

IMMIGRANTS UNDER ATTACK

THUGS TARGET NEWEST PHILADELPHIANS: PAGE 3



Alberto, who came to Philadelphia from Mexico, was stabbed more than 10 times.

ALLANORO A. ALVAREZ/Today News

IMMIGRANTS UNDER ATTACK

Violence greets newcomers

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ALBERTO still has no idea why he was stabbed 10 times in the back early one morning last June, or who caused the additional knife wound in the neck that almost killed him.

An undocumented worker, Alberto, 21, was on his way home to South Philadelphia from a 13-hour shift at a Center City eatery, walking on Morris Street near 8th when some *pasanos* — fellow Mexicans — attacked him.

The three men — one was tall, two were short — said nothing as they plunged the *navaja* into his lower torso over and over again.

"I don't understand why this happened," he says nearly six months later, in an interview conducted in Spanish. The scar on his neck is still visible. He asked that his last name be withheld. "They didn't take anything. They didn't want money. Nothing."

Alberto's violent assault last summer was one of a growing number of crimes against immigrants in South Philadelphia — particularly against Mexicans — community advocates and activists say. The neighborhood's Mexican population has swelled to about 10,000 in recent years, many from one state, Puebla.

Yet they are an invisible group of victims who work 10-to-14-hour shifts in restaurants, construction and housecleaning, sometimes six days a week. Many hold down at least two jobs, and that perceived work ethic may make them a target.

"They see that we work all day, and they think that one is always going to have lots of money in bags," said immigrant Alberto Diaz, also speaking in Spanish.

The victims may know little about banks and local laws, but slowly they are beginning to stand up for themselves and learning to work the system. Once, many feared reporting a crime. Now, some do report them.

Now Diaz, a crime victim himself, and Carlos Rojas are heads of a safety committee for *Juntos*, a South Philadelphia-based com-



Carlos Rojas (left) and Alberto Diaz work with *Juntos*, a South Philadelphia-based community group that assists Mexican immigrants.

munity group that helps Mexican immigrants.

Police don't keep crime statistics for specific ethnic groups, but community activists say that, anecdotally, the numbers of attacks have been rising over the last three years.

The growing problem will be a key part of a meeting — called "Rights on the Line: Responding to Anti-Immigrant Attacks" — tonight, from 6 to 8, at the American Friends Service Committee at 1501 Cherry St. in Center City.

Other sponsors include the American Civil Liberties Union and the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition.

Robberies and assaults go unreported because of fear — mostly of deportation and government officials. "Most folks are scared of talking to the police," said Peter Bloom, director of *Juntos*.

Some "have done an illegal thing to get here. Since they are not here legally, they feel that any engagement with law enforcement will lead to deportation," Bloom said.

Back in Mexico, adds community activist Ricardo Diaz, "You don't necessarily report it [a crime], because it might come back at you. You might be giving away [an official's] friend."

Here in Philadelphia, Alberto — the June stabbing victim — is lucky to be alive.

Once the attack was over, "I stood up and saw my hand and it was pure blood," Alberto said. The thugs did not take the \$20 or so in his pockets or his cell phone.

The doctor, who later saw him at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, told him it was a "miracle" he had survived the stab wound to his neck, which hit a vital vein.

The *Juntos* South Philadelphia Safety Committee was created about six months before the attack. Its leaders, Rojas and Diaz, are documented workers employed at Stephen Starr's upscale restaurant *Buddakan*.

The breaking point, they say, was when a friend lost an eye during a robbery. The perp took \$20.

"It's not the amount but the violence he used," said Rojas, 34, an assistant pastry chef, explaining the rationale of the committee.

"We won't be punched and violently assaulted anymore." The safety committee, along with other community groups, organized several meetings beginning in January, reaching out to residents to hear their concerns about safety.

A June meeting at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in South Phila-



Violence victim Alberto shows scars from stabbing in June.

delphia with the faith-based Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project, drew close to 250 people, including police officials, community leaders and concerned immigrants, Diaz said.

Since then, the group has worked closely with Capt. Mike Weaver of the 3rd District and the 4th District's Capt. Joseph Zaffino to improve communication and create a so-called "safe corridor." Both districts are headquartered a 11th and Wharton.

In August, Bloom said, police began increasing patrols in the areas marked as unsafe by residents: 6th and 7th streets from Washington Avenue down to Ore-

gon beginning after midnight until 5 a.m., right about the time restaurant workers arrive home. Both parties say it has been a success.

Despite the stepped-up police activity, fear of authority continues to be a problem. A study released this week by the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies found that nearly half of the record 7.9 million immigrants who came to America in the last five years did so illegally.

"They're afraid, still, of people with uniforms," says community activist Ricardo Diaz.

"This they bring with them [from] home." ★