin picks me up, and I'm so relieved. I feel safe, and happy that I can relax, and so grateful I could cry.

The next day I am too spent to look for work. At 4 p.m., I move into Señora Maria's house. I have to give her two weeks' rent plus a $20 key deposit. In just two days, my $424 has dwindled to $110. It all adds up: jitney rides to look for apartments, phone cards to answer job ads. I eat a dinner of $2 cheeseburgers, unpack and go over every inch of the room. There's a flimsy wooden dresser and a plywood entertainment center where I stack my clothes. On the closet wall I later find a trace of who's been here before:

"Rainbow Lesbians Yelly n Jessie," someone has carved.

"2gether til eternity Was here 6/30/03 left 8/9/04"

I sleep with a hammer next to my pillow in case the door lock is as flimsy as it looks. I try to ignore the people outside, yelling and honking their car horns.

On the job

I spend the next two days looking for work. Up and down Main Avenue, through Clifton and Passaic, I fill out applications and stop at places with help-wanted signs. I use my real name, but I'm vague about my background. I try about 20 businesses, with little success. A taxi company needs drivers, but it takes four weeks to get a license. I've washed dishes for restaurants, but Venezia's needs only waiters. I stop by Brickforce Staffing, one of a few temporary employment agencies in the city of Passaic. A woman tells me to come in at 6 a.m. and ask for Nelson. I'm sick of walking everywhere. My employment opportunities would double if I had a bike. I see a few and am tempted to take one -- why don't kids lock up their bikes? I call it a day and head home.

The next morning I'm up a few minutes after 5 a.m. It's still dark as I walk the mile downtown. At the Brickforce office, I sign a couple of forms and show my Social Security card. That's all it takes: I'm hired. The morning rush there is busy. People trickle in and, by 6 a.m., workers crowd around Nelson, the dispatcher, angling to be sent out on a job. Nelson takes calls from clients on a cell phone while juggling others on a speakerphone, all the while talking to jitney drivers over a Nextel walkie-talkie.

Later, I learn that Brickforce is well known, thanks to a word-of-mouth network. Brickforce acts as the middleman between warehouses and factories across North Jersey and a pool of laborers. The warehouses, or clients, use temps when regular workers are absent or when there's a big shipment coming in and not enough people to get the job done.

In economic terms, Brickforce supplies a product -- workers -- to its clients for a fee. The boxes we fold and move and stack are the clients' product, but I am Brickforce's product: a worker ready to work. Temporary agencies give the labor market flexibility to respond to demand: Their people can fill one factory's need one week, another factory's the next. At its best, it means flexibility for employees who may be between jobs or unable to take a full-time job. The light-industrial sector pays the lowest wages in the temp industry: between $5.15 and $9 an hour at Brickforce.

I pile into a jitney with about 20 other temps. There are no seat belts, and the bus rattles like a dishwasher -- we shake back and forth like we're on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. Brickforce subcontracts with a jitney service as an essential part of business. Because the agency transports us to the warehouses, it can promise on-time delivery of the necessary number of workers each day. Some temp agencies expect workers to get to the work site themselves, a problem for clients and agencies if workers show up late or not at all.

Fine print

While Brickforce sells clients this competitive advantage, it charges employees for the ride. *The rationale is that if Brickforce didn't shuttle us to warehouses,* we'd have to pay to get there ourselves. I don't have a car and public transportation could take hours. Brickforce subtracts between $4 and $7 a day from my wages to pay for the rides to and from work. No one tells me this directly, but the arrangement is explained in a section of the application I signed on my first day.

Still, the deduction doesn't register until I get my first paycheck. The company jitney costs less than if I had to ride New Jersey Transit to Secaucus, where my first assignment is. But the jitney also means getting up at 5 a.m., in the dark, so I can walk to Brickforce. There I wait up to 30 minutes for the ride, then spend an hour or so onboard -- sometimes standing in the aisle -- as the driver drops off a few workers at one factory, a few more at another. Some afternoons I wait 90 minutes after my shift ends -- all off the clock -- to get picked up.

