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**LOCAL NEWS**

**'He wanted a better life for us'**

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BY BLAKE SCHMIDT, SUN STAFF WRITER  
May 22, 2006, 7:41 pm

With his father unable to work because of a cyst in his kidney, Edgar Martinez-Colorado decided he would have to be the bread winner for his family.



So he left his job at a Coca-Cola factory in Coatepec, Veracruz, with a human smuggler he had met through his godfather. He headed north to the United States.

"He wanted a better life for us," his mother, Lucilia, said in a telephone interview with The Sun.

One of a number of surviving illegal aliens is wheeled into YRMC emergency room five years ago today. Fourteen of the group died as a result of exposure. SUN FILE PHOTO

Martinez-Colorado and a group of 27 illegal immigrants from Veracruz and other parts of Mexico crossed the border

illegally east of Yuma, following a route that has been known as "the devil's path" in 115-degree heat.

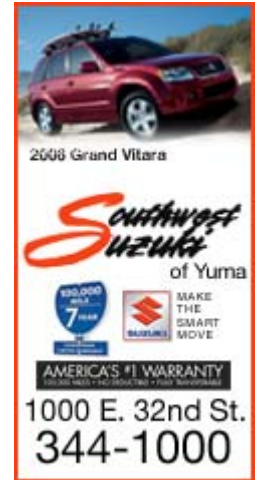
Five days after the group of Mexican men and teenage boys set out across the border, Colorado-Martinez's body was found along with 13 others in the desert near Tacna.

It was five years ago today that the bodies were found after their group had been abandoned by their smugglers in what is considered to be the deadliest attempt to cross the border in Arizona history.

Thirteen people survived from the group, at least one having told doctors he drank his own urine in desperation.

Since the group, referred to as the "Yuma 14," first grabbed international headlines five years ago, their fatal trip along the Yuma-Pima county line has led to books on the subject and a failed lawsuit, and has fueled civilian and government attempts to reduce the number of deaths on the border.

Months after the deaths, the U.S. Border Patrol's Yuma sector installed its first rescue beacons, towering devices with emergency buttons and instructions in English and Spanish that are placed at points in the desert where immigrants have



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been known to cross. The sector has 12 beacons with plans to put up seven more and the sector has been training a growing number of agents how to respond to medical emergencies, said Claudia Delgado, spokeswoman for the patrol's Yuma sector.

Thanks to the beacons plus cooperation by the U.S. and Mexican governments, more aliens are being rescued by the Border Patrol than perish in the desert, Delgado said.

The Mexican government airs public-service announcements about the dangers of crossing the border, and has helped U.S. authorities prosecute smugglers, Delgado said.

"An unprecedented binational cooperation between the United States and the government of Mexico has proven that by utilizing the right combination of technology, manpower and infrastructure, as well as educating potential illegal border crossers through public-service announcements, more lives can be saved and tragedy averted," she said.

Eleven family members of some of those who died five years ago filed a \$42 million lawsuit against the federal government. The lawsuit contended that the deaths could have been avoided if the government had let humanitarian groups set up water stations for illegal immigrants in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.

A request to put in water stations made by Tucson group Humane Borders was denied in an April, 2001, letter from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which said the stations could not be granted in "critical habitat" for the endangered Sonoran pronghorn.

"The next month, they picked up 14 bodies," said Robin Hoover, director of Humane Borders.

Hoover said the group walked within a mile of one of the group's proposed water stations. Though the lawsuit was dismissed last year, the refuge has permitted five water stations in Pima County, Hoover said.

The case has left family members like Lucilia Colorado-Martinez in Mexico wondering who is to blame, and attempts by the Border Patrol and civilian groups to reduce the number of deaths here have been frustrated as the Yuma area is flooded with an increasing number of illegal immigrants crossing the desert.

Though the number of immigrant rescues in the Yuma sector each year have quintupled since 2002, so have the number of deaths — to a record 51 last year.

As the patrol intensified security elsewhere along the border, a shift in immigration flows through the Yuma sector was anticipated, sector officials have said, and the patrol has sought to minimize resulting deaths by putting up rescue beacons.

A section of a Yuma cemetery where unidentified bodies are buried has a growing number of unidentified bodies found in the desert and near the Colorado River that are believed to have been immigrants, said Candy Ruby, Yuma County public fiduciary.

"These were individuals that were trying to chase the American dream," said local immigrant advocate Fernando Quiroz, standing among crosses at Terrace Cemetery in Holtville, Calif.

Holtville is within the patrol's El Centro sector, where rising numbers of deaths have also been recorded.

Though most of the immigrants found in the desert are sent back to their homes in Mexico via the Mexican Consulate, some end up in cemeteries like the ones in Holtville and Yuma.

"This is immigration policy at work right here," Quiroz said, looking out over about 500

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graves in a section of the cemetery tucked away behind rows of bushes.

The cemetery's groundskeeper, Martin Sanchez, said most of the bodies are unidentified people believed to be immigrants.

Ruby said that in the last five years, 41 unidentified bodies have been buried in the Yuma cemetery, most of them believed to be illegal immigrants who died trying to cross the border.

Quiroz, who used to plant water in the desert west of Yuma for illegal immigrants nearing Interstate 8, said though there are human-rights groups operating throughout California and eastern Arizona, there is no group in the Yuma sector, though the number of deaths are rising.

Lucilia Colorado-Martinez said she has been trying to put her son's death to rest.

She said she does not know what to think of the smugglers who led her son into the United States. At least three people — Jesus Lopez Ramos, Joel Viveros Flores and Francisco Vasquez Torrez have been convicted and sentenced in connection with the alien deaths, according to The Sun's archives.

Her son never told her how he planned to get to the United States.

"According to (Edgar), the smuggler was a safe person," she said.

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