IMMIGRANT RIGHTS ON THE IMMIGRANT ROAD FROM SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, TO PORTLAND, MICHOACAN

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Byline: RUBEN MARTINEZ

Body

RECENTLY, on a flight from Los Angeles to Guadalajara, I sat behind a Mexican woman in her forties who stowed a bulging Nordstrom shopping bag in the overhead bin. Across the aisle a trio of U.S. businessmen, laptops open, were crunching numbers in some transnational deal. Next to me were two Mexican men in Stetson hats, jeans, and boots. They were not "middle class" by most standards -- they had just finished a season working in a ***Portland*** meat packing plant -- but here they were jetsetting next to the gentry of free trade.

I asked the man next to me where he lived. "***Portland***," he said, and then he hesitated. "I mean, ***Michoacan***." He smiled. "I guess you could say I live in ***Portland***, ***Michoacan***."

I thought of my friend Rosa. Though she usually travels over land routes, she could just as well answer my question, "St. Louis, ***Michoacan***."

Rosa is about as middle class as the cowboys sitting next to me. In the U.S., she is at best a "working person," more often an "illegal" or a "wetback." But she assumes she has the right to middle class mobility, even though forces on both sides of the border have made that a life or death proposition.

Rosa hails from Cheran, a small town nestled in the Purepecha Indian highlands of ***Michoacan***. Last spring, her three older brothers set out on their usual route to California, bound for Watsonville, where they had picked strawberries for years.

They never made it. After they crossed the border illegally east of San Diego, they got into a pickup truck. The smuggler at the wheel tried to outrun a Border Patrol jeep pursuing them, but overturned at a sharp curve in the road. The brothers were crushed under the mangled chassis of the pickup.

The story made headlines for its numbers -- six others were killed in the crash and several more critically injured -- and also because it occurred only days after a highly publicized incident in which Riverside County Sheriff's deputies were caught by a helicopter newscam severely beating undocumented ***immigrants*** after a freeway chase.

Rosa was working at a posh hotel in downtown St. Louis at the time. She went home immediately to bury her brothers.

At first, there was no thought of returning to the U.S. Rosa could imagine the anguish her mother would feel if her daughter undertook the illegal journey. But eventually Rosa decided to take the risk. Between the 30th of November and the 5th of January, she attempted to cross near Nogales six times with her baby daughter in her arms. The first five times she was caught and reported. On the sixth try, she got through -- and walked six hours over rugged desert in temperatures just above freezing.

Rosa risked her own life and the life of her daughter for reasons that do not fit the conventional formulation of conservatives or liberals. They are neither welfare hungry nor just plain hungry. Rosa and her family own a modest home with electricity and, although they lack running water, they eat three meals a day. They have a color TV set and a VCR. Adults and kids have enough to wear, including shoes, for harsh highland winters.

The poorest Mexicans are not, generally speaking, the ones who migrate to the United States. Most are people like Rosa and her family.

Rosa risks her life because there is an overwhelming feeling of being stuck in time and space back home in Cheran. The town is too small for people who have seen how the other half lives. Every Sunday night, the families who own satellite dishes (about one in four) tune in to "The X Files" at the same time as North Americans do.

Rosa says she realized her daughter could not get more than an elementary school education in ***Mexico*** -- children in rural areas are expected to work as soon as they're able-bodied. And it would not be possible to save enough money to buy such creature comforts as a microwave oven or a stereo to distract her grieving mother.

And Rosa has personal ambitions, too. "I'd never be able to drive a car here," she said to me in ***Michoacan*** last year. In St. Louis, she has driven her brother-in-law's Pontiac Grand Am. She also wears jeans in the States, not the traditional shawl (rebozo) all Indian woman wear back home. In St. Louis, her husband helps with the dishes and tends to the baby, behavior picked up in the liberal north.

From ***Michoacan***, the whole world looks as if it is moving and interconnected. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, rich and poor, have ventured into the world, and brought the world home.

Rosa does not intend to stay in the north. Like most of her fellow migrants, she would like to work in the United States for several months a year and spend the rest of the time with her family in Cheran.

And she feels she has the right to move from one place to another, without regard to international boundaries and immigration laws.

By facing the fact of her brothers' death and continuing to move on, she is fighting for that right.

On the morning of the day she left ***Michoacan*** for St. Louis, Rosa visited the church. She lit a candle, and prayed: "My brothers who are in heaven," she remember s saying, "guide me along the roads so that I can get home alive and well."

She is home now. In St. Louis, ***Michoacan***.

Notes

OPINION

Ruben Martinez, based in ***Mexico*** City, is an editor at Pacific News Service.

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