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FROM THE FRONT | 9A

12 DAYS

From Page 1A

The family currently has little income and receives assistance from a local church, which donates a few clothing items and food when possible.

Javier removes brush and performs other landscaping tasks in odd jobs here and there, but it's far from enough to provide even the most basic needs, including food.

"We don't have any more than coffee — very little — after noon we (eat) a little," Javier said in Spanish.

Most meals are small. Sometimes they'll have avocados, rice, soup and they often eat beans, Javier said. Every once in a while the family gets to eat meat.

About a dozen chickens were relocated when the family had to leave their home at the ranch where they worked. The chickens have stopped laying eggs.

"It's been a very hard situation, so we had to kill two of them (for food)," Javier said.

They all often go to bed hungry.

SCRAPING BY

Javier Jr. helps when he can with money he makes working construction. However, jobs are few and far between for the 24-year-old.

If he gets work, it's usually for two to three days at a time, and he might make \$250 for the week.

Ana, 26, is pregnant and raising her 6-year-old, Sergio, with the help of her family.

Roberto will be graduating from high school next



PHOTOS BY DELCIA LOPEZ | DLOPEZ@THEMONITOR.COM

Alyssa peeks out of the door of her trailer home Sunday in north Palmview. At left, Javier De La Cerda, 49, stands outside the small shed he uses to sleep in Sunday in north Palmview.

year, if he sticks with it.

When the 17-year-old saw what a struggle it was for his parents, he wanted to drop out and get a job to help support the family, he said.

However, teachers and counselors at Benito Juarez-Abraham Lincoln High School talked him out of it.

"I want to be an architect," Roberto said, almost under his breath.

He's a soft-spoken and shy teen, who says he finds inspiration for his drawings of houses and buildings from newspapers, books and what he sees in nearby neighborhoods.

Although it's difficult for Roberto to think about the future beyond the next morning, he does want to go to college, he said.

"I think I can do it," Roberto said. "But I don't know how right now. I don't have any idea."

He blinked tears away as he thought about the obligation he feels to care for his family and said he sees college as a selfish undertaking.

Elena, 16, wants to be more active in school and in extracurricular activities, but it's hard with only one car among them, and no money for gas, she said.

The high school sophomore enjoys English class the most and she wants to become an elementary school teacher.

"I like kids," Elena said. "I guess (because) I take care of my nephew."

School has become a bit of a refuge for the two teens.

There they get a reprieve from the heat of the warmer months and the cold of the winter months; and they get lunch five days a week, which keeps their bellies from grumbling too much.

ONE WISH

Graciela and Javier haven't given Christmas much thought this year.

Instead, her family is thinking about their next meal and ultimately, a home to call their own.

Three weeks ago, Javier scrimped and saved up \$270 to buy a dilapidated house. It needed many repairs, but at least he thought he would be able to provide a home for his family.

He planned to place the house on some land his daughter Adriana is making

payments on.

After paying the seller, Javier returned the next day to move the house.

"For us, it was very large ... and before we could move it, he took the money and the house without telling me," Javier said. "We called the police, but we lost it."

So the family is back to square one, and scraping together enough money for the next day's meal.

Roberto and Elena both have the same wish for Christmas.

"A new house," Roberto said. "For my parents."

Graciela doesn't want to ask for help, though she is grateful for any help given, she said.

Along with clothing, blankets and food, the fam-

ily needs food and a refrigerator.

Weather forecasts predicted low temperatures tonight — into the 30s.

Graciela and her girls, Sergio and Javier Jr. will huddle together in one of the tiny bedrooms and try their best to stay warm.

Javier might add another blanket, if there is one, to his makeshift bed in the shed outside.

Together, they will rely on faith to get through the cold night.

"Dios nos cuida," Javier said.

God will protect them.

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