

JOSÉ

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I first met José while having lunch, about a year ago. He was bussing dishes and I was finishing off a bowl of soup. He headed to the kitchen with a tray of plates and glasses. He unloaded, and returned to clean the table next to mine.

He seemed happy, but he muttered a few phrases, obviously in Spanish. He was dark skinned, sort of brownish, and I guessed he was from Mexico, or some place south of our border. My Spanish is limited but I ventured a question:

"De donde?" I asked. "Where are you from?" He started to smile, then looked a bit startled. Who was

this stranger, speaking to him out of the blue What other questions might follow?

He answered in English, not too bad, but heavily accented. "I leevve in Norwoood," he said. We might call it Norwood.

How long have you been in the United States?" I asked. He knew I wasn't asking where he slept.

"Many months" was his reply. And he trudged back to the kitchen with another tray.

In the next few weeks, José and I became better acquainted. And he became more relaxed making idle talk. He told me he was living with his cousin - Antonio. They were sharing a two room apartment with 6 others. I learned José had been in the US a little over a year, all but 10 days in Cincinnati.

Ten days was the time it had taken him to make his way from Mexico into the US and then on to the mid-west. His entry - which was totally illegal - had ended with an exciting hike across the border, at night, in the rain.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

What follows is the human side of the story of how people like José - and many others - are risking their lives to cross our southern border in search of work, and what our government is doing to stop the flow.

We all know that since September 11, the country has been concerned - as never before - with the threat of immigrants to our safety. But, these efforts have focused largely on fighting organized terrorism - which is the prime purpose of the bill the President signed just a few weeks ago.

As time passed, José gradually realized I wasn't going to turn him over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the much maligned INS - and he loosened up a bit. He was cagey about names - his only relative at home was his mother, Mama. His cousin, Antonio, the cousin he was living with, didn't seem to have a last name.

José's home is a little town in the state of Oaxaca - way to the south in Mexico. His job paid him about 5 dollars a day - roughly Mexican minimum wage. Though he is only 25, and not yet married, life for him looked bleak. People ten years older were no better off. Many of his friends had decided to move north, some to Mexico City and others all the way to the United States. Entry level wages in the US - now running over \$6 an hour - sounded pretty damn good. And then Antonio called from Cincinnati to say he had just landed a new job making \$9. It seemed time to go - but how?

José had heard the horror stories of migrants entering Mexico from Guatemala. They had to be smuggled all the way across Mexico before even trying to cross the US border. Most were being shepherded by a coyote, a smuggler, who charged as much as \$4700 a trip. This covered transport across Mexico, arranged for an illegal border crossing into the United States, then a ride to Phoenix. But, then another \$300 was needed for the trip to Chicago, or Cincinnati or wherever jobs might be found.

A good chunk of money paid to a smuggler goes for bribes - primarily to the Mexican cops along the way. And part of the time smugglers turn out to be pure bandits - leading travelers into deserted areas and then abandoning them.

People smuggling, much like running drugs, is highly organized. The coyote is the boss. He organizes travel for 15-25 migrants and collects the fees. His foreman, or guide, the man directly in

charge of each trip is a pollero - pollo is chicken in Spanish. Chickens are what they call immigrants and a pollero is a chicken wrangler.

As he was planning his trip, José had heard many horror stories about those who made the journey across from Guatemala. Here's how he described it -

After been hidden several days in a barn, immigrants are loaded into a pickup truck. It is remarkably efficient. They are made to lie with one head going in one direction, another head going the opposite. They call it ence-bollados, which means onion style. Then another layer of people is laid on top of the first group, same onion style. And finally a sheet of stout plywood is bolted on top of the truck bed, hiding the travelers.

José's trip was not so harrowing, since he had Mexican documents and could travel with relative ease while still in Mexico. He met up with his guide, his pollero, in Mexico City and from there on José traveled by truck and bus with 15 others.

They were headed for a crossing near a remote little Mexican town called Naco, right on the border with Arizona. The US Border patrol has a major surveillance post at Naco - a giant wall, 18 feet high, running for about 2 miles. There is no foliage to screen the wall. Video towers and lights are mounted periodically the entire length. It looks much like a prison. Dozens of Agents patrol the area in Ford Broncos, outfitted with electronic gear and bright search lights - while others scan the video screens.

