

TASTE & MYSA

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San Antonio Express-News

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SPECIAL REPORT

A dangerous dream

Convinced a better life awaited them in the U.S., they set out from remote Guatemalan villages, their toddlers in tow. They entrusted their fate to smugglers. In the dense brush near the Rio Grande, something went terribly wrong.



Photos by Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Amelia Sopón, 42, grandmother of Marleny, grieves the death of her granddaughter by a small shrine at her home in El Reparo, Guatemala.

A Catholic layman, Onofre Dioncio Paxtor, leads a group in song at a shrine for Briseyda Chicac and her son, Denilson, in Guatemala.



By Silvia Foster-Frau and Dudley Althaus
STAFF WRITERS

CIHIQUIRINES, Guatemala — All three were mothers. In May and June, they set out separately from villages nestled among the banana and oil palm groves of Guatemala's Pacific Coast. Two of them were accompanied by their husbands; a third planned to meet hers in Los Angeles. In leaving behind their homes, friends and loved ones, they were guided by a set of commonly held assumptions. In Guatemala, they were poor and always would be. In the U.S., they would find opportunities undreamed of back home. This was the received wisdom, and

it told them something else: to bring their children with them, despite the dangers. Once they crossed the Rio Grande, they would be safe. They would surrender to Border Patrol agents and quickly be released from custody, with a notice to appear before authorities at a later date. And so all three women brought their children on the journey, five in all: three girls and two boys. The oldest was 11, the youngest 15 months. Unlike thousands of migrants, these three families were not driven from their homeland by famine or persecution. Their villages had not been gripped by gang violence. Rather, it was a sense of futility, of

thwarted aspiration, that propelled them, family members said. "In the city, there's violence. In the countryside, there's poverty," said Adalberto Aguilar, a brother of one of the women, Neyli Aguilar, 35. "The only option is to live the American dream." Their dream ended in a thicket on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande in South Texas. There, one of the mothers, Briseyda Chicac, 20, and three of the children were found dead June 23. It appears they became disoriented in the dense scrubland and succumbed to heat exposure, authorities said. Their remains were discovered just

Nightmare continues on A16

Missing woman's husband arrested

By Peggy O'Hare and Vincent T. Davis
STAFF WRITERS

For more than four months, the family and friends of Andreen Nicole McDonald, the businesswoman and mother who went missing and was presumed dead, grieved and searched for answers.

On Saturday, two days after her skeletal remains were found, her husband, Air Force Reserve Maj. Andre Sean McDonald, 40, was arrested and charged with murder in her death.

He became a suspect almost immediately after his wife disappeared Feb. 28.

Bexar County sheriff's officials haven't publicly revealed how Andreen, 29, was killed.

Her body was found almost by chance Thursday night on a ranch in the 600 block of Specht Road, east of Camp Bullis — just 6 miles from the couple's home.

Arrest continues on A4

Colleges move toward free tuition

By Brooke LaMantia
STAFF WRITER

The Alamo Colleges District board unanimously voted Saturday to launch the first phase of a program that eventually is to offer all new graduates of Bexar County high schools free tuition at its five community colleges.

Officials said Alamo Promise will cost the district \$300,000 in funding for the first year, to cover graduates of the 25 high schools whose seniors historically have had the lowest college-going rates in the county or have higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

The estimated loss of tuition revenue the district must cover the first year will be relatively small because so many of those graduates qualify for federal Pell grants and other assistance, but is expected to jump to

Colleges continues on A17

To our readers

Starting today, Opinion will have a new home in the Sunday Express-News.

Editorials, cartoons, letters, and local and national op-ed pieces no longer will appear in a free-standing Opinion section on Sundays. Instead, they will be published in the back of the main news section, just like on other days of the week.

The book reviews, author profiles and related content that appeared in Sunday Opinion now can be found in Taste & MySA (Section E).

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FROM THE COVER



Amalia Perez, mother of Briseyda Chicas, holds her adopted daughter, Asly. Briseyda wanted to earn money to help her parents.

Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Nightmare ending to a dream

From page A1

west of McAllen, in a wildlife refuge encircled by a gravel road used by the Border Patrol.

The location is a short walk from a popular riverfront park that President Donald Trump visited in January to promote his immigration crackdown.

The two other mothers — Neyli and Yaquelin Reyes, 20 — were rescued by Border Patrol agents, taken to a hospital and later placed in detention.

