

Marcos' all-American success story has a shadow over it

Marcos is an all-American success story, except for one thing. He breaks the law every minute of every day.

He is, as our society so callously puts it, an illegal alien.

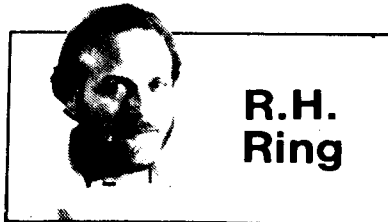
Relentless laboring and determination sum up Marcos. That is what got him out of his small village in southern Mexico and, tortuously, into the small guest house in Tucson where he lives today.

San Lorenzo was at the end of the paved road that twisted through the mountains from Oaxaca, the capital city of Oaxaca state, when Marcos was growing up. He was one of 12 children. Six died when they were very young.

"They got sick," he says with no elaboration. The coffee flows in our booth at a midtown restaurant.

In San Lorenzo, Marcos lived in a one-room house with his brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents and uncles. "We slept like this," he says, arranging his silverware so it is parallel and touching.

His family's house had a dirt floor, and no electricity. His mother



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cooked over wood fires. There was one telephone in the village, outside the police station. The school went up to the fourth grade. The mayor had gotten only that far.

Marcos farmed as his father did, as his grandfather and great-grandfather had before him, back even before the Spanish came in the 16th century. The family is descended from Indians, the Zapotec Tribe.

As a boy, Marcos followed behind as his father opened the earth with the energy from a yoke of oxen. The barefoot boy made a hole with his big toe for each corn kernel, then covered each with a shuffle of dirt.

But toiling the fields was not enough for Marcos. "I wanted to improve myself, to be better day by day." So, after completing three years of schooling, he went by him-

self to Oaxaca and took what work there was.

He started out shining shoes. He slept wherever he landed. Then he got hired as a hotel servant. Then as an altar boy in a cathedral. All the while, he managed to pursue education through the 10th grade. It was Americans touring the cathedral who gave Marcos the idea to leave.

"They told me this was the land of opportunity. You could do anything you wanted, if you worked hard."

Things were, and still are, different in Mexico. "There's no way you can get ahead. The government never gives you a chance. Let's say you want to buy something that costs 1,000 pesos. So you work hard, and when you have 1,000 pesos, the thing you want costs 5,000."

He was 18 then, 10 years ago. The world outside Oaxaca was full of possibilities and risks that could barely be imagined. Marcos spent \$12, half of his life savings, for the train ride north; 1,500 miles and five days and nights later, he reached the border at Nogales.

Marcos slept near the fence until

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dusk, then he slipped under and into the land of opportunity.

He had the shirt on his back, jeans and cheap gum-soled shoes. In a little bag, an extra pair of pants, another shirt, two pairs of socks, some fruit and cheese. That was all.

He didn't speak a word of English. His plan was to act logically, and not to ask any questions. He had no map, only a vague course heading north.

Two men stopped and offered a ride as he walked by the road outside Nogales. They let him off in Amado, where he caught a bus. The driver spoke Spanish, looked at him strangely but said nothing.

Marcos got off in downtown Tucson. Within two hours, he was offered a job pulling weeds by an elderly woman who saw him walking in an alley behind her house. The pay was \$2 an hour — more than he made in a day in Oaxaca.

"I didn't want to charge that

much. I thought, maybe \$1.50. But she was very firm at \$2."

He slept in a shed in the yard of another elderly woman, and took jobs cleaning-out yards and painting houses. He landed a steady job, washing dishes at a restaurant.

Six years ago, he hired on as a cook at another place. He works there now, eight hours a day, seven days a week, Christmas and New Year's off. From his starting pay of \$3 an hour, he has worked his way up to \$5. Maybe you have eaten his eggs.

Marcos learned English, and got help to fake an application to a local college-level school. He has two vocational degrees. His classmates thought he was from Texas or California. He pretended not to hear questions that probed deeper.

His house is filled with books on technology, science, sociology, history. He watches the TV news every day and reads the morning paper.

"I like to know what's going on in

the world, to learn about different cultures, like in India, where it is so crowded and they have to eat with their hands."

He gets around on foot and by bus and bicycle. He has no car. He is afraid to try to bluff his way into a driver's license. One slip and he would be sent back to Mexico. Other illegals he knows have been sent back, even when they turned themselves in, seeking permission to stay after years here.

Perhaps 10 people here know his story. Marcos hasn't seen his family since he left. He writes and sends a little money. The family has electricity now, but still no phone. The dirt floor of their home has been paved with concrete.

Marcos has turned down marriage offers from American women, made to legalize his status. He doesn't want to do it that way. He follows the news as politicians posture in debates over amnesty. And he pays income taxes and sales taxes.

Marcos likes Americans, likes it here and he wants to stay. He keeps alert so he can.