My co-worker Priyank says he doesn't mind the jitney, except when the driver forgets to pick

Please see WORKING, A9

Barely getting by

New Jersey's Poverty Research Institute says a single person in Passaic County must make at least $1,697 per month to be self-sufficient. Because I earned only half that amount I had to skimp on necessities like food, phone and health care.

-- Tom Meagher

	Money needed for self-sufficiency	Amount I earned
TOTAL INCOME	**$1,697.00**	**$852.94**
EXPENSES	**Amount I should have spent**	**Amount I spent**
Food	$224.00	$98.93
Housing	$900.00	$645.00
Health care	$104.00	$0
Transportation	$59.00	$77.45
Taxes	$281.00	$97.06
Misc.	$129.00	$69.65

Graphic by JAN HOUSEWERTH/Herald News

Continued from A8

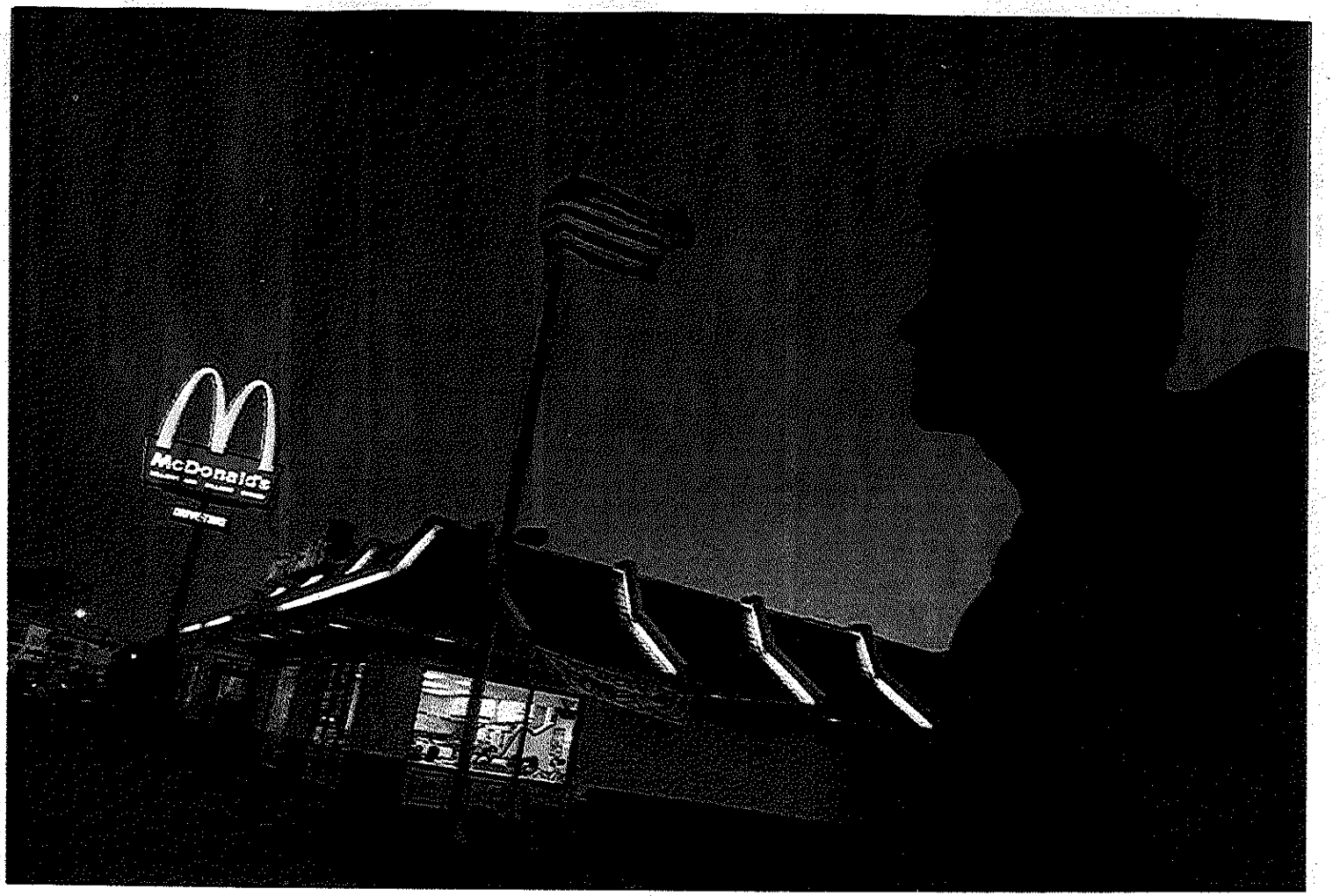
him up. He's had to walk more than three miles home from a factory in Wood-Ridge to the city of Passaic.

