

The New York Times

AMERICAN ALBUM

Dreams in the Dark at the Drive-Through Window



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Gloria Castillo, 22, works from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. at a Burger King in West Dallas, earning \$252 a week before taxes. She and her husband, who have two boys ages 7 and 8, work different shifts.

By [CHARLIE LeDUFF](#)

Published: November 27, 2006

DALLAS — Off a bleak and empty interchange midway through the Dallas sprawl stands a Burger King. It's past midnight, the rain sizzles on the parking lot blacktop like frying bacon. A young woman is working the lobster shift at the drive-through window. She is overweight and wears pink lipstick.

American Album



Portraits of offbeat Americans by Charlie LeDuff, with videos, appear every other Monday.

“Nothing special,” she says of herself. “Nothing much.”

Gloria Castillo is 22, married, a mother of two, a Latina from the rough side of Dallas. She is on the low side of making it.

The night is busy, and a mustache of perspiration breaks across her lip. She is alone with the fry cook.

The customers are rude tonight, drunk and bellicose. One guy doesn't want to pay for his food, figuring it ought to be free. If he had wanted to rob the place, Ms. Castillo says with a tight smile, it would have been easy enough; the window doesn't lock here like it does at the McDonald's.

From the car window, the whole fast-food experience is a numbing routine. Pull up. Order from the billboard. Idle. Pay. Drive away. Fast food has become a \$120 billion motorized American experience.

But consider the life inside that window on Loop 12 in West Dallas. There is a woman with children and no health insurance, undereducated, a foot soldier in the army of the working poor. The fry cook sneezes on the meat patties. Cigarettes go half smoked. Cameras spy on the employees. Customers throw their fries and soft drinks sometimes because they think it's funny.

“I hate this job,” Ms. Castillo says with a smile. “I hate it.” It is her third drive-through job. First it was Whataburger. Then McDonald's. Now here. It is becoming a career.

“Burger King pays better,” she says. Even so, she has taken a second job: “It's a bar. There's a lot of white guys in there. I go and clean the restrooms. There's three restrooms I clean for \$150, and I do it in one hour and 30 minutes. One hour and a half.”

Ms. Castillo is the daughter of an illegal immigrant who came to America from Honduras by bus 22 years ago, with Ms. Castillo gestating inside her. Her mother lives on a disability check now, and

Ms. Castillo is the American who sees herself competing with illegal labor, labor that drives down her wage, she says.

“I never worked with white people,” she says while putting a cup of soda and ice together. “Everywhere I go and apply, it’s always Mexicans, black or Chinese.”

She surmises that the entire morning staff at her Burger King is illegal. “I can tell you everyone who works here in the morning works fake papers. No English. Nobody in the morning knows English.

“Somebody takes the order and then we tell them in Spanish.”

Ernesto Hernandez, her manager, says that he does not know if he employs people who work with false Social Security numbers and that it is not his job to know if the numbers are real. “Call corporate,” he says in a thick accent. “They have that information.”

Corporate did not return calls.

Whatever the truth of the matter, there’s a lot of ethnic friction behind the drive-through glass, Ms. Castillo says: “There’s a lot of hate.”

She hands the soda and a sack of 10 tacos to a guy in a Chevy who looks stoned. He doesn’t count his change. He drives away with one hand on the wheel, one in the sack of tacos.

A sign on the window says: “Burgers for breakfast beginning at 8 a.m.”

Ms. Castillo works from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. She earns \$252 a week before taxes. There is no chance of overtime, because the boss doesn’t allow it. To make ends meet, she and her husband work split shifts, he at an auto parts place during the day and she at the Burger King at night. And so the children, ages 7 and 8, are alone for a half-hour in the morning, left to wash and dress themselves.

Ms. Castillo arrives at her two-bedroom rental house on a tough street at 7. She takes the boys to a McDonald's for breakfast at 7:15 — the same place she used to work — before dropping them off at school at 7:45. A man named Carlos works the window there. They used to work there together.

Every morning, the boys' order is the same: one sausage, egg and cheese biscuit; one bacon biscuit; two hash browns; and two orange juices. Ms. Castillo could take free food home from Burger King, but the boys like McDonald's better.

She returns home, sleeps until 2 and collects the boys from school. She cooks them supper prepared from frozen packages, and sometimes they eat it in front of the television. It takes time and money to eat healthy, she says.

At 7 she puts the kids to bed. She spends a few hours with her husband, dresses in her purple polyester uniform with the yellow piping and drives to work. On Saturdays she attends community college, hoping that in a few years she will be a paralegal going to work in a downtown office tower, wearing a pantsuit. She is hoping for \$20 an hour and a lunch break.

“Regrets, yes, I got some,” she says. She wishes she would have worked harder in school. Not gotten pregnant at 13. Again at 14. She wishes she would have thought about life instead of letting it come at her, one dead end job at a time.

Around 2 a.m. work begins to slow down. This is the unpredictable hour. It could be filled with only the fry cook's music, or it could be the hour that gunmen rob the place and lock them in the freezer. It's happened before, she says. It happens dozens of times a month at fast food restaurants across the country.

Tonight, it's music. Gloria Castillo stares out the open window, allowing the wet air to blow inside. “I got dreams,” she says. “I'm a human being.”

She looks at the crummy little house across the parking lot with peeling paint. “That would be good too, a little house. I don’t want much.”