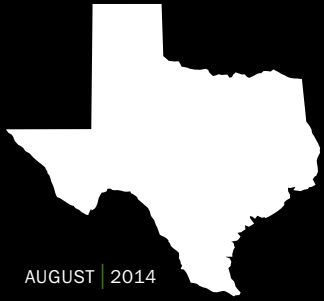


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AUGUST | 2014

OBSERVER

THE BORDER CROSSERS

They come to the U.S. fleeing violence
and poverty, and vanish in South Texas.

BY MELISSA DEL BOSQUE



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PROPERTY OF THE GOVERNMENT

If you need help
Push the red button
Help will arrive
Do not leave the area

Si necesita ayuda
Oprima el botón rojo
Ayuda llegara
Quedese aqui

如果您需要幫助
按紅色按鈕
幫助的人將抵達這裡
不要離開這裡





Into the Wilderness

Like millions of immigrants, Exelina Hernandez lived safely and illegally in the U.S. for more than a decade. To become a legal resident, she would have to risk her life.

BY MELISSA DEL BOSQUE | PHOTOS BY JEN REEL

Border Patrol has installed emergency beacons on some ranches in Brooks County for migrants who are lost or suffering a medical emergency. The sign provides instructions in English, Spanish and Chinese.

The smugglers dropped them on the side of a desolate highway at dusk.

They tumbled out of the two SUVs as if being pursued, the drivers yelling “*Apúrense!*” at their backs. The migrants skittered after two young guides into a thick patch of mesquite and thornbrush. The SUVs sped away in a cloud of white dust. Exelina Hernandez hid in the brush with the others and waited for the guides to signal that it was time to begin their long walk. The sky was streaked orange and red, and darkness was slowly enveloping them. The 24 men, women and children had formed into smaller groups with family members or others they’d met on the journey north. Indians from the highlands of Guatemala squatted next to mestizos from El Salvador and Honduras. Some were frightened, some hopeful, holding water jugs and backpacks close. After so many weeks, so many perils and thousands of dollars spent, they had finally reached the United States. Now they only needed to walk a few more miles around an immigration checkpoint and they’d be free to join their families. Exelina was looking forward to reuniting with her two young children, Ana and Javier, and her husband, Gustavo, whom she hadn’t seen since her exile to El Salvador months before. She had returned to El Salvador in a desperate attempt to gain legal residency in the United States. But gangs in her San Salvador neighborhood proved too dangerous and Exelina was fleeing back to Texas. It was a seven-hour drive to her home in Irving from the spot where Exelina hunkered down in the South Texas brush. After weeks of traveling, she was on the last leg of her journey, but she was still a long way from home.

READ more about the reasons for migration from El Salvador at txio.com/els

Her husband and children are U.S. citizens. What magic a slender passport holds. Only a month before, her stepfather had arrived in San Salvador to pick up her 10-year-old daughter for a flight to Dallas—a four-hour trip. But for someone without that precious document, the overland journey to the U.S. meant sacrifice, possibly death. She knew the trip was risky; she knew that many people died trying to reach their families in the United States, but death was difficult to comprehend. *La muerte* was a concern for the old and the infirm. She was young—just 31 years old, recently married and in love. A journey like this required hope, a positive outlook, even a joke or two to pick up the mood for her fellow travelers. It had taken her three weeks to arrive at the Texas border from San Salvador, and she spent another 11 days at a safe house in Brownsville. The privilege of being crammed into a windowless warehouse with several dozen unwashed strangers and being forced to hike for several hours through desolate ranches of thorn

scrub and prickly pear would cost her \$3,200.

At the warehouse in Brownsville, Exelina had gotten to know a woman in her late 50s, a devout Christian also from El Salvador, and a younger woman from Guatemala. Exelina was always making friends. Just 5-foot-2, she was chubby with long, wavy, dark brown hair. She loved to tell jokes and blast romantic *bachata* ballads so she could dance around her living room in Irving. She was always chatting and sharing information with the neighbors, much to her mother Elsy’s dismay. “Don’t be so friendly. You never know who a person really is,” her mother often warned. Exelina would tease her mother. “You’re like that, mamá, not me. I’m different.”

