

DAILY NEWS

The American dreamers

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The special perspective that a rising generation brings to its parents gives an unusual twist to a new Queens Museum of Art show about the lives of immigrant workers.

The exhibit came out of a three-month research project involving 60 students from schools in Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan, all of whom have come to the U.S. in the past five to six years.

They interviewed and photographed relatives and friends, who described the challenges and successes they experienced as day laborers, domestics, fledgling small-business owners and fast-food restaurant employees.

The students' compilation can also be seen in a book entitled "Forty-Cent Tip: Stories of New York City Immigrant Workers." The book is being sold at the museum in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park or online at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.

The project was the work of students at International High School at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, Queens, as well as international schools in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and took place last year.

"Everyone has a story to tell, in terms of the experiences they encountered in the workplace—unsafe working conditions, low wages and employees' rights issues," said Noreen Perlmutter, a teacher who oversaw the project at LaGuardia.

"Through this exercise, these stories are told through the ears and eyes of youth who are themselves newcomers," she said.

For Jessica Orellana, 18, of Brooklyn, the project was a "special experience." Her essay, "A Needle Through My Finger," is about her mother, a sewing machine operator.

Before the project, Orellana said, her mother never talked about her job.



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Students show off book 'Forty-Cent Tip,' about immigrant workers in city.

"I got to know how she worked and the environment. Then I realized she is working so hard, and I didn't know that. I think a lot of kids don't know what their parents are doing," said the native of Ecuador.

"I think about the future more now because she is hoping that her kids would not do the same thing as she is doing now. I feel I have more hopes and dreams on my shoulder and also, in a way, I learned to love her more knowing that she works so hard for me," said the high school senior.

Fen Li, 17, of Elmhurst, Queens, wrote about an Indonesian laundromat worker, who is a friend of her mother's.

"In Indonesia, I was an accountant in a television factory. I came here to seek a better life. However, even with higher salary, life here isn't as good as in Indonesia, where everything is much cheaper," the worker told Li.

Diego Barragan, 17, also of Elmhurst, said, "My dad is a dental technician. In Colombia, he had his own lab and had people working for him. Now he works for others."

"I feel great admiration for my parents," he added.

In his essay, Diego's father talks about coming to the U.S. six years ago, telling his son, "I love it here. Nowadays, who doesn't want to come to the U.S.? This is the country of opportunities and cultures."