



PHOTO BY JOSEPH GLODE

Cristina Castaño Henao, a social worker from Colombia, works at JOIN, a Portland nonprofit that serves the needs of vulnerable communities.

# 'Do something'

*When Colombian social worker Cristina Castaño Henao brought her talents to Portland, she learned how even in the land of plenty, there are needs*

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

**C**ristina Castaño Henao's job as a social worker once took her to dizzyingly high altitudes amid

Colombia's active volcanoes. Four other contractors had gone up before her but refused to return.

The assignment was to act as an intermediary between the families who had lived there for generations and the Colombian government. The land had recently been designated a

national park. It was her job to explain to them that they had to release their property.

Each trip – and she took many – began with a seven-hour horseback ride into freezing temperatures. She'd stay in the mountains for two weeks at a time, traveling between homes, which were often an hour's ride apart.

"There are no roads, no electricity, just farmers who have lived there since colonization," she said.

She and a co-worker secretly showed the

mountainside farmers what their land was worth, warning them not to sell to the government too cheaply.

"I think that is why I loved it so much," she said. "It was empowering people."

She had found her calling in social work and was making a living fulfilling government contracts, often bringing aid and information to isolated communities in the mountains and valleys of Northern Colombia.

In rural areas, farmers and their families were caught in the violence between paramilitaries and the Marxist guerilla fighters who'd been waging a civil war for more than 50 years.

Much of her work was helping children, whether they were starving in the countryside or fighting to survive, homeless and alone on city streets.

Her interest in social work began in the 1990s, when she was a teenager living in the small Colombian city of Pereira, located at the foot of the Andes' coffee-producing slopes.

Pereira also sits at the center of Colombia's Golden Triangle, the area between Cali, Bogotá and Medellín – a city once known as the murder capital of the world, with more than 6,000 homicides in 1991 alone.

Its location made Pereira a center for commerce. It also put it on the route taken

by many travelers, as well as drug and sex traffickers.

When Cristina was a child, violence, shootings and car explosions were a way of life in Pereira.

"I remember hearing shootings, and then seeing someone running with blood. You just stop, you see what's happening, but you don't stay there," she said. "You don't talk about it."

When she was 20, a man was shot while he was walking right next to her.

She said people were always wary of motorcycles because they were the preferred vehicles of the "sicarios," cartel hit men.

But despite the danger, people didn't stop living their lives.

"We would go to school, we would play in the streets with our friends in the neighborhood, but of course it wasn't safe," she said. "You could see it in people."

Her father, Dario Castano, opened an ice cream factory called "Pandy Helados."

His business thrived, and he and her mother, Orfilia Henao, made a home for themselves and their daughters in a middle-class neighborhood.

Cristina attended an all-girls Catholic high school. But in a country where 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, her family was not. She considered herself to be

**See CRISTINA, page 5**

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*A periodic series on the personal journeys  
within Portland's immigrant communities.*