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He says working with donkey beats maquiladora job

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NOGALES, Sonora - Ten years ago, Martín Corona came to Nogales, Sonora, in hopes of getting a job.

He'd never heard of NAFTA, but family and friends he knew in the city told him there would be work in the border factories, so why not come up from the Mexican state of Aguascalientes and make his life on the border instead?

Corona, 38, worked a stint in a border factory that manufactured door locks. Then he found his own way.

He now works "with the burros," putting empty tequila bottles in tourists' hands and Zapata-style sombreros on their heads before snapping a Polaroid of them alongside or astride Nicolás the donkey.

"So I came to work in a maquiladora and ended up on a cattle ranch instead," he said, interrupting his conversation to yell to a trio of young Mexican women walking by: "Hey ladies! Don't you want me to take your picture?"

After living in Nogales for a year, in 1995, Corona worked on a cattle ranch in Hermosillo for two years and then returned to the border, where he found work at a maquiladora.

He found the work dreary.

When he started, he earned the equivalent of \$55 per week; when he quit two years ago, he was making about \$75 per week, he said.

He got the idea for the picture-taking job from a friend who knew about the opportunity.

Now he takes in about \$120 per week and is one of only five people working the Nogales streets with a Polaroid and a donkey. It's enough to support his family, which includes a wife and two sons, ages 7 and 3.

"I like this much better because I work for commission," he said. "It's my own motivation that decides how much I'm going to make.

"In the factory, no matter how much you work, you're getting paid the same."

Best of all, he said, "There's no pressure from the boss standing at your side."

Every morning, Corona walks to a house about three blocks from the border and picks up Nicolás. They walk along the busy streets to a corner of Obregon Avenue, less than a mile from the Nogales port of entry, where a cart

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featuring a backdrop of an Indian carrying a woman at the top of a snow-capped mountain, sits day and night.

His Polaroid camera is nearly 20 years old and he keeps a stack of vibrant sombreros for the tourists.

A plainer one, more similar to what the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata wore, lies at the bottom of the pile.

"The customers seem to prefer the hats with a lot of decorations and colors," he said.

Brianna Santoyo Campoy, 5, from Nogales, Ariz., looked back at her parents with wide eyes as Corona picked her up and sat her on Nicolás, who only stared at the ground.

But a moment later, with a wooden rifle in her hands and a red sombrero on her head, Brianna's bright smile matched the colorful backdrop behind her.

Her father paid Corona \$5 and the family walked away, Brianna stopping to pet Nicolás' muzzle.

"It's turned out not being too bad a life," Corona said as he tucked the \$5 into his wallet.

"I didn't make the money I thought I would here, but not bad just the same."

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