

Bottom's Up

CAMERON PARK IS THE POOREST COMMUNITY IN AMERICA, A BROWNSVILLE COLONIA WHERE PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO GET BY ON LITTLE MORE THAN \$4,000 A YEAR. SO WHY ARE ITS RESIDENTS SO OPTIMISTIC?

HE CALLS THEM HIS "ONE thousand acres of excellence." In the northeastern corner of this border city, just four miles north of Mexico, Bill Hudson has reinvented Brownsville in a way Brownsville never dared imagine itself. Using tile, stone, and stucco, the cheery blue-eyed native converted property his grandfather had purchased in 1937 into an upscale and as yet unfinished residential and retail development known as Paseo de la Resaca. There are now restaurants, shopping strips, and an events center, and when all is said and done, Brownsville will also count some two thousand new homes and a man-made waterway framed by a nine-mile hiking and biking trail. "This is six years ago," says Hudson, who looks and dresses like a Southern gentleman but is fascinated by Mexican border culture. He points at an aerial shot of a brown wasteland hanging on his conference room wall and snickers. "*Nada*." For Hudson, Paseo de la Resaca is more than a development; it is a symbol of what could happen all along the Texas-Mexico border if only its people were willing to think big, to dream. In his view, the biggest challenge the border region faces is not drugs or immigration or low wages but what he calls "a deficit of spiritual capital, which is reflected in a resignation to mediocrity."

But even as Brownsville basks in this new identity, Paseo de la Resaca is not the only development in this part of town where people have come with visions of upward mobility. Rubbing against Hudson's excellent acres, in the shape of a slightly flawed parallelogram—and at a markedly different point on the economic spectrum—lies Cameron Park. This neighborhood of 4,895 residents is, according to the 2000 U.S. census, the poorest place in the country. The ranking is based on the median income per capita for communities of one thousand or more households. If the middle-American tries to make it on \$21,587 a year and the middle-Texan lives on \$19,617, the Cameron Park resident squeaks by on just \$4,103. For most of the people who live here, this is the beginning of the American experience. "This is the starting point in Brownsville," says Father Mike Seifert, a quick-witted, highly philosophical missionary with the Marist Brothers who has worked in Cameron Park since 1996. "This is the place you land when you cross the river."

From Paredes Line Road, the thoroughfare that links it to the rest of the city, Cameron Park looks like your typical working-class neighborhood on the border. You see trees (mesquite, mostly), businesses (from tax services to tire shops), chain-link fences, and lots of life. But take a drive down its skinny streets,

a confusing network of paved roads with names unfitting for its Mexican population—Gregory, Nannette, Jeffrey—and the poverty begins to seep into the picture. A grand home here and there may have six bedrooms and three baths and be worth up to \$150,000. But next to a two-story stucco with ornate Mexican windows will sit a trailer that sags mournfully—or maybe two, or maybe five, sometimes squeezed onto a single plot of land, sometimes spilling out useless junk. The most interesting dwellings are the hybrids, where a wood-frame house that's been painted only on the front sprouts from a one-room mobile home. Cinder blocks, rebar, and gravel stack up on empty lots until the owner can afford all the material necessary to start a home or add on to one. Decommissioned cars decay in front yards. On one lot a horse passes the day tied to a scraggly tree amid a tangle of brush and old tires. Children—little ones in diapers, big ones with blaring car stereos—are everywhere, and for each family that lives comfortably, there is another whose kids sleep side by side on couches and floors.

Cameron Park is a "colonia." The Spanish term refers literally to a "neighborhood" or a "settlement of homes," but along the Texas-Mexico border, it carries the stigma of fierce deprivation. Along the border it translates to rutted roads, crumbling homes, no running water. Along the border it means that the community is not incorporated, that it exists in legal limbo, really, because no government entity wants the responsibility of providing basic services. Colonias began to crop up in the sixties, when wily developers started selling plots of raw land that were cheap but had no infrastructure: no paved streets, no water and electricity hookups, no sewer lines. The lots were typically sold under contracts for deed, meaning that the buyer did not get title to the land until he made his final payment. By 2000, when critics of George W. Bush made conditions in the colonias an issue in the presidential race, the number of colonias in Texas had grown to almost 1,500.