The smugglers called Exelina “*gorda*.” They joked that she was too fat to endure hours of hiking through the brush to get around the Border Patrol checkpoint in Brooks County. But she refused to listen. What choice did she have? Her kids, her husband and her family were in Irving. Every few days, a group would leave the Brownsville safe house for the journey north. But the smugglers refused to include her. Instead, they offered to smuggle her in a tractor-trailer for \$5,000. Another traveler warned Exelina that it was a trick to extort more money from her family, which could scarcely afford the \$3,200 in the first place. So she turned the offer down. After 11 days of insisting she could make the hike, and after they received half the smuggling fee, the men decided to let her make the trip. That afternoon, she left with a group of 20 men and boys and three other women, including her new friends, the Salvadoreña and the girl from Guatemala. The women stuck together, excited that they were finally on their way.

It was Friday, Nov. 1, 2013. They would walk all night and into the next day until they reached another highway north of the immigration checkpoint in Falfurrias. There, more SUVs would come for them and they would drive five hours northeast to Houston. Once they reached Houston, their families would pay the other half of the fee to the smugglers and then they’d be free. In Brownsville, the smugglers who had taken the initial payment made the trip sound routine. But, in fact, dozens die in Brooks County every year trying to hike around the Border Patrol checkpoint. The number of deaths began to climb after the checkpoint expanded and immigration policies were tightened in the mid-1990s. The death count rose even further in recent years with the exodus of Central Americans escaping violence at home. Many immigrants like Exelina feel they





have no choice. If they want to reunite with their families in the United States, they must risk the walk through the Brooks County brush.

Darkness fell and the two guides beckoned them forward. *La migra* were all around them, the guides warned. They had helicopters, surveillance balloons and truck patrols looking for immigrants. There were also the ranchers who could shoot you on sight for trespassing, and there were wild animals, snakes and roving gang members who would rob and rape you in the brush. She'd heard these stories during her stay at the safe house in Brownsville. She'd prayed with the other women for safe passage. Exelina figured she had nothing to steal anyway—only a fake gold chain with a crucifix.

It was late in the fall, but the daytime temperature reached a record 91 degrees. By the time the group started walking, the temperature had dipped to 85 degrees, but a tropical front rolling in from the Gulf of Mexico was pushing the humidity higher. The night air felt hot and close. Under a sliver of moon, the travelers tried to focus on the two guides, who carried flashlights. An occasional light from an oil rig or cell phone tower glimmered in the distance, but otherwise the night seemed impenetrable. And then there were the sounds: the mournful yips and howls of coyotes, a frightened animal rustling in the brush, their own nervous laughter when someone tripped

or was startled by a noise.

The ground shifted beneath their feet—in some places the sand was nearly a foot deep and carpeted with burrs. Since the last Ice Age, westerly winds had been depositing great layers of coastal sand across the inland county. It felt as if they were walking along the bottom of a vast ocean, drowning in darkness. The sand seeped into Exelina's shoes and rubbed at her feet. The burrs covered her pants and socks, scratching her legs. Thorns tore at her arms through her thin gray hoodie. The only vegetation that thrived in Brooks County seemed designed to inflict misery: thorny mesquite, prickly pear, horse crippler cactus and cat's claw. Mile after mile they marched through the sand, the humidity rising and barely a breeze in the air. Exelina wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve. Her thighs cramped. Her feet became blistered and raw. She began to fall behind. One of the guides, still just a teenager, offered her a pill. "So you can endure it," he said. Exelina swallowed the pill. It was an old trick of the coyotes to give the *pollos*, as they called their clients, cheap over-the-counter diet pills, or amphetamines, to keep them alert so they could walk all night. But the amphetamines caused even greater thirst. By midnight it was 68 degrees but the humidity had climbed to 94 percent. The heat felt unbearable. Her head ached and throbbed. Growing dizzy, Exelina veered away from the trail they were

Darkness fell and the two guides beckoned them forward. *La migra* were all around them, the guides warned.