Briseyda's and Neyli's husbands had crossed the river safely days earlier, each with one of the children. They now are with relatives in Missouri and Arkansas, awaiting immigration court hearings and possible deportation.

As they wait for the remains of the dead to be returned and the fate of the living to be decided, the women's relatives in Guatemala struggle with regrets and recriminations. Neighbors ask why the mothers put their children at risk.

Rescues and deaths of migrants along the southern border are on the rise. So far this fiscal year, the Border Patrol has made 3,400 rescues, a senior official said in Senate testimony.

In one recent week, 12 migrants died trying to cross the border in the Rio Grande Valley sector, the prime corridor for those entering the country without documents.

Border Patrol agents detain about 1,000 people a day in that sector alone, most of them adults traveling with small children, authorities said.

The Trump administration has taken various steps to try to discourage the migrants, so far without success.

For months last year, the administration separated migrant families at the border, placing children, even infants, in federal foster care — until public outrage and court rulings forced an end to the policy.

This year, the U.S. has pressured Mexico and Central American governments to turn back migrants headed for America.

The administration also has drastically slowed the processing of asylum applications at legal points of entry.

Migrants seeking asylum have been required to wait on Mexican soil, sometimes for weeks or months, to file applications and await interviews and hearings.

In response, many have hired smugglers to take them across the Rio Grande on rafts. Others have tried to swim the deceptively calm-looking river, sometimes with tragic consequences.

"People ask why they would go and take their children when there is life here," said Julio Perez, 50, an uncle of Briseyda, whose 15-month-old son died with her in the wildlife refuge. "But you have to put yourself in their shoes. You

Tragic journey to the United States

Three families — 10 people — embarked on the harrowing thousand-mile journey from the southwestern coastal plains of Guatemala to the U.S. border within weeks of each other this year. Four family members died after crossing the Rio Grande in their attempt to seek asylum in the United States. A look at their journey.



Before departing Valle Lirio on May 23, Neyli and her family stood for a portrait in the barren dirt yard of their home.

She, her husband and their son, Juan Enrique, 11, stare pensively but determinedly at the camera. Juan Carlos holds the boy protectively. Neyli's right hand rests on the shoulder of their 3-year-old daughter, Juana Anastasia.

The toddler, wearing a red polka-dot skirt, a blue top and a white bow in her hair, glances away, eyes fixed on the hardpan earth.

'My two princesses'
In a village several miles away — down a paved two-lane road and a dirt track through dense palm groves — Yaquelin was making plans to leave with her daughter Marleny, just 22 months old.

The toddler's father, Douglas Rivera, 23, had crossed the border without documents three months after she was born and had settled in Southern California.

Yaquelin had been unable to find steady work in her village, El Reparo. She decided it was time to reunite the family. They would leave May 30.

"I discouraged her, but she said, 'Now I have to find my own way,'" her mother, Amelia Sopón, 42, said through sobs in the family's home in El Reparo, a sullen string of one-story houses baking in the sun.

"We have no way to make money here," Amelia said, as chickens scratched beneath a mango tree in the dirt yard and a pair of sheep bleated. "We have absolutely nothing."

Douglas lives in a working-class, mostly Latino section of Los Angeles and makes a living doing residential tile and ceramic work. He was looking forward to seeing his wife and daughter again. He hoped they would arrive in time to celebrate Yaquelin's birthday on July 12.

He planned to take them to Disneyland.

"How could I not miss them? They are my two princesses," Douglas said.

During a Facebook video chat with his wife and daughter, he had seen how Marleny liked to hop and swirl to Duranguenses, a style of Mexican regional music. He had bought the girl a surprise gift — a doll that could sing and dance like she did.

"You want your kids to come out ahead," he said. "I couldn't wait to watch her grow."

'They won't stop'
Briseyda had had more than enough of life in Chiquirines, a village of 2,000 halfway between Valle Lirio and El Reparo. She was 20 and the mother of two toddlers.

Her husband, Denilson Rincón, 21, only could find sporadic work at the palm oil and banana

don't know the necessities of someone else.

"What is certain is that they did not lightly decide to go," he said.

'No other solution'

Neyli and her husband lived in Valle Lirio, a village less than 10 miles from the border with Mexico, in one of Guatemala's more fertile corners, bounded by the impoverished highlands to the north and the Pacific Ocean.

Guatemala City, the capital, is a nearly five-hour trip on a potholed, mostly two-lane highway.

