

With border policy, life imitates art

Mexican women involved in SXSW immigration film denied visas to attend screenings.

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The letters in the documentary "Letters From the Other Side" are actually videos that producer-director Heather Courtney uses to paint intimate portraits of Mexican families torn asunder by immigration and trade policies.

In the videos, women left behind in post-NAFTA Mexico communicate with loved ones in the United States, and Courtney makes the point that she can carry the letters across the very border the women can't legally cross.



Larry Kolvoord
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Two Mexican women who were involved in Heather Courtney's documentary 'Letters From the Other Side' could not get visas to attend South by Southwest screenings.

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The movie screens tonight at the South by Southwest Film Festival, but the immigration policies that frame the film are also preventing two of the women involved in it from legally attending the event.

Courtney said the U.S. Consulate in Mexico has denied visitor visa applications for Eugenia González Teodoro, who is featured in the documentary, and Rocio Cañada Melecio, an adviser on the project. Three other women featured in the film couldn't travel because of passport problems or family reasons.

Courtney said she assured immigration officials that she would sponsor the women's trip to Austin to participate in screenings and discussions.

U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett's office helped them secure an interview at the consulate.

"It's pretty disheartening. They deserve the respect and recognition, to see their story unfold as other people watch it," the 38-year-old Austin-based filmmaker said.

Courtney said she is asking immigration officials to explain why the applications were denied.

González, contacted in her hometown in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, said a U.S. consular official asked to check the women's bank accounts and seemed to question Courtney's assurances in a notarized letter that she would pay for the women's expenses.

"It's very difficult to get a visa if you're poor and they feel you're not going to" return to Mexico, said Jacqueline Watson, an Austin immigration lawyer who tried to aid Courtney's efforts.

A State Department spokeswoman in Washington, though not commenting directly on the case, said a visitor visa is often denied if officials believe the applicant intends to emigrate. She said economic status is one factor used to assess whether someone is likely to return to their country.

Courtney said the denied visas echo themes of the film, "which is how difficult it is for a Mexican to be able to enter this country legally."

"Letters From the Other Side" has received critical praise after its recent premiere at the Slamdance Film Festival in Park City, Utah.

Courtney said the perspective of women and children left behind in Mexico is missing from the nation's ongoing immigration debate and media coverage.

"I think these women speak more powerfully and articulately than anyone else could about what I think is the true tragedy of our failed policies, that is that families are forced to live apart to survive economically," Courtney said.

"The Mexican government also needs to play a larger role to provide alternatives to immigration, to create jobs in their communities so that men don't leave."

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'Letters From the

Other Side' events

'Letters From the Other Side' will be presented at two South by Southwest Film Festival screenings: tonight at 9:45 at the Austin Convention Center and at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday at the convention center.

A party and fundraiser for the women in the documentary will be held after tonight's screening at the Whiskey Bar, 303 W. Fifth St. Maneja Beto will perform.