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Economic woes at home force many to migrate

By ALEXIS CHARBONNIER, Special to the Herald-Sun
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PAHUATLÁN, PUEBLA, Mexico -- Romel Pérez Castelán owns Tortillería La Reforma in Pahuatlán.

He's proud to wear a UNC T-shirt a nephew who has worked in the U.S. gave him. And he has 30 more nephews and cousins in North Carolina.

But he isn't about to rush to the Triangle.

"I don't want to leave," says Pérez, 37. "I have a stable, prosperous life here. I've got a business."

His brother-in-law wants to open a tortilla factory in Durham. But Pérez has good reason to stay put.

His tortilla factory delivers all over Pahuatlán municipio -- the size of a small U.S. county. A 30-tortilla kilo (2.2 pounds) runs 55 cents, and Pérez sells half a ton of tortillas daily. That's about \$550.

Not everyone is as fortunate as Pérez. People grow coffee, sugar cane, peanuts and chilies, too. But with so many locals gone, there's a labor shortage at harvest time.

"Local youth have been emigrating for 15 or 20 years. They start to dream of the U.S. in grade school and leave in junior high," Pérez says.

Most who leave, he says, are under 18.

Migrants used to go to Los Angeles to make \$7 an hour. Now, in North Carolina, they make \$9, Pérez says. Emigration has brought a lot of money into Pahuatlán, he adds, as people send earnings home from the U.S.

Juan Carlos Zepeda, who didn't want his real name used, gave Romel Pérez the UNC shirt. The 30-year-old pahuatleco rents speakers and repairs TVs. But he's a bit overqualified for the job. Zepeda has a bachelor's degree in elementary education, but jobs are scarce in that field. Public school teachers in Mexico must buy their "plaza" -- literally, "spot" -- from a retiring, cash-strapped or business-savvy teacher.

A plaza usually costs one or two years' salary. Otherwise, "You need a 'helping hand,' " Zepeda says -- a well-connected friend or relative.

Zepeda would make just \$120 a week teaching in Mexico instead of \$10 an hour in the U.S.

"People leave because they must. There's little work, and salaries are paltry," he says.

Zepeda says he has worked in Durham, Wilmington; Alexandria and Fredericksburg, Va., and New York. The built-in Pahuatlán support network makes life in the U.S. easy, he says.

"Most of Pahuatlán is in Durham. You run into people you know on the street," he says.

Illegals need at least six months to recoup their investment, since smugglers charge \$1,800 from Pahuatlán to North Carolina. Zepeda says Mexican police extort migrants; he says cops robbed him at gunpoint in the state of Sonora. Zepeda has no such complaints about U.S. police.

"U.S. cops are great," he says. "They respect migrants' rights and they're well-trained. I have nothing but respect for them."

Despite local trilingual skills, global economics have hit Pahuatlán hard, leading to emigration, says María de la Gracia Santos, 49, the locally born owner of a coffee shop.

"The problem with coffee is global," she says. "We depend on the futures market, which is quoted in dollars. Some people have left because of the drop in global coffee prices."

Santos says she pays about 60 cents a pound for raw beans. She checks the futures price constantly, since she sells to exporters. She extracts, dries, stores, cleans and roasts the beans herself, then retails freshly roasted and ground coffee for \$1.30 for half a pound.

Blaming emigration only on the coffee crunch is a crutch, Santos says. Coffee isn't the only industry, and fewer than 10 percent of locals depend on coffee for survival. Small-scale local plantations cover 2 to 4 acres; growers sell beans 200 pounds at a time.

Most want to leave, Santos explains, because they're just not making enough to get by.

"People just float around here without a trade or a degree," she says. "Teenagers just want money. They don't even start high school. Parents don't have enough money to pay for school. Older brothers are already in Durham, so it's easy for younger brothers to leave."

Santos says emigration boomed 10 years ago in the area. Now, migrants have gotten used to dollars, she laments.

"They come for a few days, boasting, 'I make \$9 an hour.' They don't want to work here anymore," she says.

The main local pipeline for North Carolina greenbacks, the Dolar-In, has run out of cash. The armored truck shipment from Tulancingo, Hidalgo, has been threatened again.

About \$300,000 a month pours into Pahuatlán's Dolar-In, one of two wire transfer offices in a county of over 18,000 residents and no banks.

Every few minutes, a local woman walks out with several hundred dollars' worth of pesos, a small fortune around here. The office runs a 2 percent dollar-peso spread.

Women usually pick up transfers, since husbands leave first. Sometimes they leave for years and come home to see their kids grown up, says María de Jesús Hernández Pérez of Tulancingo, 28, and a Dolar-In cashier. But single mothers are going north, too, she says.

The average migrant sends home \$100 to \$300 every two weeks, Hernández says. That money builds homes, keeps families fed, and pays for school expenses, she says.

People migrate to the Triangle from San Pablito, Xolotla, Atla, Zoyatla, Cuauneutla and Tlacuilotepec, among other villages, Hernández says. More Otomí than Náhuatl is spoken among women cashing transfers. Ninety to 95 percent of wire transfers to Pahuatlán originate in North Carolina, mostly in Durham, according to Hernández.

"Most people have a relative in North Carolina. Durham must be full of Mexicans! There are many Pahuatecos in North Carolina," she says.

To Leonarda Ortiz Castillo, 47, a homemaker and part-time baker from nearby Montellano, Durham "is an image floating in thin air."

Three of her eight children are in North Carolina -- two in Raleigh and one in Durham -- but she can't visit them.

Castillo swears she wouldn't overstay a tourist visa if granted one.

"I have a son studying in Puebla, a daughter in high school and another at technical college. We're gainfully employed. We've got a bakery," Castillo says proudly.

But, she adds wistfully, "I'm happy my sons are doing well, but a little sad, too. I don't see them often."

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