The family had been struggling with medical bills when Neyli decided to leave. Her father had battled stomach cancer; by the time he died last July, Neyli's mother had fallen \$3,000 in debt. The

family members faced foreclosure on the three-room concrete house where seven of them live.

Two of Neyli's younger siblings couldn't land good-paying jobs in the local banana and oil palm plantations — about the only salaried work available. A brother living in Kansas City, Mo., sent money from his wages as a mechanic, but it wasn't enough.

In May, Neyli decided it was up to her. She would go to the United States and find work.

"She said, 'Since I'm the oldest, I have to care for you all,'" recalled her brother, Adalberto, 32. "It hurt, but there was no other solution."

Many Central American migrants believe adults with children have a better chance of being

granted U.S. asylum. Neyli and her husband, Juan Carlos Miranda, decided to bring their two youngest. They left their 16-year-old daughter behind with Neyli's mother.

Their chance of being formally granted asylum, a process that can take years, would appear remote. Asylum is intended for those who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in their homelands for religious, political or other reasons. Over 80 percent of applications eventually are rejected.

But if migrants clear an initial screening, they usually are released into the country while the cases work their way through immigration courts. In the meantime, many applicants live with relatives already in the U.S. and earn money to send home.

Mike Fisher/Staff artist

FROM THE COVER



Photos by Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Vivian Aguilar, 20, aunt of Juana Anastasia, 3, lights a candle July 1 at a small shrine for the toddler in Valle Lirio, Guatemala.

plantations, earning \$10 on the days he got lucky. He and Briseyda juggled debts to pay for food, medicine and clothes.

The couple, their 3-year-old daughter and their 15-month-old son lived in the crowded front parlor of Denilson's parents' small house, which they shared with the families of several of his siblings.

The children played in a barren dirt yard that became a muddy quagmire during tropical downpours. They cooked their meals over firewood in an open-air kitchen on the back porch.

"You can see they had a hard time living here," said Faustino Javier Recinos, 70, Denilson's grandfather. "They wanted something better for their family."

A teenage beauty queen in Chiquirines, Briseyda had married at 16, soon after finishing the last of her nine years of school. Friendly, even-tempered and serious-minded, she yearned for a proper home, her family said.

She also wanted to help her parents financially. They had adopted a 6-year-old girl with a heart defect and were struggling to pay for the treatment she needed.

Deciding to head for the U.S. didn't require much imagination.

Briseyda's father and various aunts, uncles and neighbors had gone north over the years. Many worked at poultry farms and processing plants in central Missouri.

Her mother-in-law has lived without papers in Batesville, Ark., for years. An older brother crossed the border a few years ago. A sister followed last July, applying for asylum for herself and her small children.

Briseyda and her family left on June 8.

"We told her not to go," her father, Rogelio Chicas, 49, said during a dayslong memorial vigil at the family's tumble-down concrete home in Chiquirines. "She said she had already decided."

Briseyda's mother-in-law, Ingris Orozco, speaking by phone from Arkansas, said she understood the young woman's determination.

"After someone has such need and someone has such excitement



Rogelio Chicas, upper right, father of Briseyda Chicas, watches as workers build a burial vault for his daughter and her son in the cemetery in Chiquirines, Guatemala.

for coming here ... they won't stop," she said.

"You get the idea to come here to give a better life for the kids, so they can start studying in school young and learn quickly. Many people come with children, and they're fine, because the migration picks them up," she said, referring to the Border Patrol. "That was our idea. We never imagined the tragedy that happened."

"We just keep losing"

Boosters have dubbed the Chiquirines area the "Land of Green Gold." The reality is different.

Jobs in the plantations and packing sheds are seasonal and poorly paid. By the time they reach age 40, men and women are considered unemployable, villagers say.

Small general stores and cheap restaurants abound. Pigs wallow in tree-shaded puddles in families' dirt yards. Chicken, turkeys and ducks peck for scraps. Evangelical churches appear to be the only growth industry.

By all appearances, people do not go hungry. But paying for necessities is a constant challenge.

Export-focused plantations occupy much of the best soil, so poorer families rent small plots to cultivate plantains, chili peppers and other crops for sale.

They raise corn and beans for their own consumption on the left-over land, often planting right up to the edge of the asphalt highways.

A successful harvest of even a small plot of bananas or plantains can bring in several thousand dollars, villagers say.

