



Forty-Cent Tip
Photo:
COURTESY OF STEVEN COLUMBA

Let me tell you about the screen of people standing in the hall when I help the girl that got lost. Then, "Eh, eh, eh, come into the kitchen now!" Oh, the luck to realize I got lost in the country. I was not having a good time. But then I met a worker who has no name. One day my name is Carlos, another day Oscar taking on other people's identities. Because in the government I don't exist. Like the worker in the city every three months I change. The underdevelopment—so what? I still get food on my table.

In a dreamy process, my mind goes to the different places at the same time. When I'm at work, my mind is back in Colombia. There I have to clean tables and take care of people. In Colombia, I helped students and organized it people for how they took care of them. Back in Colombia, I tried to save money from being there I would not return to place. It's better if you think about it, you don't know how good you had if you don't see everything.

I came to this country to make more money. I remember when my mother used to tell me, "In the U.S. you can find a better career." In the only place where everybody is equal in the promised land, which I think I love you, but that was the biggest lie anybody ever told me. I have been here three years, and I still don't see the promised land. There, my great success has not made you about the hard work of an immigrant, and people making fun of your English. You can never get respect if you come from another country. For a person who has graduated from university, it's hard to think you will be working at a restaurant in New York City.

They get me wrong, but I'll do what I can. I don't see the other workers that don't see anything, the biggest success story. On the old guy that always sits at tables, when he wants his glass to look like this one, it's all about the money. The owner said to the owner, make a drink with a little. It costs you, and he comes on the table every track. You do the work, to see how much I get for a tip. But it's a job. At least I have food and a very small house with one room. So thank, thank. But these ideas of coming here to a better life. It is good. Not so better.

PHOTOGRAPH BY 1



PHOTOGRAPH BY 2

BOOKS

Immigrants' Stories: The Lives of Low-Wage Immigrants Told By High School Students

Forty-Cent Tip: Stories of New York City Immigrant Workers
By Students at Three NYC Public International High Schools
Next Generation Press, 2006
30 black-and-white photographs, 72 pp.

By Stephen Wolgast

ONE OF THE YEAR'S BOOKS that touches on the effects of immigration to the United States is a collection of photographs and interviews of foreigners working low-wage jobs. The men and women came to the U.S. hopefully, sometimes legally, and most of them end up living under the radar of the rest of us. The photographers visit them in their cramped, dirty, and sometimes dangerous workplaces, and let them tell their stories alongside their portraits.

The topic is in line with one of the biggest domestic debates taking place this summer. So it's not surprising that a book on such a hot topic is coming out now.

What is surprising is who the authors are. They're 34 high school students in New York City who explored the unseen warehouses, backrooms, and restaurant kitchens of their neighborhoods. Using curiosity as their credentials, the teenagers—who are recent immigrants and are still learning English—took tape recorders and digital cameras to document the lives of their neighbors, friends, and even family members.

The tales they heard were at once hopeful and frustrated determined and disillusioned. The workers they interviewed hold mostly low-wage jobs, but there's also a dentist from South America who practices illegally because, he says, getting licensed would cost him \$100,000 in education fees.

A man from the Czech Republic who has been here for seven years worked in construction when he arrived in the U.S., but he had to buy his own tools and on some days his bosses

simply wouldn't pay him for his work. "I could never complain to anyone," he says, "because even now I know only about five words in English." A friend told him about a job removing asbestos, which pays \$38 an hour. He took it. (*"Breathing My Own Death,"* p. 20, above.)

"I can't say that I hate my job," he says, and acknowledges that his new career is far from ideal. "I have to wear a special mask every minute that I work with asbestos—at least that's the law, but my company doesn't follow it."

The students attend one of three small public high schools in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan that enroll only recent immigrants. Their training in photography and interviewing—that is, journalism—came from their teachers or volunteers. Considering that this is their first try at journalism, it's easy to look past the technical stumbles and realize the omnipresent challenges outsiders face.

At a time when bloggers want to be considered journalists for posting their rants and raves, it's encouraging to see high schoolers treading the streets, finding stories, and telling them. It makes a person think that if teenagers spent less time trading music downloads and more time comforting the afflicted, newspaper circulations could stop their decline.

But that's hoping for a lot. In any case, the stories of these low-wage immigrants are engrossing. Are they working the jobs that Americans don't want? Are they a threat to our security? There's one way to find out: find the immigrants in our communities, talk to them, and tell their stories.