

The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon)

January 26, 2007 Friday
Sunrise Edition

Finding riches in one Blazer's lost \$100 bill

BYLINE: John Canzano, The Oregonian

The housekeeper found the \$100 bill on the carpet of the Trail Blazers locker room, not far from Travis Outlaw's locker. This was a week ago, early morning, with the team on the road, and nobody else in the building but her husband, Adalberto, who was emptying trash cans on the other side of the room.

Sara Farfan, 48, had come upon lost items in the Blazers locker room before. Fancy tailored silk shirts. Jerseys. Shoes. A cellular phone, once. And two years ago, she even stumbled upon a silver Rolex watch embedded with sparkling diamonds that a player had left behind.

Now, she'd found cold cash.

Farfan is a wife, and a mother to four beautiful children, and a grandmother to five others. She is an immigrant from Mexico, medically uninsured and without transportation of her own. And if you ask about her employment history at the Rose Garden Arena, the small woman with short thick, black hair will beam and tell you she's worked there for nine years, and her job title is "390 Lead."

Farfan, who was reduced to part-time after Paul Allen threw the arena into bankruptcy two years ago, held up the \$100 bill for her husband, who doesn't see so well anymore. Adalberto came closer, and closer, and finally, he found himself squinting at enough money to buy him a pair of eyeglasses, or pay a portion of their terminally unpaid \$600-a-month insurance premium. Or maybe, several times over, fill the gasoline tank of their daughter's automobile, which they borrow to drive to work in the morning.

So here's what happened next: Adalberto, also a part-time custodian, retrieved a piece of paper from a nearby office, and folded it neatly in half. Then, Sara placed the \$100 in the fold, and scribbled "25" --Outlaw's jersey number --on the outside of the paper.

Then, they put the envelope away, smiled at each other and went back to work.

Sara's supervisor, Beverly Ross, said she wasn't surprised when Sara later handed her the folded piece of paper with Outlaw's \$100 bill inside.

"It's Sara being Sara," Ross said. "You ask me what times she comes to work, and I'll tell you, 'Whenever I ask her to be there.' Right now, Sara and her husband are the only ones allowed into the Blazers locker room to clean."

Justin Zeulner, senior operations director at the facility, said: "There's a lot of stress that goes on in these sensitive team areas. Some teams don't leave anything behind because items tend to disappear."

With the Blazers locker room over the years, the left-behind shirts, the shoes, the jerseys, even the silver, diamond-crusted Rolex timepiece that Sara described as, "The most beautiful watch I've ever seen in my life," always found their way back.

Sara is so trusted that she is also the only person allowed to clean Allen's personal "loft" --a two-bedroom, three bathroom unit that has a helicopter pad and two balconies. The owner's condominium is a facility secret, tucked away high in one corner of the Rose Garden Arena.

"It's a gorgeous apartment," Sara said. "So wonderful."

The money was lost. The money was found. Sara's supervisor gave the \$100 bill to Geoff Clark, the Blazers long-time equipment man, who slipped it back to Out-law. The Blazers forward then peeled \$20 --a ten and two fives --from his wallet and sent them back to the housekeeper who cleans his locker every day, yet he's never even met her.

So, well. Yes. Who is Sara Farfan, exactly?

She was born in Mexico. Got married. Raised three girls, and one boy while she worked as an insurance agent, and later, a housekeeper. Her husband drove a beer truck and worked part-time as a handyman. And in the end, she's a woman who realized her family would never get ahead unless she did something drastic.

It's customary, when emigrating from a country such as Mexico to the United States for the father to move in front of his family, establish a job, citizenship, and then, if things go well, send for his family. But Sara knew that her children needed their father, who was better with them with their homework, and so one morning, in 1996, Sara kissed her children goodbye, and came to the United States alone. Then Sara took a job at Taco Bell, where she worked double shifts for four years, making \$5.75 an hour, while sending the money to her husband in Mexico via money order.

"It was a horrible time," her daughter, Laura Munoz, said. "We'd never been apart as a family. My mother worked so hard, and was so far away."

Laura, now 31, said she realized in elementary school that her family never had much money, but she said, "We may have come home from school to an empty house for three or four hours, but we never went without."

"We got lots of attention from our parents, and mom always cooked a dinner at night. She stayed up all night cleaning our house, and hand-washing our clothes, and ironing them."

In the morning, Sara's children had clean clothes, and breakfast. And before Sara left for work, their mother gave each of them a hug, and enough change to pay for their bus ride to school.

Said Laura: "My parents made sacrifices."

This isn't to cast Sara and Adalberto as sympathetic figures, but instead, to demonstrate that the American dream --their dream --was born out of a desire to give their children a better life than the one they knew in Mexico. It's why Sara accepted the risk and came to Oregon. It's why her family followed her here when she'd saved enough to bring them, and figured out how to navigate the immigration process.

Sara's four children have more education than their parents. They have dreams of their own now. One daughter went to nursing school. Another graduated from college. And recently, the three daughters opened their own house-cleaning business.

"I'm so proud of my children," Sara said.

Sara pays taxes. She follows current events on the news. Said Laura: "My mother and father love this country so much."

Eventually, Sara and Adalberto saved enough to put a down payment on a three-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom home in Gresham. The whole family, four children and five grandchildren, now live under one roof with Sara and Adalberto again.

The Blazers are showing signs of youthful promise, but they have nothing on the arthritic woman who cleans up after them. Maybe it's Sara, who arrives early to vacuum and collect the trash of millionaire athletes, who has the real life lesson to teach us.

A few days ago, Sara's supervisor called the family home and told one of the children about their mother finding the \$100 bill, and turning it in. And maybe you're not surprised that Sara hadn't yet said a word about her honest deed. So around the dinner table, Sara finally told the story of finding the \$100 bill by Outlaw's locker. Then, she pulled out the ten and two fives, and every set of eyes at that table, especially her grandchildren, all of them between the ages 4 to 9 years old, followed the bills and nodded.

"That \$100 bill didn't belong to me," Sara said. "My integrity is what's most important to me. As a parent, you preach that to your children.

"Integrity is so important."

The \$20 tip from Outlaw was all Sara's. The money burned a hole in her pocket. So much so that Sara has already spent it.

Said Sara: "I bought a tank of gasoline for my daughter's car."

#