Las Américas Comunidad de Fe
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SHE COULDN’T COME IN ALIVE

Maira Zelaya died at 7 pm on Monday, June 15; but the coroner didn’t register her death officially until 10 am on Tuesday morning. He said the official cause of death was exposure, meaning exposure to the heat and cold, sun and drought and the barren landscape of the desert that she crossed from Mexico to Arizona. I guess I would say, she died of exposure not only the cruel elements of nature; but to cruel, unjust immigration laws, to the barren neutrality of apathy, to cold hearts and hot tempers driven by fear of the privileged population believing the “Mairas” of the world want to “take from” them.

“Take what?” I wonder. Would they take anything nearly as valuable as your family, the ones you love, the very heart of your being? Maira knew what it was like to be separated from her family. When she was a small child her mother, Carmen, had fled to the United States from El Salvador during the war years with the hope of finding a job so she could send money back to feed the family. Maira’s brothers came to the U.S. at different times for different reasons, but Maira stayed in Ursulutan to take care of her grandmother. When ‘la abuelita’ died nine years ago, it was Carmen’s time to finally reunite with her mother.

When Maira crossed the border, she was stopped by Immigration officials and was given a court date to appear before a judge in Texas. Her family paid the required fees and brought her to Iowa. Because it was far away and Maira did not have a lawyer to ask how to change the venue, she didn’t appear in immigration court. Her failure to appear in court was an automatic cause for the judge to issue a deportation order.

Around nine years later on Feb. 20, 2009 at 7:00 in the morning, ICE officials knocked on her mother’s door. Maira, always cheerful and friendly, opened the door and they barged into the house. They had a piece of paper with someone’s name and picture on it. The family knew the name, but the person had never lived in that house. They think the person had moved out of state and was using their address. The ICE agents asked for everyone to show their IDs and then they arrested Maira, her brother, Elmer, and a family friend. Elmer was released on bond, but Maira was held for two months in Polk County jail, one week of which was in ‘the hole’ – solitary confinement with only a hole in the middle of the room, no furniture, blanket or anything, one month in Texas and then deported in April.

From El Salvador, Maira told her mother she was coming back to the U.S. Her mother begged her not to, but Maira made arrangements with a coyote. She paid him $6,500 which provided her a trip and guide through Mexico, mostly in taxis or vans, and then another guide would take them over the border. The group of 21 prepared to walk two nights, all night long. They made it through the first night, but during the second night they were spotted by a helicopter and they hid. Later the helicopter came back and ICE agents came to capture them. Half of the group was caught, but Maira was among the few who followed the coyote and escaped. They regrouped and decided they would wait a day and go another way.
On the day they were to take off, Maira called her mom and talked of her experience – her fear, the exhaustion, the thirst, the hunger, the bruises and bumps. Carmen heard Maira’s deep profound cough and begged her daughter to turn back, but she did not. As they walked they heard the helicopter overhead and they all dove into the hot, biting sand. The helicopters flew away. Before the day was up Maira became too weak to walk and Noe, a friend, carried her in his two arms. The rest of the group grew impatient with him. Around 7:00 pm he knew that she had died. The others in the group said, “Put her down. She’s already dead. Put her down so we can get going!”

“No,” he cried. “She is a human being not an animal. I’m not leaving her here!”

The others took off without them. Noe found shade under a tree, laid her down and covered her with a sweater. He walked for two hours trying to find someone to help, anyone - ICE or whoever - with no luck. He returned and carried her to the highway which took the rest of the night. Early in the morning he reached the highway and set her body along the side of the road and went in search of anyone who could help him. He found an Immigration station and told them where he had left the body and how they could identify her.

His arms were bloody and bruised from carrying Maira through the night. He was exhausted and weak from hunger and thirst. Immigration officials put handcuffs around his bloody wrists and arrested him. After he was processed, Noe was allowed to call Maira’s family to explain what had happened. They already knew because the El Salvadoran consulate had contacted them. They say they will always be grateful for Noe’s compassion and courage. If Noe had not made such a sacrifice, Maira’s body would have been left along the way, unidentifiable, unburied, and abandoned to the forces of nature.

Noe feels fortunate. Normally a person caught while re-entering the US after they have been deported receives an automatic sentence of 5?? years. Noe’s lawyers have given him hope that his heroic and humanitarian efforts will encourage the court to be lenient with him. Hopefully, he will be in jail only for a couple of months before they deport him.

