



Journey to the Drop House

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Journal: | Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education |
| Article Title: | <i>Journey to the Drop House</i> |
| Author(s): | <i>Westbrook</i> |
| Volume and Issue Number: | <i>Vol. 12 No. 3</i> |
| Manuscript ID: | <i>123042</i> |
| Page Number: | <i>42</i> |
| Year: | <i>2009</i> |

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work’s Center for Social Work Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Journey to the Drop House

Max Westbrook

The reports of abduction, murder, and torture just inside the Mexican border with the United States are finding their way into many local newspapers with increasing regularity. Drug cartels, driven by an endless demand and supply mentality, are fighting for control over common points of entry into the United States with a phenomenal disregard for human life. Mexican officials have responded to this bloodshed by calling upon their own military personnel to step into the line of fire where other, often corrupt, Mexican police authorities have either failed to uphold traditional Mexican values or have been gunned down for their efforts by superior-armed and ruthless drug traffickers.

Among the key issues in the relations with Mexico that involve public safety are the drug cartels that move illegal drugs into the United States, and with their vast earnings and ever more violent characteristics pose an ever increasing threat. A second important issue is the need for jobs among the Mexicans, and until recent months a shortage in the U.S. of persons willing to do unskilled labor in construction, ranching, restaurants, and meat processing. Yet there is another side to the Mexican immigration matter and that is the simple danger and desperation of those seeking to get across the United States border in the hope of opportunities for improving their lives. Here is a story with names changed to protect those involved that illustrates that side.

Nine Lost Souls

Juan Antonio Mondragon had just turned 18 and the pain, hardship, and frustration were boiling over in the middle of his adolescence. Born the son of a small town pastor, Juan Antonio knew poverty first-hand and he admired the strength and passion of his parents to raise him to the best of their abilities in a strict Christian sense. Six days a week his mother went to the market at the town's center to sell the vegetables

that she painstakingly grew in their modest garden beside their home. She used the same variety of medium-sized paper bags that she had used for the past 30 years to carry and proudly display the fruits of her labor. Mrs. Mondragon made sure the top of the sack was neatly folded down to make the bag appear full to customers. Juan was used to eating only the vegetables that were a little too ripe to sell. He was also used to seeing his mother work for ten hours a day and walk to the market wearing the only pair of shoes he could remember being on her feet.

The name of Juan Antonio's small village is Los Cristales, Mexico, located about 70 miles southwest of Laredo, Texas. He wanted a better life, and though he loved his family dearly, Juan wanted out of Los Cristales at almost any cost.

Twenty-five-year-old Benito "Falcon" Sotolongo, whose grandparents had immigrated to Mexico from Puerto Rico, grew up on a small ranch near Los Cristales and he did not hesitate to find opportunities to take off his shirt and display the Santa Muerte tattoo that covered his skinny back. Most of the locals believe that this particular tattoo represents those who have been outcast by the church, but this particular "Holy Death" tattoo has a special appeal to narcotic and human traffickers. Santa Muerte bears a close resemblance to the Grim Reaper who carries a sickle in its right hand and a small globe in his left. The sickle can represent justice, even to those who break the law, and the globe generally represents dominion over the world. The villagers in the area of Los Cristales did not put much thought into how Benito "Falcon" Sotolongo made his money, but it was obvious to all who wore the same shoes each day that Falcon could go for weeks without donning the same pair of boots.

When the paths of these two young men crossed it was born of the desperation and frustration felt by Juan Antonio and the shallow greed of Falcon. Falcon initially told Juan that he would

Max Westbrook is a Lieutenant with the Austin Police Department.

get him to a safe place the United States for a nominal fee, but he would have to do exactly as he was told and pay the money up front. Juan Antonio gave Falcon the \$1,000 (U.S.) that he had saved for years delivering newspapers, washing windshields and other odd jobs and was told that the dangerous journey would begin at the next new moon under the cover of darkness.

A few days later, at 11:30 p.m., Falcon picked up Juan Antonio, who left only a note for his parents saying that he would be gone for a while but was okay, at the designated point along the only paved road through town. Six other young Mexican Nationals, five men and one young girl who looked no more than 15, were already in Falcon's van when Juan Antonio nervously climbed inside. Juan did not slide the rusty door with enough authority and had to open it back up for another try just as Falcon began to drive away from Los Cristales.