The origins of Cameron Park date to 1964, when a thin, bespectacled man with a white mustache named Edward Dicker began selling off hundreds of 7,200-square-foot lots for as little as \$300 each. That was well before Cameron County officials passed building codes in the early seventies that required new subdivisions to provide water and sewer services. But even after the new restrictions were passed, Dicker continued to sell. In 1979, when a Mexican journalist asked him who had authorized the sales, he replied defiantly, "Me. They're mine."

The floodgates were open. People who had crossed over the border from Mexico flocked into the neighborhood, where they squeezed into acquaintances' homes or rented trashed-out trailers while saving up to buy their own plot of land—their own little chunk of the American promise. The men took jobs as shrimpers, welders, day laborers, construction workers, or housepainters. The women became maids, home health aides, or seamstresses, or they participated in the informal economy, selling blankets, jewelry, and used clothing. Cameron Park stretched out until it became a city of sorts, one that has now displaced Indian reservations and Southern rural towns as this country's most glaring illustration of economic deprivation. After the census made Cameron Park's status official, journalists arrived from Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Germany, pressing residents on what it's like "to live in the poorest place in the nation." They cited the alarming numbers: Four fifths of the colonia's dwellings are substandard; more than a third still lack indoor plumbing.

And yet, these poverty statistics obscure the fact that Cameron Park is, in its own way, a success story, a down-and-out version of Paseo de la Resaca. Like Bill Hudson's Brownsville, the Cameron Park of today looks nothing like its former incarnation. As the largest of the county's 119 colonias, it has in the past eight years demanded and secured the attention of elected officials, with some \$8 million in public funds having gone into making the place a symbol of what can be done in these poor settlements of the border: paved roads, water and sewer hookups, and soon to come, even curbs, gutters, sidewalks, and streetlights. How to show in a quantitative survey that Cameron Park has a bustling community center that offers a whole slew of social services? How to brag that there is now a Boys and Girls club, a sheriff's substation, a small health clinic, and a park? How to describe the shops lining its western boundary, which offer everything from birthday cakes and flowers to rotisserie chickens and tuxedo rentals? The signs of empowerment are everywhere. Undocumented immigrants speak of legalization, the documented speak about the importance of voting, and religion has taken root in the homes, where neighbors gather weekly to relate spiritual readings to their own material needs.

In other words, how to explain to demographers and statisticians and newspaper reporters that poverty is a relative thing—to rationalize why, amid the doom and the tragedy, optimism thrives?

"THIS IS THE WAY CAMERON Park used to be," says 56-year-old Gloria Moreno, tapping her fingernail on a snapshot of mesquite and three-foot-tall weeds, which she pulls from a pile of photo albums documenting Cameron Park's progress since the seventies. "Like this. Like a jungle. There were snakes, there were scorpions, there were tarantulas, and at night you could hear the coyotes go like this: *auuuu!*" The worst was when it rained, says the self-described traditional Mexican wife who metamorphosed into an unflinching activist. When it rained, the children were scolded by bus drivers for climbing on with dirty shoes and had to scrape off the mud at the school's restroom sinks before entering the classroom. When it rained, the excrement rose to the top of the latrines, where the mosquitoes hovered before buzzing around the colonia and feasting on its residents. When it rained, the neighborhood erupted into a chorus of grunting automobile engines as cars and trucks fell prey to the hidden potholes and the chewy mud, their wheels spinning pitifully until the earth gave or a motor broke. If the rain came at three in the morning, the men emerged from their homes in a frenzied rush to park their trucks on the main road outside the colonia. The next morning, the repercussions: a missing battery, slashed tires.

The activism was born of sheer frustration. In its nascent stages, it was a movement shaped by men in guayaberas and cowboy hats, residents of the colonia who were inspired to action when they began to see county officials and other politicians pop into the neighborhood to drum up political support. Maybe their voice—at least their vote—mattered beyond Cameron Park. They joined forces with Valley Interfaith, a church-based, grassroots community group that was working to raise the standard of living for residents across the Rio Grande Valley. They organized meetings in the colonia, where the community president, Fidel Velasquez, diligently learned how to conduct a meeting. On the walls, they hung white paper and spelled out the rules in Spanish: We shall put our politics aside when the meeting begins; we shall maintain our concentration on the central topic; we shall not digress from the issues to discuss personal

problems. But it seemed the politicians never lived up to their end of the deal. The Mexican daily newspapers, which covered Cameron Park extensively in the seventies and eighties, speculated that county officials hoped Cameron Park would not develop into a permanent neighborhood because the Brownsville Country Club was about to be constructed not far from the colonia's western boundary.

