

USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism
The Story Behind the Story

"Leaving Home, Finding Hope"

Karen Branch-Brioso,

Published in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

April – May 2004

Each time I'd write an update about immigration talks between Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox – now they're on, now they're not – I'd hear the same thing from priests and immigration advocates in the St. Louis area: No one's going home to Mexico anymore. The under-the-radar community of illegal migrants was settling permanently and avoiding return trips home, thanks to stepped-up border security and the increased risks that came with it. Many were pinning their hopes on an amnesty in the U.S.-Mexico talks to change that.

That premise was always in the back of my mind as I planned, reported, wrote and re-wrote a series of articles about the undocumented population in the St. Louis area. It was about the only premise that survived that process. Others dropped off quickly. I had hypothesized that it was post-9/11 border security that was driving the switch to a state of permanent illegal residence. Instead, I found that a series of build-ups along the border in the past decade – and not just the post-9/11 security surge – that had this impact. I had assumed the employment of Latino immigrants in the low-wage sectors was drawing exclusively on undocumented workers. In fact, a trip to one of the 'feeder' towns in Zacatecas for many illegal laborers to our area turned up a whole new trend: many St. Louis employers who had once exclusively hired undocumented workers were now using temporary work visas to bring their workers from the same towns.

Writing about the latter was the easy part. I could use the full names of the workers on H-2B visas; I could speak to their employers; photographer Rick Mach could shoot portraits of them at work and at home and capture every emotion on their faces. We could do none of that with the families that made up the bulk of our series. They were illegal immigrants and most wouldn't even let me know where they lived without a promise to protect their identities. That meant using first or middle names only – and in one case, it meant using a pseudonym. That meant photography that blurred or hid faces – or that featured below-the-neck portraits. And, weeks after the series was published, it also has meant a continued paranoia that despite all of that care, some detail I have described in the article might prompt an immigration raid that could lead to unemployment or deportation of the families who trusted me to protect their identity.

Achieving that trust was not so easy. I started by trying to build up trust with the people that I knew the undocumented population trusted already: immigrant-service providers and clergy. They were the ones who have readily shared stories of hardships with me for past articles – but only in a generic sense. This time, I went to them, looking for names and phone numbers and addresses. In some cases, I hit dead ends. One priest told me flat-out that “no good can come from this.” The illegal population in the St. Louis has been a virtually untold story – and he told me that whatever my intentions, detailing its existence would likely lead to an anti-immigrant backlash. I couldn’t blame him. I understand his paranoia – and his no-good-can-come-from-this warning rings constantly in my ears. But, eventually, other priests helped. And so did immigrant-rights advocates.

One of the most important breakthroughs came during my initial reporting foray to St. Louis in mid-December. Ironically, that was the trip that I assumed would only set the groundwork for building trust and had no expectations it would yield direct contacts with illegal-immigrant families. I picked a three-day window that included Dec. 12 – the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint. I thought it would provide some nice color for the article, which it did. But the extremely long day – from the 4 a.m. Mass in Fairmont City, Ill., and the 6 a.m. Mass in St. Louis County to the return trip to Fairmont City for the evening Mass and celebration – reaped as much benefit as exhaustion. The priest in Fairmont who had seemed hesitant over the phone seemed delighted that I would make it to the 4 a.m. Mass. The face-to-face meeting with the immigrant advocate at Our Lady of Guadalupe in Ferguson, Mo., led to a lunch, and more than a bit of inquisition on her part to sound out my intentions. (The response was as simple as it was true: “Most people in St. Louis have likely never known – or been able to communicate with – an undocumented worker who is their neighbor. I want them to hear, from the immigrants’ own mouths, why they came, why they stay, where they came from. I want readers to realize that border and immigration policies affect St. Louis, too.” After lunch, I dropped my inquisitor off at her office. She received a phone call on her cell phone, which she promptly handed to me. It was a woman whom I refer to in my article as Dolores: She was sobbing. She had left her son behind in Puebla more than five years ago and he desperately was trying to join her in St. Louis. But the teenager had been caught at the border several times. She agreed to talk to me about it in her home later that afternoon – and gave me the phone number where I could reach her son in Puebla. Many, many phone calls and visits later – from December to March – the story abruptly changed. Her son tried another illegal crossing and made it in March. She paid a smuggler in Phoenix \$2,100 to make it happen: \$1,050 when her son made it to the drop house in Phoenix; \$1,050 more in cash to the driver of

the Ford pick-up who dropped Jose off at a highway shoulder in St. Charles County, Mo.

During the Guadalupe celebration in Fairmont City, Ill, on the night of Dec. 12, I met the cousin of the man known as “Francisco” in my articles. Francisco was living proof of the post-9/11 build-up along the border and the dilemmas it had created. His father had died, post-9/11, and he wrestled with whether to return for the funeral, a trip that would entail the risk of leaving his wife and two young children behind in Fairmont. He went to the funeral in Mexico and took nearly two months to get back. I had long hoped to talk to Francisco for the article, and the meet-up with the cousin paid off. Francisco called my cell phone a day and a half before I left St. Louis to return to Washington. He said I could come over to his house, as long as I agreed to never report his name. Our first meeting was at his home in a snowstorm, where the history of Francisco’s wife was as compelling as his own.

That led, eventually, to trips to the towns in Jalisco to meet with the families they’d left behind.

That initial trip to St. Louis also was essential, I believe, in raising my editor’s enthusiasm for the series. The 6 a.m. Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was a stunner, even for me. The church was packed to the back doors as several hundred people arrived for the Spanish-language Mass. It turned out to be the largest turnout they’d had – something the priest and the parishioners attributed to border security making it just easier for people to stay put in St. Louis, rather than going home for a month or so at the end of the year.

