

METROPOLITAN

Salvadoran refugee family adjusts to life in Southeast Portland

by Robert Lothian

Members of a Salvadoran family torn apart by the civil war are living in a sparsely furnished, rented house in Southeast Portland.

They came to the U.S. to escape the chaos in their country and to provide a decent place for their children.

They described poor food and sanitation in their home city of San Salvador, water made impure by bombs and bodies, unemployment, no school, and bodies being eaten by dogs in the streets.

"Life is better here, said 55 year-old Juan Antonio Ramirez, through a translator.

Ramirez, his daughters Carmen, 21, and Maria Gomez, 26, his son-in-law Julio Gomez, 31, and grandchildren Ana, 6, Luis, 4, and Rene, 3, chose fictitious names to protect family members who remain in El Salvador and to protect themselves from being picked up by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. They entered the U.S. illegally.

Ramirez was a bartender and head waiter in El Salvador who directed up to 20 waiters at large receptions until the war caused him to be laid off and he had difficulty finding other work. His wife, two daughters and a son remain in El Salvador, he said, where his wife owns a small store.



Salvadoran refugee family staying in S.E. Portland hide their faces for fear of being identified by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

(Photo by Kris Artucher)

Another son disappeared three years ago and is presumed dead, a victim of right-wing terrorism, he said.

Also, said Ramirez, his wife's store was robbed by people they suspect were off-duty National Guardsmen who said, "Give me your money or I'll kill you," he said.

Friends and neighbors of suspected guerilla collaborators are often killed or taken away by the military, said Maria Gomez. "I can't sleep well in El Salvador," she said. "If you hear a car coming by your house, you start to shake because you think they are coming for you. They come and take people and the next day you see their bodies in the streets."

Ramirez said he first came to the U.S. in 1981 and worked for 10 months as a painter. He saved enough to return to El Salvador and bring back his daughter, Carmen, in May.

He said he would rather have crossed the border legally but U.S. immigration policies make it hard for Salvadorans to enter the U.S. "Even with money and a home," he said, "you still can't leave El Salvador and get a visa to come here because the U.S. government thinks you are going to come here to get a job."

Ramirez and his daughter had to bribe Mexican officials twice and then pay a "coyote" another \$500 each to guide them across the border, for a total trip cost of about \$2,000 each. "It was an adventure," he said. Carmen Ramirez said she received scrapes and bruises while running to avoid the searchlights of a border patrol helicopter.

Julio Gomez said that he, his wife and their three children came across the border covered by plywood in the back of a truck.

Ramirez and Julio and Maria Gomez have minimum wage jobs. Ramirez' goal is to save enough to return and visit his family, and possibly bring them to the U.S. Gomez is working to pay off the several thousand dollar debt he incurred from friends in the U.S. who helped his family with the expense of getting here.

Both Ramirez and Gomez prefer not to talk about their experience in war-torn El Salvador with Spanish-speaking co-workers, "because they think we are destroying ourselves," said Gomez. Also, he said, "We don't have friends in this neighborhood."

Even though the family is living independently of social service agencies and charities on the income from minimum wage jobs, Gomez can still say: "Life is better here for poor people. You have more

chances to buy things cheaper, for instance, garage sales."

He said the family enjoys shopping at Fred Meyer and Corno's. Here in the U.S., said Gomez, people have more education and the food is more pure. "The food has more protein and vitamins."

The entire family looked toward grandfather. "I like cheeseburgers," said Ramirez.

In El Salvador, said Gomez, "The children get sick very often, and here they don't get sick; that's the difference."

His 6 year-old daughter Ana is already fluent in English. "I forgot Spanish a little bit," she said with a bright smile. "She asks me for the time and I tell her in Spanish," said Maria Gomez, and she says, "Mom, please tell me in English."

Ana attends a nearby grade school where she has made friends and learned "to draw a house with colors." She also likes to watch TV. "I like smurfs the best," she said.

