

Now, he's solid as a rock

EDGAR REYES leaned back and raised his bearded face toward the suddenly overcast sky. From behind him came the sound of a strong wind whipping through Central Park.

"Hey, man," he said. "Where's the sun? I need some sun. It's getting cold out here."

He grinned and went back to work with the trowel, scraping and scooping excess cement from the wall he was building at the northern edge of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The wall is low and curved and made of Jet Mist granite. It's 240 feet long, nearly the length of a football field. It will parallel a path that will serve as an entrance to the park at 84th St. and Fifth Ave.

Reyes, 22 years old, is the supervisor on the project. For once, we have a New York story with a happy ending.

During an interview on his lunch hour, Reyes explained how he basically had to escape from his own home when he was just 10 years old.

"My stepfather used to beat us," he said. "For no reason. He'd come home drunk and he'd start hitting people."

These were not spankings. "He had a horsewhip," Reyes said. "Sometimes he'd beat us with a stick. Whatever he had handy."

One day Reyes got into trouble at school. The teacher told him not to come back unless he had his parents with him.

The youngster was absolutely certain that nothing good could come of this. When a 10-year-old is beaten with a horsewhip for no reason, he knows that the sky's the limit when he's really done something wrong.

"I didn't want to get beat any more," he said. "So I told my teacher what was going on. She called the Bureau of Child Welfare and they got me out of the house."

Eventually, Reyes' mother was given a choice by city authorities. She could live with Reyes and his older brother and sister, or she could stay with their stepfather.

She stayed with the stepfather. "I went from group home to group home," Reyes said. "I didn't like it. Some of the kids would organize, you know, get together to go out and mug people. Sometimes they would go to the park just to pick off gay people and rob them. I wouldn't do it. I didn't have the heart for it."

"But I'll tell you the truth, I had a chip on my shoulder. Once I tried to talk to a counselor but he said he wasn't there to hear my problems, he was there to get his paycheck."

"I got into fights. I always had the feeling nobody cared about me."



BOB HERBERT

In his mid-teens, Reyes ran away from his last group home and started living on the streets.

"It was fun," he said. "It was summer. I was sleeping on the rooftops. There was nobody to listen to. No curfews. I used to paint. I painted a lady's house. That's how I made ends meet."

By this time he had already experimented with a few drugs but decided that wasn't what he wanted to do. More ominously, he had experimented with selling drugs:

"There was money to be made. But one time the beeper went off, which meant the cops were coming. I was scared, man. I knew that wasn't the field for me. I gave that up."

While Reyes was having "fun" sleeping on rooftops and living without a curfew, a cold snap rolled in. Summer was over. Reyes went back to the Bureau of Child Welfare.

That's when his life changed. Taken in by the Queens Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, he was told about Manhattan Valley Youth, a city-run program at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine.

The program provides troubled youngsters with work, schooling and a paycheck. Reyes' first job was helping to clean up Highbridge Park. He worked hard, but let it be known that he wanted something more.

Now St. John the Divine is in the midst of an enormous construction project that will complete the Gothic cathedral, which was started in 1892. The work will continue well into the next century. Reyes was given a job as a laborer at Cathedral Stoneworks, which was set up as part of the construction project. He spent his days carrying mud for the bricklayers, hauling limestone blocks and generally doing whatever he was told.

"I paid attention," Reyes said. "I didn't know anything at all about stonecutting, but I wanted to build. I had the feel for it."

The bricklayers began to teach him things. He was allowed to do small skilled tasks, and when he showed an aptitude he was taken on as an apprentice stonemason.

Edgar Reyes completed his four-year apprenticeship last June 23. When he talks about it, he grins from ear to ear.

Yesterday, standing in the unseasonable cold outside the Metropolitan Museum, he said with no sense of bitterness that he had encountered a number of "bad experiences" during his life but it had never occurred to him to give up trying to make something of himself.

He said he has met many youngsters who feel abandoned by the world, who feel that no one cares about them.

"I tell them," he said, "that somewhere there are people who care about you — but even if there aren't, it doesn't matter. I tell them that what's important is how they feel. You have to be positive, to want something."

There were more questions to be asked and more answers to be given, but Reyes' lunch hour was over and he had to get back to work. Someone had already sprayed some black graffiti on his wall. He pointed to it and shook his head.

"Don't let me find them," he said. He was obviously angry but he didn't dwell on it. He looked up at the massive stone walls of the museum.

"Someday," he said, "I'll build something like that. Then, when I have kids, I can bring them by and say, 'Look, that's what daddy did.'"