

# Local

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## When parents can't find jobs, children go hungry

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STAFF WRITER

Sometimes there's breakfast at the Torres' home and sometimes there isn't.

The Torres children can eat a free lunch at school. But at times the thought of sitting through morning classes with growling stomachs is too much for them.

"My children say, 'I'm not going to school because I'm hungry,' or 'I've got a stomach ache and I can't study. I've got a headache,'" said Esperanza Torres, a Watsonville mother of four teenagers.

Esperanza said she and Enrique, her husband, who came to Watsonville in 1976 from Mexico, never expected to find themselves in a situation like this.

"It wasn't like this when we first came here," she said in Spanish in a recent interview. "At first everything was good. There was work all year round."

With two adults working, a family could pay the month's rent with a week's paycheck.

But those times ended when the Torreses lost their jobs at Watsonville Canning during the strike. They put together a small business — a lunch truck — but had to sell the truck when they needed cash to pay their rent after the earthquake. Since then, they haven't been able to find steady work.

"There is no work," Esperanza said.

The family of six is trying to make do on monthly welfare payments of \$662 and the part-time salary of one of the oldest children.

Rent for their two-bedroom home is \$680. They've borrowed money and participate in a program at Adelante that distributes fruits, vegetables and sometimes chicken or fish once a month. They've also received one-time-only assistance from the Salvation Army and a few other programs to help cover rent and PG&E bills. The children's clothes are worn out.

They've moved half a dozen times, to cheaper and cheaper homes.

Esperanza said she feels desperate and bitter.

"We just keep going further and further down," she said, brushing away some tears.

She said she wishes the government would spend less on people in other countries and on the military. She worries about the impact of the free-trade agreement with Mexico and the future of canneries in this country. She said the family has thought about moving somewhere where rents are lower, but they have yet to find such a place that also has jobs.



Kurt Ellison

### Esperanza Torres

The Ruiz family is a little better off. There isn't much money, but everyone gets to eat. Carmen Ruiz, who was laid off earlier this year after 13 years at Green Giant, stretches the food budget for the family of six with powdered milk and by buying beans and rice in bulk — and by not buying all the expensive new cereals her children see on the store shelves and tell her they HAVE to have.

"I tell them, 'No, not this week,'" she said.

Carmen's youngest daughter is going to be 5 in a few weeks. She wants a baby doll, a party in the park and a Minnie Mouse cake, just like her friends have had.

"I don't have money to buy her presents or a pinata and to pay for a birthday party," Carmen said. "It's very sad."

Carmen's husband, Jose Manuel, has steady work as a cement layer, and she's still getting unemployment checks. But the rent on their three-bedroom home and utility bills alone come to about \$1,000 and there's never enough to cover the rest of the bills on time.

"It's very difficult to live on one check in the United States," she said. "All the Mexican people who come to the United States think, 'Oh, all these green

bills' ... but here everything costs a lot of money."

Ruiz said this is the first time her family has really had to struggle financially.

"This is my first experience like this," she said. "I'm so mad with my company. I'm so mad with the owners."

Ruiz is taking three classes offered in a program for the laid-off workers and at Radcliff Adult School, trying to improve her English, reading, writing and computer skills. It's putting a strain on her family not to have the income she could bring in, she said, but she's convinced she needs to finish if she's going to have any hope of finding a decent-paying job.

Ruiz said she has participated several times in a local program that provides fresh fruits, vegetables and meats at a low cost.

"I don't want to apply for welfare," she said. "That's the last thing I'll do ... if (it got to the point where) my children were going hungry, then it's clear I need to do it."

The only thing that's keeping her from that now is her husband's work, and that could be jeopardized if Watsonville has a wet winter.

"Oh, I hope it doesn't rain," she said. "If it rains, no work."