Falcon stayed on the main road towards the border with the U.S. for only a few miles before suddenly veering off onto an unmarked, unpaved dirt road that seemed to never end. The headlights offered very little in the way of comfort for those who could catch a glimpse out the front windshield but Falcon drove quickly into the darkening remote ranches that consumed thousands of acres of Mexican scrub brush, cactus, and snakes. The stars were in vivid contrast to the darkness that covered the harshness of the land around them. Falcon obviously knew every turn and had made this drive many times.

The van was quiet – with two exceptions – the gravel that was kicked up into the wheel well made a consistent low roar that the anxiety-ridden passengers associated with too much speed for the remote roads, and Falcon mouthed the words to vulgar American rap music that he played at an uncharacteristically low volume. The bizarre scene existed as if it leapt from the mind of the director of a low-budget horror film. Falcon picked up two more male passengers and the van was now uncomfortably full and rode too low to the ground. He allowed the sole female passenger to sit in the front next to him. Falcon smiled at her with cheap gold teeth as she sat down uncomfortably and reached for a seatbelt that wasn't

there.

Falcon stopped a few times at exceptionally isolated ranch gates. Occasionally it appeared as if he paid a fee to gain access to the private roads that continued to twist on into the night for hours. No one but Juan Antonio noticed that it was very strange that anyone would be waiting for Falcon at such an isolated place so early in the morning. At almost 4:00 a.m., Falcon turned off the music, slowed down, and turned towards the back of the van. Though no one was talking, Falcon, with a newly acquired intimidating tone, said in Spanish, "Be quiet. No one talks now." The rap music and the gravel sounds were gone. Falcon turned off his headlights and drove about 200 yards where he parked behind some scrub mesquite trees and stared intently in one direction.

Juan Antonio and a few other passengers needed to relieve themselves and find a drink of water but were met with an even more hostile tone of voice when they asked Falcon if they could step out of the van. Falcon clearly stated that he would leave them all in the brush to fend for themselves if any of them jeopardized his mission to get them across the border. The van was very dark and the young girl in the front seat stared into the darkness in the same direction as Falcon, so it was easier for a few of the men to urinate into a cup without being seen or embarrassed.

Another 90 minutes passed before Falcon noticed a very quick flash of headlights several hundred yards away. Falcon ordered everyone out of the van. The interior lights that normally come on with an open door were not working and the group of nine, plus Falcon, walked by starlight into darkness.

Crossing the river on foot was a blur of short, harsh commands by Falcon. The Rio Grande was very shallow at this point, but the banks on both sides were a mix of cactus, heavy reeds, and steep ledges of mud and unforgiving rock. No one crossed that night without their share of scrapes and cuts; and each of the men took turns helping the young girl negotiate the terrain, while wishing Falcon would turn on the flashlight he held in his hand.

Falcon met quickly with two men near the

Journey to the Drop House

U.S. side of the river where another exchange of money took place, and as he turned back towards the Mexican border he told the group of nine they were now to listen to the two men and do exactly as they say. The men were older with sagging, stained, cowboy-type shirts with blue jeans and boots. The nine waited on the bank of the Rio Grande, hungry and tired, and when ordered, followed them out of the river bottom, along a narrow path that ran parallel with the shallow water.

The 11 people walked for a few minutes before coming to a large black pick-up truck with Texas license plates. The two men Falcon met in the river sat up front and they ordered everyone else to get into the back seat – except there was no back seat. The original nine were too nervous to debate anything they were told and all of them climbed into the cramped space as best they could, just as the driver began another hours-long journey into the vast south Texas wilderness.

The nine lost souls sat on the floor of the large Ford pick-up truck and all of their senses were working. The truck smelled brand new but the occasional whiff of musty fast food from the balled-up Burger King wrappers on the floor and stale stench of cigarettes also danced in the air. The men announced some rules – the passengers were allowed to sit on the floor until the sun came up, or unless they were told to lie down. The tops of their heads could just be seen through the side windows of the trucks and the front passenger made it very clear that everyone would be in jeopardy if they were seen by the police or border patrol agents. The journey through the rough terrain was not unlike what had happened on the Mexican side of the border, but the powerful truck seemed to gobble up the merciless ranch roads and the vulgar rap music had changed to a more traditional Mexican polka.

An hour passed when the truck stopped at a galvanized panel gate. The driver dimmed the headlights – leaving only the amber parking lights on – as he stepped out to talk to a man who sat in a dented old farm truck smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. The sun was about to peek over the horizon to bring in another day and all nine watched through the front window knowing this might be the last time they would be allowed to

look out a window for who knows how long.

