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America's Longest School Bus Ride Suddenly Becomes a Trip of Minutes

By Sue Ann Pressley

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TERLINGUA, Tex., Aug. 2—It used to be so difficult -- those darn, other-wordly mornings, up at 4:30 a.m., stumbling out to meet the big yellow bus. When Jessica Garcia looks back on her high school years, she probably will not feel much nostalgia for those moments. She is one of the last veterans of the longest school bus ride in America.

"A lot of times, we'd laugh a lot on the bus," said Garcia, 17, a rising senior, describing the slow 90-mile trek each morning and again each afternoon through the wild desert mountains of her home. "But a lot of times, we didn't feel like having fun. We'd just try to sleep, wanting to be home."

When school reopens here in a few days in this remote border community, with its friendly residents and its dusty edge-of-the-earth quality, Jessica and her 44 high school classmates will savor a small miracle: the new Big Bend High School, right here, only minutes from their homes.

It was built for \$550,000 on the thinnest of shoestring budgets, with grants and donations from people around the country who were impressed with reports of the students' struggle to get an education. And with its dedication today, it offers the youths something they have never had -- a place to belong to.

"We will have lab facilities, all under one roof, bathrooms even, all those things everybody has in a normal school," said Kathy Killingsworth, who serves as both the high school principal and the superintendent of the Terlingua School District. "It's been a community, state and nationwide affair, getting this school built. Everybody

wanted to get the kids off the bus."

For many years, however, it was a given: Children who lived in Terlingua or nearby Lajitas or the Big Bend National Park -- one of the most rugged and least-visited parks in America -- enrolled through the eighth grade at the Terlingua Elementary School. Then with no other choice, they boarded the bus and headed north up lonesome Route 118 to attend high school in the small town of Alpine.

Along the way, they passed wild turkeys, deer, the occasional ferocious javelina and the colorful peaks that rise 5,000 and 6,000 feet above the sagebrush -- Elephant Mountain, Packsaddle Mountain, Hen and Egg Mountain. But even the most starkly beautiful scenery can fail to fascinate on the 180th round trip, and the school dropout rate was discouraging.

"Oh, we worried so much about it," said Nereida Jurado, a waitress whose eldest child, Miguel, 14, is a rising freshman. "We kept wondering, 'Oh, my God, how will we ever survive the bus?'"

The longest bus ride actually ended last fall when school officials, finally certain they could finance construction of a new school, hauled mobile homes to the Terlingua site to serve as temporary classrooms. That strategy, of course, did little to promote school spirit, and the faulty air conditioning and cramped quarters were further inconveniences to the students. But all that is behind them now, and Big Bend High School, Home of the Roadrunners, seems like a palace.

By most standards, the new facility is tiny, with only six classrooms. But as students and parents toured the facility today, they cried out with joy at the sparkling white walls, the neat cabinets and gray carpeting, the new construction smells. Getting the structure built was truly a community effort. Concerned residents used their trucks to haul in equipment; fathers of students did the concrete work.

"I'm pretty excited about starting school again," said a beaming Gina Lujan, 16, a sophomore. "Everybody is. I love to be involved in school."

Before, of course, there was no time for the students to be involved in much of anything. Pulling out of Terlingua before dawn, returning at 6 p.m. (with some even having to travel an additional 30 or so miles into the most

isolated canyons and hills) everyone was exhausted. School sports were out of the question. No one could remain in Alpine for practice, and clubs and other extra activities had to be sacrificed.

"Sometimes I felt we'd been missing out of a lot of stuff," said Amanda Guzman, who will enter the 10th grade, "like a real prom, and pep rallies, and -- I know this sounds silly -- but just stuff like getting to walk in a big hallway. The normal kind of thing a teenager would like to experience."

It may be a while, the students realize, before Big Bend High School will boast enough students to field a football team, and a chorus would require participation of every student who can carry a tune. But the teachers are talking about organizing a track program, maybe trying for a little golf.

And maybe some day soon, Amanda and her classmates will be able to meet at the library -- that's the next project on the Terlingua fund-raising list. After that, everyone seems to think a gym would be a nice addition.

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