

'Soy aventurero'

Samuel Henriquez' journey took him from the countryside of El Salvador to a new and challenging world in Portland

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Waiting at an outdoor table in front of the small coffee house where Samuel Henriquez had agreed to meet me, I looked up to see a short, stocky man standing at the corner, wrapped in a bright blue parka against the cold. His hands were deep in the pockets, the hood pulled over a yellow knit cap, and most of his face hidden. When he glanced down the street to where I sat, I walked up to the corner and asked in Spanish, "By any chance are you Señor Henriquez?" He was.

I introduced myself, and we sat together at the table beside the busy street. I offered to get him a coffee or tea or something, but no, he didn't need anything. He does not drink coffee, he had just eaten, he was full.

Still, food was what he was most eager to talk about. He offered advice: "There are many things that people do not know. If one wishes to improve health, one must stop eating a lot of things: red meat, carne asada, seafood, pork, potatoes, wheat flour, bread, sugar, tortillas, pan dulce. Maybe one time per month, but not every day."

These are the very foods he grew up eating in El Salvador, but now they are a danger to his health. "Now, I cook fish, or chicken. I eat vegetables and fruits." No more fried bananas with beans and heavy cream.

In the past few years, he has had to completely change the habits of a lifetime.

Samuel Henriquez has lived in the United States for more than 30 years. He came here

in his 20s, when El Salvador was deep in a civil war fueled by U.S. support for a repressive government. Though it took years and several court cases, eventually many Salvadorans were granted asylum due to the violence in their country; Henriquez was one of those. A legal resident of the United States, he said he understands a lot of English. "It is necessary, for work." Yet together we spoke only Spanish.

He is the second of four brothers and four sisters; they are scattered all over the United States, with some family still in El Salvador. He has remained single: "It is a rare to find a woman who doesn't care how much money you have, but only cares for the love you can give."

He never described himself as "*sin casa ni hogar*" or "homeless." He doesn't see the story of his life that way. "*Soy aventurero*," he says: "I am an adventurer."

As a boy in El Salvador, he worked alongside his father in the fields. Their home was in cool, mountainous country, surrounded by coffee plantations. The family was poor, but they had a little land, and "there was enough to eat."

At age 6, Samuel contracted polio. His legs became weak, his feet splayed out, his knees collapsed inward. For many months he could not walk. Though he gradually recovered, it left his body forever a little *chueco* – crooked. He has suffered much as a result; physical pain, as well as rejection.

When Samuel entered his teens, El Salvador was becoming dangerously violent, and the family was driven from their home. "My father lost everything – land, animals, everything." They moved to the capital, San Salvador, hoping for better opportunities. The move was difficult.

"To go from the country to the city is hard," he said. "In the country you grow what

you need, and make what you can. But in the city, you have to buy everything."

But Samuel found work in a bakery; his first paid job, at the age of 14. To this day he thinks of baking as his true profession. He never went to high school because he was always working. "I had the duty to support the family."

He described those years in the capital. "I saw the rich, how they were," he said. "They would buy something very fancy, very expensive, and give it to their dogs. They treated the dogs better than the poor people. In the civil war, the teachers took up arms and fought against the government. They saw that the children did not even have a chair to sit in at school. The government did not respect the people."

Samuel was the first to venture north, and then one by one his other siblings came. The United States looked more stable, less perilous.

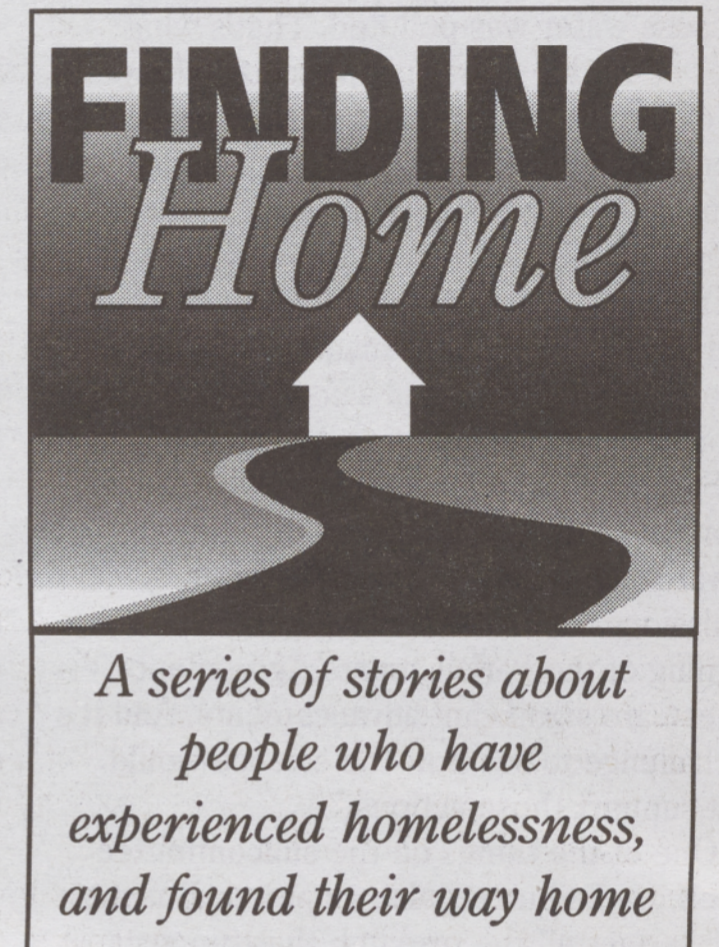
"In the U.S. there are opportunities," Henriquez said. "In El Salvador, nothing. In El Salvador you cannot even enter where the rich people are; there are gates and fences. In the United States, you can walk right past the houses of the rich. And if you have the money you can go into any restaurant and eat there."

He admits he sees problems in this country, too, of course: "Yes, yes, I have seen prejudice in the U.S., against Hispanics. But it is not like in El Salvador. The rich are separate there. They are different."

Still, he speculated that someday he might move back to his home country. "The air there was clean, not heavy. Here in the U.S. they put chemicals in the air, and it is too heavy. In the U.S. they add so many chemicals to the food, it causes diabetes. My sister had diabetes. But she went back to El Salvador for one month, and the diabetes was gone. Milk in the U.S. has sugar added to it. But in El Salvador it comes straight from the cow, so it is healthy."

"In El Salvador, when you are old, you are free. You are not contained. You can walk around, medicine is cheap, you can see a doctor, there is food."

Though wistful for the land of his boyhood, he has lived all over the United States, often following family members



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