

How immigrants are changing U.S. ski towns

By David Page, Powder

Wednesday is ski day at Mammoth Elementary School. Which, for parents of kids in the program, means an added level of complexity on Wednesday mornings. Not only do the kids have to be in the car by 7:35am, with lunches, homework, combed hair, brushed teeth, and snow boots on the correct feet, but they also have to have their skis, boots, poles, goggles, helmets, gloves, long underwear, jacket, ski pass, sunscreen, snacks, bib, etc. One missing item could mean a kid gets stuck in the lodge all afternoon with a teacher. Or that a parent has to cut out early from work to go pick the child up.

On one such morning last winter, just as the first bell rang, Oscar Ayala (not his real name), dropped his kids at the school. In the near distance, above the paint-speckled ladder on the roof of his third-hand Isuzu Rodeo, Mammoth Mountain Ski Area stood against a blue California sky. They had their heads down, steeled for what lay ahead: four long hours of school—for “dual-immersion” kids like Oscar’s (and mine), education comes half in Spanish and half in English—followed by a short bus ride to the mountain and an afternoon on the slopes. Alison was in second grade; her brother, Oscar Jr., in fifth. Oscar Jr. was born in the U.S.; his sister in Mexico. He has a U.S. passport; she doesn’t. Neither was particularly excited about skiing, at least not early on a Wednesday morning heading into school.

Oscar is one of a growing number of immigrants finding a home in a ski town. He made his way north from Sinaloa, Mexico, in 2001. He had a degree in industrial engineering and went to

Tijuana to try to get a job. Angela, his fiancée, had gone to Mammoth, invited by distant cousins on her mother's side who needed help taking care of their kids while they worked. On the phone, she described to Oscar a place that sounded like paradise: jobs, clean mountain air, trees, a decent school, friendly neighbors, and a general lack of kidnapping, extortion, drug cartels, murder, bad water, extreme poverty, and mean-spirited immigration authorities. There weren't any jobs in Tijuana—in industrial engineering or anything else. So Mammoth became the dream.

His Mammoth Mountain name tag bore the same name as his fake Social Security card and green card (neither his own name nor the one I've given him), for which he paid \$150. The money withheld on his paycheck for Social Security, unemployment insurance, workman's comp, and Medicaid would never be seen again. Not that he was complaining; that's just how it was. "We have zero permission to stay here," he says. "We're the same as those who cross through the desert. The laws are starting to change, but we're still here with the fear that at any moment for any reason they can send us back."

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