And a few miles inside the border, a tethered balloon carries radar equipment. The radar was originally intended to intercept low flying airplanes which might be carrying drugs. But officials have learned they can also detect slow moving bodies as they snake their way along. On a recent visit, the cook in a nearby restaurant chuckled as he described to me what

happens when the balloon is taken down for repair. As soon as it's down, a spotter for the smugglers gets on his cell phone, sends a message across the border and very quickly groups start moving across, sometimes floating on inner tubes if there is water in the river.

As José makes ready to cross, the radar is the least of his problems.

After resting a few hours in town, the group starts out in late afternoon. Their guide leads them well beyond the end of the Border Patrol wall, across some rugged hills and then down a winding trail. He promises it will take only 5 to 6 hours.

By now it was not only dark, but raining, and José and two companions become separated from the group. For several hours, they follow a path - they are never quite sure when they cross into the US. The three of them somehow find their way to a rural Arizona road. The rain increases, it is cold and in the darkness their best hope is to beg a ride. The first car barely slows before realizing who these people might be and quickly speeds off. In what seems hours, a second driver arrives and pulls over. Fairly quickly, he sense who they are, mutters "get in" in Spanish - and hauls them into Bisbee, about 30 miles.

The driver knows what to do because he's done it before. Turning onto a dark side street, he delivers José and his companions to the home of a woman in the Bisbee Network. The Bisbee Network is sort of an underground railroad formed some years ago to help stranded immigrants. The next night, the trio is moved to another house, where they rest for several days. They get cleaned up, receive a few replacements for their now filthy clothes - and even a US style haircut.

They didn't tarry long in Bisbee. The Network loads them into a van, and they head north toward Phoenix. Another car goes ahead to scout for Border Patrol checkpoints. They arrive at the bus station and

José says goodbye to his friends who are headed for Los Angeles. Within 30 minutes, José's bus to St. Louis and then on to Cincinnati pulls out. José told me that was the first moment he really felt safe.

José climbed on the bus with only a small bag, underwear, one extra shirt and a supply of burritos and chips. Four days later, the bus dropped him at the Greyhound station in Cincinnati. He was on the alert for possible trouble. He had been warned to watch for Immigration officers, but none were in sight. What a relief. He knew it would be quite different in Los Angeles or Dallas where surveillance is much more intense.

José had called ahead to say when he would arrive. Just as planned, his ride was there and they set off. Antonio had borrowed a car and was at the wheel. They headed for the two bedroom apartment in Norwood which Antonio was sharing with several others. There was a bed for José, but they made it clear it was only for a few weeks - then he would have to find something else.

It took José just three days to get necessary worker identification - a fake Social Security card and a resident alien card. "I handed over \$100 and a photograph and two days later I had all I needed," he confessed.

José filed for several job openings. In less than a week, he was working, at 6:30 in the morning at the restaurant where we had met. He said they never even looked at his fake card. If someone like José can produce a reasonably accurate ID, the business owner is largely off the hook with the INS.

But following September 11, José knows his risk of discovery has increased. As never before, national attention is focused on the broad question of illegal immigrants and what to do about them.

The question of how to deal with immigration has really been with us for decades. It is, of course, a common dictum that we are a nation of immigrants. So, it is no wonder that Federal policies and laws dealing with aliens go back to our country's beginnings.

As early as 1808, attempts were made to outlaw African slave trade. Then, as the nation grew, there soon was a series of legislative responses. In 1882, a flood of workers from the Orient triggered Chinese exclusion laws. In the 1920's, quotas were set to limit immigration by country, with the annual limits for each country based on how many were already here. On the other hand, during labor shortages, like World War II, we actively recruited foreign workers. And farm workers continue to be welcomed today.

And at different times humanitarian concerns have also guided our policies. Irish immigrants fleeing famine arrived -perhaps some of us here tonight are descendants of that migration. After World War II, we welcomes refugees from communist countries - including Cuba, Vietnam and Cambodia.

But as the US economy grew, following World War II, the flow of illegal immigrants grew to alarming levels. Congress sought a new solution in the 1986 Immigration Act. This law put the burden on the employer - it made companies subject to fine, and even imprisonment, if found guilty of hiring - knowingly hiring - workers without documentation.

