

## CITY NEWSPAPER

---

### IMMIGRATION: Desperate crossings

An Arizona journalist, coming here next week, talks about the chaos on the border.

By [Tim Louis Macaluso](#) on May 5, 2010

---

Failed economic and immigration policies have turned the southern US border into a war zone between two friendly nations, says Tucson journalist Margaret Regan. And while Arizona's new immigration law has shocked the country, Arizonans have been coping with chaos along the border with Mexico for 10 years, she says.

The wall built to prevent migrants from crossing through metropolitan areas in Texas and California has funneled them into Arizona, she says. And the desperately poor pay a tragic price.

Regan, a reporter for the Tucson Weekly, will be in Rochester for a public lecture at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 13, at First Unitarian Church, sponsored by First Unitarian and other faith groups. Her new book, "The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands," is a hard-hitting description of the plight of thousands of undocumented migrants who try to enter the US every year and the border patrol that tries to intercept them.

Regan opens her book with a haunting description of a young Salvadoran girl's last hours. After crossing the border into Arizona's inhospitable landscape, the girl becomes ill.

"She was too weak to stand up, let alone hike this roller-coaster trail out to the road," writes Regan. "It was a problem. The group had that ride to catch, and the longer they lingered here the more likely they'd be caught. The coyote had a decision to make, and this is the one he made: he would leave the young girl behind, alone in the desert."

Arizona has become the point of entry for the migrants who work in our northeastern orchards and clean our hotels, Regan says. Although poverty is the driving force, increasingly migrants like young Josseline are trying to unite with family already living and working in the US. Arizonans, like much of the rest of the country, are divided, says Regan. While many people sympathize with the plight of migrants, others say the country is being invaded.

In a telephone interview last week, Regan discussed the Mexican immigrants' plight, the atmosphere in Arizona following the passage of the strict immigration law, and how the problems at the border affect the rest of the country. An edited version of that interview follows.

**CITY: There are sympathizers with the migrants. Then are those who think the US is being invaded. Can you describe the atmosphere in southern Arizona?**

Regan: The last few days have been extremely volatile with the passage of the new law. Usually it's not quite like this. But people are extremely divided.

If you go down to the border, you can sit on the Mexican side and see how busloads of people are let out on the American side. It's just amazing.

The numbers are down, for sure. At the height of this, we had something like 600,000 arrests of migrants a year, and last year we were down to 250,000. That's more than a 50 percent drop. But it's still an extraordinary number of people being caught and brought back over to Mexico.

**Your book, "The Death of Josseline," describes what sounds like a war on our southern border. Is that how you see it?**

It feels that way. Visually, you've got the wall, the border patrol agents, what they call stadium-style lighting at night, and helicopters flying overhead making a lot of noise.

It's kind of odd, because these are two nations that are at peace with one another. Mexico is one of our allies, so it feels strange to have this whole semi-military operation going on. People have compared it to the wall that Israel has built along the Palestinian territory. Others have compared it to the Berlin Wall.

The other side of the coin is that a lot of people describe it as an invasion. And they say the US has a right to protect its borders.

**How do you think most people in Arizona feel about the new law that the governor has signed?**

Divided; certainly the protestors that are out there are against the law. I've been reading the letters to the editor in our daily paper, and they are running very much against the law, which is sort of surprising. However, the comments on internet sites for the newspapers tend to be very anti-immigration and pro the law.

While the new law is considered to be humanitarian toward the immigrants who are in the US already and living here illegally, it calls for more border enforcement. If what we have now isn't enough, I can only imagine what it's going to look like.

Pima County where Tucson is has a long border with Mexico. And interestingly, the sheriff said yesterday that the law is illegal and it's racist. And he said he is not going to enforce it. He's putting himself at risk. It's not the sheriff's job to decide on the constitutionality of a law.

People around the country have probably heard of Sheriff Joe Arpaio up in Maricopa County [Phoenix]. It is quite different than it is down here. We don't have the kind of showy raids that Sheriff Arpaio stages. He's made a career out of staging raids on city halls and arresting cleaning ladies in the middle of the night. He does sweeps in Hispanic neighborhoods where suddenly a lot of sheriff deputies are in there stopping cars for broken headlights, that sort of thing.

We've not had that. Our county prosecutor has said that she's interested in real crimes rather than [immigration] status offenders. But this new law could change the atmosphere down here, too.

**The problems of violence and death along the Arizona-Mexico border weren't anticipated, were they? In an effort to solve the flow of migrants across the border, didn't we make matters worse?**

In Arizona during the 1990's, we didn't have that many people crossing here. San Diego in southern California and El Paso, Texas, were the big crossing points. There were so many crossings in San Diego; one year, I think they had more than 700,000.

But they had this idea that they could solve this problem of illegal immigration by sealing off the crossing points. And they did it quite effectively by building multiple layers of fencing. Maybe you've seen pictures of the wall going straight across the beach from San Diego and way out into the ocean. They did that so people wouldn't be tempted to swim around it.

And they thought that there was this forbidding landscape in Arizona between El Paso and San Diego. What they didn't count on was how desperate these people are. Very soon after that, we started to get what they call the "funnel effect." People were pushed out of those areas and were just trying their luck crossing through Arizona instead.

Arizona has large swaths of relatively flat desert interspersed with very high mountains. The mountains rise up to 9,000 feet. People either go through these deserts where the temperatures in the summer routinely reach over 100 degrees, or they try going through the mountains. And in the winter time, it gets very cold up there, with snow and freezing temperatures. Pretty soon we started having hundreds of thousands of people here making the crossing. And the deaths started to spike.

