

BOOK EXPLAINS WHY MEXICAN MIGRANTS KEEP CROSSING THE BORDER

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Byline: Joe Holleman Of The Post-Dispatch

Body

* At least once a day, a **Mexican** wanting to make his or her way into the United States dies trying.

Last year, 369 perished at the 2,000-mile **border**, more than 3,000 died in the 1990s. The United States has built more walls, hired more guards, and bought more guns, helicopters and searchlights.

But still they **keep** coming.

Illegal **migrant** workers pay \$1,000 and more to "coyotes" to guide them on their dangerous journey, just so they can live in fear of being caught and make minimum wages working in farmers' fields and fast-food restaurants.

Still they **keep** coming. And many end up in the St. Louis area.

But why do they take the risk? That's the main question asked by Ruben Martinez, author of "**Crossing** Over: A **Mexican** Family on the **Migrant** Trail."

"To put it simply, they want their piece of the American Dream," said Martinez, who will be in St. Louis on Thursday to promote his **book**.

"One man I interviewed thought about it and then told me 'I want to buy a bicycle.' The guy never had a bike when he was a kid, and he wanted to be able to have that."

Martinez, 39, is an Emmy award-winning journalist and one of the bright lights in Hispanic issues in the United States. He received the Emmy for his work on a Los Angeles-based public television show, "Life and Times."

He is a Loeb Fellow at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design and the author of two other **books**: "East Side Stories; Gang Life in East L.A." and "The Other Side: Notes from the New L.A., Mexico City and Beyond." In addition, he is an associate editor at Pacific News Service, a correspondent for PBS' "Religion and Ethics News Weekly," and has appeared as a commentator on "All Things Considered," "Nightline," "Frontline" and CNN.

His latest **book** focuses on the Chavez clan of Cheran, in southern Mexico, about 200 miles west of Mexico City. The family has had ties to the St. Louis area for more than 10 years, with many family members working in the agricultural fields here.

Two of the subjects still live in St. Louis, albeit illegally -- Rosa Chavez and her husband, Wence Cortez, and their two small children. The two agreed to be interviewed on the promise that no photographs would be taken and that their place of residence and employer would not be identified.

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Rosa Chavez speaks little English and was even more apprehensive than her husband. Chavez, 26, has learned about the pain of illegal immigration. In 1996, three of her brothers were killed when the van in which they were crammed to sneak across the border flipped over and crashed. The town of Cheron still mourns the deaths, but it did not keep Chavez from crossing over in 1997.

Cortez is slightly more open in conversation, though still wary of strangers -- especially ones taking notes.

"I want my daughters to go to school here. The schools are much better here," he said. "And it is very hard to find work in Cheron."

Martinez notes that a worker in Cheron will earn about \$3 a day, a pittance when compared to the U.S. minimum wage of \$6 an hour, and will work up to 60 hours a week.

As far as fear of being caught, Wence Cortez doesn't spend much time thinking about it. He said that if he should be forced to return, he simply would cross back over.

"I miss things in Mexico, like the food. But I want to stay here so I can make enough money to build a house and maybe start my own business," he said as he, Rosa and the two children sat in their small, neat apartment.

Cortez said bigotry is not a major problem, but a problem nonetheless.

"Some Americans do not like Mexicans, and they say so. But mostly it's all right. The children all seem to play together OK," he said.

Martinez said his main goal for writing this book was to convey the sense that the Mexican crossovers of today are no different than the immigrants of the last century.

"I think it's human nature, unfortunately, to forget what we were and where we came from. As Americans, we take a certain pride in that we are a nation of immigrants," Martinez said. "But when we see new immigrants, it's an existential reminder of where we came from.

"And, in reality, the Mexican journey is no different than the ones taken in past years by Italians, Jews, Poles and other ethnic groups."

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Ruben Martinez

What: The author will read from and sign his book

Where: 1 p.m. Thursday at the Bridgeton Trails Branch of the St. Louis County Library, 3455 McKelvey Road; and 7 p.m. at the Crossroads School, 500 DeBaliviere Avenue.

How much: Free

More info: 314-291-7570; 314-367-8085

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Graphic

PHOTO, GRAPHIC; (1) PHOTO headshot - Ruben Martinez; (2) Color PHOTO - (cover of book, "Crossing Over); (3) Graphic / Illustration - (a footprint)

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