A migrant way station on a private ranch near Falfurrias. Clothing and other personal items are often left behind by migrants who traverse the South Texas countryside to avoid the Border Patrol checkpoint on U.S. Highway 281.



“I told her, ‘Don’t give up. Think of your children. They are waiting for you.’”

Elsy Hernandez in her Irving home.

following, then stumbled to the ground. “I can’t walk any farther,” she said.

IT WAS SUNDAY MORNING and Elsy was at home in Irving getting ready for church when her husband Salvador’s cell phone rang. Elsy was planning that day to ask the congregation to pray for her daughter Exelina’s safe arrival. *Finally*, she thought. It had been nearly unbearable waiting so many days for a phone call from her daughter, saying she was okay and waiting for them in Houston. The cell phone showed that it was a private caller. “This could be her,” he said to Elsy, answering the phone.

“Is this Exelina’s father?” a woman asked.

“Yes, I am her stepfather,” Salvador said.

“We prayed with your daughter,” the woman said. He could tell she was Salvadoran by her accent. She sounded older than Exelina. “I told her, ‘Don’t give up. Think of your children. They are waiting for you.’”

“I don’t understand. Where is she?” Salvador said. Hearing his words, Elsy felt panic rise in her chest.

“The men carried her on their backs,” the woman said. “Even one of the smugglers carried her for a while. They didn’t want to leave her, but they just couldn’t carry her anymore, and she couldn’t walk. She couldn’t do her part.”

“Where is she?” Salvador asked again.

“We prayed with your daughter that she could walk again,” the woman continued. “We poured water over her forehead, her hair. She had stripped

off her shirt and her sweater. She told us to leave her. She was starting to foam at the mouth.”

“But where did you leave her?” he asked.

“We left water for her,” the woman said. “The guide said she was 40 minutes from a ranch, so she could get help, or immigration would fly over in a helicopter and see her there and rescue her.”

They had left Exelina at 7:30 in the morning, the woman explained, and then they walked all day until they reached the highway north of the immigration checkpoint. There they were picked up by some men in trucks and driven to Houston. They arrived that Saturday around 9 p.m. “I am a woman in my late 50s, a grandmother,” she told Salvador. “There aren’t any words to explain how difficult it was.” But somehow everyone had made it to Houston—everyone except Exelina. The ranch was near a town called Falfurrias, the woman offered. But the guides would give her no further information. “I am praying that God delivers your daughter safely to you,” the woman said, and then hung up. Salvador stared at his phone for a moment, then turned to look at his wife. The color had drained from her face. “What has happened to Exelina? Where is my daughter?” she said.

LIKE HER DAUGHTER, 47-year-old Elsy Hernandez had once hired smugglers to bring her to the United States. She had arrived in Texas in 1995. For most of her life, Elsy had been hiding from one faction or another of the Salvadoran civil war that lasted until

1992. For more than 12 years, the U.S. government invested heavily in El Salvador's right-wing military as part of its Cold War strategy, certain that the country's military dictatorship would root out the leftist guerrillas, whose ranks consisted mostly of *campesinos*, or peasant farmers, from the impoverished countryside. Because of the war, the schools in Elsy's rural hometown of Carolina, near the Honduran border, were often closed. She had little chance for an education.

Her family grew corn, beans and sesame. For years, during coffee-picking season, Elsy and her family hired on at coffee plantations and were paid per burlap sack. One day, as the family was picking coffee, soldiers arrived in a truck. One of them placed the muzzle of an assault rifle against the back of her father's head. They had orders to execute him on the spot because the family had allowed guerrillas into its home and had given them food. Elsy pleaded for her father's life: "I told them, 'They are human beings just like you. If people are starving, we feed them. We would do the same for you. We are all human beings, aren't we?'" Miraculously, the soldiers let her father go. Elsy was 12 years old. Thirty-five years later, describing the incident, in her kitchen in Irving, she wept and trembled at the memory.