Almost all the other temp workers speak Spanish and little English. I'm assigned to work with one man, and we develop a kind of sign language. I'm raring to go and working quickly, but it's only 8 a.m. My partner gestures with his hands, and the message is clear: Ease up a little. It turns out to be an unspoken rule of temping. Don't work too hard or too fast. The day is long and the work exhausting. No one pays you enough to wear yourself out. As it is, I can't pay my second week's rent. I make a deal with Señora Maria to pay her installments until I get a full paycheck.

I spend my first full week at a warehouse near Teterboro airport. It's ridiculously hot. We're assigned busy work while we wait more than a week for a truck carrying 1,000 boxes to arrive from California. When the driver gets in, Steve, my supervisor, tells him the delay has cost him $2,000 a day. Now there's work to do. Steve and I stand deep inside the trailer loading boxes onto pallets. We work through the afternoon break. My arms are sore and I'm soaked with sweat, but the action, the constant scooping, tossing, turning, feels exhilarating. When we're done I'm almost a little sad to see it end. We finish in two hours, for which I earn $14, before taxes.

Life out of reach

Another temp named Julio and I sort the 1,000 boxes, then assemble them in smaller stacks and label them. The radio blares commercials that advertise a life out of



LESLIE BARBARO/Herald News

"Julio's" two jobs, at Brickforce Staffing and McDonald's, allow him to support his wife and two children in Peru.

reach: Take your family to Dorney Park; buy a computer; invest in real estate. I put on gloves and grab a 2-foot-long roll of shrinkwrap. I tuck one end under the corner of a box and run around the stack in circles, wrapping it for transport. By the time I'm done, I'm dizzy.

Everything that comes through the warehouse – mostly women's clothes, shoes, handbags – is made in other countries. Basically, we take large shipments and repackage them into smaller ones that go out to discount clothing stores.

We break when the lunch truck arrives. I buy a slice of pizza. Julio eats his box lunch quickly and then sleeps. He sleeps on breaks, on the jitney, every moment he can. I pull out a Spanish phrase book and tell Julio I am trying to learn Spanish; he says he needs to learn English and we begin to talk. He's from Peru, where he used to be an accountant. He had a business and rented out apartments, but Peru's sour economy left him unable to find work to put his son through medical school. He came here last year on a tourist visa and started working at Brickforce.

Sheer exhaustion

Julio, who does not use his real name for fear of deportation, lives with his aunt and her husband in Passaic. At 49, he's left behind his wife and children in Peru, but exhaustion keeps him from feeling lonely. He sleeps only four hours a night. "I work and work," he tells me.

He works at Brickforce from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m., then at McDonald's from 5 to 11 p.m., except on weekends, when he works the overnight shift. He takes home $375 a week for 78 hours of work. He pays no rent, so most of his paycheck goes back to his family in Peru, nearly $1,300 a month.

Julio's plan is to work in the U.S. for five years. He wants to work here legally, but he has no time to find out how to get the proper documents. He took a year preparing his family for his departure. They didn't want him to go. "That's a father's sacrifice," he says. You want your children to have a better life.

He calls home every Sunday. He misses his wife so much. Every time they talk, they cry. He carries photos of his wife, parents, sisters and children in a knapsack, wherever he goes. In some, they're smiling because it's Christmas, or they're relaxing with friends. Two pictures show Julio with his family at the airport the day he left Lima. Their faces have a stony, blank look of worry and disbelief.

At home

Tenants in my rooming house have no kitchen access, and we aren't allowed appliances in our rooms. (The rules say no microwaves, no air conditioning.) My first paycheck, for the first day I worked, comes to $35.16 after taxes and the jitney fee. My second paycheck, for a full week's work, comes to $196.46. After paying $125 a week in rent, I'll have $5 a day to live on. I skip breakfast and decide to ration my money between lunch and dinner.