Moreno, who moved into Cameron Park in 1977, sometimes stood near the back of the room during those meetings, soaking up the lessons about how to approach and speak in front of elected officials. But when the U.S. Department of Agriculture asked the mother of eight to begin organizing nutrition classes for the colonia's residents, she initiated another kind of activism that catered particularly to the needs of women and children. After the nutrition lessons had been imparted to her neighbors, she began working the rest of the colonia by street, which wasn't easy since there were no street signs or addresses at the time. So Moreno pulled out the map she had received when she bought her property and began tracking her progress with a black marker. When an organization that provided health care asked her to find it some clients, her method became more precise; she filed each household's paperwork in separate envelopes and labeled them for future reference: "White house with red trimmings and three pines."

The huddled political meetings and street organizing began to pay off. In 1994, after residents had made frequent visits to Austin, the Texas Water Development Board and the Brownsville Public Utilities Board agreed to install water and sewer lines. Many of the homes did not meet the codes required for hookup, but state officials decided to proceed anyway. After much prodding, Cameron County began paving the streets, and Texas A&M University's Colonias Program helped build the community center. That center serves as the clearinghouse for a number of other government and nonprofit programs, which deliver their services in Spanish, with cultural modifications if necessary. The colonia's churches—Catholic, Baptist, and Pentecostal—provide another crucial spiritual and social support system. "If Gloria and I want to do something, and if we want everybody to know," Alma Rendon, the center's 54-year-old program coordinator, says, "we call the churches and everybody hears the gossip."

Social services have transformed Cameron Park, but the biggest remaining challenge here, as in all colonias along the border, is housing. Owner-built homes, which are the norm in the community, take years to complete and sometimes don't meet building codes when they are finished. The major obstacle to securing a mortgage is that the poor have a difficult time qualifying for loans because banks require some credit history. Using low-interest loans subsidized by the federal and state governments, the nonprofit Community Development Corporation of Brownsville (CDCB) has built 130 simple wood-frame and brick homes in the colonia since 1997, but this hardly makes a dent in the housing problem. Several years ago Don Currie, the executive director of the CDCB, pushed this idea: that the government loans would go further if they could be bundled with private loans from Valley banks. The CDCB has helped organize the eight-year-old Rio Grande Valley Multibank, a group of lenders that has been making these loans for two years—with nearly flawless results. Unlike traditional mortgages, potential homebuyers do not have to meet rigorous credit standards; they only have to prove that they pay their bills on time and earn enough to meet their monthly payment. The banks protect their own risk by jointly maintaining a reserve fund in case anyone fails to make a monthly payment. Out of 145 mortgages the CDCB has overseen in Cameron

Park, only one has been foreclosed on—and this because the borrower died and left no family to take over. "Our main point," Currie says, "was to show that you can lend these people money and they'll pay it back."

ALONG WITH THE DREAM OF owning a home, the promise of an education is the other main source of Cameron Park's optimism. After contending for years with the question of how best to educate the colonia's children—one highly controversial proposal involved pulling them out of the regular elementary school they attended and educating them inside the neighborhood in portable classrooms (thus, the conspiracy theory went, leaving more space in the regular school for the rich kids)—the Brownsville school district, in 2001, finally built them their own gleaming campus, which is staffed by a corps of teachers that is 100 percent bilingual. Despite their faith in their students' potential, however, the teachers at Gallegos Elementary find themselves playing a number of roles beyond that of educator. The children have to be socialized. Some even have to be taught to use an indoor restroom, since they have never seen one. The little ones have to be encouraged to speak in complete sentences—sometimes to speak, period—because their language skills haven't been developed at home. Parents get to "shop" for used clothes that teachers donate, and principal Lucy Green has kept a bag of shoes in her office ever since she witnessed a small girl padding around the school in socks. Her shoes, the girl's teacher later explained, were too tight. "We believe that all children can learn," says Green, a bubbly native of Mexico City. "But there are days when we take a deep breath."

