

Finally at Peace: Rafa mourned by kin, friends he helped during his life

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MICHOACAN, Mexico - Rain pounding the sedan's roof drowns out quiet small talk as friends and family of Rafael Martinez Ruiz follow his body home.

The remains of "Rafa," as he was known, are in the back of a white hearse leading the sedan.

Faster than the wipers can move it, rain blurs the windshield. Huge puddles splash out from under both sides as the hearse makes its way toward Rafa's home. It's still pouring at midnight when they finally pull into Rafa's hometown, Panindicuaro, about 100 miles east of the airport in Guadalajara.

Rafa's remains are being brought home after his death in the southern Arizona desert, where he made his 18th illegal border crossing to work in the vineyards of central California.

His life and death were the epitome of the struggle many Mexicans in villages like Panindicuaro face. They're driven north to the United States for opportunity. Rafa is one of 2,600 people whose economic struggles in the past decade ended in death along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Altogether, Rafa and his seven siblings crossed the border 52 times successfully since 1979. One of them, Alfredo, is working to become a citizen.

The hearse driver waits while Alfredo rounds up men to carry the coffin through the front door of the house Rafa built with his own hands. The coffin is inside a cardboard box spotted by rain drops. The men shift it a couple of times to fit through the door.

Rafa's mother, Flor, wails.

"Aye, my son," Flor cries over and over in Spanish. "His children want their father."

A roomful of 60 people bursts with screams and sobs. Some mourners look serious, some sad. A nephew who is about 12 looks furious, wiping tears from his eyes.

Women's heads are draped in black scarves. They periodically cross themselves, bringing hands from forehead to stomach and across the chest, side-to-side.

Candles burn subtly under a light bulb, creating an eerie glow when the storm knocks out the power.

Rafa's wife Jisela cries softly, "Rafa."

His photo is on top of the coffin. Their 10-year-old daughter Mayra cries quietly. Geovanni, their 5-year-old son, pops in and out of the room, curious.

Jisela goes with Rafa's mother behind a curtain separating the bedroom from the living room.

"Aye, aye-aye," Flor cries from the next room. "Aye, aye-aye, son of my life."

She comes back to the coffin, Rafa's photo pressed to her tear-streaked face.

Alfredo, Rafa's older brother who found his sibling's remains in a mesquite grove after three days of searching the Arizona desert, calls a doctor to come and monitor his mother's heart.

People pray. Some leave as the rain dies out. Two young men take a bottle of tequila with them.

Life in Mexico

Wedding and baby pictures deck the peach walls. The white tile floor is clean.

"Pain for him," a woman chants in Spanish. She's alone in a corner. Others join and simultaneously pound their fists over their hearts.

Those who were closest to Rafa gaze out the open front door, lost. The last mourners leave the house Rafa built.

"It's all money from the U.S.A. If it wasn't for that we wouldn't have anything, not even a dream," Alfredo says.

The dream to have nicer homes began when Rafa and Alfredo were growing up, crammed into a two-room adobe shack with six other siblings and their parents. It's dark inside their old house when Alfredo visits the new owner. There's no electricity. The air is stale, damp from wet laundry. The floors are dirt and an open fire burns in the corner for cooking. Water is carried from a community spring about a mile away. The boys bathed in an open fountain down the street; mother and sister used buckets in the back yard. They had a donkey and chickens.

But the house looks worse now, Alfredo says.

"My mom used to keep the floor nice and flat, but now it's all uneven," he says. "My dad was smart. We were very poor, but he was smart. He could make us appropriate furniture."

Rafa watched and learned, Alfredo says. When he wasn't picking fruit in the United States Rafa was building houses here. Alfredo's new house in Mexico is some of Rafa's last work. For days, he used a sledgehammer to break massive rocks into pieces he could carry away to clear space for the patio.

"He had to do it all by hand; we had no machines," Alfredo says.

Rafa had no hobbies, Alfredo says, just work. Rafa also did all the electricity and plumbing in the houses he built for himself, his siblings and his parents.

"He'd see it once on a job and learned how to do it," says Alfredo, proud of his brother who was closest to him in age.

Rafa's funeral

Three generations mourn Rafa for two nights.

His friends and co-workers take turns standing around the coffin. Wind blows out one of the four candles. They listen to Alfredo's story of finding Rafa in the desert.

Their father Bruno sits distraught on the front porch, his face sagging. He's under a sign Alfredo drew with the details of Rafa's funeral Mass, including time and place.

People bring flowers.

At 5, Rafa's son Geovanni is a bit young to understand death, Alfredo says. He takes breaks from playing to be adored by family and talk about his dad. Then he gets on his bike and cruises the bumpy road.

Alfredo is worried about Mayra, Rafa's daughter. She's quiet, just like Rafa, he says. She doesn't speak unless spoken to; she works without being asked.

"Her face looks just like (Rafa's), very serious," Alfredo says.

Even so, he fears a lack of reaction could hurt her in the long run. He holds her close, and they cry together.

Rafa's father crosses his hand over the coffin. He's 69 years old and not in the best of health after a life of working in the fields. He's one of few men here who never left Mexico for the alluring wages of the United States. He could never bring himself to leave his family, Bruno says. The women far outnumber men in the village because so many able-bodied men have gone to "El Norte" to work and send money home.

