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RESEARCH PROJECT

Teens compile immigrant workers' stories

By Stephen Geffon

What is it like to be an immigrant worker in New York City?

That is the question Diego Barragan, 17, Katerina Habanova, 18, Wendy Perez, 19, Jessica Orellana, 17, and 50 of their classmates from the International High School in Long Island City will seek to answer as they complete their research project in June.

The result of the project will be a book of stories and images chronicling the trials and tribulations New York City's immigrant workers face.

The International High School is a multicultural alternative educational environment for recent arrivals, serving students with varying degrees of limited English proficiency. It is a collaborative project between the New York City Department of Education and LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York.

From now through June, the students will interview and photograph relatives and friends who will describe the many challenges and successes they have experienced working as day laborers, small-business owners, domestics and fast-food employees.

From the interviews, the student journalists will write articles, the best of which will be published in a book that will be printed in-house and sold in local bookstores.

The project has been given a financial boost by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and "What Kids Can Do," a not-for-profit organization that supports students' research projects, enabling the researchers to purchase tape recorders, film and cameras.

Tough family histories

From early interviews, the students already have learned about the poor working conditions some immigrants endure.

Barragan, who came here with his family from Colombia, said his parents worked making molds for a dental lab, starting their day at 8 a.m. and not coming home until 1 a.m. He added that in addition to the long hours, "sometimes, the boss didn't pay them."

Habanova, who immigrated to the United States seven years ago from the Czech Republic, learned through interviews at a modeling agency that some immigrants hoping to become superstars were being exploited by their agents and photographers.

"It was very interesting to find out what really is going on behind the industry," she said.

The project also learned more about the struggles her parents faced since arriving in this country. Sometimes, she said, her father wouldn't get paid for three weeks - sometimes longer.

Perez interviewed her aunt from the Dominican Republic, who works three jobs - cleaning a hospital, an office and a home. The aunt works 80 hours a week.

"If you look at her fingers, they are cut up at the edges," Perez said.

"Everyone has a story to tell, in terms of the experiences they encountered in the workplace - unsafe working conditions, low wages and employee-rights issues," said Noreen Perlmutter, a teacher who is overseeing the project. "And through this exercise, these stories, which capture the experience of New York City's immigrant workers, will be told through the ears and eyes of youth who are themselves newcomers."

Altered dreams

Andrew Turner, an English teacher, said the students will ask the people they interview what their American dream was before they came here and how it has changed.

Before the students began their interviews, a team of English language, humanities and social studies teachers discussed the history of immigrant workers in this country. They had the students read Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," which exposed abuses in Chicago's meatpacking industry, and learned about the Triangle Factory fire of 1911 in which workers died, the horrific sweatshop conditions that prevailed in the early 1900s and about child labor at the turn of the century.

Perlmutter said the students really have a lot of power, "they have a great story to tell, and they say it in a very unique way." She added, "This is something that can make a difference - who knows."

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