And yet, the success stories are breathtaking. Consider the case of Gaspar Garcia: In 1991 Gaspar was a sixth grader at Vela Middle School with dark skin and soft eyes who had fancied playing the clarinet until the realization struck that his family couldn't afford to buy him one. When he tried to tell the band director that he couldn't join the band after all, the teacher mulled over the problem for a moment and then struck a simple, unusual deal: You stay in my class this semester, and I'll give you an A. Secretly, he thought the child could at least begin by learning rhythms. And so, for the entire first semester, while the rest of the students made awkward sounds with their new instruments, the boy who had none sat clapping out the beats with his thick, bare hands.

Few kids from Cameron Park were in the band or other extracurricular activities in those days. Those who did well in school learned to do so by keeping to themselves and focusing on their work; those who didn't formed a gang they called C.P., in deference to their home turf. At lunchtime, the school cafeteria replicated the class segregation of their outside lives: right side, Country Club; left side, Cameron Park. Yet Gaspar persisted, and in his second semester he was able to borrow a bass clarinet from the school. Every weekday and Saturday morning were spent in the band hall, blowing notes and counting rests and fingering keys. By his first year of high school, Gaspar had made All-State Band, a rare accomplishment for a freshman. The following year—and again the next and the next—he was the highest-ranked bass clarinetist in Texas.

The story of Gaspar is dramatic evidence that lives in the colonias do get better, even little by little, and that when they do—and this is perhaps the biggest enigma about Cameron Park—some people insist on staying put. It would seem that Gaspar, now an extroverted, exceedingly polite 22-year-old with worlds to

conquer, would be ready to leave Cameron Park behind. But the opposite is true. "I come to my senses when I come home," he says, creasing his forehead and offering a broad smile. He has one more year of music school left at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where all of his expenses are paid right down to his clothes and shampoo and where he still plays a borrowed instrument—this one, however, a silver-plated Selmer bass clarinet worth some \$10,000. He has performed abroad and been invited to attend the world's most prestigious bass clarinet conservatory, in Rotterdam, next year, whose director—in Gaspar's exuberant words, "the greatest bass clarinetist who ever lived!"—sends him postcards from his global travels: "This could be you in five years if you come with me."

But during his summers, Gaspar returns to Brownsville and rings up groceries at the local H-E-B. He admits to me that he is considering passing up the chance to attend the conservatory, because his real desire is to come back to the border to teach disadvantaged kids, to use music to impart a profound lesson he himself learned and came to believe in: that poverty is not binding, that there is an entire world beyond the rigid boundaries of Cameron Park in which you can choose your own place—even if the place you settle on is, ultimately, the same place you started. "I've been in some very fancy places to play," Gaspar says. "I can act the part. But when I come back here, this is me. I appreciate a lot of these things. What some say is nothing, I think is a lot. I could never let go of that house we grew up in; there are so many memories. We're still there, but we have come a long way. As a family. As a community."

IMPROVING THE STANDARD OF LIVING in colonias is a project without end. For every person who builds a new house or just an indoor bathroom, who lands a higher-paying job or celebrates a college graduation—for every person who manages to leave the tightly circumscribed world of poverty behind—another one arrives to start at the bottom. The large percentage of people who are barely getting by explains why the census numbers, despite so much progress, remain dismayingly low. Too many stories resemble that of Miriam Lopez, 37, a petite round woman with small, dark eyes, thick hair, and a burning desire to see her children escape poverty. A native of Tampico, she followed her husband to the United States only to have him abandon her cold in Cameron Park. She now lives with her three kids inside a room no bigger than a cozy kitchen, which is attached to the back of a handsome, two-story stucco home with neat landscaping. The owners, who are not related to her, do not charge her any rent. But even with no monthly payments beyond a small telephone bill, there is never enough money to do seemingly simple things, like buy her growing daughter a sweater when winter arrives.

