

Bones - March 23, 2014
By Laurie Jurs, Community Columnist
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“Fragile prey of elements you came this way
Air, earth, water, fire
Slowly time wrapped you in its cloak of invisibility
Until only your bones remain”

These lines are part of a poem (Marie Vogl Gery 2009) written to an unknown teenager whose scattered bones were found near my home. I live southwest of Green Valley by open range, in the shadow of the southern perimeter of the Sierrita Mine tailings pond.

In February 2009, my neighbor found the dispersed bones of two people. In the process of memorializing them, we found smaller bones, determined by the Pima County Medical Examiner to be a third person, a teenager. Given the location and the articles nearby, these are bones of migrants who did not make it out of the desert. Rooftops along my road can be seen as one walks between the sites, now marked by crosses adorned with plastic flowers, prayer cards and handwritten notes.

We who visit the sites can imagine any number of stories about these people. We do not know their ages, whether they were male or female, if they knew each other or where they came from. We don't know when or how they died and neither do the people that gave birth to them, raised them, loved them, prayed for their safe passage.

Though the Pima County Medical Examiner's office does everything possible to identify bodies or decomposed remains, it must have something with which to make a match.

The premise of an upcoming Al Jazeera America documentary is compelling. Titled “Borderland,” this series airs in early April. (See it via satellite or on-line.) Australian filmmakers chose six U.S. citizens, paired them, and assigned them to reenact the journeys of three border crossers whose journeys ended at the Pima County Morgue.

The film begins in a walk-in cooler with 150 bodies or sets of remains, stacked six high on industrial shelving. At least 100 of the 150 are migrants. Many toe tags read “John” or “Jane Doe.” One simply reads “Doe.”

One pair will reconstruct the odyssey of Nelson Omar Chilel Lopez, a boy from El Porvenir, Guatemala, a poor coffee growing area south of the Mexican border. To support her family, Omar's mother left to work in Phoenix in 2006, soon joined by Omar's older brother and sister. Suffering deeply the loss of his family, Omar, age 13, persuaded his mother to pay a guide to lead him and an older female family friend through the desert. They crossed into the Tohono O'odham Nation in July 2010. The older woman soon fell behind the group. Omar chose to stay with her. Two years later, their partial remains were found. Thanks to the Medical Examiner and Guatemalan Consulate, identification was made. At last, Omar's mother reunited with her son.

The documentary's six participants represent a range of views. We'll meet a third-generation asparagus and potato farmer from Washington, who employs 180 Hispanic workers. The group includes a community organizer from Florida, a young Nicaraguan woman who emigrated legally at age 12, and a retired Marine and radio talk show host from Illinois, who ran a write-in campaign for Governor on an anti-immigrant platform.

As the six, none of whom had ever been to the borderlands, start their journey, Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Greg Hess tells them, "You all have strong opinions about the border. The one thing you all have in common is you don't really know it."

Dr. Hess says, "Sometimes the families...are here illegally. Sometimes they're here legally. We don't know what their status is or where they are. If we do make identification, then it can bring closure to a family if they are indeed looking for this missing person. Then they can carry on with their lives. It's just the humane thing to do."

I salute those willing to listen, learn and test their perspectives with direct experience. I've not seen the documentary, just the trailer, but was struck by a quote from the retired Marine. He said that despite political differences, the six agreed, "Something has to change. We all agree it's a horrible situation. I don't care which side we are on. Families are destroyed and die in the process."

Dr. Hess works mostly with bones. His office has been able to identify two-thirds of the crossers, which is balm for the many broken hearts. The chances that the crossers, whose remains were found near my house, just four miles northwest of Canoa Ranch Golf Club and Resort, have been or could ever be identified are slim to none.

Another of Gery's poems is dedicated to them:

"The bones you left behind we all share
Humerus and ulna, arms that hold a lover, a child
Carry wood, wash basket, and groceries
Or maybe a gun to kill a man, or a deer...
Femur and tibia, legs that walk, run for help
Waltz a crying child to sleep...
Remember that once you were here in this place
Know that we, too, will leave our bones behind
Know that we, too, will carry some answers
Beyond the reach of those we love."