Fast-food dollar menus and value meals are a salvation, and I'm grateful for cheap slices of pizza. At the grocery store, two days of food money buys enough bread, peanut butter and jelly for 10 sandwiches – a couple days' worth. One payday, I treat myself to a two-piece fried chicken combo from KFC for $5.29. I think about food all the time.

In the evenings it's hot in my room, and I'm lonely. I've got a standing phone date with my girlfriend, Ginger. In the beginning I buy $5 phone cards so I can call her. They're supposed to charge 10 cents a minute, but there's a 90-cent surcharge every time I use the card at a payphone, so I can only make three or four calls per card. I miss her an almost unhealthy amount, even though she comes to visit every week or so. The fact that I can't call her when I want to is making our separation painful. I think of Julio. I can't imagine what it would be like to leave her behind and go to another country.

An oddity

I've been at Brickforce a couple of weeks when Nelson tells me I'm a good worker. I get the sense that "good" means mostly that I'm on time. Nelson says he doesn't want me to be bounced between $8-an-hour jobs and $5-an-hour ones. He'll try to get me $8 an hour from now on.

Turns out the best-paying job is at the perfume factory in Mount Olive. After a few days, the regimentation there reminds me of high school. We're transported in buses, profanity's not allowed, we keep our bags in lockers, and the women constantly leave the assembly line in pairs to go to the bathroom. At day's end, everyone stops, waits for the end-of-shift buzzer and runs for the front door.

When he announced the job, Nelson said he needed five men and 10 women. Nobody questions this division of labor, and there are more women than men.

Later, I learn this segregation may be discrimination, banned by *state and federal law*. Last week, *when I asked the company to* comment on this story, it said, "Brickforce Staffing complies with all federal and state laws pertaining to hiring practices, wage and hour guidelines and any other applicable regulation and/or statute."

There also seems to be a hierarchy based on language. To work here, you're supposed to know English. I don't think Julio was even considered for this job for that reason. Most line workers are Spanish speakers with only basic English: hello, yes, no, thank you. The line supervisors are bilingual Latinos; the managers speak English only.

This makes me an oddity on the line. I'm the only white guy, and the only native English speaker, on the Brickforce jitney in the morning. Nobody talks to me. I imagine people assume I've just gotten out of jail. In the warehouses, though, I get a few questions.

"Why are *you* working for the agency?" asks one of the regulars at one warehouse. "It doesn't pay anything."

"Are you Polish? From Polonia?" someone else asks.

I've got dirty blond hair and a pink complexion, but a Latino coworker asks me: "Are you white?"

The questions puzzle me until I realize what's behind them. It's rare to see white people in the Brickforce temp world. In downtown Passaic, someone with blond hair is probably from Poland. White Americans *don't* work these jobs; Caucasians who do are usually immigrants from Eastern Europe. My co-workers are trying to fit me into the categories that define their lives and this work. I think about the guy who asked if I'm white and marvel. The segregation of class along racial lines is so strong it's made him question what he can see before his eyes.

