

## Daniela

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2003

I wanted to discover Daniella's secret. How could she work such long hours at a physically demanding job and stay so cheerful, day after day?

Half-way into my interview with her, I realized I might have to scrap her story for this newspaper.

"You're not 'illegal,' are you?" I asked Daniella. That thought had just occurred to me, even though I've known for a long time that Daniella is a Mexican immigrant.

She quickly answered "Yes."

Daniella is an undocumented worker, or "illegal alien." If I revealed Daniella's real name and workplace, I could cause serious trouble for her and for her employer.

So I decided to disguise her identity and say only that she's 30 and she works in Menomonee Falls.

With my newfound knowledge of Daniella's situation, my interview focus quickly changed from cheerfulness to intrigue. How did she get into the States? Did she pay a so-called "coyote," one of the sometimes unscrupulous smugglers of human cargo?

"Yes, \$600," she said. That was about nine years ago; Daniella said the fee is much higher now. Daniella fled with her brother. "We were all squished in a van. It was a little painful and tight." But it only took about half an hour to get across to the U.S. Her plan at first was to stay for one year "because there's not enough work in Mexico."

Of undocumented workers like herself, Daniella said, "There are millions of us."

Daniella lives with her brother now and is seeking a way to become a legal resident. "I wouldn't mind paying taxes," she said. And she knows she'd be paid more if she were a legal worker. America? "I love it." She's noticed one difference here -- in Mexico, females live with their families until marriage, not with a roommate or a boyfriend.

Daniella is one of 10 children. At first, her mother was upset about her leaving, but now is glad her daughter has a good job. Several of Daniella's siblings have also migrated to the States. Daniella visited home three years ago.

I finally did ask how she stays so cheerful. Daniella had no answer. She just threw back her head, laughed and said, "I don't know -- Just keep smiling. I think it's fun here. If I don't like this work, I'd probably quit right away."

The End

*[PS This story was published as my column in the Menomonee Falls News. It's about our family's favorite waiter, Javier, or "Javi" as we called him. He loved that I changed his identity to "Daniela" – coincidentally, his middle name is Daniel. Illegal immigration is such hot news now, and I keep thinking what Javi told me: "There are millions of us." – GGS, 5/06]*