At 15, Elsy became pregnant with Exelina, and three years later she had Walther, her son. One day the children's father disappeared. In those days, men were always disappearing in El Salvador. Perhaps he'd been forcibly recruited into the guerrillas or killed by government soldiers for being poor and, therefore, suspect. Or maybe he'd slipped across the border into Honduras to escape the horrors at home. In the year Exelina was born, 1982, government forces killed more than 14,000 *campesinos*, using scorched-earth tactics to wipe out whole villages, and torturing survivors to ensure the ranks of guerrilla sympathizers didn't grow. The Salvadoran military's U.S. advisers called the purges "draining the sea," and passed along other counterinsurgency tactics they'd perfected in Vietnam.

To feed her children, Elsy wove palm leaves into sleeping mats and sold them on the side of the road. But it was never enough money. When she thought about the future, she couldn't envision how her family would thrive. After many months of contemplation, she decided the only hope for her children was for her to leave. "I had two obligations foremost in my mind when I came to the United States," Elsy says. "That was to give Exelina and Walther a better life." But the United States didn't allow just anyone to migrate. If you came from a poor country, you had to have property, money and an education to obtain a U.S. visa. Elsy had none of those things. So she left Exelina, 13, and Walther, 10, with her parents in Carolina, hired a smuggler and headed north.

In Dallas, Elsy found a job cleaning office buildings at night. Every month she sent money back home to her parents and children. She met and fell in love with Salvador, a streetwise mechanic from El Salvador's capital, who, like her, had fled the war-torn shambles of El Salvador for Texas. The two married, and they had a son, Ernesto, in 1999. The years passed, and Exelina, still at her grandparents' house in Carolina, desperately missed her mother. She begged to come to Texas. So in 2001, a smuggler brought 19-year-old



Exelina as a new mother.
PHOTO COURTESY
ELSY HERNANDEZ

Exelina to the United States. The Border Patrol caught her in Eagle Pass, and she was put in a detention facility. Elsy posted \$10,500 in bail and took her home to Irving. Before she left, Exelina was given an order to appear before a U.S. immigration judge.

Now reunited, Elsy and her daughter began to catch up on lost time. They were overjoyed to be together again. But in a consultation with an immigration attorney, Elsy was informed that her daughter had little chance of winning her case. When Exelina appeared before the immigration judge, he issued an order for her deportation.

Salvador and Elsy had been luckier with U.S. immigration law. Salvador became a legal resident in the 1980s after the U.S. Congress and President Ronald Reagan granted amnesty to nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants. After Elsy married Salvador, she was able to become a legal resident, she says. But because Exelina had been caught entering the country illegally and been given a deportation order, they were told, it would be impossible to fix her immigration status. In the meantime, Exelina had fallen in love and become pregnant. She decided to ignore the deportation order and remain in Texas illegally. Elsy was furious. The bail bondsman demanded the \$10,500 in forfeited bail money. She says, "I told Exelina, 'I brought you here so you could have an education and get ahead in life.'" Elsy stopped speaking to her daughter.

Exelina found work cleaning office buildings at night and caring for other people's children during the day. She worked hard and raised her daughter Ana. In 2009, she had her son, Javier, but a year later she split with the children's father, whom she had never married. Elsy adored her two grandchildren, and through them she began to repair her complicated relationship with her daughter. In 2011, Exelina met and fell in love with Gustavo, the son of Salvadoran immigrants. Gustavo had been born in the U.S., so he was a citizen. The two were married in January 2012. Elsy was elated to see her daughter finally happy. "My daughter was so in love," she says. The family hoped that Exelina, now married to a U.S. citizen, could finally fix her immigration status. But

Within weeks, gang members began to target Exelina. They demanded money or they would kidnap and kill her children.

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So many of the dead were from her country, or Honduras or Guatemala. Brooks County was a graveyard for Central Americans.

