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Convictions on the line

Life-and-death lessons abound for those aiding migrants' pilgrimage

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Arivaca, Ariz. - Francisco Gonzalez looked up in a daze, the clothes he had worn for two days in the desert soaked in sweat, his eyes squinting in pain.

Becca Sullivan looked down in something close to panic, trying through the adrenaline rush to remember her training.



A Guatemalan laborer trying to sneak across the U.S. southern border, Gonzalez had run out of water a day into the trip. When his legs weakened, he was abandoned by his guide and robbed by bandits who stole the \$500 he needed to get to Georgia.

A spiky-haired blond who graduated from Colorado College last May, Sullivan traded in plans to sling burritos for the summer to aid illegal border crossers making a treacherous desert trek.

Sullivan and seven Colorado Springs students are volunteering this summer for a group called No More Deaths. They have slept in the desert, braved scorpions and tarantulas, and suffered through temperatures hot enough to melt the rubber soles of tennis shoes.

And now they may face arrest.

Border Patrol officials last month issued a stern warning to the group that they're treading a fine legal line by aiding immigrants trying to break into the U.S. Though they have yet to make any arrests, federal agents have begun near round-the-clock monitoring

of the desert camps where the volunteers stay.

No More Deaths is one of several citizen efforts to aid border crossers in Arizona that have emerged as deaths have steadily climbed, topping 200 last year. The group is a coalition of at least 20 organizations, many linked to local churches.

Volunteers hand out food and water to groups of migrants stranded in the searing Arizona heat. They take the worst cases to hospitals and clinics in Tucson, including a makeshift clinic in a local church.

More than just humanitarians, the students see themselves as being in a battle for the attention of lawmakers and voters - with the ultimate goal of dramatically changing border policy.

"We have great restaurants to eat at affordable prices and great houses that can be built really cheaply so that we can have all these comforts," said Holly Thompson, a graduate student in social work at Arizona State University. "And all of it is based on people who have to go through this life-or-death roulette.

"As a citizen of the United States, I feel like it's my responsibility to be out here and say, 'I don't agree with what we're doing,'" she said.

Desert's lessons are harsh

At the group's busiest desert camp, near the crumbling adobe town of Arivaca, volunteers spend most of their time patrolling the desert washes and rural roads favored by migrants.

Before starting on an early-morning patrol in a dusty Jeep Cherokee, Colorado College sophomore Hayden Simmons twirls the dial on an iPod to select the morning's soundtrack. A song from The Orishas, a Cuban hip-hop band, pours from the speakers.

Pulling up to a wash on the edge of the Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge, Simmons and Daniel Strauss, a Colorado College sociology graduate, grab an armful of water bottles and several Baggies full of carb-laden snacks, known among volunteers as "migrant paks."

They walk through the wash, occasionally shouting their friendly intentions.

"Somos amigos, no tenga miedo." We're friends, don't be afraid.

"Traemos agua y comida." We've got water and food.

Walking through undergrowth lush from the summer monsoons, the pair stumble on a man from Sonora napping in the shade of a cottonwood tree. They spend a few minutes trying to explain their mission, but the migrant is visibly confused.

"This is strange," is all he manages to utter, as the students walk on after leaving food and water.

But the desert isn't always so hospitable.

In July, Beth Sanders, an Oregon native who graduated from Colorado College in May, discovered two brothers from Sinaloa amid the mesquite and cactus that lined an isolated road. The younger man had broken his arm, and his brother was pouring rubbing alcohol over him to keep him conscious - the only thing they had for the pain.

After taking him to the hospital, Sanders stayed with the 18-year-old migrant and talked for hours - about soccer, family and girls.

"I felt almost like he was my little brother," Sanders said.

The gregarious 22-year-old conceded that the summer in the desert has been far from easy. She's heard the stories of female border crossers being raped by bandits or coyotes, the human smugglers who guide groups across the desert.

"I think most people are a little on edge when they're out" there, she said.

A conviction that silences fear

But critics such as Arivaca Deputy Fire Chief Jim Conklin say the students face more dangers than they imagine.

The group's organizers say that protocols are in place to keep volunteers safe. They always patrol in groups of two or more and always carry cellphones.

But echoing Border Patrol concerns, Conklin says that many coyotes now carry guns and that among the smugglers, the presence of Mexican organized crime gangs is on the rise.

"You have 14 or 15 guys out there on their way to Montana. They see your SUV, and they decide they are going to take it at whatever cost. What are you going to do?" Conklin said.

Whatever their fear, the students say it's outweighed by their conviction.

The students see their efforts this summer as an extension of what they learned in the classroom: that NAFTA and the toll it has taken on Mexican farmers is partly responsible for the flow of migrants north; that U.S. employers have become heavily dependent on illegal Mexican labor, yet rarely face legal penalties; that U.S. border agents shut down safer migration routes during the 1990s and pushed illegal crossers into the desert - a deterrence strategy they see as directly responsible for the rising deaths.

Many cite the civil rights movement as a model for what they do. And most say they are willing to go to jail.

"For the law to change, you have to act. We're not representatives; we're not senators. The most we can do within a democracy is direct action," said Simmons, 20, a San Francisco native.

"Like a grace from God"

Already this fiscal year, the migrant death toll has passed 175 along the Arizona border, according to human rights groups. In the second week of August alone, 14 border crossers died in the desert, five of them in a single group caught as temperatures reached 114 degrees.

One name not on that list is Gonzalez, the Guatemalan laborer Sullivan and two others found in early August at the edge of a rural highway, where he had crawled for help.

The 37-year-old migrant said he sat against a fence post for more than nine hours, and that he was passed twice by Border Patrol vehicles and once by police before the white Ford Explorer carrying the No More Deaths volunteers pulled up.

"You are like a grace from God," he said in Spanish.

Gonzalez, who has three children and was on his way to Georgia to work as a carpet layer, stayed two days in the hospital and several more recuperating at a Tucson church.

Organizers say that after receiving money from relatives, he left on his own at the beginning of August, and is now in Georgia.

"I love my country. I'm not trying to screw over Americans who are losing jobs," said Sanders, 22.

"We are trying to help someone in a human way. If anyone doesn't agree with that, I don't know what to tell them."