The inaudible conversation was interrupted by nervous laughter between the two men and Juan Antonio felt some tension beginning to build. The passenger in their truck was sitting up very straight and he reached into the center console of the truck to retrieve a pistol while trying to make it appear as if he wasn't moving at all. All nine heads in the back shrunk down a little lower to the floor but none of them could completely remove their eyes from the developing scene at the gate.

The nervousness at the gate grew into a heated discussion and then into a full-blown argument. It was easy now to hear the voices and Juan knew the men were disagreeing on the amount of money the driver felt he had to pay to get through the gate. The passenger now had an older-looking blue steel .45 caliber semi-automatic handgun in his right hand, and his left forefinger pushed the button to lower his window. The scrub brush and mesquite trees offered no obstruction to the sun's destination in the morning sky and each minute that passed gave way to a readily deteriorating situation. The young girl began to cry softly as she clutched a worn silver cross hanging around her neck.

The driver was now furious with the gate keeper, but the driver reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money that he counted loudly and deliberately so no mistakes were made. Everyone in the truck knew that the gate keeper received \$1,000 cash, and it was clear this was more than any previous trip made. As the driver stomped angrily back towards the truck, the passenger relaxed his grip on the pistol but kept a close eye on the keeper as he opened the gate while trying to hide a grin of success under the brim of his hat.

The driver and passenger now relived the exchange with nervous energy, banging their fists into the dash, and driving too fast for the dirt roads. The passenger would pause for a moment only to yell at the nine to remember what he had said about the sun. Juan Antonio caught a glimpse of a paved road that loomed in the distance just as they lay down on the floor and on top of each other as ordered. The larger men

went towards the bottom of the human stack. Juan felt lucky because he was immediately behind the front seats on his right side, but at least no one was on top of him. Juan could see the young girl had stopped crying just as he heard the truck's tires change their pitch as they hit a paved road and accelerated quickly.

Juan had never seen a divided interstate highway, but he knew from his quick peek out the window that the truck was now on one. From Juan's cramped vantage point, the speedometer was easier to see and the truck's cruise control was locked in at a steady 64 miles per hour – well below the posted limit but hopefully fast enough not to draw attention. Juan could also see a small fixed wing plane flying at an astonishingly slow speed. Both men in the front seat also paid attention to the plane and while they did not say a word about it Juan could tell they were anxious for the pilot to choose another path.

As the hours passed, the truck's interior began to smell worse and the stack of humans in the back was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. A few of the men had urinated on themselves and while the others were sympathetic the resulting odor and general discomfort made their existence almost intolerable. Juan's mouth was very dry and even though no water was available he thought to himself that he would probably decline any offer of fluids. He was simply too embarrassed. The bright morning sun now shining into the backseat only made the smell worse.

The truck began to slow down and Juan could see the rooftops of buildings and hear the low rumblings of traffic noise and even a siren off in the distance. They were passing through a town and the men in the front seat were sitting like mannequins in a shop window, looking straight ahead with expressionless faces perched squarely on frozen necks. As the buildings and traffic sounds died away the truck made a few quick turns and wound up on another bumpy, dusty road where after only a few minutes it abruptly stopped at a faded old mobile home that was well protected from view by thick, green cedar trees. A natural reaction to sit up and look out the window came to all nine, but they were immediately met with an angry dictation from the front seat. The two men

were handed a plate of food through the window and the truck then made its way back to the highway.

The men ate their food and the smell of sausage and tortillas now dominated the entire cab. The polka music was louder now and the men were certainly more relaxed than at any other time the nine had seen them. As the food disappeared and the music and laughter died down, the passenger turned back to the nine and began to give some very clear, threatening instructions. The truck was only a few minutes away from its destination near Austin, Texas, and when they arrived all nine were to get out of the truck and immediately walk into the house. They were told that food would be available for them, as well as a place to sleep and a clean bathroom. Once everyone was settled in, the men would make individual transportation arrangements for the nine. But the passenger repeated – "Go straight into the house as soon as the truck stops." His glare was felt even by those on the bottom of the human pile who could not see his face.

Juan could see a giant "U-Haul" sign out the window as the truck slowed down on an exit ramp of I-35. The men in the front seat were once again sitting rock still in the front seat and muttering directions to each other as they approached a traffic light on Slaughter Lane. The driver used his blinkers, carefully checked his speed, and concentrated on staying in his own lane. The courteous nature of his driving did not match what most Texans would associate with the skills and patience of someone who owned such a large truck. Juan could see streetlights and he could tell that the truck was moving at a very residential pace as the driver asked the passenger what the speed limit was for this stretch of road. The passenger answered in nervous Spanish that it was "30 miles per hour." The driver made a few more turns and said they were getting close.

