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by

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What the Drug War
Left Behind

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What the Drug War

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by

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Report

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Abstract

What the Drug War Left Behind

by

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Since 2008, Ciudad Juarez has seen almost 10,000 murders due to Mexico's ongoing war against drug-trafficking organizations. However, in 2011 the murders in the city began to decline. This report examines the reasons for this decrease and the lingering effects that will remain once the violence ends. It also analyzes historical factors dating back to the 1960s that have made Juarez a vortex of violence and looks at how such issues might affect the city's future. Now that the violence is falling, some argue that the people of Juarez must to shift their attention from public safety and security and focus more on the recovery of the city. This report analyzes the question of what it means to reconstruct a city, one of 1.3 million people, or whether or not Juarez can be restored at all. It takes a look at the city through the eyes of several of its residents, including the president of the local Chamber of Commerce, an elementary school teacher, and a working journalist for one of the city's television stations. It examines how each of their sectors of the city has been affected and how each of them can help in the recovery. This report includes a visit to one of the city's schools to see first-hand the effects that the drug war has had on Juarez' most vulnerable citizens, its children. It also follows a city journalist and examines how life for a reporter has changed in Juarez and how reporters can help the city by reporting on it in a more responsible manner. Finally, after seeing more than 10,000 businesses close, the city has struggled in jolting the economy. A project proposed by the Chamber of Commerce hopes to revitalize the economic sector of the city, but many wonder if it's realistic to expect this project, which is to build a new convention center, to fix an entire city.

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It was a sunny, unseasonably warm mid-December day last year in Ciudad Juarez, and Alejandro Seade was holding court at El Corralito, a steakhouse in the city's Gomez Morin business district. He was impressing on his associates, all local businessmen, the importance of replacing the city's rundown horse track with a shiny new convention center.

"We have to get back on our feet," Seade insisted, arguing that his proposed act of urban alchemy, horse track for convention center, is precisely what Juarez needs to bring it back to life. The city has been wracked by four years of drug-related violence so intense it has cost the lives of nearly 10,000 Juarenses and forced thousands more to flee to safe havens in interior Mexico or across the border to El Paso.

But Seade's companions expressed skepticism about such a grand plan ever taking root in their tortured city.

To the left of Seade was his father, Jose, who agreed that the city must begin to look ahead. "It's important for the people of Juarez to focus on more than just the violence," he said. But he remained unconvinced about who would invest in such an expensive project in a city with so few resources and a scarred reputation.

Seade, a tall, dark-haired, typically confident 37-year-old, didn't have an answer for his father. He's currently the president of the Juarez branch of the National Chamber of Commerce and he agreed that there are many obstacles to the plan. Last year, the federal government took over the racetrack and plans to hand it down to the municipal government to begin construction. But as with most projects in Juarez, it has run into countless bureaucratic red tape. In this case, the

government couldn't agree on who would cover the money needed to build the center.

In Seade's view, four years after his city first made international headlines for its drastic increase in violence, Juarez has hit its make-or-break moment when its citizens must shift their attention from personal and public security and focus on the hope represented by economic development and the repair of its social fabric. "It's been very difficult to complete some of our projects because of the image attached to the city," Seade said in an interview a week after the lunch. "We need to start changing that." A new convention center, will attract more businesses, and in turn, inject more money into a city that sorely needs it.

The men sitting around the table generally agreed that the cloud of drug violence the city has lived under since the spike of municipal police officer murders in January 2008 is gradually beginning to lift. In 2011, Juarez saw homicides drop by 1,200 compared to the year before, but it continues to be a city of uncertainty and is only in the nascent stages of reconstruction, a recovery that will require more than just the work of the government or city officials. Seade admitted that even he remains reluctant about working in Juarez.

"Of course there is still a sense of fear," he said. "But we have no choice but to keep working."

During the lunch, Seade's father was curious as to why I was in Juarez that day and it made me think. Juarez has always played an important part in my life even though, until recently, I didn't care to admit it. When I was five years old, my father decided to move us to El Paso from Chihuahua, Mexico where I was born, and

he began working in Juarez. Despite the fact that I was very young, and Juarez was significantly safer then, I could see the decomposition of the city taking hold. The buildings were decrepit. The wait at the lines of the international bridges always seemed to take ages. I remember seeing homeless people amble up and down the bridge, selling knickknacks between the cars while we waited to cross back and being sad at the sight of them.

