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**Crossing Arizona**

(Documentary)

A Rainlake production. Produced by Dan DeVivo.  
 Executive producers, Kim Connell, Joel Pomeroy.  
 Directed by Joseph Mathew.

With: Mike Wilson, Byrd Baylor, Chris Simcox, Manuela Martinez, Alexis Mazon, Isabel Garcia, Robin Hoover, Rev. John Fife, Ray Ybarra, Ray Borane, Racquel Goldsmith, Adam Adame.

By **DENNIS HARVEY**

One of several recent docus looking at the trafficking of illegal immigrants across the Mexico/U.S. border, "Crossing Arizona" finds a vivid hook in the fact that more than a thousand such migrants have died -- primarily from thirst -- in the harsh deserts of southern Arizona since the mid-1990s. From anti-immigrant conservatives to humanitarian organizations, everyone agrees on one thing: Current federal policy isn't working, and something must be done to curb this death toll. Former photojournalist Joseph Mathew's soph feature is a potent plea for just that, most suitable for pubcast showcasing.



Tonoho O'odham tribe member Milke Wilson services water stations where illegals often cross in doc 'Crossing Arizona.'

Pic begins and ends (perhaps slightly overplaying this hand) with Mike Wilson, a member of the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation whose reservation lands are often crossed by illegals. Saying "Nobody deserves to die in the desert for a cup of water," Wilson makes

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weekly trips to refresh jugs left at scattered points in a landscape where bodies are routinely found dead of dehydration -- when they're found at all. But even among his tribes people, some consider such humanitarian efforts as encouraging an unwanted immigrant flood.

"Hold the line" measures introduced in California and Texas closed off easier crossing routes over a decade ago, forcing an undaunted stream of emigres toward New Mexico and Arizona. This stretched journeys to four or five days, in temperatures up to 120, though sparsely populated lands with scant natural water sources.

Misinformed by their paid-guide "coyotes," the arrivals often have little idea how far it is to urban centers they can "disappear" into, like Phoenix -- and the more heartless coyotes simply leave behind the sick or slow to perish.

Among those interviewed here are humanitarian org volunteers who, like Wilson, patrol such areas to replenish water stations and hopefully find lost foot travelers. Other individuals and citizen's groups also patrol, albeit in order to spot groups they'll detain until Border Patrol officers arrive to arrest and deport them.

While some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric sounds suspiciously racist, or inflamed by distorted right-wing input, it's hard not to sympathize with ranchers whose longtime family lands and livestock suffer frequent costly damage as a result of the emigres forever tromping through.

Nor are all those in favor of tougher law enforcement and beefed-up border security straight-ticket Republican stereotypes -- crusading Tombstone newspaper publisher Chris Simcox openly scorns President Bush for directing human and monetary resources toward the Iraq war rather than these closer-to-home problematic foreigners.

On the other hand, a gloating Simcox's successful organization of civilian "Minutemen" may be activism run amuck: Do we really want regular folks, many exercising their Constitutional right to bear arms, excitedly searching for Central American "undesirables" as if it were deer season?

And some national personalities, like the inimitable Bill O'Reilly and Republican Congressman Tom Tangredo, are simply fanning hysteria. Fear that a tide of "criminals" and "drug dealers" is flowing North is not born out by the many undocumented migrants here who say they've been forced to leave their families in order to provide for them.

Those who suggest more Border Patrol officers and Berlin Wall-type fences overlook the fact that such U.S.-driven policies as the North American Free Trade Agreement largely created the collapsed local

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economies which in turn create emigrant waves. Additionally, point is made that undocumented workers are a huge if unacknowledged part of the U.S. infrastructure.

Deftly sustaining many points of view, engrossing feature begins to seem overloaded only toward the end, when it suffers typical docu dilemma of trying to wrap up too many ideas in a complex, still-evolving debate. Lensing and editorial contribs are solid.

Camera (color, HD), Mathew; additional camera, Dan DeVivo. supervising editor, Kim Connell; editors, DeVivo, Laurie MacMillan, Christina Kaufman; sound, Mike Dillinberger. Reviewed at Sundance Film Fest (competing), Jan. 20, 2006. Running time: 97 MIN.

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