Winding down

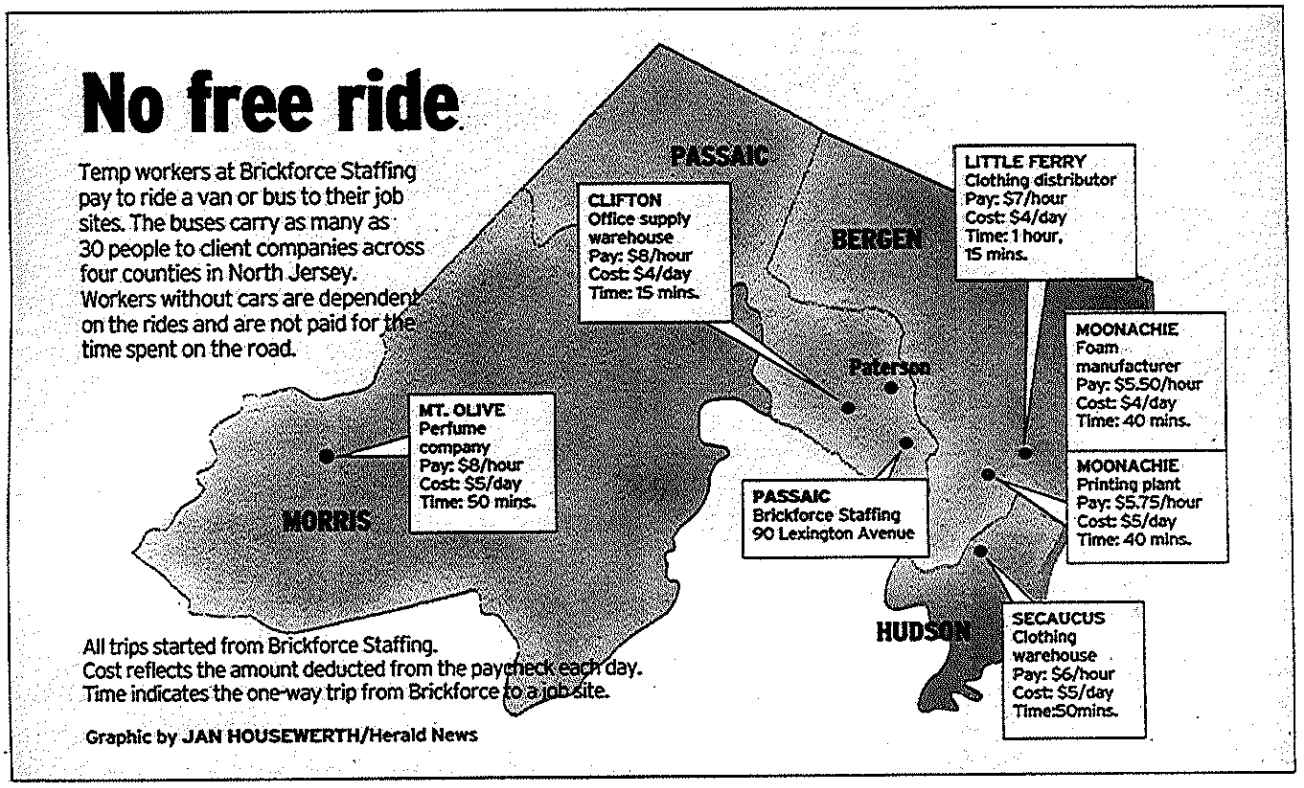
By the two-week mark, I can't wait for this project to end. I begin to count down: two days until the weekend, one week until an overnight trip to Baltimore for my grandfather's memorial service; a few days more and I'll be done. I wake up every day, go to work, come home to shower, go to the library, then wait for Ginger's call.

Finally, it's Aug. 31. I tell Nelson it's my last day and tell the rooming-house super I'm moving out on Sept. 1. The super says if I'm ever back in town I can stay there. I pack my things, take the jitney to Paterson and walk up Grand Street. I trudge onto New Street, over Interstate 80, to the Herald News office.

I kept a job and a roof over my head and my belly mostly full – a life of minimalist survival. I couldn't have supported a child or taken a vacation, a day off or a sick day. To do better, I'd need to do what so many, like Julio, do: work a second job. An illness or work slowdown could have plunged me into homelessness.

At the office, I put my bags down and hug my colleagues. In the weeks ahead, I'll find I'm still scraping by at the paper, but it's different than temping in Passaic. I can eat when I want to, see my girlfriend and friends, talk to my co-workers instead of laboring in silence. I feel connected to the world, and that makes a huge difference.

I'm relieved it's over. In a second, I step out of one life and back into my own.



Library and church offer refuge and A/C

When I get off work, and the jitney returns me to the city of Passaic, my time finally is my own.

August's heat leaves me thirsty and uncomfortable, my feet sore from standing all day. I'm hungry for food and human connection. In this grueling month, I find pockets of relief.

My room at Señora Maria's rooming house offers a few comforts: a soft sofa, my bed. There's a wire for cable if I could afford a television. One afternoon the guy next door brings over a stack of clothing for me. On the porch downstairs, I talk with Marilyn, a long-term tenant, about the books we like to read.

