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## Images far from home

By Rick Polito, IJ reporter

LUZ ELENA CASTRO knows what it means to be far from home.

A professional photographer, Castro has carried her lens across Latin America and Europe hunting down images and stories. She has lived in London and Madrid, and is now raising her son in Mill Valley.

But when she talks about "home," she means Colombia, the country of her birth and the place where she launched her career as a photojournalist.

So the images in "Lejos del Hogar (Far from Home)," a photography show of Latino life in West Marin now at Gallery Route One in Point Reyes Station, are familiar to her. Even the images she didn't shoot.

"They are making their lives here," she says, her eyes wandering across the images.

The show is a photographic account of what it means to be Latino and living in Marin, far from home. Working with the Marin Literacy Project and the gallery, Castro found seven students in West Marin, all Latino immigrants, who have put pieces of their lives on film for the show. She gave them the cameras and sent them out to document life as it is lived on the ranches, in a culture all but unknown to much of Marin.

"Something happened with them," she says, looking at a wall of photos. "They never had cameras before. They are so pure."

Castro saw this world through her own viewfinder as well. Half of the gallery is filled with her photographs. She wanted to communicate what she calls the "color

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of Latino life": the families, the food, the fiestas, the things she misses, living so far from home.

"I would love to show daily life, what is important for them, why they get together," she says.

Castro's photos and the pictures snapped by her students tell simple stories. The families look up from tables heaped with food. A teenage girl in all her finery celebrates her 15th birthday, the ceremonial quinceanera so important in Latino culture. Children smile. Grandparents peer shyly at the camera.

For the student photographers, it was important to share a part of their lives with other residents in their new home. Maria Luisa Gonzalez is unsure of her abilities as a photographer but says, through Castro as interpreter, "It's important for the American people to see how the Spanish who live here, live."

Betty Macias says she can't help but notice how the Anglo and Latino communities live such separate lives.

"In American celebrations, I have been noticing that the Latino contribution is minor," Macias says. "When we have our Latino celebrations, we don't notice too many Americans." She hopes shows such as "Far From Home" will help.

That was certainly the design behind the show, says Nancy Bertelsen, president of the board of directors of Gallery Route One. The show is part of what Bertelsen describes as a continuing effort to "include the whole community" and "to try and get the Latino community to walk through that door."

The gallery has created a task force to address the issue, but language had been a major barrier - a barrier that dissolves in the camera lens. A photo does not require a Spanish-English dictionary.

"Far From Home" gives a voice to "the folks who are not as visible in our community," Bertelsen says. "It helps me to see this world we share through their eyes."

For Castro, it's about communication. The Latino and Anglo communities are too often segmented from each other. The Latino immigrants often work odd shifts on isolated ranches, kept out of the mainstream by circumstance and suspicion. The income divide in a wealthy county spins the orbits even wider.

The camera becomes a tool to reach across the differences. What develops on film are the common values of family and feelings. "I want to mix the communities," Castro says. "The communication gets better."

Castro believes the photographs have become a testament that she can make a life here. "Home" may still mean Colombia for Castro, but Marin is becoming the place where her life is.

"It's more real life for me," she says.

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