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Border documentary gives retiree Oscar hopes

Filmmaker wants residents' story told

SIERRA VISTA HERALD

SIERRA VISTA - As Mercedes Maharis looks out across the desert plains from her stunning mountainside home, it is a bittersweet experience.

This was where she and her husband, Robert, had dreamed they would enjoy a peaceful and well-deserved retirement.

Instead, the couple are living in daily fear for their lives.

In fact, illegal immigration has had such an effect on the pair, Mercedes Maharis has created a film highlighting the extent of the problem in Cochise County.

She is now hoping the documentary, titled "Cries from the Border," will be submitted for an Academy Award next year.

Her main goal, however, is to raise awareness of what life is like living in a border community.

"We were not really aware of the immigration issue," said Maharis, a retired producer and director. "We knew just a little bit, but it was not a consideration when we moved here from Las Vegas."

It was only when they moved into their dream home in May 2004 that the couple realized the extent of the problem and just how much it would affect their lives.

"We started seeing the Border Patrol trucks and I began to realize this was a real issue," Mercedes Maharis said.

The couple also soon became aware their property was being used on a regular basis by illegal immigrants crossing the Huachuca Mountains.

A worn-out patch of desert grass and shrubbery below their home also is used as a rendezvous and pickup point for the border crossers.

The Border Patrol helicopters fly over their house, virtually on a nightly basis, and what they thought would be animal paths bringing wildlife past their house have instead become people paths.

"I was very alarmed. It's like being in a war zone," said Maharis.

"One night there were two cars parked below our house and we got up and turned on the porch lights. These men just started yelling, then they got into the cars, which backed down the path and tore down a fence as they took off."

Although retired, Maharis felt so strongly about what was happening that she decided to pick up her camera and put it on film.

In the following months she approached different agencies, organizations and local residents, who all agreed to provide information and be interviewed.

Representatives from groups such as Border Action Network also have their say on what they believe is the ill-treatment of some border crossers.

"I've tried to give a balanced view," said Maharis, who also obtained graphic photographs of illegal immigrants who perished in their attempts to get into the United States. She uses many in her film.

"I hope this might be a seed of positive change. I want other people to become familiar with what life is like living in a border community."

To qualify for submission for an Oscar, the documentary must be screened in four cities.

It received public showings at the Sierra Vista Public Library and at R&M Cinema last month. Due to the sold-out showings, it will also be screened in Los Angeles, Boston, New York and San Francisco later this month and in October.

Maharis admits making "Cries from the Border," which included interviews with two illegal immigrants who said they were lost but looking for work, has been an emotional journey.

"This situation is very disheartening," she said. "When I came here I wanted to hike, enjoy nature and be at peace. But I am not at peace. I love this spot because of the views but I'm just living in a state of wild trauma. I feel uneasy in my own home and we are afraid to leave the house sometimes.

"We never know what is going to happen or when. It's an extremely complex social situation and it needs more attention.

"But making this film has been a way to take me through those feelings of trauma."

Maharis, who made four hours of film but has released one hour so far, also hopes her work will be accepted by the University of Arizona as a resource for anthropology and sociology students.

"I believe that education is the key to our future," she said. "If people don't know about things, how are they going to make intelligent choices for civilization?"

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