I find an oasis in the Passaic Public Library. Every night, I walk through its electric sliding doors, feeling welcomed by the air conditioning and the warmth of the library's wood paneling. And the bathrooms are free.

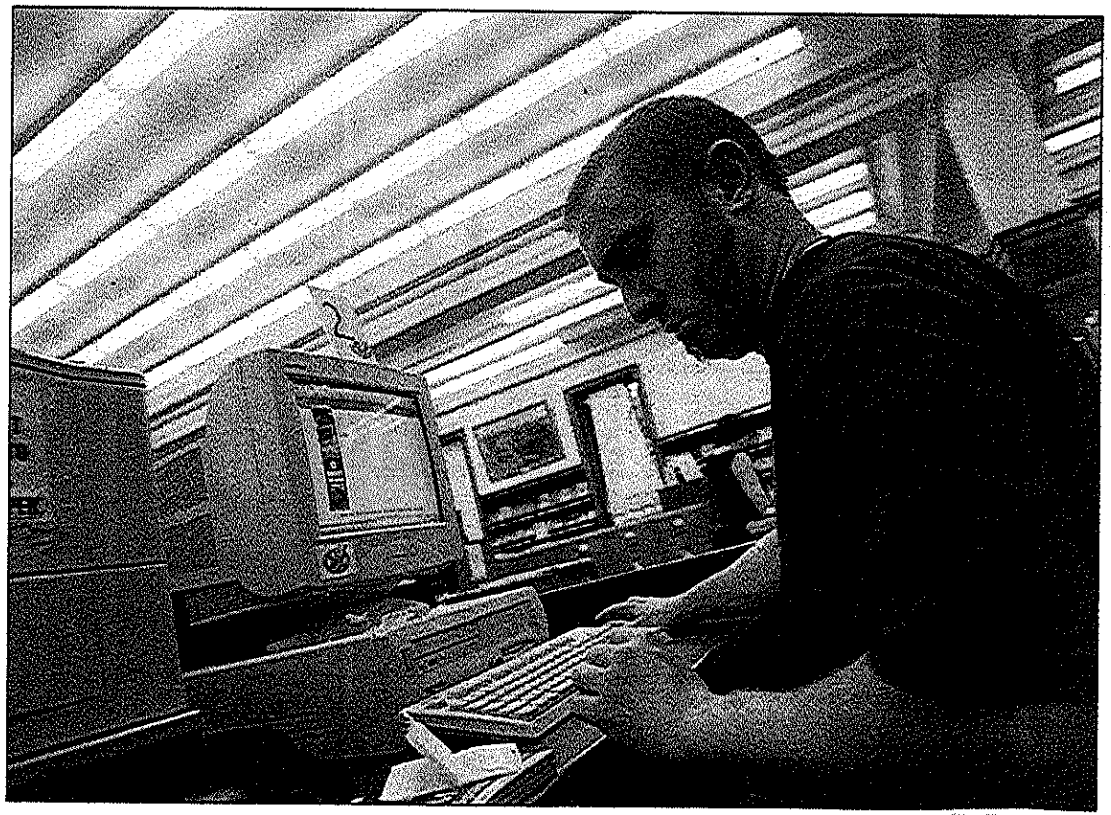
The library is full of old people, young people and a cross-section of Passaic's ethnic groups: Orthodox Jewish, black, Asian-Indian, Peruvian, Mexican. People check out the video collection, and some arrive at the wide tables near the back as if they've got an appointment to read the newspaper. After getting proof of residence at Señora Maria's place, I get a library card to check out books, but I'm also eager for the library's Internet access. Longing for personal contact, I look up people I cut ties with years ago, e-mailing them to say hello.

My fiancée, Ginger, visits a few times, and treats me to a meal or a movie. She spends $20 to get me an electric fan for my room. Many immigrants, I know, are tapped into a support network. It's clear to me now how important that is for supplying small favors and material help. Temp work comes with no benefits, but permanent employees at the warehouses offer their own small acts of kindness. More than once someone buys me and the other temps a soda or a Dixie cup of ice cream.