However, the cost of pesticide and fertilizer keeps rising, market prices for the produce can swing wildly, and a bad storm can destroy a year's crop.

"I remember my father planting and planting and planting and never getting ahead of the debt," said Julio Perez, Briseyda's uncle, who farms his own rented parcel. "We just keep losing. That's why people decide to head north. It's the only way to get ahead."

At the mercy of smugglers

The three women and their families followed a well-trod path north — across the Suchiate River into Mexico on rafts, up the main Pacific Coast highway by bus, then east across a narrow isthmus toward the Gulf of Mexico, and north again to the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

In June, the families arrived in Reynosa, a Mexican border city plagued by gang violence. It's the main staging area for U.S.-bound migrants. They had traveled more than 1,000 miles.

Though Briseyda, Neyli and Yaquelin lived near one another in Guatemala and are distantly related by marriage, their families say the women didn't know one another when they set out separately for the U.S.

In Reynosa, however, they became acquainted and together hired smugglers to take them across the Rio Grande.

Then they waited. Neyli's relatives said she and her family spent 20 days in a smug-

gler's safe house. Briseyda and her family stayed in at a hotel, according to her relatives.

When the time came to cross, the husbands went first. Neyli's husband took their son, Juan Enrique. Briseyda's husband brought their daughter Ingris.

Both men surrendered to the Border Patrol. They and their children were processed and released with instructions to appear before Homeland Security officials at later dates.

Neyli's husband and son went to Kansas City to join her brother there. Briseyda's husband and daughter went to stay with his mother in Arkansas.

Next, it was the turn of the women and the three remaining children.

On Tuesday, June 18, Briseyda, Neyli and Yaquelin contacted their loved ones in Guatemala and told them they would cross into Texas the next day.

On Wednesday, smugglers sent two photographs to at least one of the women's family members in Guatemala, as if to provide proof of services rendered.

One of the pictures shows the women and three children being transported by van to the Rio Grande. Neyli smiles excitedly, as if expecting an adventure.

The other picture shows the mothers and toddlers in a raft by the river bank, preparing to cross.

The women sit with shoulders hunched, holding their children tightly, eyes focused on the U.S. shore.

Neyli's brother, Adalberto, said the smugglers charged \$800 per person for the river crossing, including the children.

Nothing was heard from the women for the next two days.

Then around noon on Friday, June 21, Border Patrol officers came across Neyli and Yaquelin, dehydrated and disoriented, on or near the gravel road that encircles the federal wildlife refuge.

Migrants usually head straight for the road after crossing the river so they can find Border Patrol agents and surrender. That's what **Nightmare continues on A20**



Yulissa Chicas Perez, 24-year-old sister of Briseyda, sits on her bed at her parents' home in Chiquirines.



Faustino Javier Racinos, left, Briseyda's grandfather-in-law, and Rogelio Chicas, Briseyda's father, reflect on her death.

FROM THE COVER



Members of Briseyda's family live in a small house in Chiquirines, Guatemala, an impoverished farming village.

Photos by Bob Owen / Staff photographer



A member of the Mexican National Guard patrols at the Suchiate River to check papers of migrants crossing from Guatemala.



Juana Marleny Briseyda Denilson

Journey of hope

Three families — five adults and five children in all — left Guatemala's Pacific Coast in May and June, headed for the U.S. border. Four of them died of exposure in dense brushland near McAllen, Texas. Two were rescued by the Border Patrol. Four others had crossed the Rio Grande safely days earlier.

- Neyli Aguilar, 35 — rescued
- Her husband, Juan Carlos Miranda — crossed safely
- Juan Enrique, 11 — crossed with his father
- Juana Anastasia, 3 — died

NIGHTMARE
From page A19

smugglers instruct them to do. But somehow, the women and children had gotten lost in a square mile of land known as the Gabrielson tract, part of the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

The location is not isolated: It's between the riverfront Anzalduas Park in Mission and an international bridge over the Rio Grande.

Yet a Border Patrol officer familiar with the tract said migrants could easily get lost amid the mesquite and cactuses, a monotonous terrain with few landmarks.

The migrants spent two days and nights in the scrubland. They endured daytime temperatures that spiked above 100 degrees.

The women had brought little or no food or water, family members said, because the smugglers told them they would quickly be taken into custody by the Border Patrol.

By Friday morning, Yaquelin's daughter Marleny had become pale and unresponsive, she told her husband later.