"Love cannot be stopped." Many personal notes and items are left along the hundreds of miles of border fence dividing Mexico and Texas. Photographed in Brownsville, April 2013.

again, Exelina wasn't so lucky. U.S. immigration laws had changed in an overhaul under President Clinton in 1996. The only way for Exelina to live in the United States legally was to return to El Salvador and petition for entry, a process that could take several years.

They hired an immigration attorney to see if there was any way Exelina could remain with her family. But the attorney discovered her 2001 deportation order still on file with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which was another strike against her. The attorney advised her to return to El Salvador and apply to enter the United States. But he was candid about her prospects: Even though her husband and children were U.S. citizens, she had little chance of being admitted. The penalty for having entered the United States illegally and ignored a deportation order was a ban from the U.S. of 10 years or more.

The meeting with the attorney was devastating. Exelina debated for several weeks what to do next. Gustavo didn't want to live in El Salvador. Since the war had ended, violence and poverty had continued to plague the country, and El Salvador had one of the highest murder rates in Latin America. Gang violence had become epidemic. Salvadoran gangs such as the Barrio 18 and MS-13 traced their origins back to Los Angeles, where young Salvadoran war refugees in the '80s formed gangs as protection from other inner-city street gangs. After the civil war ended, the U.S. began deporting thousands of those gang members to El Salvador, where they carved up the country into gang-controlled fiefdoms. The government, plagued by corruption and a lack of resources, seemed powerless to contain the spiraling violence. It wasn't uncommon for someone to be killed just because he was from another neighborhood controlled by a different gang. Gustavo, who had tattoos, worried he'd be mistaken in El Salvador for a gang member and would be killed either by government forces or by gang members.

After several weeks of agonizing, Exelina decided that she wanted to do things the right way, rectify her immigration status and live in the United States legally. She would return to El Salvador, and she would take her children Ana and Javier with her, as soon as school ended in June 2012. It was a risky choice. She had lived illegally in the U.S. for more than a decade and remained safe, working and raising her kids. Now, to comply with U.S. law, she would have to put herself and her family in danger.

Gustavo would stay in Texas and help support Exelina in El Salvador until they could fix her papers. Salvador and Elsy had a house in a working-class neighborhood in the capital, San Salvador, where Exelina and the children could live. The day they left, Elsy drove her daughter and grandchildren to the Dallas airport. They cried at the airport, but they took some comfort—despite the odds—in the idea that Exelina would be able to apply for legal reentry to the United States. "I told my daughter, 'Be patient and it will all work out,'" Elsy says.

At the airport, Elsy warned Exelina, as she always did, not to be so friendly in El Salvador and not to tell the neighbors or anyone else about her family in the United States. Elsy says, "I told her, 'Mija, when I send you money, I don't want you to tell anyone. When you



speak to the neighbors only say, 'Good day, how are you?' and that's it."

In the years Exelina had been away, life in El Salvador had grown more difficult. The violent Barrio 18 gang controlled the San Salvador neighborhood where Exelina would live, extorting residents and businesses with impunity. Anyone with relatives in the United States was ripe for extortion.

But it wasn't long before Exelina was gossiping with her neighbors in San Salvador, sharing stories about how much she missed her new husband and her family in Texas. Within weeks, gang members began to target Exelina. They demanded money or they would kidnap and kill her children. At first, the monthly extortion was \$200. Every month Elsy and Salvador sent money to pay off the gang. "She would call me in tears, saying she didn't want to live there anymore," Elsy says. "But I would tell her, 'Be patient. Wait for your immigration papers to come through.'"

Still, Exelina and her husband found the U.S. immigration system difficult to navigate. Months passed and Exelina's request for residency seemed to stall with no explanation. Her 3-year-old son, Javier, became sick, and she decided he should return to Irving to get treatment. In Texas, he would also be safe from the gangs. Her stepfather flew to El Salvador and took the boy home. A few months later, the gang members began to ask for \$500 a month or they would kidnap her 10-year-old daughter. "I sent the money three months in a row," Elsy says. But the threats continued. One night, Exelina called and



asked her mother to come for her granddaughter. “She was afraid the gang would take her,” Elsy says. In September 2013, Salvador flew to the capital again and picked up his granddaughter. “Exelina must have been thinking about leaving then,” Salvador says. “But she never mentioned it.”