To make it work, and get business support, those already working here were exempted. With a stroke of a pen, they all received legal documents. Employers were then spared the travail of verifying the records of existing workers, many with years of service. Well over 2 million were granted amnesty.

This Federal Act was supposed to add new force to the fight against illegal immigration. The reason this is important to our story of José is that it hasn't

worked. And further, the number of illegal residents - people already working here - is considerably greater today than in 1986.

So the same questions of 15 years ago are being revisited - how do we make employer sanctions work? And should we again grant amnesty to those working in the US illegally? And should children automatically become citizens when born to parents who are here illegally? And should we have some kind of guest worker program, removing the legal stigma from guys like José and Antonio?

What are the facts today? Legal immigration limits - from all sources - are now set at 675,000 per year, but that level is usually exceeded. Most legal immigrants are either family sponsored - a husband or wife, a daughter or father. Or - they are admitted because they bring to the US some kind of employment skill, like playing shortstop for the Boston Red Sox. The old idea of quotas for individual countries has largely been dropped.

Then, as we have learned since 9/11, there are many people in the Country on temporary student or work visas. And we have learned, to our amazement, how tough it is for the FBI to keep track of them.

Then there are the immigrants like José, who illegally cross our borders. The numbers are huge. But - and this is not well understood - over half of the illegal residents we have living in the US were first admitted temporarily - and they found it a simple matter to stay.

So, how do all these numbers add up? The report from the 2000 Census gave us the stunning figure of 8 million people believed to be living in the United States illegally. That would be an increase of about half a million a year from the 1990 report. But who really knows? José, for one, is not about to report his status to a census taker.

And so the numbers keep growing. Remember the giant sucking sound Ross Perot warned about during the debate on NAFTA? He was worried about jobs leaving the US. In fact, the sucking sound we hear may actually be that of the healthy US economy pulling in workers needed to fill our growing job base.

This problem is unlikely to abate anytime soon. The task of dealing with it has fallen on the shoulders of the US Border Patrol, an arm of the INS and the Justice Department.

Recently, I attended a meeting where the speaker was the Chief of the Tucson Sector of the Border Patrol. But it seemed more like he was on trial. A group of very belligerent women was peppering him with questions. They were upset with how immigrants were being treated down on the border.

But, their concern was not that too many were making their way across. Their beef was about human rights violations by Patrol Agents. These concerns are shared by a number of humanitarian groups. Many officers do operate alone, in remote areas, which are difficult to supervise. So, agents have been charged with using unnecessary force, and even a few incidents of rape.

The Chief did admit that maybe some of these charges were true; but he said they should blame Federal policies which were adopted over 5 years ago. That's when the US launched a grand new strategy to defend our Southwest Border. Budgets were increased, border fences were authorized and 1200 agents were added. This raised total Patrol manpower to 8500 to cover the 1500 miles along the border.

Oversimplified, the plan was to fortify the cities where most people were then sneaking across. The idea was to funnel immigrant traffic into the small towns and rural areas where the deserts would provide a natural barrier to entry. Indeed, a large chunk of

immigrants had been making their crossings at easy to reach places like San Diego, El Paso and McAllen, Texas. It was hoped that because the rural crossings would be so much more difficult, immigrants - like José - would be discouraged and more likely to stay home.

I guess if you live in San Diego you might deem the plan a success. Because traffic there - and in El Paso and other larger southwest cities - is down, but by no means stopped. But, like squeezing a balloon, the pressure has simply shifted. As a result, arrests are up dramatically in rural areas and smaller towns all along the border. One small Arizona community, population 14,000, saw an increase in immigration arrests from 120,000 per year to 250,000. And their crime rate jumped as well.

Earlier we described how the Patrol is using various technologies to watch for intruders - huge walls, searchlights, video cameras and so on. They are not above using more ancient techniques, as well.

They have become very adept at tracking footprints in the sand, not exactly a new idea. At heavily used trails, they deploy large metal objects that look something like harvesting machines you find on farms. They are called trail drags and every week or so the trail drags are towed behind a truck to smooth the sand so that new footprints can be easily spotted, often from the air. As we know, for every action there is a reaction. We have heard of migrants who cross these roads, each carefully stepping one after another in a single set of footprints. As José reminded me, we may be desperate but we're not stupid.

