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IN FOCUS

At this year's Salem Film Fest, clashing views when crossing borders

By Peter Keough Globe Correspondent, Updated March 10, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Eddie Canales trying to remove graffiti from a water station. HANDOUT

Every year I serve as a juror for the [Salem Film Fest](#) (March 19-28) I have the same difficulty picking the best films. They are all first rate, and here are two among the many contenders.

Lisa Molomot and Jeff Bemiss's "**Missing in Brooks County**" begins with what seems a murder scene. A man in a pick-up spots vultures circling overhead and drives into the brush where he discovers the body of a young man.

For the driver, Eddie Canales, this is a common occurrence. Director of the South Texas Human Rights Center, he is one of the people in Brooks County, Texas, who cares about the immigrants crossing the arid, sweltering wasteland on their way to find friends, family, or employment farther north. He puts out water stations for the desperate refugees and searches for the many reported missing by their loved ones.

Another Good Samaritan is Kate Spradley, a forensic anthropologist who brings a team of her Texas State University students into the county's badlands to recover some of the hundreds of undiscovered bodies. They take the bodies to the lab where they try to identify them in order to notify the deceased's families.

On the other side of the issue, rancher and veterinarian Michael Vickers has seen the flow of migrants increase from a few polite peasants a week to a flood of desperate people. Many of them, he claims, are criminals and possibly terrorists. To counter this invasion he has formed a paramilitary group to hunt down the migrants and report them to US Border Patrol agents. He also refuses to allow Canales to put his water stations on his property, claiming that only encourages human traffickers and drug smugglers. If the migrants are desperate for water, he says, there's plenty available, indicating a cistern for livestock with its surface covered with scum.

As for Canales, he doesn't trust Vickers. "I think he's connected [with the smugglers and traffickers]," he muses. "We're just waiting to catch him. . . ."

This is not the first documentary about the immigration crisis, but it's one of the most nuanced and disturbing. The filmmakers tell the stories with restraint, emphasizing the injustices, cruelty, and suffering without needless, manipulative exaggeration. They shift deftly among their subjects and present them with empathy and understated irony, building a suspenseful multi-narrative that is part detective story, part family tragedy, part critique of a dysfunctional immigrant policy.

"Missing in Brooks County" can be streamed from March 19 at midnight to March 28 at 11:45 p.m.