

U.S.–MEX:VIOLENCE

Life, Death and Journalism on the Border

by Ricardo Sandoval



Photo from Associated Press.

Relatives mourn Raúl Gibb Guerrero, the owner and editor of *La Opinión*, a Veracruz daily.

Alfredo Corchado's call, at close to midnight in the fall of 2004, convinced me we had been right in our reporting of a troublesome spike in violence by drug traffickers along the U.S.–Mexico border. And his description of an encounter with a mysterious man inside a honky-tonk bar in Laredo, Texas, was evidence that we'd touched a dangerous nerve.

I was nearly asleep in my Mexico City home when Alfredo phoned to report he had just been face to face with an unidentified man who bought him a drink, wrapped an arm around his shoulders, smiled and finished a soliloquy on media coverage of drug violence with a calm warning: "Remember, the FBI can't protect everyone."

It was not the first threat Alfredo had received since we launched a probe for *The Dallas Morning News* that began with a close look at who was killing women in Ciudad Juárez, a lawless sprawl of improvised suburbs and industrial

maquiladoras on the west Texas border with Mexico. On more than one occasion in the last four years, Alfredo has found himself scrambling to get out of public view and backing away from the front lines of coverage of the tumultuous border.

But as Alfredo says, it's been worth it to shine a light on a region once ignored, a region once written off as little more than a colorful amalgamation of people who lived and worked on either side of a political fence.

Alfredo has spearheaded work that's yielded evidence of drug dealers and corrupt Mexican police kidnapping women to be abused at traffickers' parties. The articles led to revelations that an informant, paid by U.S. intelligence agents, had infiltrated the highest ranks of the ruthless Juárez Cartel, worked with police officials in the kidnapping gang and orchestrated murders of rival traffickers, including at least one U.S. citizen. The border crime beat then led Alfredo to Nuevo Laredo, where a group of ex-soldiers known as The

Zetas — some trained by U.S. Special Forces — had switched sides and launched a bloody assault on drug territory ruled by Mexico's dominant cartels. At its apex, Alfredo's work attracted an important accolade — the Maria Moores Cabot Award for career contributions to coverage of Latin America. It also drew him attention, again, from drug traffickers. They were, perhaps, upset he had obtained a video showing the confession of a man who'd crossed the Zetas. The interrogation ended with the man's on-camera execution.

On our journeys back and forth across the border, Alfredo and I learned some hard lessons about how to report from the outer reaches of the border and not get jailed, kidnapped or killed.

"Drug violence has killed more than 300 people this year [in Mexico]. Eighty in Ciudad Juárez alone, and more than 5,000 in the last two years," Alfredo said at the start of our discussion on border journalism at UC Berkeley in February. "Nearly 40 of those victims were journalists, making the job of border correspondent one of the most dangerous anywhere in the world. Still, it's not just lives at stake; it's the very existence of what we do. As a journalist, I can think of no other time when news gathering has been so threatened and difficult to do."

Alfredo's work on the border for The Morning News has been stunning in its revelations and for underscoring an important

message: Just south of us, across a porous border that only nominally separates the United States from Mexico, there is a cancerous growth of violence and corruption, fed by billions of dollars collected from North America's insatiable hunger for illegal drugs. Lurking under that lawlessness are growing fears among officials that the violence and systemic corruption will spread deeper into both nations.

Today the story can no longer be ignored. As the situation worsens along the border — in some cases producing the kind of violence on our streets that we traditionally associate with war-torn lands far away — there are signs of increased attention from important media outlets in the United States. That has helped me get over the sting of a comment, in 2004, from a U.S. law enforcement official who told me privately: "The unfortunate truth is that these are mostly Mexicans, and criminals killing criminals, so you may find it hard to get people to care."

Our work on the border for The Morning News got a jump start after a conversation I had in Dallas in early 2004 with the paper's inquisitive editor, Robert Mong. At the end of a chat on our overall coverage of Mexico and Latin America, I asked Mong if there was one story he thought we ought to pursue to greater depth.

