

# A city barrio where Spanish is seldom spoken

By Brian Levinson

El Campa is a small barrio of Mixteca people tucked behind a gas station in Guadalajara's Colonia Ferrocarril. Roosters walk freely into the small cement houses. Vagrant dogs sunbathe in the narrow street. Radios blast Spanish-language rap, or pop songs by Juanes. A young man watches an old black-and-white Maria Felix movie on the television.

There is little Spanish spoken in El Campa. The people, especially the adults, are more comfortable with Mixteco, which is a dialect of Nahuatl. The first group arrived here in 1982 from Oaxaca, with more streaming in every year, and the barrio now boasts 170 families in 88 houses.

"We came in search of a better life, better work and for our kids to move ahead," said Prisciliano Vazquez Ramos, who acts as a community liaison. "Over there in Oaxaca, things are screwed up."

The Mixteca people trace their history back thousands of years. The civilization achieved dominance in the early 16th century, before suffering defeats to the Aztecs and later the Spanish. Today there are about 400,000 people who speak the five different variants of the Mixteco language. Communities are primarily found in Oaxaca, but also parts of Puebla and Guerrero.

Guadalajara offers many economic opportunities but the Mixteca here do not live in comfort. Most of their houses are no bigger than six by 10 meters. The roofs are plastic or tin. The government installed a drainage system and power lines last year. But the electricity is spotty and does not function at night.

Vazquez plays clarinet in a mu-



Photo by B Levinson

**A young boy walks down the street in El Campa, which is a community of Mixteca people located in Colonia Ferrocarril. The first Mixtecos arrived here more than 20 years ago. They work as gardeners, artisans and street vendors, with most still communicating in their native Mixteco language.**

sical group with 14 other Mixtecos. They work only the weekends, each pulling in about 60 or 70 pesos per night, after expenses. The rest of the week Vazquez makes handicrafts or searches for gardening jobs in the wealthier neighborhoods of western Guadalajara.

Another man, Emilio Adolfo, who moved here two years ago and speaks poor Spanish, sells gum on the streets. He makes 50 pesos a day, which is just barely enough to provide for his wife and two children. "There is no money here. I don't have a house," he said. The family is forced to live with neighbors.

The life of Mixtecos often times resembles that of migrant Mexican workers in the United States. They live modestly, in tight-knit communities and speak a different language. They look to preserve native traditions and at the same time integrate themselves into a foreign culture.

But the balance is difficult to

lived in El Campa for most of her life, some young people "do not want to admit they are from Oaxaca. When visiting their ranch back home, they pretend not to understand Mixteco."

There are strong societal pressures weighing down on the children in El Campa. They grow up as an indigenous minority in a city and a country dominated by mixed-race mestizos. "Some of the mestizo neighbors don't want their kids playing with our kids," said Carla.

There are also pressures from within the Mixteca community. Carla said that many Mixteca are socially conservative. The men do not like their wives working outside of the house, and young girls marry as early as 13 years old.

Forced and arranged marriages still take place in El Campa. "I know some families that pay money to get their daughters married off," she said in a whisper.

But for the most part, Carla's generation is more urbane, and the parents more flexible. She said she wants to be a school teacher and remain single for a while. "I'm still too young for marriage and I wouldn't even know how to maintain a family." □