I interviewed the Pima County medical examiner, Dr. Bruce Parks. He has been the medical examiner since the late 1980's. He gets all of these migrant bodies coming into his morgue. And he says that these unauthorized border crossers, as he calls them, could be counted on one, maybe two hands. He'd get maybe seven in a year. Then in 1999 he was up to 50, the next year he is up to 95, and within a few years he is up to 200 bodies.

**One of the people in the book that you interviewed described the border as the "American killing fields." How have people reacted to a loaded phrase like that?**

Go less than two hours from here down into the countryside, and this is a place where people are routinely dying outside little Arizona towns. This is a place where we have a lot of public lands, some very beautiful areas. And odds are if you go hiking in there, you're going to come across a dead body. I don't think there is any where else in the US that is likely. If you're hiking around Yellowstone, that's not going to happen. And of course, it's also possible that you'll run into migrants taking the trail north. I've heard from a lot of people from around the country who just had no idea this was happening.

**Your book has these dueling themes of good and evil. You have the criminal element and whole cottage industries devoted to exploiting the migrants. You have the people in the north employed to send them back. And then you have people in the middle just trying to ease their suffering.**

Sometimes people say, Look for the money. Boeing has made a lot of money on border security. They have the contracts for the virtual wall. I call it the "faulty towers," because it just hasn't worked. Janet Napolitano, the secretary of homeland security, has suspended the building of these things. They've been built through no-bid contracts. So there's quite a bit of money to be made. And the border patrol is always hiring.

Then there's the criminal element, which is a very ruthless business. The more we have militarized our border and the harder we have made it to get through, the more the migrants rely on these criminal networks to get through. With the large numbers of people coming across the border now, and the difficulty getting across, you have people paying huge sums of money. They're paying \$2,000 and up to \$8,000.

The drug smugglers' networks have gotten into the people smuggling trade, too, as it has become more lucrative. And, as we all know, these are not very nice people. They leave people who are sick in the desert all the time. We had a case just the other day where a woman became ill, and they dropped her and her son in the desert. Somehow the boy got hold of the border patrol and told them that his mother had fainted. The border patrol reached him, and they found this boy sitting there with his dead mother.

**Why did you begin your book with the story of Josseline? What does she represent to you?**

I started with her because her story is so tragic, and it embodies so many of the issues I try to describe. Her story is about family reunification, which is the big driver in immigration these days. When you have so many migrants already here, living and working, a big part of the traffic coming up is people trying to reunite with their families.

In her case, her mother was living in LA and her father was living in Maryland. And she was left at home with her 10-year-old brother in the care of their grandmother. The mother worked for a long time to save up the money to bring them north. They were coming all the way from El Salvador. The mother thought they were traveling with people she could trust. They may have been passed on to someone else; we don't know. By the time they reached the Arizona desert, Josseline got sick and the whole group just left her there.

But this is what happens. There is no emotional attachment on the part of the guide. He's thinking about getting the rest of the group across.

**Why should people in the northeast, for example, care about what is happening along the southern border of Arizona? We don't have scores of dead bodies showing up here in our orchards.**

There are a couple of answers to that. What's happening along our border is the result of a federal policy. This isn't an Arizona policy. This is something that we all agreed to.

More specifically, you can be sure that most of the people who are coming up to New York to work in your orchards are coming right through Arizona. These people are risking their lives so they can pick cherries. In a way, your industries, especially your agricultural industry, depend on the migrant workers. If we seal up the border even further, it's an open

question: who is going to be picking the fruit up there? This is the kind of work where there are no large pools of people willing to do this.

This gets to the definition of "migrant worker." They just move around to wherever there is work. An unemployed person in Rochester can probably go and get one of those jobs. But are they going to be able to follow the agricultural circuit? Probably not.

**You've been covering this for a long time. What do you think is the root cause, and is there a solution?**

The root cause of the problem is poverty. We're a rich country and Mexico is a poor country, and we share a 2,000 mile border. You know, I got a mention in the New York Times the other day about immigration. And you get all of these comments right away whenever you mention immigration. There's a phrase that I am starting to see more often. Someone wrote in and said, "Mexico has the 12th largest economy in the world. So how poor could it be?"

But the money from that economy is not going to the very large numbers of desperately poor people. And I try to explain to people that when NAFTA went through, we changed the lives of probably several million people at the bottom rung, because NAFTA allowed us to bring our government-subsidized corn down there. Mexico changed from a country that exports corn to a country that imports corn because our corn was cheaper than theirs. We all agreed to this - Mexico, Canada, and the US - but it threw millions of people off their little plots of land.

The border is almost an imaginary line. It's one whole great big land mass. On the one side of the line, life is a whole lot easier. You can get better jobs than you can on the other side of the line. It's not surprising that people would step over it to pursue a better life.

In the best of all possible worlds, we should equalize that economic disparity between the US and Mexico.

I tell this story about a coffee co-op: These people were selling their coffee beans, and they had no power over the price of their beans. But you and I know how expensive it is to buy a cup of coffee in the US. Where is all of this money going? Not to the farmers.

So these families had this very small-scale but smart idea. If they could band together and form a co-op, they could form their own business and control their product from beginning to end. It started with a \$20,000 micro-loan from the Presbyterian Church for a coffee roaster. It's a profitable little business for them now that involves 200 families. And what's amazing is that the business has drawn about 80 young people home from the US to work in the coffee industry because they can make a living.

If we could take some of this money that we're spending on security and spend it on economic development [in Mexico], it seems like the results would be a lot better. But is that what we want to be doing, or do we want to be employing the people at Boeing?