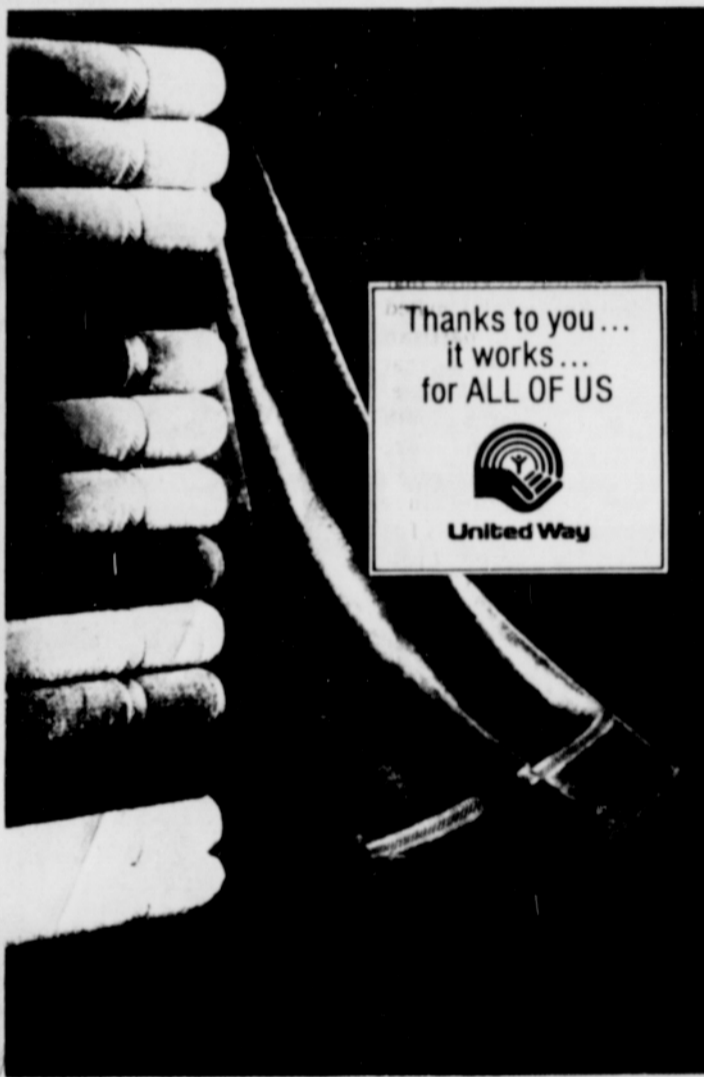
The family looks forward to being reunited, either in the U.S. or in a peaceful El Salvador. "I miss my family a lot," said Gomez. "But the situation is bad. I want to stay here and see my children get an education, a diploma. Life here is good. If the situation improves maybe we'll go back." Until then, he said, "We would like to have something like refugee status."

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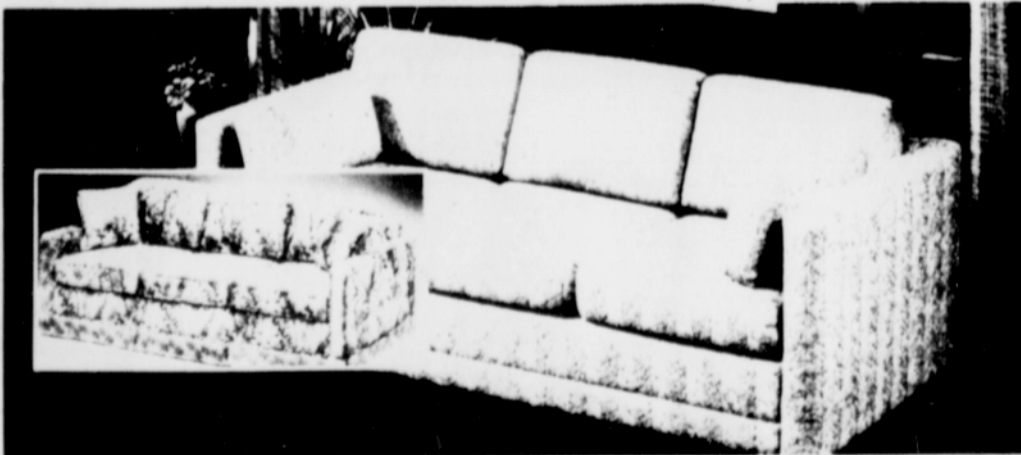
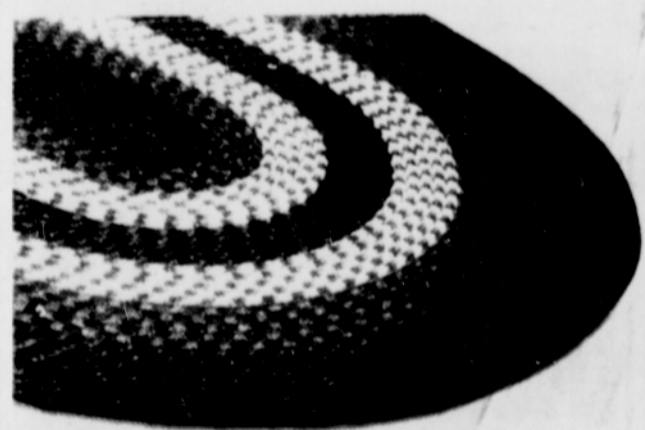
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