My father would commute from our home in El Paso to Banorte, a bank in Juarez, while my mother, sister and I stayed north of the Rio Grande, living the "American dream". But I would still cross the Rio Grande frequently for doctors' appointments, to visit family, or to have dinner with my parents. As I grew older, my visits to Juarez gradually ceased. I would always feel that crossing back into Mexico was a step back for me. Growing up, my parents always forced me to accompany them on trips to Juarez, even though we had left it behind. When I was finally old enough to decide for myself, I had already made many trips to the city. Juarez was always a place I wish I could have avoided.

But I couldn't avoid Juarez forever. When the murders began to escalate, I followed the daily roll call of homicides in El Diario de Juarez, the city's major newspaper. I was fearful, especially for my father. I felt that he was risking his life daily, and I often asked him why. I was also fearful at the thought of ever going back myself. But now this uneasiness that kept me away became my inspiration. I was compelled to find out more about what it might take to rebuild Juarez, a city of 1.3 million people, ravaged by macabre scenes ranging from severed heads left in ice

chests to headless bodies suspended from bridges. Sights that for Juarenses, have become all too familiar over the last four years.

During several reporting trips to Juarez last December and January, I saw that rebuilding the city will take more than just an economic jolt. The infrastructure of Juarez has been decaying for decades now. Growing rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, the economy has slowed to a crawl, and after so much violence, the city's social fabric is in tatters. Children are often considered the future of most cities, and once I started investigating, I saw the negative effects the drug war has had on them, which could take years to repair. This places an even greater responsibility on teachers, who are asked to do more to protect the city's youth, often with fewer resources.

During my lunch at El Corralito, both Alejandro Seade and his colleagues, continued to bring up what the violence had done to tarnish the image of Juarez, especially in the eyes of its neighbors to the north. "El Pasoans have a notion that as soon as they cross the border, they'll find themselves dodging bullets," Seade said. Juarez was once a retreat for El Paso families and a haven for foreign businesses, but movement along the border has become almost exclusively one-way.

After scratching at the surface, I began to see what the drug war left behind. It has affected Juarenses in myriad ways, from teachers to journalists, and I began to wonder if the new convention center Seade was touting would make that much of a difference in a city neglected for so many years.

The Decline of Juarez

The downfall of Juarez stretches as far back as the 1960s, and has always been tied to the city's proximity to the U.S. It was then when American corporations, looking to take advantage of cheap labor, set up factories south of the border in Juarez and other cities like Matamoros, Tijuana, and Nuevo Laredo. Another turning point for the city was in 1994 after the signing of NAFTA, or the North American Free Trade Agreement, which made all of Mexico a free trade zone. After this, the incentive to open factories in Juarez was lost. City officials refused to adapt and stuck to the same economic model, that of the *maquiladora*, which relies on mass production and cheap labor. This ultimately led to a mass migration of people from all over Mexico to Juarez.

The free trade agreement made corn farming in Mexico unprofitable for many of the country's *campesinos*, or farmers, and they chose to migrate north hoping to find work. The population of Juarez boomed by 62 percent between 1990 and 2000, and the city was not prepared for the influx. A lack of housing led migrants to construct their own *colonias,* or communities, on the outskirts of Juarez, often without running water and unpaved streets, and using electricity stolen from the city. There weren't enough schools to keep up with the population increase, and often they were too expensive anyway. This left many children with no education, a problem that continues to haunt Juarez today.

This population swell, combined with the lack of social infrastructure had a predictable consequence in the city. Crime in Juarez rose between 1990 and 2000, and came to a head during the *feminicidio,* or femicide, the killing of women simply

because of their gender. Hundreds of women were killed, many raped, in what resembled a pattern of serial killing that lapped over into the 2000s. Most of the cases were never investigated. But even as the stories of the femicide began to spread, Juarez was still considered a relatively safe city. The murder rate was comparable to that of any other major city in the country, and by the end of 2007, one year after President Felipe Calderon declared war on the country's criminal organizations, the annual homicide rate in Juarez hovered around 300 murders, about 100 less than Tijuana, Baja California, a border city across from San Diego.

"All of this has to be understood in context, in a historical context," Tony Payan said. "You cannot understand what has happened to Juarez if you only look at the last four years or five years."

The Rise of the Narco

Drug trafficking has a lengthy history in Mexico that can be traced as far back as World War II when the U.S. Government looked to Sinaloa, a state in northwestern Mexico, for opium cultivation to aid in morphine production. The stakes began to rise during the 1980s after President Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs shut out Columbian cartels of their key Caribbean transshipment routes to the U.S. This made Mexico, and its northern border cities especially, a lucrative drug route for criminal organizations. The Juarez Cartel, which would become one of the most powerful in the country, began taking shape around this time. Amado Carrillo Fuentes took over the Juarez crime syndicate in a bloody coup that ended with the death of former boss and cartel founder Rafael Aguilar Guajardo. Amado would die in 1997, allegedly during a botched plastic surgery, and his brother Vicente Carrillo

Fuentes took over as *capo,* or leader. Vicente became one of the most powerful drug lords in the country and still leads the cartel today. Alliances with other major drug lords began to form, including one with Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman, the most wanted man in Mexico and leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, but that would ultimately splinter in the late 1990s after the Sinaloa Cartel refused to pay Carrillo for the right to use some of the smuggling routes.

