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FILM / Tragedy of immigrant deaths unfolds / Documentary reveals how widows coped

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For The Chronicle

PARK CITY, UTAH - In "Letters From the Other Side", Heather Courtney's documentary about the aftermath of the 2003 Victoria tragedy, the camera gazes at Houston's glimmering skyline.

The city is where smugglers accused in the deaths of 19 immigrants are standing trial. But for Courtney, the glass and steel towers of Houston are a symbol of injustice.

"A lot of the profits and riches and excess that companies and Americans enjoy have to do with a large pool of immigrant labor," Courtney said. "It is kind of striking to have that last shot of excesses."

"Letters" premiered last week at Slamdance, the smaller film festival that coincides with Sundance in this Wasatch Mountains ski resort. But the two gatherings share a prominent theme this year. Four films highlighting a confusing and often deadly immigration policy are playing here. The other three are from Sundance, which concludes Sunday.

Courtney's outrage is shared by Pablo Veliz's "La Tragedia de Macario". Veliz, a 23-year-old San Antonio student, crafted a fictionalized account of the Victoria incident. Veliz said cheaper moviemaking tools have contributed to the rush of similar works. Those whose voices were silenced by prohibitive cost can now be heard.

"Mine was done in a humble way," he said.

"Crossing Arizona" and "DeNADIE" were the other nonfiction takes on south-of-the-border hopefuls who gamble with their lives to find employment in the U.S.

In "Letters", the Austin-based Courtney followed two Mexican women, Carmela Rico and Laura Masacruz, whose husbands died in Victoria with 17 other undocumented job-seekers when their abandoned truck trailer turned into an airtight furnace. The wives' efforts to comprehend their loss and make a life for themselves put the fallout in an intensely intimate light.

From her dusty pueblo, Masacruz declares in a video to the U.S. Homeland Security office in Houston: "How many more deaths does it take for the U.S. government to say this is enough and do something? They need workers over there. If they didn't, people wouldn't be trying to cross the border, and in trying, many die."

A Homeland Security spokesman appears uncomfortable and replies with general references to the Sept. 11 attacks, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, and assures the women that justice is being done. "God bless you," he concludes. But the women do not feel satisfied. To them it is just another muddled message in the conundrum of post-NAFTA Mexico.

The two can only laugh when the Mexican government sends them a used industrial-size oven as a condolence to open a bakery. Without training, expensive installation and more supplies, all they are left with is a crumbled wall that was smashed to make way for the giant machine.

Masacruz and Rico are eventually flown to Houston for the penalty phase in the trial of Tyrone Williams, the truck driver who avoided a death sentence and will be retried on remaining counts. The women's

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bewilderment at being transported there with ease after their husbands' tragic route is palpable, Courtney said.

"Ultimately what I want to do with the film is connect to people in a personal way through these personal stories and create some kind of compassion," said Courtney, who profiled other women affected by their husbands' absence after the tragedy. "So when they hear these women talking about their heartbreak, they'll recognize that, because everybody has experienced heartbreak in their life."

Fiction also packed a powerful message amid the piles of snow and showbiz types. "La Tragedia de Macario" focuses on the journey of one man whose shrinking opportunities push him and a buddy into stealing across the border in a rail car.

Veliz merged his own life and news accounts of Victoria to paint a picture of desperation. Veliz's dad often sneaked into the United States to work and was gone for long periods of time, creating friction in their relationship. His dad survived, and the two patched up their differences, Veliz said. The outcome of the movie, of course, cannot be made rosier.

"You can be present inside the wagon when the immigrants suffocate to death," Veliz said. "It's tough to tell what's going on. I make it fast because it's so intense."

"Macario" was acquired by Dallas-based Arrival Pictures and scheduled for a spring domestic release in major Latino markets.

For the subjects in Courtney's real-life story, the future is far cloudier.

Said Courtney: "I hope that voices like Laura's and Carmela's can be part of a national debate about the best way to solve the immigration problem, and I mean the fact that people have to risk their lives to get here, and families have to live apart."

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