Her incentive to work is this: a \$50 bill at the end of the week, which is to say at the end of cleaning, cooking, washing, ironing, and baby-sitting full-time for another family. The government gives her \$100 a month for her two youngest children, ages seven and ten, who are U.S. citizens. In the best-case scenario—and life never does seem to make its best case—she would earn \$3,800 a year for a family of four. She daydreams often of returning to Mexico because she is utterly alone here, and bursts into tears when she confesses this to me. But Miriam remains in Cameron Park because she insists that her children be bilingual and well educated. There is only one snag in her otherwise neatly conceived plan: Her eldest son—a shy, long-legged boy of fourteen who likes to watch documentaries—is undocumented and soon will come of age. "If he can't get his papers fixed, my heart is going to break in two," Miriam says, choking

up as we spend a muggy afternoon on rickety chairs outside her one-room shelter. It contains a gas stove, a mini-refrigerator, a folding dining table, one set of bunk beds, a small television, and an antiquated Macintosh computer she bought used so her children could learn to type. "Because what is he going to do when he graduates and he's not legal?" she continues. "Work in the yards? I don't want that." Like other undocumented residents of Cameron Park, Miriam and her family live nearly invisibly, slipping out of the colonia only when necessary, because the Border Patrol is notorious for patrolling the neighborhood's fringes.

FOR CAMERON PARK'S MOST IMPOVERISHED residents, the list of challenges does not stop with a lack of money. Family members are in jail. Teens are getting pregnant by the dozen. People are trudging around with diseases and no health insurance. Drug dealers come and go in their shiny trucks. And then there's the stuff that makes you shudder: physical and sexual abuse of wives and children. "There's a pornographic side to life in a colonia," says Father Seifert. "You have to wonder if that amount of sex abuse would be happening if people had three- or four-bedroom homes, where a thirteen-year-old could have her privacy." Though all of these social ills occur nationwide, they seem particularly urgent in the colonias, where poverty runs so deep. "The things you have to do to get out of it—go to the church to ask for help, go to the food bank—they're humiliating things for a people who come from a culture that's inherently proud," Seifert says. "It creates an incredible amount of stress."

If Cameron Park needed reassurance that, for all its problems, life here will keep getting better, it came in June 2001, when Governor Rick Perry chose the community center as the site to sign a bill that provides up to \$175 million to build or improve colonia roadways and drainage along the entire border. ("How can we expect children of the border to reach for the stars," he recited, "when they can't even get out of their neighborhoods because the streets are flooded?") During the fall election campaign, Tony Sanchez rolled in on the Tony Express bus to deliver a bilingual campaign speech, tejano music pumping in the background. These events testified to the effectiveness of a voter registration drive launched by Seifert and others in 1997. In the 2000 presidential election Cameron Park posted a 46 percent voter turnout. In the most recent Democratic primary—which in the Rio Grande Valley typically decides who will be the county's leaders—the colonia had the fourth-highest turnout of the county's 87 precincts. The showing is no coincidence. Since colonias are in the jurisdiction of the county, the county judge is the elected official with the most influence over their living conditions. (The incumbent, Gilberto Hinojosa, was considered a big friend of Cameron Park's, so the residents did everything they could to help him get reelected.) In Cameron Park, to vote is to establish directly the terms of your life.

The ultimate test of how far the neighborhood has come will be whether the City of Brownsville, which has created a doughnut hole on its map by annexing all of the land surrounding the colonia, ever decides to take it in too. It is doubtful that this will happen anytime soon. Cities annex only areas that can provide enough tax revenue to pay for services like maintaining the streets and providing police and fire protection, and Cameron Park lacks the tax base. Time and again, city officials have sniffed at the idea, but they always conclude that the cost of providing services is too high. The colonia thus remains under the care of the county, which has neither the authority nor the funds to do what a city can do. Some residents

say they would rather not pay city taxes anyway, while others point out that annexation would bring garbage collection, animal control, bus service—possibly even a post office and a fire station.

One person believes with certainty the day will come. "This will be a prime neighborhood fifty years from now, prime neighborhood," says Bill Hudson, tapping at the parallelogram on his aerial map. "Cameron Park is gonna get better and better and better. It is not the bombed-out, burned-out permanent slum, and it's mostly because of the people. They are decent people." While Paseo de la Resaca may provide Brownsville's vision, this colonia will continue playing the essential role of absorbing the border's—and Amercia's—deepest poverty. As Hudson's neighbor Seifert candidly puts it: "Thank goodness for Cameron Park." 🍀