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Clay migrants 'come home' to Mexican town

To artist, they represent those gone to U.S.

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TEOCOCUILCO, Mexico — For decades, Alejandro Santiago's picturesque hometown in southern Mexico has said goodbye to its youth as they left to seek work in the United States.

Now the artist is trying to repopulate his town — at least metaphorically.

With a \$100,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, Santiago has undertaken an ambitious plan to create an army of life-size clay figures.

So far, he has created about 1,500 statues, each about 4 feet 4 inches tall and 150 pounds, to represent the youth who have abandoned this hamlet in impoverished Oaxaca state.

No two sculptures are alike, he said, and many of the faces have been sculpted to reflect the hardship of migrants' lives in both Mexico and the U.S.

Santiago said the inspiration for the project came six years ago, when he returned home after three years in Paris and was struck by Teococuilco's empty streets.

Low wages and too few jobs drives thousands of Mexicans to migrate every year to the U.S., turning rural communities like Teococuilco nearly into ghost towns.

"Where are my friends, my relatives?" he asked the town's remaining residents, mostly young children and the elderly.

"They are all in the United States? I kept asking and asking. Night fell and not one soul came to visit me.

"I didn't know how many to make at first, but I knew I had to repopulate the town," he told The Associated Press in an interview this week.

In 2003, Santiago decided to experience for himself what it's like to cross the U.S. border illegally.

He bought a bus ticket to Tijuana, met a smuggler who set him up with fake papers and tried to cross.

In Tijuana, Santiago passed by thousands of crosses on the corrugated wall marking the border, placed there by activists to represent those who have died trying to cross.

He was quickly caught by U.S. immigration authorities and returned to Mexico, but that image burned into his brain.

He estimated those crosses numbered about 2,500 and settled on that number, plus one, for his project.

He said the extra figure symbolizes that there is always one more person who is leaving, risking his or her life to try to reach the United States.

The Rockefeller Foundation grant is helping him complete all 2,501 statues and pay his crew of 35 workers. He expects to finish the collection by the end of August.

The sculptures will then make a journey of their own, traveling to the northern city of Monterrey for their first exhibition in September, Santiago said.

He said he hopes to show them later in the United States and then bring them home to be installed on Teococuilco's empty streets.

When that happens, the artist promised a party.

"We will be celebrating the migrants' return," Santiago said.

Find extensive coverage of immigration issues at [azstarnet.com/border](http://www.azstarnet.com/border)

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