



BEHIND THE SCENES: Ellen Calmus, a former journalist educated at Harvard, started El Rincon after neighbors asked for help communicating with U.S. relatives.



KEITH DANNEMILLER PHOTOS: FOR THE CHRONICLE

FITTING IN: Jennifer Amilpa, 13, has struggled to acclimate to her new life in Malinalco since her family moved. She has turned to Calmus' El Rincon for help.

Nonprofit in small Mexican town helps returning migrants find home again

Lending a hand to turn a corner

By DUDLEY ALTHAUS

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MALINALCO, MEXICO — In the fresh mountain air of this ancient community that once served as a spiritual training ground for Aztec warriors, a displaced Mexican-American teenager has grasped the helping hand of an Ivy League-trained humanitarian.

Jennifer Amilpa, 13, born and raised in a small Virginia city, moved here suddenly last year and now finds herself immersed in the bewildering society of her mother's central Mexico hometown.

Ellen Calmus, the Harvard-educated American founder of a small volunteer agency that aids immigrants and their families, is the woman who will try to pull her through her struggles.

Jennifer arrived in this picturesque getaway about 65 miles southwest of Mexico City in November when her mother and stepfather decided the family needed to return to Mexico. Socorro Echeverria, her mother, had migrated illegally to Culpeper, Va., 16 years ago, giving birth there to Jennifer and her younger brother.

"She really doesn't read or write Spanish," Echeverria said of Jennifer.

"The teachers don't really understand her."

A former freelance journalist and college professor who's lived in Mexico and Central America

since the 1970s, Calmus moved to Malinalco at the beginning of the decade.

Helping the 'lost'

She fell into her new full-time vocation almost by accident five years ago when neighbors began asking for help in finding lost relatives in the United States or navigating bureaucracies on either side of the border.

Saying the neighbors pulled her "out of my cave," Calmus put her shoulder to the wheel. "In general, migrants' children are either overachievers or underachievers," Calmus, 58, said of the dozens of junior high school kids she helps who have either returned recently to Mexico or live with relatives here while parents work in the United States. "Their situation just makes so many demands."

Her organization — El Rincon, or The Corner — helps local children and their families produce handicrafts for sale, works with schools to keep troubled kids from dropping out and provides free phone calls for families to talk to migrants north of the Rio Grande.

"You see all these points along the way where people get lost," she says.

Jennifer and her 18-year-old sister, Itzel, are among them. Their mother decided that their future, and that of a 5-year-old son, would be better in Malinalco after the older girl became pregnant in Virginia. But Itzel got pregnant again in Malinalco this year and Jennifer has flunked several school courses and, at times, runs with a rough crowd.

Echeverria and her husband turned to El Rincon in hopes of keeping Jennifer in school.

"We're sort of a like a neighborhood service," says Calmus, who was honored by Mexico's first lady last year for her work. "By just keeping people in touch with each other we can achieve some beautiful things."

As in many corners of Mexico over the past two decades, mostly illegal immigration to the United States has become both a lifeline and way of life for many families in Malinalco.

While some head to Texas, California and more traditional destinations, more recent Malinalco migrants live in the U.S. Midwest or Southeast.

"Everyone here has a cousin, a brother or a nephew in the United States," says Malinalco Mayor Gerardo Chaqueco, adding that two of his five brothers have lived with their families in Cleveland, Ohio, for more than a decade. "They are illegal, so they live in total fear."

Solving problems

While the U.S. recession has forced some migrant families back to Malinalco for lack of work, tougher U.S. border enforcement has persuaded others not to come home to visit as they once did, Calmus says. Village children nowadays can go for years without seeing their parents. With

a shoestring budget financed largely by a small California foundation and donations from friends, El Rincon (www.elrincon.org) operates from small rented offices near Malinalco's 16th century Roman Catholic church.

One recent morning, Calmus and her two female aides were helping to arrange the return of the body of a Malinalco boy killed in a North Carolina car crash. They were trying to get official copies of birth certificates from Mexican state agencies.

"The bureaucracies are set up for people who have the skills and backgrounds that our villagers don't have," Calmus says. "We're able to work together with different institutions to actually solve problems."

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