

## Room at the Inn

### *Casa Marianella Gives Homeless Immigrants a Badly Needed Haven*

BY ANNA HANKS

**Dressed in a stylish** black-and-white polo shirt, long, baggy shorts, and white tennis shoes, 15-year-old Rollin could pass for any American high school student. He has bright brown eyes, youthfully rounded cheeks, a charming smile, sleek black hair, and a manner that is by turns shy and confident. Yet Rollin isn't the high-school sophomore he at first appears to be. He's a recent Honduran immigrant looking forward to turning 16 later this month so he can register at First Workers, a day-labor cooperative run by the city of Austin.

Rollin needs to work, because when he was 10 years old, his father lost the use of his legs in an accident. Since then, Rollin has been working to support his family. Last summer, he made the dangerous trip alone from Honduras to the United States.

Rollin arrived in Austin last June without contacts, money, English, or a place to stay. Hours after he arrived, he went to Austin's Casa Marianella, a temporary shelter for Spanish-speaking immigrants, where he lived until last February.

Casa Marianella is a 31-bed shelter for the homeless Spanish-speaking immigrant community. It is located in a neighborhood of small, postwar-era bungalows, near downtown on Austin's Eastside. Ordinarily, residents are only allowed to stay for 30 days, but Rollin was an exception, both because of his youth and because he was alone in Austin.

"There is a need to provide housing to a current homeless population. And we provide that," says Patti McCabe, one of five "staff volunteers" at Casa. McCabe is an enthusiastic young woman with a direct, no-nonsense manner. She got her degree in psychology from Boston College in 1997, and was placed at Casa by Americorps. The other Casa staff volunteers are Paula Sperry, Sarah Miner, Karen Lyons, and Seth Laninga -- the latter three all placed by VESS, Volunteers in Education and Social Services.

The typical resident at Casa Marianella is a married Mexican man between 15 and 70 years old, although the shelter does take in the occasional woman or child. Most of the residents intend to work and send money home to their families in Mexico or Central America; few of them plan to bring their families here. Casa Marianella director Jennifer Long says that during the past year or so, 80-90% of the residents at Casa have been from Mexico, while most of the rest were from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba, and Nicaragua. During the second quarter of 1999 there was an unusually large number of Hondurans at the Casa following the disaster caused by Hurricane Mitch.

Like Rollin, most of the residents of Casa Marianella arrived in the United States without money, a place to stay, or contacts who could help them get established. Casa Marianella provides food, a place to sleep, and, perhaps most importantly, those missing connections.

Arriving at the Casa Marianella Shelter for Immigrants on a Sunday evening, you'll see many people -- mostly men -- gathered around a small, neat, yellow wood-frame house. A handpainted wooden sign bears the name of the shelter. There's also a message welcoming visitors painted on a wooden fence by the side of the driveway. The house is in good repair, but is starting to show its age. It was donated in the mid-Eighties by Ed Wendler Sr., 68, a lawyer interested in Central American causes.

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Sarah Miner, one of the Casa Marianella staff, finishes paperwork on a Sunday afternoon.  
Photo By Jana Birchum

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One of the sleeping quarters in Casa Marianella.  
Photo By Jana Birchum

"In those years, I was doing a lot of activity in Nicaragua and Central America," says Wendler. He describes the situation in Central America at

that time as severe. "Lives were in danger. A lot of people who would have been killed were coming here," he says, and many immigrants who had been forced to leave their homes were sleeping on the streets. So he decided to donate the house specifically for use as a shelter.

In the back yard one recent Sunday evening, a barbecue grill is smoking, and a Spanish-language TV station plays loudly in the living room. Driving by, you might think it's a family party; and, in a way, it is. "It's the Casa family," says McCabe.

## Shelter From the Storm

The shelter was founded in December 1985 by the Austin Interfaith Task Force for Central America, a group that opposed the military funding being sent to the civil wars in Central America. McCabe recalls that "floods of Central Americans [were] coming up to the States to escape the violence of the wars." Casa Marianella was named for a Salvadoran lawyer who was killed in El Salvador in the early Eighties while investigating human rights abuses.

Suzy Webb, who worked from 1980-86 at the Central American Resource Center, a group that provided documentation for political amnesty cases, says the connection between Casa Marianella and various churches is very strong because churches are where people first started hearing stories from returning missionaries about the violence taking place in Central America. When the shelter was established, the residents were primarily from South American countries ravaged by civil war. Since that time, the region's political woes have quieted somewhat, but the poverty is no less intense. Now most of the Central American refugees who come to the United States are fleeing the economic problems of the area. And the proportion of residents who are from Mexico has skyrocketed.

"I think that, in general, people come here out of complete desperation," says Long, explaining that many immigrants keep moving until they can find work. Long, who holds a master's degree in English as a Second Language (ESL) from UT and has been involved in immigrant issues for 15 years, has been with the Casa for four and a half years, and has been director for the past year and a half.

Apart from providing temporary shelter for a Spanish-speaking population, VESS staff volunteer Miner says the Casa is a community unto itself. "It isn't just a bed and food. It's a house. We know these guys." The Casa also serves as a *de facto* community center for recent immigrants. One of the benefits for the residents is that the connections they make in the house allow them to meet other people in similar situations. Many go on to share rooms or apartments. Rollin, in fact, did exactly that: After leaving the shelter in February, he rented a room in the neighborhood with another former Casa resident.

Another Casa success story is Koty, a 29-year-old former Casa resident who now lives in the neighborhood and sits on the Casa board -- the only former resident on the nine-member board.

Koty, originally from Mexico City, first came to Casa in 1995, when she arrived in Austin only to find her husband living with another woman who was pregnant with his child. She was left alone in Austin with two children, one five years old, the other just seven months. With \$35 to her name, she spent two nights on the street with the children. A woman she met while buying food took her to Casa Marianella. She stayed there for a month while she looked for a job, eventually moving into a nearby house where she and her children still live. She currently works cleaning houses.

Like many former Casa residents, Koty remains part of the Casa community even though she no longer lives there. She volunteers at the Casa on Saturday mornings; in return, Casa helps Koty out with clothing for her children and occasional gifts of household items. Her children are so comfortable at Casa that they go in and out of the shelter at will, visiting with the residents and volunteers there as if they were part of the same extended family.

Another former Casa resident in secure housing is Siamon Hernandez, 46, who, like many other former residents, still comes to dinner at the Casa on a regular basis; he is among many former residents at the Sunday night backyard barbecue. McCabe estimates that around 20 nonresidents turn up to eat dinner at the Casa each day. With Benito Urbina, a volunteer ESL teacher, acting as translator, Hernandez explains that in mid-November he moved out into an apartment with some friends whom he met in Austin. Although he was fortunate enough to move from the Casa into safe housing, Hernandez says that things are hardly perfect; he and his roommates are having trouble making the rent, and because the time frame for meeting people and deciding to move in together is so short, it's hard to really get to know the people you will be living with.

Martin Barrou, 48, is another ex-resident who is at the Sunday night dinner. He is originally from Ciudad Mante in Tamaulipas, Mexico, a town not far from Texas' Rio Grande Valley. Unlike Hernandez, Barrou had nowhere to go when he moved out of the shelter in late November. Now he is homeless and is living in the woods around East Austin.

Barrou has been in Austin since October, making money to send to Mexico to his

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Residents and visitors watch a movie in the living room at Casa Marianella.  
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