"Well, I keep thinking we ought to do more on the women of Juárez ..."

I suggested it would make a great project for Alfredo, whose own family roots are imbedded in the desert soil along the Tex-Mex border.

I returned to Mexico City and didn't think much more of that conversation until a few weeks later, when Alfredo called to tell me he was bound for El Paso. It was an impromptu trip, ordered by Dallas, to see if he could match what our editors had thought was an imminent story on the Juárez murders in The New York Times.

I knew this was a big opportunity. I admonished Alfredo

that he had to break new ground on a story that until then had only been told, in fits and starts, by regional and local reporters.

"You have to either really show the reader what it's like to live with fear in Juárez or solve one of these crimes," I said.

And dang it, Alfredo did both.

The story of a possible serial killer or killers had intrigued me since 1998,

when I interviewed the distraught mother of a young girl who had long been missing and presumed dead. I was with Esther Chávez, a diminutive super-hero of a woman who forced authorities early on to look at the hundreds of deaths and disappearances of woman as an important criminal phenomenon. We were in the tiny living room of Irene Pérez's particleboard home in a desert swath outside Juárez.

"What makes you believe there is a serial killer working here?" I asked.

"One thing," Pérez replied, coldly and stiffly, having obvious difficulty disguising her sorrow. "One day the police told me they had found my daughter. They said to come over and identify her body. I went, but when I saw the body I told them it was not my daughter, but it was my daughter's clothes," on some other girl.

Today, I'm safely behind an editor's desk at The Sacramento Bee. But that day with Pérez and Chávez in

"The vulnerability of media workers in Mexico to organized crime, especially the drug-trafficking cartels, was made clear in its most tragic dimension in 2006, when there were nine assassinations of media workers in Mexico alone."

— The 2006 Annual Report of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Organization of American States.

Juárez remains a vivid memory among the many important events I witnessed in a decade as a correspondent in Latin America. It's rendered starker by the knowledge that the activist women, and the reporters who work with them, still live under a cloud of narco-violence along the border.

Meeting Chávez and Pérez led me to interviews in Juárez with many more grieving mothers, outraged activists, befuddled investigators and, on more than one occasion, men who may have had a hand in some of the violence against women.

The first of such encounters, in 1998, was punctuated by a deep chill moving up from my toes. The sensation was born from a long interview, in a state prison in Juárez, with a man known simply as "El Diablo," The Devil. His black eyes unblinking, El Diablo calmly protested his innocence of charges he led a street gang, The Rebels, that stood accused of being paid to kill women.

"You seem like you understand me and my plight," El Diablo said near the end of the interview. "Give me your number and address in Mexico City, and I'll contact you to continue our conversation."

I knew that prison, in Mexico, was only a physical barrier to guys intent on continuing to do business like they did when they were on the street.

I managed a nervous smile before thanking El Diablo. I said I'd call him later.

Alfredo, too, remains tied to Ciudad Juárez. He's back there now, reporting on the discoveries of dozens of bodies, sometimes buried in mass graves, of victims of Mexico's as-yet unchecked war among drug traffickers, Mexican army units and police.

This time around, however, Alfredo is noticing a significant muzzle on once-proud local journalists. "I'm in Ciudad Juárez with another journalist, who in hushed tones told me they are being censored," Alfredo said during the UC Berkeley talk. "Two of his reporters were sent to the El Paso side of the border to hide out after being threatened by narcos. I had come full circle, back to where this dark journey had begun for me."

Ricardo Sandoval is Assistant City Editor at The Sacramento Bee and was a foreign correspondent in Latin America from 1997 to 2005. He gave a talk for CLAS with Alfredo Corchado on February 28, 2008.

Cambio Sonora, a newspaper based in Hermosillo, Mexico, reports on its own closure.



Photo from Associated Press.