

## 15 MINUTES

## Standing on the corner

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Victor Casiano may be spotted standing on a street corner in downtown Fort Myers. He's small and slightly bow-legged, like a cowboy, and is usually friendly; he might ask you for a cigarette. He might be sitting quietly with a beer outside The Indigo Room, shiny black eyes staring out at nothing, face hollowed out, empty as an abandoned house. Sometimes the face just says "Hello," sometimes it asks, "Could you spare a couple of dollars or some change?" He is 51 years old and homeless, and there are reasons why his face looks so worn and creased, like someone smoothed out a crumpled dollar bill. Casiano said he doesn't know why, and that he is who he is.

"I sleep at the places I can find that are safe," he said. "It's a challenge, but it can be done. Once in a while I meet the right person and they give me food. Once in a while I throw out the trash for a restaurant and they give me food. I have friends in bars and they give me clothes."

Casiano, who said his father was Puerto Rican, his mother Mexican and his grandfather Italian, was born in Manhattan, and spent his first 13 years there and in the Bronx. Both his mother and father are deceased. He is the youngest in a family of four brothers and one sister, all of whom he believes are still alive although he has not seen any of them in over a decade. Memories tumble out of Casiano in tiny pieces, each forming a brief, bright picture before ending abruptly.

"When I was little I was in a drawer. I was in a dresser drawer. I remember going to sleep ...



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Victor Casiano

"My mom used to always cook crabs. There were these railroad tracks, off the ground, and there were crabs at the stores near the railroad tracks. There were clothes, furniture, food, fish food, crabs, apples. There were bananas and pineapples, mangos and pears..."

"I used to hang with a little group of guys. We were all like cousins. Ricky, Jose, Robert, Junior. We played hooky from school. We would go on the [subway], sneak past the [token] collector. 'Hey, you guys!', [the token collector said], 'Come back here!' We road the

subway up to 42nd Street even though we were scared to go that far..."

"There were block parties with Puerto Ricans...the girls and guys making out... becoming responsible mothers and fathers..."

"I used to hop on the fire truck when it came by. The firemen knew me. They were my friends."

"I sleep at the places I can find that are safe, ..."

— Victor Casiano

Casiano said he and a group of Irish friends used to rip off a local ice cream parlor.

"We knew where they kept the change, where they kept the candy," Casiano said. "Payday, Milky Way...[My friends] would get the things they wanted and I would get the things I wanted. When I went home with my new things, my mom never questioned me. I told her I was a good son, and I was. But I started hanging out with the guys on the street and doing bad things. But they were friends, and that's all that mattered."

Casiano moved to California when he was 13, he said.

"As a teenager I went to get a lot of marijuana," Casiano said. "I'd go to 18th Street, Santa Monica, Venice. Mostly I'd go by myself

and get marijuana, for me, myself and I. I had to know the gangs because I was crossing their streets."

In the mid 1980s, Casiano said doctors in California diagnosed him with schizophrenia. Since then, he gets monthly financial support from the federal government, an allowance which aims to offset his illness.

"A couple of doctors got together and told me my malady was mental," he said.

Casiano moved to Fort Myers in 1986, where his older brother Michael then lived. He came here by plane, and found work and an apartment for a few years, before being locked up for eight months on theft charges. While in jail, everything in his apartment was taken, and his brother left town never to be seen or heard from again.

"I still talk to myself," Casiano said. "But I don't hear voices anymore. I still get angry sometimes, about things in my life I feel are hopeless. I try not to, but some people in the world want to make it, and some people in the world just don't care. Sometimes the way I feel is, the hell with the world."

Casiano said Fort Myers is the last place he ever wants to go.

"I lost my New York ways a long time ago. California spoiled me and I don't wanna go back there and remember the ways I used to be like. I'm gonna try to live here the rest of my life, until I die."

During a driving rainstorm with lightning blooming above his head last night, Casiano found himself stuck out on Palm Beach Boulevard with nowhere to go, so he stepped under an awning and waited. He said that's what he usually does when it rains. ■

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