A few days later, Exelina locked the front gate of her home in San Salvador, leaving almost all of her possessions behind, and boarded a bus headed north.

THE FIRST THING ELSY NOTICED about Falfurrias when she arrived in December 2013 was its size. “There was hardly anything there,” she says. The town that weighed so heavily on her mind was little more than a few stoplights and the ever-expanding immigration checkpoint 13 miles south of town. Brooks County, with its 942 square miles, has just 7,162 residents—the majority of them in Falfurrias, which sits 80 miles north of the border and hugs Highway 281, which runs south to the Rio Grande Valley and north to Canada.

After the Salvadoran woman called, Elsy phoned ICE hoping her daughter had been detained, as she had in 2001. But ICE officials said they didn’t have Exelina. Elsy then found a contact for a volunteer humanitarian search-and-rescue group, which warned her about the rugged conditions on the private ranches in Brooks County. They told her they would put together a search party, but the help never materialized. “I waited and waited and prayed,” she says. Finally she could wait no longer. So, the day after Christmas, Elsy,

Salvador and a friend who speaks English arrived in Falfurrias with photos of Exelina.

Like hundreds of other families, the first place they went was the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office in Falfurrias. Elsy met with Chief Deputy Benny Martinez, who asked about the details of Exelina’s journey, when she went missing and whether they had information on any landmarks to help locate her. “Honestly, he was the first official who treated me with respect,” Elsy says. At the sheriff’s office, she was shocked to see so many stacks of thick binders with photos of the dead listed by year and by month. Martinez explained that 87 bodies had been found in 2013, and 129 the year before, and that so many of the dead were from her country, or Honduras or Guatemala. Brooks County was a graveyard for Central Americans. Thousands of Mexicans and Central Americans passed through Brooks County every year. How many more lost souls were out there? At least the ones in the binders had been found. There were photos of skeletal remains and more recently found bodies, blackened and bloated. Only a favorite shirt, wallet or other personal items hinted at their identities. Martinez asked whether Elsy could bear looking through these binders for her daughter. She nodded, and began with November 2013. “All these people. So many of them alone there in the wilderness with a cell phone next to them or a jug of water nearby,” she says. But none of them was her daughter. When she left the sheriff’s office, Martinez warned Elsy it would be unwise to enter the ranches herself to try to find Exelina: “He said, ‘You cannot enter those places. They’re private and so vast it will be impossible to find her.’” Elsy and Salvador visited the two mortuaries in town where bodies found on the ranches were sometimes taken, but no one recognized the photo of her daughter. The next morning, they drove home.

Seven months have passed since Elsy went to Falfurrias. These days, Brooks County is often in the news. Each night in Irving, she watches the Spanish-language news, which tells her about the tens of thousands of Central Americans coming to Texas, many of them just children, who, like her, tried to imagine a future at home but saw nothing but poverty and violence. But what she is really looking for is her daughter. She hopes to catch a glimpse of Exelina on TV in one of the many stash-house raids or in the news of another smuggling ring dismantled in South Texas. “In my heart, I feel that my daughter is alive,” she tells me. “I think she may have been kidnapped in Brooks County. Every day I ask God to touch the heart of the people who have her, so that they release her to me.” Elsy is standing in her kitchen, clutching her cell phone to her chest. “A mother knows these things,” she says. Exelina’s daughter, Ana, turned 11 in May. And every night her 4-year-old son, Javier, asks Elsy when his mother will kiss him goodnight. Elsy doesn’t know what to tell him anymore. Most nights she doesn’t sleep. Instead, she stares at her cell phone waiting for a call that never comes. And thinks of her daughter lost somewhere in the wilderness, trying to find her way home. ❏

Staff writer Melissa del Bosque is a 2014-2015 Lannan Fellow at The Investigative Fund, a project of The Nation Institute.

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