There's relief in other places, too. One Saturday I fail at my attempt to pick up construction work with the day laborers outside The Home Depot, but on the way home I pass a Presbyterian church offering free lunch. About 40 people are seated at tables. I chow down on a meal of hamburger, salad, rolls and two kinds of dessert, bowled over by how delicious it is.

Each Sunday I go to church at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, where the peace and air conditioning create a welcome refuge. The Rev. Bob Yurgel, a Capuchin friar, celebrates Mass. At the kiss of peace, he goes up and down both sides of the pews, embracing every person on the aisle.

The parish is a mix of immigrants: first- and second-generation Italians, Latinos, Filipinos. In his homily, Father Bob talks about diversity and inclusion. There's plenty of space, he says, plenty of jobs. Immigrants do jobs Americans won't do. America should offer a blanket amnesty to everyone, welcome everybody. I think about Julio, Priyank, and a few other immigrants I work with at Brickforce. Father Bob offers a different kind of comfort. You and your work matter, he's saying. There's hope.



KYE-RYUNG LEE/Herald News

Tom checks his e-mail at the Passaic Public Library after work. The library and a church offered respite from the heat.

Temp work not glamorous, but can lead to more

Like the name itself, a temp's work is short and lacking in benefits or glamour.

But for those who need a job, any job, and need it now, temporary employment is increasingly an option in a chaotic job market.

Federal statistics show that 4,197 people in Passaic County last year found work as temporary employees, those who work for placement agencies that farm out labor to client companies for short periods. They earned, on average, $237 a week, about $12,300 a year.

That's less than the $445-a-week temp workers made statewide, but still more than the $178.94 workers at fast-food and carryout restaurants across the country made each week.

Temporary agencies employed more than 71,000 people in New Jersey last year.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics bases these numbers on the unemployment reports that every company must file. But that calculation may not include all of the state's temporary workers, or it may count some more than once. Joe Broschak, assistant professor of business administration at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said the nature of temporary work – brief and constantly changing – makes it tough to accurately count the workers.

"No one knows how many times they get counted," Broschak said. "Multiple agencies could be placing the same person over different points in time."

No one disputes that the industry has grown dramatically. In the past 10 years, the number of temporary workers has grown by more than 146 percent nationwide. Nearly half of all people who work for employment services toil in the light industrial sector, which includes factories, shipping industries and construction.

Employers hire temporary workers for a number of reasons, Broschak said. Temporary agencies allow their clients to be more flexible in their labor and salary costs. The hiring company doesn't have to pay workers' benefits, and it can trim its labor pool without many hassles.

Some New Jersey temporary agencies, such as Brickforce Staffing and Joule Temporary Staffing Services, have sweetened the deal by transporting workers directly to their clients' doors.

Jack Wellman, president of the Edison-based Joule, said his company hires subcontractors to bus its workers, because many don't have their own transportation. Jobs in North Jersey, he said, often are clustered in industrial parks far from population centers. Brickforce – which operates 25 offices in New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania – sends workers from its Passaic offices to sites as far as Mount Olive, Secaucus and Little Ferry.

But the agencies don't supply the rides for free. They charge their employees for the lift to the work site. The state Department of Labor's Division of Wage and Hour Compliance has conducted several investigations in recent years into Brickforce's use of the practice. Ultimately, investigators determined that as long as employees consent to the payroll deductions for transportation, the practice is legal.

Wellman said that for those with little experience or references, temporary work could be the key to finding a better job.

"It builds an employment history with people so that they become much more marketable," Wellman said. "We provide a great opportunity for people to enter the work force."

More important, a temp job offers a flexibility that parents, students and those seeking a second job can be hard-pressed to find.

Broschak's research also found that temporary workers are just as reliable as full-time employees, despite erratic hours and low wages.

"Temps actually outperform full-time employees in terms of how productive they are, in terms of their attitude toward the company," Broschak said. "The reason is that they hope to get hired full time."

– *Tom Meagher*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Tom Meagher has worked as a welder, laborer, sandwich maker, short-order cook, lawn mower, disc jockey, dishwasher, record shop clerk, grocery bagger, TV closed-captioner, warehouse lifter and assembly line drone. He covers the city of Paterson.

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