

**USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism**  
**The Story Behind the Story**

"Border Compilation "

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Fresh from the Institute for Justice and Journalism's gritty and eye-opening tour of the California and Arizona borders, I penned a memo to my editors at The Sacramento Bee. This was late 2003, and I had just come off a six-month project on civil liberties. While I would have loved to propose a lengthy, multipart series on border issues, I knew my editors wanted me back in the daily mix and on the immigration beat full-time.

My memo included concise but detailed budget lines for what I envisioned would be four quick-hit A1 stories. The stories were about Christmas migration to Mexico, Mexican maquiladoras closing down because of competition with China, fencing along a stretch of Southern California border and the effect of illegal immigration on certain natural areas. I also proposed a longer-term Sunday feature on the "state of the border."

The proposal looked nothing like the one I had submitted when applying for the Border Justice Fellowship. I had originally planned on probing the vigilantism that has cropped up along the Arizona border, led by California transplants such as Chris Simcox and Glenn Spencer. But during and after IJJ's rolling seminar, I learned there were fresher, newsier pieces that were more relevant and timely to my readers in Northern California.

I was able to pick off one story relatively quickly: The piece about changes in seasonal migration patterns to Mexico. The story, which ran A1 on Christmas Day 2003, included sources who spoke to us during the seminar and Northern California families who were foregoing their annual trips to Mexico because crossing the border illegally has become more difficult and dangerous.

The other stories were not quite as easily accomplished.

Though my ideas were greeted with enthusiasm by my direct editor, the city editor and the assistant managing editor, my memo moved slowly from one level to the other. In early 2004, I was told that the newsroom's second-in-command wanted me to focus on the local impacts of Bush's guest worker proposal, not on border stories.

The Sacramento Bee, like so many other mid-size dailies, has focused heavily on the concept of “regionalism” in recent years. In our case, this has meant concentrating our coverage on a six-county area in Northern California. From what I could tell, the managing editor was telling me to write closer to home.

So, my task at this point was to figure out how to cover the guest worker proposal from Sacramento, and how to combine stories about the President’s plan with “border-related” issues.

Taking a cue from esteemed colleague and IJJ fellow Dan Kowalski, I realized “the border is in Sacramento” and that there would be many opportunities for me to accomplish both tasks.

So, in February and March, I embarked on a story about day laborers in the Sacramento area. Photographer Hector Amezcua and I spent six weeks – off and on – at a local pick-up spot for *jornaleros*. We zeroed in on a group of six men, all loosely related, who share an apartment and the day-labor lifestyle. We won their confidence, and explored their daily lives.

The result was a major Sunday feature that ran March 21, 2004, jumping from the front page to two open pages. The story not only explains how these men would fare under Bush’s proposal, but what it’s like to live in the United States illegally.

Though I was braced for ugly calls and e-mails from readers complaining about illegal immigrants, the bulk of readers who contacted me wanted to know how to hire the men we profiled. About 50 people called or e-mailed.

Soon after publication of the *jornalero* article, it became clear that Bush’s plan wasn’t going anywhere. I was able to shift back to broader immigration coverage, including border issues.

I decided, as the weather began heating up, that I needed to write a story about the border-crossing deaths in the California and Arizona deserts. This time, I was much more mindful of the paper’s emphasis on regionalism, so I decided to seek a family in our area who lost a loved one while crossing the border.

It was a difficult task, and I came tantalizingly close to having an amazing story. Through our local Mexican consulate, I was given the name of a Yuba City man whose wife died last year in the Tucson sector. She had returned to Ensenada for her mother’s funeral, but died while being led back across the border by a coyote.

The husband, who was caring for their two children while his wife was gone, didn't know what happened to her until about a month after she died. The consulate helped him find her, and he had to identify her body through photographs. He couldn't return to Mexico for her funeral because he's in the country illegally. Heartbroken, he never told his children how their mother died.

I tracked Marco down in Yuba City, and over the course of three long visits over a few weeks, tried to convince him to participate in the story. When it became clear he wouldn't be willing or emotionally able to provide the kind of detail I needed for the story, I gave up.

Though I continued to search for a great local example, none materialized before fall, when border-crossing deaths decrease because desert conditions are milder. But another story popped up in the mean time, and it would become the last piece of my IJJ project.

In July, a Mexican immigrant from Winters, a farming town near Sacramento, was elected mayor of his hometown in Zacatecas. Andres Bermudez, a well-known tomato farmer and U.S. citizen, is among the first Mexican migrants to return to their native country to run for public office.

He was inaugurated in September, so Hector and I traveled to Jerez to attend the ceremony and explore the effect of migration on the community. Zacatecas is one of the major migration feeder states to the United States, with about 800,000 Zacatecanos currently living here and 1.3 million living there.

We spent a week there, and when I returned, I wrote a front-page story that was both about Bermudez and about migration to America. Response to the story, which ran Sept. 29, 2004, was mixed. Some readers who know Bermudez called to complain about him. Other readers found the concept of Bermudez straddling both worlds fascinating.

Clearly, these three stories are significantly different from the ones I proposed for the IJJ fellowship. But they're no less relevant. Together, they showed Sacramento readers how the border affects their lives from hundreds of miles away. By highlighting the men who landscape their yards and build their homes, and an American-made businessman who returned to Mexico to apply his knowledge, these stories make clear that migration isn't a nebulous, faraway concept but a very distinct phenomenon that shapes their lives in the here and now.