All the new men and equipment are indeed on the job. Just a month ago, we watched the Patrol making an arrest. It was mid-morning, about 10:00 AM - in wild desert country - the cactus stretched for miles. About a 1000 yards into the bush, approaching rapidly, we could see perhaps 15-20 bodies. Hovering overhead was a Border Patrol helicopter, sort of corralling them,

like you might do with cattle. On the road, trying to figure how to intercept were six Ford Broncos, with lights flashing, manned by a total of 9 agents.

Despite these efforts, the migration continues. A dramatic example, just recently. On consecutive days, two truckloads of immigrants overturned after being chased by the Patrol at high speed. 40 people ended up in the hospital, at a cost of over \$300,000. And here is an example of where Federal interdiction efforts end up causing local communities a lot of grief. When immigrants need medical help, the Patrol usually makes no arrests - because they have no budget for such matters. So, the illegals are let go, and the community is stuck with the medical expense.

The Chief was still dealing with the angry women. He was quite assertive. The Border Patrol, he said, was stabilizing many small towns where immigrant traffic was up. In one town, before the Patrol cracked down, a house had been broken into 27 times. Dogs had been poisoned. Ranch outbuildings vandalized. He concluded that this kind of stuff had largely stopped.

One day, José was talking about his cousin, Antonio. When Antonio made his border crossing he wasn't as lucky as José. Antonio was part of a group of 20, made up of 18 men and two women. They had endured a long bus drive from the south of Mexico, not far from José's home. The ride was dusty, hot - it was late May. Temperatures were hovering around 100 degrees.

And the ride was marked by numerous places where the police stopped and searched the bus, the guides intervened and bribed the cops; the migrants - the pollos - became frightened; and then the bus moved on. This little drama was acted out at least 3 times before they arrived in Nogales, Sonora.

Antonio's guide planned to cross the border the following day. That night they slept in a large room,

full of bunk beds with dirty mattresses and no bedding. The bunking room was part of a remodeled chapel, on a hill just off the main street in Nogales, whose population has mushroomed to over 400,000.

The chapel is owned and run by Father Humberto. Though he dresses like one, he isn't really a full fledged priest. In fact, at one time he ran a successful business - he finances the chapel largely out of his own pocket.

The good Father does use the chapel to conduct full religious services. But he has another mission: he houses travelers. He provides brief overnight stops, which include simple meals and a place to wash up. When I inspected his building in the daytime, about noon, it was empty. But, the previous night, we were told, 25 people had bunked there.

Father Humberto likes to shout. He thinks the Mexican government stinks, and that all those in it - including new president Fox - are cheats and liars - and therefore, guided by this unbiased judgment, he offers help to anyone who wishes to leave Mexico. As he gets more excited, he invokes a common Mexican derogatory phrase - before long, he vows, President Fox will be shining my shoes.

After a night in the bunk room, Antonio's group was up and loaded into the bus for the last run to the border. Nogales is another city where the Patrol has erected a huge barrier wall. So, they made their way about 15 miles west, to a spot where they were told surveillance was weak. After dark, they crossed the border and found themselves hiking through a working cattle ranch, the Double X. They had walked no more than a half hour when they learned that their information about the Patrol was dead wrong. Because, they were staring straight into the headlights of 2 patrol wagons and a Ford Bronco, manned by 5 agents.

For the Patrol, this has become a routine matter. They quickly loaded Antonio's group into the wagons, fingerprinted them, and then deposited them back across the border. Years ago, the Patrol concluded that the expense and legal hassle of detaining those arrested at the border was not worth it. That night, Antonio and his group trooped back to sleep in the very same bunks as the night before. Father Humberto takes pride in caring for travelers moving either north or south.

The guides were not deterred by their failure at first try. Some border crossers have been stopped 10 times. But two in this group decided to give it up and head home. They claimed they would try again some other time.

Overnight, Antonio's guide was in touch by cell phone with his counterparts in the US, the ones who would eventually haul the group to Phoenix. They advised a drop off much farther to the west - 30 or 40 miles - with far less chance for arrest.