I told my editor about the crowd on the phone the next day: “There are Mexicans in Ferguson?” he said incredulously. Our series was on its way.

The next several months, I found innumerable sources to answer the questions. The Census was just a starting point to find, at the neighborhood level, where the population had seen the most growth. I found churches within those neighborhoods and spoke with priests and nuns, who all had anecdotal examples of the population growth. From there, I tapped into public school statistics in Missouri and Illinois – piecing together graphics over several years that showed the growth in the Latino student population. But more importantly, I asked each state for their statistics over those years just for students enrolled in their English-as-a-Second Language classes over that same period. I pieced together a graphic that looked only at the ESOL kids whose first language was Spanish, and then I broke that down by school district – a measure that any reader could understand. That showed

to me just how significant the growth had been, because these were newly arrived children who couldn't speak English. And if there are children here, they are usually arriving with their parents.

Dolores' son, Jose, it turned out, would enroll in one of these programs a few weeks after crossing the border at New Mexico with the help of a coyote.

I chose two places in Mexico to write about the other side of the immigration story. I wanted to have an idea of what the immigrants' lives would be like had they stayed behind through the eyes of their families there. We were also able to experience a between-the-two-worlds moment (or 30-plus hours of such moments) by getting to Mexico by taking a charter bus company whose entire livelihood is based on bringing Mexicans who live in Mexico with Mexicans who live in the United States. Despite the lack of sleep, the bad food, the uncomfortable seats, it was a tremendously important part of the series. Because the bus stops gave us a look at all small towns and large cities all along the route that have been changed, just in the past decade, by the growth in the Hispanic population.

We were able to get a wonderful view of an immigrants' life through their families by spending a few days with Francisco and Maria's families in San Juan de los Lagos and Rancho La Purisima in Jalisco – but the trip paid off in many other ways as well. Francisco and Maria were by far the most hesitant to open up about their lives. But that changed significantly once I returned from Mexico to visit with them. They opened up more after our return from Jalisco.

The trip that we made to the town of El Salto, Zacatecas, also bore unexpected fruit. I'd expected to get some wonderful color of the small town where so many residents had families in St. Louis. What I hadn't expected was to find so many who now were going across legally each year on H-2B visas. The first night we arrived there, three brothers were getting ready to board a bus for Monterey – which would eventually bring them to St. Louis where they, like hundreds of others, were arriving to work for landscaping companies.

Because of that, I wrote up a couple of FOIA requests once I returned to Washington – and, about a month later, received a copy of the database of H-2B workers for the past several years. Some quick analysis showed that Missouri companies had been going after these visas like crazy in the past few years. After talking to several employers, it turned out that they'd been frightened by immigration enforcement in the past decade that led to mass arrests of illegal workers at landscaping companies. So one company began seeking H-2B visas – and their competitors were quick to follow.

That led to a final piece that gave my readers several very specific examples of how immigration was impacting the St. Louis area – and looked ahead to legalization proposals – starting with the one suggested by President George W. Bush.

There was one more surprise. After years of writing articles about U.S.-Mexico guest-worker talks – and hearing from many readers angry at the idea – I expected to be inundated with loads of anti-immigrant e-mails and phone calls once the series ran. I did receive several of those. But I received far more e-mails and phone calls like these:

- “Just wanted to say, great article about Hispanic immigration in St Louis. I think there are still a lot of people not aware of the increase in Hispanics here. My mother came to St Louis from Ecuador in the early 1960s and when I grew up, Spanish speakers were a rare breed. I left St Louis from 1993 to 2001 and I was floored when I returned to the area I grew up (St Ann/Bridgeton area) and saw the transformation. It was even more interesting since I returned with a Mexican wife! There's quite a bit of change from what I would have anticipated.”
- “My daughter married an illegal and I pray everyday that her world will not fall apart. We have embraced their situation because we have an adorable grandson who deserves a unified family. I understand why they come here. As your story makes clear, if they can get in, they are coming. So it seems simple to me that they must be stopped and more must be allowed in legally. But, and this is our problem, he is here, he can prove he is established let him be legal. My daughter met this man as most people meet, working side by side, getting to know each other in their work environment, he is a hard-working man and a wonderful husband to our daughter and daddy to our grandson. I appreciate any understanding your story can bring to this issue.”
- “I am so very touched by this story. It means a great deal to me to read about this on the front page of the St. Louis Post Dispatch. I come from El Paso Texas where 80 percent of the population is Hispanic. I wasn't even aware that we had illegal Mexicans being smuggled by the dozens into this country. Than I came to St. Louis and met my husband. He told me the story how he got here and it just made me realize how us Americans take for granted everything we have. My husband came here from Guanajuato, Mexico, about 2 years ago. He is the hardest working man I have ever met. We now have a one year old son. He to left his family in Mexico. But now we struggle

with the possibility of him having to return to Mexico for up to 10 years. That can happen tomorrow or next year. In closing thanks again for giving your time and effort into this article. It truly meant a lot to us."

- "I just wish you could put together a gringo version of a book of recipes by the ladies of El Salto, perhaps with an "afterword" of more recipes from the migrants in Fairmont City. Nothing fancy; not even hard-bound. Just good things to eat made from the staples they have to work with. Proceeds could go to the ladies of El Salto. Just a pipedream, I suppose. But if St. Louis does not already have a "sister city" in Mexico, imagine the good that our residents could do for these people."
- "I live in Mexico, Mo where I volunteer with our Latino community. For years Missouri has ignored its undocumented population. Thank you for giving them a human face, for sharing their very personal stories and for making it just a little harder for us to go on pretending they don't exist. You did a wonderful job."