The truck pulled into a short driveway and the garage door went up quickly as the passenger ordered all nine to get out of the truck and get inside. Juan just had time to see that the house was very small and a large wooded area dominated what would normally be a backyard. For some reason he thought of the number of vegeta-

Journey to the Drop House

bles his mother could grow beside the house. The large, flat area between the house and the next home would be perfect for garden.

The nine did not notice at first but the truck had left with the two men who brought them to this place just as all of them entered the garage. The door came down loudly and as their eyes adjusted from the bright Texas sun to the dim garage each of them noticed the faces of dozens of other people staring back at them with hollow eyes.

The nine were now in a very small, 900-square-foot home, with no furniture, no working bathroom, and surrounded by the dreams of 38 other Mexican nationals. The 47 souls were guarded carefully by a small group of men, one of whom was talking on a cell phone. Juan heard him say in Spanish, "We have too many here. Do not send anymore until we have time to take care of a few things."

A large angry-looking man with a similar tattoo to the one Juan had seen on Falcon called to each one of the nine and instructed them to enter one of the bedrooms. He had a clipboard and he asked each of the nine to give their name, hometown in Mexico, family member names, and a phone number. Each of them did as they were asked and in doing so sealed their fate as hostages, victims of ruthless human smugglers who then hold people against their will to extort money from family members in Mexico to gain their release. Falcon did as he promised. He delivered Juan to the U.S. for \$1,000 but what he failed to mention is that Juan's family would have to pay much more before Juan would be allowed to leave the small house in Austin, Texas.

That our vernacular is flooded with words like "drop house, human smuggling" and "human trafficking" to describe the fate of world citizens is a sad testament to conditions in our society. Young men like Juan put themselves in this type of situation every day in hopes of finding work or simply to improve their quality of life. In January, 2008, the USA Today Newspaper reported that the Phoenix, Arizona, metropolitan area is expected to have "about 1,000 drop houses." Each of these places is likely to look just like the one that these nine lost souls found themselves trying to escape

from. The Austin Police Department has a unit of detectives who do nothing else but investigate reports of human trafficking.

The debates regarding immigration reform, drug cartel violence along the U.S. / Mexico border, and the challenges associated with guns, money, and drugs are not unrelated to human trafficking and human smuggling. The increasing instability in Mexico that is fueled by a declining economy and an unprecedented increase in violence have certainly impacted the opportunities for those who choose to stack human beings into cargo holds and promise them a better life in the U.S. The Cantarell Oil Field, one of Mexico's primary means to supplement its failing economy, is now predicted to go dry in the next few years, and previously used Caribbean drug routes have been cut off by an increased effort from the U.S. These facts squeeze economic demands and drug trafficking to the subculture that now exists along the border of the U.S. with Mexico. The people who "mule" illegal drugs into the U.S. from Mexico are sometimes the same people who charge thousands of dollars to traffic humans.

At a federal level, a comprehensive agenda that addresses the underlying causes of these horrific crimes against humanity must be a priority for anyone willing to take on this task. Locally it is critical to establish action and reaction plans to reports of human trafficking, and an international vigor must drive an effort to champion those who cannot speak for themselves. In this instance, the "Nine Lost Souls" are fictional, but they easily represent many others who have made this frightening journey.

The Department of Homeland Security estimated in September, 2008, that the United States is home to 11.8 million illegal immigrants (defined as foreign-born non-citizens), compared to 8.5 million in January, 2000. An estimated 7 million (59%) are from Mexico. California leads the nation with the number of illegal immigrants at 2.84 million, and Texas is second with 1.71 million. And Georgia is the state that represents the largest percentage increase in illegal immigrant population with a 120 percent increase from 2000 to 2007. (This information was printed by the Department of Homeland Defense in an arti-

cle titled *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2007*, written by Michael Hoefer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan Baker.)

The U.S. and Mexico must work together closely to recognize and take ownership of the challenges each country brings to this problem. It is not enough for Mexico to send its military to Juarez, for example, to quell the hideous cartel violence while the U.S. fails to recognize the number of cocaine and meth addicted citizens. Neither is it okay for the U.S. to spend billions of dollars upgrading border security while Mexico fails to address corruption and pending economic concerns with Cantarell.

Many more than these nine souls are at risk. The men and women who escape the perils of human trafficking can be released into U.S. society where this type of immigration plays a part in the U.S. government's own ability to care for its citizens. Social services can be economically strained in their delivery, educational systems can find themselves fighting for additional resources with no additional tax revenue, and governmental services can face cultural challenges that they're ill prepared to understand.