Maira’s family knows many, many people who have crossed as Maira did and they have heard of the hundreds of people who die each year; but they have never known anyone who died. They were sure it had to be a mistake until they actually saw her. They couldn’t imagine another option except to have her body brought to Iowa. However, they had no idea that the complete cost of the sending and preparing; coffin, burial plot, etc. would cost $17,000.00. They would have done the same if they had known the cost ahead of time, but they continue to wonder if there could have been a cheaper way to do it.

The visitation and funeral for Maira were during a week of sweltering Iowa summer – a ‘not even the wisp of a mouse tail kind of breeze’ day. Fans roared and brows dripped, while we were all aware of the luxury of fans and roof and water that had been denied Maira. I looked at the crowd of sad faces and I asked, “How many of you have traveled that same path that Maira took?” Easily 75% of them, without hesitation, raised their hands. Others seemed to be remembering another path that must have been equally difficult.

The family had requested to have an all night vigil, as is their custom in El Salvador. They could not have it in their home so they asked to use the church. Because our church has an incredible personality of radical hospitality, there wasn’t even a thought of rules or regulations of the church. I could, without hesitation, afford the family that courtesy.

After the funeral many expressed their thanks and wondered why they had never participated in an all night vigil in the United States. Was it against the law? Was it not permitted? The response was; no, it is not against the law, nor is it forbidden by any official agency. Perhaps previously nobody had the open relationship that we have or listened to the
needs of the people or the regulations of the building didn’t permit it. For this family, it was very important to grieve in their traditional way.

Because the visitation was in the church, we needed to decide when the casket would be closed, when they would say their ultimate farewells to Maira. Having been to funerals where the casket is reopened after the service, I have personal objections to doing that in the church. We had celebrated Maira’s life and had, during the worship service, handed her over to God’s care. When there was some discomfort among the family members, I held strong to my theologically correct (from my point of view) answer. After our meeting ended, I called a friend who is a pastor from Mexico. He assured me that it was quite customary to reopen the casket at the cemetery, stay until the casket was lowered and filled in with dirt. Even then the family members might stay for some time after all of this had been done.

As the family gathered in a side room before the funeral service began, I apologized for my presumptuous behavior. I assured them we could leave the casket closed or open it as they preferred at the cemetery. Most quietly indicated that they preferred the casket to remain shut, but an aunt voiced her opinion, strongly, that it be reopened. I looked at the mother, and said, “And what would the mother prefer?” She quietly said to keep it closed, to which everyone agreed whole heartedly with her choice.

The short service at the cemetery was difficult. The pain and sorrow were expressed openly and unabashedly with no attempts to muffle the volume. It was difficult to speak over the cries. There was fainting, smelling salts and great sadness by all, as we sought shelter from the hot sun beneath the shade of the awning and the large trees. In the background was the distance sound of the carillon playing familiar hymns. As beautiful as the music was, I wondered how many of those hymns were part of the family’s faith tradition? How many losses have they suffered?

It requires some time and effort to connect the past and continuing U. S. foreign policies, the war in El Salvador and immigration policies to Maira’s death; but we must if we believe understanding is the first step to change. Sitting under the shade trees, listening to the carillon and the cries of her family; it is hard to see beyond borders to the direct connection of the U. S. and El Salvadoran governments actions that contributed to her death; but we must understand if we are to stop the cries of future generations.

We, those with voice and vote and power to cross whatever boundaries exist, must walk with ‘the Mairas’ and use our voices, our hands, our bodies to carry her story so that deaths in the desert never happen again. We are called by God to be on the journey with them, those who are overshadowed and overpowered by forces greater than all of us. Name those forces what you will, they are evil and we know God’s love is greater than evil.

If we are to be faithful to the message of Jesus, if we are to be the body of Christ resurrected with the same message that caused John the Baptist to lose his head – the Reign of God is here and has no boundaries or borders – we must stand together, across all borders to reveal to all creation that God’s message of love, mercy and justice is for all creation.

We must if we are to stand with the long line of faithful witnesses who have risked all – life, limb and property – carry the voices of the ‘Mairas,’ rather than their dead bodies, to the places where changes in laws happen.

God’s will be done. ¡Así sea!

Rev. Barbara Dinnen
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