

# Living

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●● In an issue where  
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common ground  
- here is some  
common ground.●●

ELLEN CALMUS  
Director, Proyecto El Rincón

BY MARIA GALLUCCI  
The News

**M**ALINALCO, State of Mexico - Through towering green cliffs and down an endlessly winding road, this quiet pueblo is steeped in the mystical history of a once-powerful Aztec empire. More than half a millennium later, residents still pass down their hometown's ancient legends and recreate indigenous art in weavings and woodcarving. But just as Malinalco proudly preserves its dynamic past, the town of just 6,500 people is finding that the stories of today's generations are inseparably linked to a very current phenomenon: migration out of Mexico and to the United States.

Over the past two decades, the Aztec narratives have slowly made way for the complex accounts of Malinalco residents whose fathers, sisters and sons have headed north to find work and prosperity abroad. And whereas shame, grief and guilt have silenced these stories in earlier years, today the town is finding its voice through the community-run non-profit Proyecto El Rincón (The Corner Project).

"This is the home community of migrants...and this community group responds to the collective needs in a way that makes sense to (Malinalco)," explained Ellen Calmus, who founded the organization in 2005 after evolving the after-school educational resource center she set up for local children seven years earlier.

Malinalco, located 65 kilometers south of Toluca and 115 southwest of Mexico City, is also the capital of the 23,000-person municipality of the same name.

Calmus noted that immigration is relatively new to Malinalco, and that the El Rincón initiative has grown and adapted as the community itself evolves. She said that increased security on the U.S.-Mexico border, plus an economic downturn and soaring unemployment in the U.S., have meant that the town's migrant day laborers have either been stuck abroad, unable to afford to come home, or left to jobs they're not as qualified to do, resulting in more requests from families to bring bodies back to Mexico.

The initial idea for El Rincón began in 2004, after an after-school participant's cousin died in the United States. The young woman asked Calmus to help make phone calls to bring her cousin's body back for burial

## EL RINCÓN

### creates lifeline to Malinalco migrants



Albertina, second from left, supported her family for two years by stitching and selling handbags after her husband, a migrant in California, was killed by a drunk driver.

and to supervise her now-orphaned child. With a private donation to cover a year's worth of an Internet phone subscription, Calmus began facilitating more exchanges for other burdened families, and she began devoting full-time efforts to the project a year later. Last October, the non-profit moved from what the director called a "closet" and into more spacious home-turned-office.

Today, the director's scrapbook

is essentially a storybook of modern-day Malinalco, with each pasted photograph chronicling the town's triumphs, hardships and endless maneuverings of the U.S. immigration legal system.

Take Albertina, for instance, the widow of a migrant who was killed by a drunk driver in California. With no source of income and two young boys to put through school, Albertina began crafting handbags after

attending a stitching workshop at El Rincón. She supported her family for two years through handbag sales until the insurance compensation for her husband's death finally arrived late last year.

In Mariano's case, his mother approached the non-profit after her young adult son had gone missing for a year. A few phone calls to the United States revealed that Mariano was facing a life sentence in prison. Although

his public defense attorney was convinced of Mariano's innocence, she saw a plea bargain and subsequent deportation as the only way out for the Mexican immigrant. Conflicted with what Calmus called his Aztec honor, Mariano refused to admit guilt to a crime he didn't commit. A cultural translation between El Rincón and the attorney helped Mariano better grasp the situation, and soon he was happily sent home to his mother in





Florencia, right, approached El Rincón after her son Mariano, center, went missing.



El Rincón director Ellen Calmus, left, with office manager Maribel Sánchez, right.

and wait the better part of a year to return home north of the border. Two years later, Janet is still awaiting the chance to reunite with her family as she occasionally progresses through a slow-moving system.

"I've had the encouraging experience that when I explain a problem we're trying to sort out for one of our migrant's families, people in the U.S. are usually glad to help," Calmus wrote in a later e-mail message. "I think when people understand the whole story, including what it means for the family back home in Mexico, aspects of migration that otherwise seem baffling start making sense to people up north, and they are more able to understand these as human stories rather than the inexplicable behavior of 'aliens.'"