Mayra approaches to say goodbye to her father for the last time. Tears fall on the coffin as she kisses it. Her mother stands behind, covering her eyes with one hand and resting the other on her daughter's back.

It's time for Rafa's final departure from home. Several men carry Rafa's coffin into the sunlight and put it in the back of a red pickup truck.

Women inside the house blow out the candles.

Everyone's hat is in hand as they march through the streets behind the truck and flowers. Others join as they get closer to the church. Some women hold hands.

Neighbors look on. Dogs bark.

Rafa's coffin is carried through the church's big brown doors, through a crowded aisle to the front. All of the wood benches are filled; about 500 people are in attendance. The coffin is put on the same black steel stands used in Rafa's home for the wake.

It's a tall church with green floors. Pictures of angels hang on the white walls, which have gold trim. The ceiling is arched and a balcony is above the back of the room. The flowers on Rafa's coffin are the only vegetation in the church. A choir sings.

"(Rafa's) a victim ... of the border," says the Rev. Melecio Farias Arreola. "How many die on the road like Rafael? He was looking for a better life."

A crucifix and religious statues are high overhead.

"The monsters of migrant traffickers. We don't want anymore deaths," the priest says. "The blood of your brother. Listen to the father (God)."

Rafa's burial

Four men carry Rafa's coffin into the street toward the cemetery. A picture of Rafa in blue jeans is on the front.

One of the pallbearers has a thin mustache and wears dark tinted sunglasses. Another sports sideburns and, like the man behind him, takes off his cowboy hat as they walk.

Every so often the lineup changes.

It's humid and everyone's clothes stick to their skin. The only sounds are footsteps and occasional whispers. They shift pallbearers for the fourth time. Rafa's friends are all eager to take part.

The air is damp and fresh from recent rain, contrasting the dry heat Rafa died in. Rafa died in a desert, but here the landscape is lush green hills dotted with wildflowers. It smells of spring in September.

A few women and children walk through the cemetery gate before the coffin leads the rest. Chile cans once used as flower pots rust alongside graves.

There are about 1,700 tombs in the cemetery, says Elia Sanchez Perez, who buries the dead. About 25 of the tombs hold the remains of people who died on the border. In addition to the tombs, there are countless unmarked graves of people who can't afford the structures.

Some tombs are tiled, some just bare concrete. Flowers in various stages of decay are everywhere.

Rafa's coffin is put on a white concrete stand carved from stone before a woman leads in prayer, with a muffled following.

Rafa's mother, wife, sister and children don't attend the burial. "It's not possible for them to take it," Alfredo explains. "It's too much."

It's almost too much for Alfredo, but he's there.

"I wanted to give thanks for many reasons, but after the church, I can't ... I just can't take it in my mind. It's hard. It will take me forever to understand," Alfredo says.

It's a challenge to get the coffin inside the tomb. It sticks out the back, apparently not fitting. There are a few nervous faces.

The coffin is scooted side-to-side, but something's not right. It's pulled out entirely. A quick adjustment of the wooden slide inside and Rafa's coffin fits snugly.

A cemetery worker spills mortar into an empty tray at the head of Rafa's grave while a young cousin born in the United States offers prayer.

Bricks are laid on top of each other with mortar between. It looks like a chimney. Perez uses a flat, steel trowel to spread the concrete. He taps each brick into place with the handle.

Ping-ping, ping-ping.

Perez uses brick chips to fill in the top level, and splats more mortar onto the bricks. He spreads it smooth, slapping it with the trowel and again smoothing it out.

Alfredo sighs deeply, his hands folded over the picture of Rafa from the coffin. An orange butterfly drifts by.

The concrete starts to dry. It smells of wet mud and the aroma mixes with that of flowers and perfume in the air. Perez lights a smoke at job's end.

Everyone looks tired. There are no smiles. Some clouds have rolled in.

Family members pile mud around the site to make it look more natural. Rain drizzles from above. Perez's assistant clears his throat and scrapes his shovel clean.

People start to leave.

One of Rafa's teenage nephews, Eduardo, squats behind the crowd and the plot, crying hard. He says his last goodbye alone, his young face filled with emotion.

Rafa's remains rest in his hometown, in a cemetery visible from his house.

Fourteen hundred miles to the north the harvest continues.

By the numbers

\$1,650 - the average cost for autopsies of illegal immigrants in Pima County.

\$800 - what the Mexican government paid for Rafa's coffin, to prepare him for funeral, get him to Phoenix and cover the coffin and tray it was put on.

\$491.50 - what the Mexican government paid to fly Rafa's remains on a commercial airliner.

18,504 - number of people living in Panindicuaro, according to Mexican census figures. Agriculture is the main source of employment.

Mexican funeral traditions

Catholic families in Mexico hold a velorio for one or two nights before a funeral Mass as a type of wake. Friends and families of the deceased get together, usually in the home of the deceased's family, and talk about the person, offering prayers to God.

Beginning the day after the funeral, also at the family's home, Mexican Catholics hold a novenario, nine evenings of prayer aimed at ensuring the deceased's safe arrival in heaven. Friends and family mourn over the picture of the deceased used during the funeral, and the candle lighted at the altar is taken into the family's home.