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Film walks the Mexico/U.S. line

ANNA BLOOM Of the Record staff

While filming "Letters From The Other Side," documentary filmmaker, **Heather Courtney**, suddenly found herself on the other side of the camera lens. Originally, she imagined her film would focus solely on the Mexican women and children left behind by their husbands and sons who crossed the border to work in the United States.

Then, one of her subjects asked if she wouldn't mind showing her son, an undocumented worker in the United States, some of her footage.

"That's when I realized how messed up it was that I could bring these video letters back and forth across the border," she recalls. "As a complete stranger, I can go visit her sons, but she can't unless she wanted to risk her life."

Courtney hesitated to become more of an active participant in the film, but once she started to bring the letters back and forth, she says she recognized how powerfully it illustrated what she considers to be the biggest tragedy of U.S. and Mexican immigration policies: Mexican families torn apart.

"[Families] are forced to live apart just to survive financially and they can't even visit each other, because they're not allowed to cross the border," she says.

Friday, the film had its premiere at the 2006 Slamdance Film Festival, telling the story of four families separated in order to provide a livable income for themselves and their loved ones -- a business that brought in \$1.7 billion to Mexico in 2004, according to Courtney's research. The only other source of income for the country that tops money sent to Mexican families by undocumented workers in the U.S., is oil, she says.

The idea came to her after filming *Los Trabajadores (The Workers)*, a film that focused on several day laborers in Austin, Texas.

"I didn't necessarily know how the story would play out," Courtney confesses. "I know I wanted to find women who wanted to talk about the situation and share these stories with me."

The main motivation, Courtney says, was to give these women a voice.

"It's a very human story and a personal story, and a story that's not really given much attention in the media or our national debate about immigration and trade policies," she explains. "These are the people who are being affected by the situation on a daily basis, and because of that, they can speak more articulately and elegantly than anyone else could."

Armed with a Cannon digital camera, circa 1997, Courtney shot most of the movie herself in small towns in central Mexican states under a Fulbright fellowship. She met women and families at stores or through work programs funded by the government.

"For me in the beginning especially, it was so important that these people felt comfortable," she explains. "Everyone in America is used to cameras, but these were small towns in Mexico, so they're not very media savvy. It seemed in the beginning, just me and my camera was enough."

Two of the women Courtney interviewed, Carmela Rico and Laura Masacruz, were widowed by one of the most tragic smuggling incidents in U.S. history, when 19 people suffocated to death in a truck crossing the Mexico/U.S. border in 2003.

According to Courtney, 464 people died trying to cross the border in 2005, many paying as much as \$2,000 in smuggling fees. Instead of bringing down the number of those trying to cross, she notes, a tripling of the number of Border Patrol agents since 1994, has only increased the number of those trying to get to the U.S.

The workers do not want to leave, Masacruz explains in the film.

"How many more deaths does it take for the U.S. government to say this is enough and do something?" she asks. "They need workers over there. If they didn't, people wouldn't be trying to cross the border, and in trying, many die. Enough already! Enough death and suffering!"

If there are indeed jobs for Mexican workers, Courtney agrees, they wouldn't be going. Many of those who leave have dreams of returning home to build a house, but more often than not, find that they cannot afford to move back.

According to Courtney, her film illustrates how the idea that while U.S. and Mexico will allow products and services to move across the border freely, they make it nearly impossible for some people, particularly those without resources or power, to cross that same border.

The human element is what Courtney says keeps her interested in making films. Her favorite part about the process was meeting Mexican women and being able to witness their courage, she says.

"I was really inspired by their strength and perseverance -- it taught me a lot about how to take heartbreak."

Courtney does not think "Letters From The Other Side" will necessarily have the power to change the world, but she hopes it will change some people's minds.

"The stories in the film are really about heartbreak and I think people will recognize themselves in these women," she said. "They have a saying in Mexico, 'poco a poco,' which means little by little. My hope is that the film will help people to question their previous assumptions and possibly feel moved to do something about it."

"Letters From The Other Side" will screen again at the Treasure Mountain Building on Main Street on Friday, Jan. 27 at 6 p.m. For more information, log onto www.slamdance.com.

[Photo: Maria Yanez gazes across her farm of corn and beans she cares for with her husband, Domingo, in Mexico. Photo: courtesy Front Porch Films, LLC.](#)

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