So, once again the group climbed aboard a bus, but when it stopped, they were acutely aware that this time the guide was much more serious. He was passing out gallon water bottles, two per person. "Should be enough, but don't lose them," he said. "And," he added, "take a long, long drink before we cross, just as much as you can possibly swallow." It was clear this was going to be a different experience.

And it was. They hiked all night, the guide leading the way. By morning they might have gone 10-12 miles. One of Antonio's water bottles was already empty. They rested, and then moved on during the day, watching for border patrol planes. By noon, the desert temperature was 110 and some of the group was falling behind. Their water was running low, and the guide looked worried, using his cell phone every hour or so. He said it was only a little further to where the truck should be. And sure enough, at about 4 in the afternoon, they spotted a dirty pickup, hidden from the

sky under several mesquite trees. After some cat and mouse games with border patrol check points, Antonio was in Phoenix, ready for his trip to Cincinnati.

Antonio and his group were mighty fortunate. The gamble to take the longer route, sometimes called the Devil's highway, had paid off. Unfortunately, many others have had tragically different results.

Almost exactly a year ago tonight, another group was hiking a more rugged pathway, a little further west. They were being guided on a long route of nearly 50 miles through very tough, hot, dry country. After two days, they became lost, and soon drank themselves out of water. Their guide collected \$80 from each person - he said he knew where to find water and would bring some back. He never returned. Two hikers eventually made it to a road where they were lucky to find the Border Patrol, and reported the disaster. In recent years, the Patrol has set up rescue teams, and one now went into action. The survivors provided direction and the Patrol's plane soon observed the group from the air. Here is what they reported:

"From the air, we could see several bodies face down on the ground, some fully naked. Their skin was purple and leathery. Some died trying to bury themselves in the sand to get away from the heat. Those still alive had thrown up on themselves. Some were drinking their own urine," they said.

Pretty grisly stuff. 14 people died in this one episode. Though extreme, it was by no means the first such tragedy. Over the past two years, at least 152 have died in the desert from thirst or exposure.

One humanitarian group decided they could do something about this mounting death toll. Making water more available might be an answer. It had been tried in California with some success.

The concept is remarkably simple. Fill up 50 gallon tanks. Scatter them at various stations in the desert. Equip them with a water valve so it is easy to fill a gallon plastic bottle - nobody hikes this desert without at least one bottle. Erect a 30 foot pole with a blue flag so that hikers can find the tanks. And then arrange to keep the tanks filled with safe, chlorinated water.

Much has been done in the past year. There are now 13 stations in the desert, southwest of Tucson, located about 15 miles apart. Each week, the organizer, Robin Hoover, makes a water run to the stations. His truck is outfitted with a pump and a 400 gallon tank mounted in back. He asked me to join him on a recent trip.

At each station, the drill is efficient - check the tanks for water usage - which ranges from none to 40 gallons. While Robin starts the pump, he directs me to check for water safety - is there enough chlorine - and then I jam the filler hose into each tank. There are usually 2 or 3 tanks at each station. Part of the deal with the Patrol is that on each trip, Robin's volunteers will police the area for trash, up and down the trail.

We found stuff everywhere. Smugglers and illegals have much on their minds besides the environment. They drop garbage wherever they are. Empty water bottles, bread wrappers, shirts, shoes, pants. Even bras. Crossers often wear two layers of clothing - when they realize they are safely in the US, they clean up by discarding their dirty, cruddy top layer of clothes so they won't stand out too much.

One obvious problem was how would the Border Patrol respond. That is, would they simply stake out these water tank locations? But they were under great political pressure to do something about the dramatic deaths. They soon caved in and are not yet putting the tanks under surveillance.

Not everyone agrees with this water project. Some argue it will simply attract more illegals. But, so far, there is no evidence that a few gallons of water is motivating people to risk their lives in a 15-30 mile desert crossing. For now, the need to avoid these tragic deaths has outweighed the other arguments.

After hearing Antonio's story, several weeks passed before I saw José again. He was still working at the restaurant and he had been promoted from bussing dishes to assistant cook. He had enrolled in an English class and he was studying at night.

And he had found a second job. He was now working part time in a warehouse near where he lives. José likes his location - close to Montgomery Road in Norwood. Public transportation works for him. "Get on the Number 4 bus and I'm downtown in 15 minutes" he says. "Go the other way, and I'm at my job in Kenwood. And there's a Mexican grocery just a block away." For the time being, he finds it a good arrangement.