In the countless other stories inside and out of the scrapbook, El Rincón has played a vital role in linking the home community to the Malinalco diaspora sporadically scattered across the United States. With connections to consulates, congressmen, lawyers and even prison wardens, the non-profit can often provide the missing link to desperate family



The quiet streets of central Malinalco.

members with little reach beyond the rural mountain town. The organization has become the place residents turn to in times of crises or urgency.

"There is a greater proportion of people who have been up north. The challenge is to find a way for it to be a positive thing," Calmus said from her office. "If you don't create barriers to creativity, you don't know what can come out of it."

El Rincón also works to foster development within Malinalco itself, offering summer apprenticeship programs and counseling to children whose parents have migrated northward. For the past four years, master woodcarvers have paired up with local adolescents to carve Aztec and indigenous symbols into hand-crafted and artisan keychains, broach pins, earrings and picture frames for domestic and export sales, giving the teens both peer support and the chance to earn some extra spending money.

Calmus added that this year she is hoping to develop a volunteer program that would maintain El Rincón's infrastructure while the director focuses more on immigration policy discussions.

"If you can approach this apparently impossible program (of U.S. immigration reform) by collaborating with the local community, things start falling into places. Everybody wins," she said. "When policy doesn't take the family situation into account, things get very bad. On the other hand, when you employ the family perspective, you can fix things and work out solutions. (Reform) is not going to be a one-liner solution."

"When you can solve problems, it's not so polarizing. In an issue where it seems that there is no common ground – here is some common ground," she said.

For more info, visit [www.elrincon.org/english](http://www.elrincon.org/english).

# Concert at Carnegie Hall shines light on Tibetan culture

BY BEN SISARIO  
The New York Times

NEW YORK – In 1988, when Tibet House US, a cultural organization in New York, held its first benefit concert, things were not looking good for the Tibetan homeland. It had been under Chinese occupation for four decades, and the Dalai Lama, its spiritual leader, had been in exile for three.

On February 26, Tibet House presented its 20th benefit, and things still don't look so good for Tibet. Riots erupted there as China prepared for the 2008 Olympic Games. The Dalai Lama, who is still in exile, recently met with President Barack Obama, but in a concession to the Chinese government the meeting was semiprivate; the Dalai Lama left the White House through a back door, near piles of garbage bags.

Many would view these as discouraging signs. But for Robert A.F. Thurman, a professor of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia University who helped found Tibet House, the cause is as strong as ever.

"The Tibetans are like the Na'vi," Thurman said, alluding with a chuckle to "Avatar," James Cameron's science-fiction epic. "They're hanging in there. Maybe not fighting with bows and arrows, but they are staying connected to nature, and we think they will prevail."

After two decades the Tibet House concerts, held at Carnegie since 1994, have developed into an institution of their own, shining a light each year on the urgency of preserving Tibetan culture and offering music fans starry, varied lineups. Past participants have included David Bowie, Moby, R.E.M.,

John Cale and Vampire Weekend. The February concert included Philip Glass – another Tibet House co-founder, who puts together the concerts each year – along with Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Gogol Bordello, Regina Spektor, Bajah & the Dry Eye Crew, Pierce Turner and Tenzin Kunsel.

When the concerts began, Glass said in an interview at Tibet House's headquarters in Manhattan, Tibet was far below the radar of most Americans, and Tibetan refugees had trouble assimilating into American society. "You had men who had spent their lives studying religious texts wrapping packages at Macy's," he said.

Since then, the Tibetan cause has become a regular topic of American public discourse, and the Dalai Lama a familiar face around the world. In 1989, he won the Nobel Peace Prize and is now a regular presence in the mainstream news media. He may be dressed in robes and sandals, but his organization is tech-savvy: On February 22, an official Dalai Lama Twitter account began sending out regular news updates.

The concerts, which celebrate the Tibetan New Year (February 14 this year), raise \$100,000 to \$250,000 each year, according to Tibet House, a nonprofit group founded at the Dalai Lama's request in 1987. Most of that money supports Tibet House, but some of it is also sent to other Tibetan groups in the United States.

As Thurman sees it, the visibility of the concerts and the Dalai Lama's example of nonviolence have drawn worldwide sympathy for the Tibetan cause and put pressure on the Chinese government to reconcile.



The composer Philip Glass in New York at Tibet House US.