

Desert trek takes Yolanda north to U.S.



Vans, packed with migrants on their way to the border, pass crosses that memorialize adults and children who have died during desert journeys. Van drivers make the sign of the cross as they pass. In 2002, the year of Yolanda's trip, more than 130 migrants died in the Tucson sector, which includes the Sasabe crossing.

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statistics from the Arizona desert along with stories of murder and migrants who bake to death in the back of tractor trailers.

As the bus crawls to the border, men in military fatigues board. They start searching bags and asking questions.

How old are you?

Yolanda answers.

Who are you with?

What is he to you?

She's my niece, Juan says. He says they are going to visit family. After almost four years of intimidation, Yolanda has learned to stay silent.

The officer examines their documents and lets them continue.

By day, they arrive in Altar, Francisco García Aten's town where the local population swells with the tides of immigrants and commodities.

There used to be 200 daily crossings, the mayor recalls. By 2001, that had increased to 1,200. The town itself has little reason to exist apart from the traffic. There is the main drag with the Pollo Feliz restaurant, the town square and dozens of hotels and small lodges where migrants can rest. At the square, Ford Econoline vans line up from morning until sundown, packing people 20 deep for the hour-plus trip to Sasabe, where most of the desert crossings begin. Nearby, a church offers one last chance for prayer.

Jesus' heart, full of love and mercy, I want to pray to you for my fellow migrants, a message inside reads. Have pity on them and protect them, because they suffer from mistreatment and humiliation on their journey, and they are known by many as dangerous and marginalized because they are foreigners.

At the back is a space to post photos of missing men and women.

Abel takes his group to a small inn, where they sleep on mattresses on the floor in a large room. The next afternoon, they leave for the desert. Yolanda carries chips, a few small bottles of water and a ragged birth certificate. It is her only form of identification.

They pack into a van at the square, drive out of town and turn onto a dirt road toward Sasabe where white crosses rise from the sand and drivers make the sign of the cross on their chests. Saguaro cacti point prickly fingers out into the emptiness.

Just southwest of Sasabe, many immigrants jump off in a junkyard of rusted trucks, hypodermic needles and a few homes, where trash and used toilet paper hang from cactus spikes. These are the last residues of life in Mexico. From there, they transfer to trucks that carry them off road along dry creek beds. They arrive at a barbed wire fence, hop across and begin walking into the Sonoran.

Simple, unless you get lost.

In 2001, 78 people died in the Tucson sector, which includes the Sasabe crossing. The number will reach 134 in 2002.

It is a terrifying experience for a child. Apart from the heat that can push 110 degrees, there are the rattlesnakes



A van carrying migrants takes the hour-plus trip on a desert road from Altar to Sasabe, Mexico, where the travelers will start their crossing. Their water supplies are limited, and they will fight extreme heat and rugged terrain while trying to hide from border patrol agents.

and desert tarantulas and giant hairy scorpions and cacti with funny-sounding names like prickly pear and hedgehog and fishhook.

Abel's group transfers from the van to a truck that takes them off road in the desert, where they cross a fence and walk half an hour to a creek bed. There, they wait for night to fall and listen to

passing helicopters.

What's Don Juan to you? Amber, the young teenage boy, asks Yolanda.

Nothing. It's that her father doesn't want her to be in Mexico, Juan says. *He wants her to be with her aunts and uncles in the United States.*

Yolanda is silent. Night comes. Abel begins leading the way to a place he

knows as the Indian's house. Once they reach that house, they will be safe. The Indian will drive them into Arizona.

They walk for several hours in silence, dodging the spotlights of the border patrol. Abel puts branches on the ground where border patrol vehicles have left tire tracks in the sand, walking atop them to prevent leaving footprints

that can be tracked. Yolanda thinks she sees human bodies and snakes. Strange things brush up against her, and thorns lodge in her clothes.

Suddenly, Abel calls out from ahead. *Don't come any farther.*

He has fallen down a steep embankment. One by one, the men carefully climb down. Yolanda is left alone on the top. There is the fleeting thought.

If only I could run away now. She knows it would mean sure death. She climbs down in the arms of her devil.

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Coming Tuesday: "For the old cat, a tender rat."

HOW TO HELP

Some agencies that aid abuse victims:
Human Rights Initiative of North Texas
 214-855-0520
 www.hronline.org
Mosaic Family Services
 214-821-5393
 Home@MosaicServices.org
 www.mosaiccservices.org
Child Abuse Prevention Center
 214-370-9810
 www.excap.org
Catholic Charities
 Immigration and Legal Services
 214-634-7182
 www.catholiccharitiesdallas.org
Dallas County domestic violence resources
 www.dallasdvresources.org
The National Domestic Violence Hotline
 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
 www.ndvh.org
The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
 www.missingkids.com
 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)



A man crosses a barbed wire fence a few hundred feet from the U.S. border near Sasabe, Mexico. From there, he will start walking into the Sonoran Desert and into Arizona. Yolanda and Juan crossed near here in the spring of 2002, during a sad journey that took the girl away from her home and into Arizona, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and Texas.

A note on sources

To tell this series, *The Dallas Morning News* traveled more than 5,000 miles by road from La Barra del Potrero, Mexico, to Oaxaca City, the Sonoran Desert, Arizona, North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia and Texas.

The series is based on interviews with more than 80 people over seven months, as well as Mexican and American government documents, trial records and

reporter observations.

Descriptions of events have been corroborated by more than one person or are based on information contained in documents. Places and people are represented as they would have existed at the time described.

Dialogue is presented in italics as observed by those who took part in or directly witnessed the conversations

described.

Chapter 2 is based on interviews with Yolanda Méndez Torres, Francisco García Aten, Juana Alonzo Pedro, Aquilino "Quile" Torres, Jacinta Aguilar Borques, Jessica Casique Espinoza, Darwin Casique Espinoza, Margarita, Abel and his family. Additional information comes from court documents, background research and reporter observation.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In rural Mexico, Yolanda Méndez Torres lived in a society where sexual violence against girls often goes unreported and unpunished. In America, she joined legions of undocumented abuse victims who have little hope of finding justice. This narrative series chronicles Yolanda's crossing between the two worlds.

Sunday, Chapter 1: "God, why won't you kill him?"
Today, Chapter 2: A girl in the desert
 Tuesday, Chapter 3: A shadow in America
 Wednesday, Chapter 4: "Love or something"
 Thursday, Chapter 5: An unlikely angel
 Friday, Chapter 6: A slight voice rises
 Sunday, Chapter 7: American dreams