But life is still no picnic for José. His cousin Antonio is about to move out of their apartment. His other roommates are still strangers. He hasn't met any girls yet. He's lonesome.

I invited him to join me for coffee. "Now that you're here, José, has it been worth it," I asked. I wondered about the long trips, the danger in the desert, the huge cost for guides, the risk of being arrested. "Was it worth it?"

I already knew the answer. "I'd do it again in a minute," he said. "You have no idea what life is like for someone stuck in a small Mexican town. We have no paved streets, no plumbing. We get our water from a well. There are no real jobs. We end up making less than a dollar an hour. And can you believe this, some factories in Mexico are closing so they can move to Cambodia where wages are even lower!"

"Sure," he said, "I still feel a little uneasy about my legal status." But his manager hadn't yet asked for any more documents. He was OK with the forged papers José had first produced. How are operators of small business to know whether the documents are legitimate? Some of those forgeries are pretty damn good. So, they conclude they have little to fear from the understaffed INS. Employers everywhere are making the same decision.

There are, of course, exceptions. Just last January, down in Tennessee, the INS indicted chicken processor Tyson Foods and 6 of its executives. The case goes back over 5 years, and hundreds of undocumented workers. In this instance, Tyson was aggressively seeking illegal workers. They were paying smugglers 100 to 200 dollars for each worker they supplied. Tyson is a big company and could get hit with a \$100 million fine. If so, this may result in making other employers more careful.

Farm workers are another story. If, in recent weeks, you have eaten grapes, or an apple - or squeezed a lime into a gin and tonic - chances are it was handled by migrant workers. Major produce companies claim they couldn't function without them. So, going back many years, Congress has created special exemptions for immigrant farm workers.

These examples underscore the basic conflict in coping with immigration pressures. Many experts liken this to our drug problem, our war on drugs. Despite years of effort, and billions of dollars, drugs keep getting smuggled into this country illegally, driven by the huge demand. Like drugs, it seems likely the migrants will keep coming, as long as the US economy stays strong.

One day, José told me something special had happened. He had been saving some money, and finally had sent home to his mother - his very first payment - \$200. He was very proud.

In Government parlance, such payments are called Remittances - that is payments made by workers in the US to their families and friends back home. We are now talking both legal and undocumented workers. Such payments have a huge economic impact.

Over nine billion dollars a year goes to Mexico alone, the largest recipient nation. This equals over 10% of their gross domestic product and exceeds the foreign exchange generated by either their agriculture or tourism. I developed a new respect for Mother's day when I learned that - a year ago - payments to Mexico on their Mother's day totaled almost one billion dollars in just one 24 hour period.

But with such huge payments stimulating its economy, you do have to wonder how serious Mexico is about controlling migration into the US.

As we bring this to a close, we can report there are faint signs that Border patrol policies in the Southwest are having success. Since 2001, total arrests are down somewhat, but this could be largely the result of our recession. When the US economy declines, there is less incentive to seek jobs in the North. And then during the worldwide upset after Sept. 11, border crossings took a real dip. However, in just the past three months the trend has reversed and is headed back up. Even today, the numbers for the Southwest border are staggering. Over 80,000 arrests per month - nearly 1 million per year. And, as José and Antonio can attest, there are many people they don't manage to catch.

Before ending this tale, I should confess that this story may not have happened exactly as told. But it is based entirely on actual events. I am particularly indebted to Ignacio Iberra, a writer for the Arizona Star, for his insights and reporting.

California is one of the states with huge immigrant problems. Schools and social services have

been heavily affected. If history is any guide, we will likely face similar developments here in Cincinnati - say in 10 years, about the time Mark Twain would have guessed. And while we are forecasting, it seems possible that our Literary club will be hearing a paper, perhaps by a Mexican American, and that it will describe the growing Hispanic community here in Southwest Ohio.

José and I continue to deepen our friendship. He called me recently. He has a new cell phone and told me he had just talked to his mother in Mexico. He said he was sending her some more money. And - he told me - I have another cousin in Mexico - Maria - and she plans to come to Cincinnati soon. Thank you.

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