

Mexican village was ready , but Jesica's funeral not to be

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Body

Everything was set for **Jesica's funeral:** schoolchildren were preparing a parade, a teacher wrote a poem in her honor, volunteers spruced up her burial plot.

Then word reached the people of Arroyo Hondo that the 17-year-old wasn't coming home after all. Her parents had chosen to bury her in Louisburg, N.C., fearing that if they brought her body across the border into Mexico they would be barred from going back.

Jesica Santillan left Arroyo Hondo four years ago when her parents paid a smuggler to sneak her into the United States for better medical care. Last month she got a heart-lung transplant, but a mistake in the blood type caused her death.

Now, the complexities of immigration law have disrupted her **village's** plans for a dignified farewell and have compounded resentments among its 300 people. Many Americans see the immigration curbs as vital to control the human flow from south of the border, but most Mexicans see them as baffling and inhumane.

"I really don't understand why, when we had everything planned and everyone was **ready** to say their last goodbyes, suddenly they say she's **not** coming," said **Jesica's** aunt, Marina Santillan. "God let her be born here, but the United States says she cannot come back to rest in peace."

In fact, there were no laws preventing the return of **Jesica's** body. But her parents originally were illegal immigrants and their current legal status in the United States is unclear, so they decided it was too risky to leave.

This sun-scorched mountainside **village** never had much, and it took the tragedy of Jesica Santillan to bring it to international attention.

It was here that she learned to ride a bike and to fish with a pole made out of sugar cane. It was here she got good enough at soccer to play with the boys, developed her first crush and dreamed of one day getting the heart transplant.

Jesica suffered from a heart deformity that kept her lungs from getting oxygen into her blood. Doctors at Duke University mistakenly gave her a heart and lungs of the wrong blood type. A second transplant failed to save her; she died Feb. 22.

"She wasn't our child, but we all saw her grow up and leave to get help," said Irma Ramirez, the mayor of Arroyo Hondo. "We all felt like we lost a child. She loved life so much that she made everyone around her smile."

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Arroyo Hondo is a three-hour drive from the western city of Guadalajara and has one paved road. Much of the village depends on a nearby sugar mill and surrounding fields of head-high cane. But the industry pays just \$9 per 12-hour day.

The local school stops at the sixth grade. After graduating in 1997, Jessica worked as a maid in a neighbor's house before leaving for the United States.

Nearly everyone of working age has headed to the fields of North Carolina.

"It's sad, but everybody goes up there," said Marina Santillan, whose husband and three brothers are living in North Carolina. "What is there to keep them here? There's no way to make any money."

Village officials were going to cancel classes so that all 52 school children could parade in her honor carrying roses and wearing black ribbons. Her second-grade teacher wrote a poem for her about heart-shaped chocolates and hope.

Jessica lived with her parents, a younger brother and sister in a whitewashed two-story home by the church and a scrawny orange tree.

Jessica's grandmother, 81-year-old Rosario Diaz, lives next door and keeps the Santillan home locked up, waiting for a family that may never return.

Diaz, who has been in and out of the hospital with heart problems of her own, said Jessica wanted to come back and visit when she had recovered from the operation.

"We were excited to see her," she said. "Now we will never see her again."

Victor Ramos, who runs the only grocery store, said Jessica's death left Arroyo Hondo in mourning. But the villagers are used to loss, he said. Many people leave and never return.

"You know where you were born, but you don't have the right to know where you die," Ramos said. "A lot of people - half the people in this town - left and disappeared. Maybe they died, maybe they are happy somewhere else. But to us they are gone."

Graphic

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