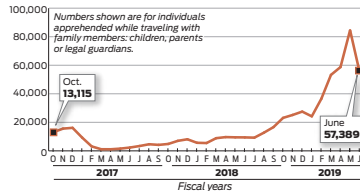
Neyli's daughter Juana Anastasia died in her arms as her mother sobbed, according to family members.

Desperate, the two mothers left the others to go find help. The Border Patrol officers who found the women took them to a hospital.

It wasn't until two days later — Sunday, June 23 — that rescuers found the remains of Briseyda and the children: Marleny, Juana Anastasia and Briseyda's 15-month-old

Mass Migration

Apprehensions of family units at the southwestern border rose sharply starting in mid-2018.



Source: Customs and Border Protection

Mike Fisher/Staff artist

'It wasn't her fault'

The next day, Yaquelin's husband, Douglas, was driving in Southern California when his cellphone rang. It was an official at the Guatemalan Consulate in McAllen. The caller told Douglas to pull over to the side of the road.

Yaquelin came on the line. Between sobs, she told her husband Marleny was dead.

"She couldn't remember anything that had happened," Douglas said. "She told me that she was to blame for what happened."

"I told her it wasn't her fault," he said.

The FBI, which is investigating the case because the deaths occurred on federal property, declined to comment. Border Patrol officials also declined to comment.

Shattered families

Today, Neyli's husband, Juan Carlos, and their surviving son are

living with her brother, Walter Aguilar, in Kansas City. Walter chokes up when he speaks about what happened. He says Juan Carlos remains too distraught to talk about it.

In Arkansas, Briseyda's husband, Denilson, spends his days sleeping or lying listlessly on his bed. He doesn't eat and sobs frequently, said his mother, Ingris.

Briseyda's 3-year-old daughter, also named Ingris, wraps her arms around her father or cuddles with him in bed.

Often, she asks about her baby brother. She calls him Gordo, Spanish for chubby. She remembered him when she saw clothes her father had packed for the boy.

"She said, 'These are for Gordo,'" the girl's grandmother recalled with sobs. "I can't tell her what happened."

'The end of their dreams'

In a brick building tucked behind a recycling center off U.S. 281

in Edinburg, were four body bags. A receptionist ushered Father Roy Snipes, a Catholic priest and pro-immigrant activist, and Brownsville Bishop Daniel Flores into a sterile, bare autopsy room. The sealed bags lay in a row on a stainless-steel table. The two clergymen murmured prayers. They sprinkled holy water on the remains.

"You think of their beautiful dreams of coming to the United States in search of life, and liberty and happiness," Snipes said later. "But that was the end of their dreams."

Two days later, Snipes led his congregation of about 30 in a motorized procession from La Lomita Chapel in Mission to the banks of the Rio Grande. He placed a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe atop his Ford Escort, along with speakers blaring a melancholy cowboy song, "Blue Shadows on the Trail."

At the river's edge, the mourners placed four wreaths into the rippling water.

After a final blessing, they watched them float away.

'Now at rest'

Nearly 1,200 miles south, candles flickered on altars on the porches of the family homes of Neyli, Yaquelin and Briseyda.

Neyli's family welcomes friends and family members every day to pray and reminisce.

Yaquelin's mother has made the rounds in the village, begging or borrowing the money she expects to need to bring Marleny's body home.

Friends have built a cinder-block burial vault to hold Briseyda

- Yaquelin Reyes, 20 — rescued
- Marleny, 22 months — died
- Briseyda Chicas, 20 — died
- Her husband, Denilson Reclinos, 21 — crossed safely
- Ingris, 3 — crossed safely with her father
- Denilson, 15 months — died

About this story

Express-News journalists Dudley Althaus, Bob Owen and Silvia Foster-Frau reconstructed the ill-starred journey of three Guatemalan families who set out for the U.S. in May and June. Althaus, a special correspondent, and Owen, a staff photographer, traveled to villages on Guatemala's Pacific Coast, where they visited the migrants' homes and interviewed their friends and family members. Foster-Frau, a staff reporter, tracked down and interviewed relatives living in the United States — in Los Angeles; Batesville, Ark.; and Kansas City, Mo.

and her son once their bodies are returned. People gather every night to say prayers and sit with Briseyda's parents and siblings.

"We shouldn't weep for them," a Catholic lay minister told the crowd on a recent night. "We know they are now at rest."

News researcher Misty Harris contributed to this report. sfosterfrau@express-news.net