

# CHATHAM County Line

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## A look at migration from the other side of the border

By Luis Melodelgado and Nora Haenn

Thanks to a Fulbright-García Robles grant, since August 2009, we have been living in the county of Calakmul on the Yucatán peninsula researching how migration to the U.S. affects Mexican communities. Calakmul is a rural county of 24,000 people. Tourists appreciate the area's Mayan ruins and tropical forests. We came to interview people who have gone to the U.S., people who are thinking about migrating, and people uninterested in migrating but whose lives have been changed by the phenomenon. As part of an occasional series of reports, we describe

Se puede leer en Español **atras en pagina 12.**

The Spanish version of this article is on **page 12.**

this latter group as they make sense of remittances in an economy marked by constant financial insecurity.

This insecurity is based on a lack of jobs and poorly paid farm

work. In Calakmul, government jobs are considered the most secure. The county and the Mexican army are the region's biggest employers, offering a combined 600 jobs. The county seat of Xpujil is a market town. Its family-owned stores and restaurants provide an additional 300 jobs. A typical wage in these establishments pays \$10/day. The county and shops serve the larger farming community, of whom at least 80 percent receives state welfare.



Because of their father's remittances these brothers, living in Calakmul, Mexico, haven't had to work on a family farm. Collecting firewood, weeding crops, and carrying water are chores that occupy many of their peers. PHOTO BY NORA HAENN

Gracias al dinero enviado por su padre, este grupo de hermanos jamás ha trabajado en el campo. Recolectar leña, desyerbar y acarrear agua, son ocupaciones que realizan muchos de sus contemporáneos.

FOTO DE NORA HAENN

Consequently, people travel to find work. At any given moment, at least 1 percent of the local population lives in the United States. Migrants from Calakmul tend to be men in their 20s and 30s. Migration is especially attractive to Native Americans whose low status in Mexican society means they have less a chance at paid employment.

These migrants send \$2 to \$5 million each year, and non-migrants watching this flow of money to

**MIGRATION** continued on page 12.

## In high school and undocumented

By a Chatham student

Growing up in the United States has been challenging. I can't get a job or a driver's license because I don't have a social security number. I couldn't apply to Summer Ventures or Governor's School because of the residency requirements.

Paying for college will be difficult because of my legal status.

Three years ago my parents confronted me with one of the most difficult decisions of my life. My parents and younger sister were moving back to Guatemala; my dad had an order of deportation. He didn't want to wait for "la migra" to knock at our door. They asked me to go with them. I



didn't want to leave them but I also wanted to stay in Siler City. I moved here when I was six years old. I had very few memories of Guatemala.

I made my choice. I would stay with my oldest brother. I am American even if I don't have proper documentation attesting to my legal residency. I have devoted myself to my community. On the

day that my brother and I left my parents at the airport I cried because I didn't know when I would see them again. I haven't seen them since then, but I know that they are proud of my dreams and motivations to finish high school and attend college here.

All of this has made me a more

mature person. It motivates me to do my best in school so that I can assure my parents that I made the right decision. I firmly believe that a person's life experiences shapes them as a person.

Gary Phillips submitted this column on with the permission of the student, who wrote it for an application to UNC.

### FOCUS: IMMIGRATION



Chatham's earlier inhabitants Page 3



Wind-blown garden immigration Page 7

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Julian Sereno on the folly of huge tax cuts.

## Chatham strives for immigration reform

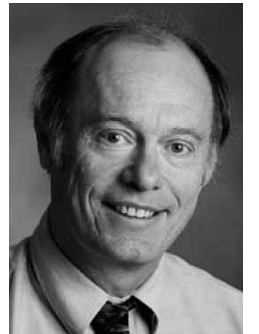
By Kat Rangel

"Immigration" has become a hot button word in national politics, sparking emotions on both sides of the issue, and Chatham County is no different. Our county has seen a dramatic rise in the immigrant population and we have had growing pains in responding to this new dynamic. In the past 10 years, Siler City has been host to large rallies both against (in 2000) and in support of (in 2006) our growing immigrant population. During the past year Chatham County has played an important role in efforts around the state to ensure that all residents, regardless of national origin, are treated justly.

In the beginning of 2009, the Chatham County Commissioners took a bold stand by actively stating that they would NOT participate in the 287g program, a federal law that permits local law officials to identify and process undocumented immigrants for deportation, a federal responsibility. Many other communities had not signed on and passively avoided the issue, but Chatham was the first to actively make a resolution stating that they were not going to do so.

While it may seem reasonable to have local and federal cooperation in this, the realities of what happens on the ground are very different. Victims become afraid of reporting crimes to police because of their documentation status. Hard working people are deported for minor traffic violations like nonfunctioning taillights. Though the 287g program supposedly reimburses counties for costs associated with detaining and housing people on federal charges, it is not nearly enough to cover the costs. Local money is drained from effective community-based programs and the jails become overcrowded. As Commissioner George Lucier said at a hearing

**REFORM** continued on page 8.



County commissioner George Lucier said at a recent hearing on immigration, "We'd rather build schools than jails."

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