Guzman was arrested in Guatemala and extradited to Mexico in 1993 but eventually broke out of prison eight years later, during which many members of the rival Juarez Cartel defected to join the ranks of his Sinaloa-based organization. After masterminding his escape, Guzman was determined to take over Juarez. This moment coincided with the National Action Party defeating the Institutional Revolutionary Party in the 2000 presidential election, ending the PRIs 71-year reign over the Mexican presidency. It was widely suspected that prominent PRI party members were colluding with criminal organizations, so once the PAN took charge, cartels had to find protection elsewhere. Before 2006, when Felipe Calderon became president, cartels would usually go about their business inconspicuously, although pockets of violence began shooting up a couple of years before in Nuevo Laredo. But cartels generally operated out of the public eye, and families of criminals were usually spared. That all changed once Calderon took office at the end of 2006 when he sent federal troops to six states considered cartel strongholds, officially marking the start of his war against Mexico’s criminal organizations.

For the first year, Juarez remained relatively stable. In 2007, almost 3,000 people were killed in Mexico, but only a little more than 300 murders were recorded

in Juarez that year. Juarez seemed spared from the worst of the violence. But in January 2008, the war between the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels intensified when dozens of municipal police officers were slain and many more were threatened to be next. Calderon responded by sending 2,500 soldiers and federal police agents to Juarez that March in an attempt to contain the growing violence, in what came to be known as Joint Operation Chihuahua – by far Calderon's largest operation at that point. Instead, the number of homicides exploded and by the end of the year 1,623 people were murdered in Juarez. According to the Mexican Attorney General, the number of killings in the city climbed to 2,635 in 2009 and then to 3,103 in 2010, a staggering eight murders a day.

But then came 2011. Something in the city changed. *Juarenses* began taking back the streets and reclaiming public spaces, but still with a sense of reluctance. Malls began seeing more shoppers, restaurants more diners, and even bars began seeing younger people. According to Payan, the weakening of the Juarez Cartel is one of the main reasons for the decrease in violence. Assets, drugs, and weapons have been confiscated, leaving the criminal organization with fewer resources to bribe authorities. Many low-level drug dealers have been cut loose by the cartel and left fending for themselves, thus the city began seeing a bump in other crimes like extortion and kidnapping, but a decrease in murders.

And by the end of 2011, the murder rate dipped to 1,974. That number hardly seems like progress, but it's a far cry from the 5,000 homicides that some researchers had predicted. Already in 2012, a February edition of El Diario de Juarez reported that the city has had seven days without a murder - more days without a

homicide than all of 2011. But even with this renewed sense of security there are constant reminders that the city's progress could be set back at any moment. January was a bloody month for the city's police officers, as eight were killed throughout the city. This prompted police chief Julian Leyzaola, who Seade also credits with the decrease in crime in the city, to allow his officers to stay at hotels and carry weapons even when not on duty. Leyzaola is often credited for his attempts to clean out the municipal police force, which at one point was almost entirely taken over by the cartels. The city still has days with a handful of murders, but even with the slight but noticeable decline in violent crime, the repercussions that this "war" will have on the people of Juarez, especially its children, will linger long after it's over.

Escuela 28 de Octubre – Ciudad Juarez

To see the effects that the drug war has had on its youngest citizens, I paid a visit to Maria de la Luz Estrada's sixth-grade class at Escuela 28 de Octubre, an elementary school on the city's east side. As I stepped inside her classroom, I was welcomed by a boisterous, "*buenos dias",* from the 36 sixth-graders she teaches. After I responded with a, *"buenos dias. Como estan",* or "good morning, how are you," they replied, like a chorus, with *"bien, y usted?"* The kids were sitting through a lecture of, ironically, five current societal challenges affecting the countries of the world. Estrada was soft-spoken but firm when talking to the children. She was in her 40s and had been teaching for 28 years, 15 of them at this school. Originally from Torreon, in Coahuila state, Estrada had taught throughout several cities in northern Mexico and had experience teaching all primary school grade levels. The student's

desks were divided down the middle of the classroom, with the rows of desks aligned so that the students were facing each other. The classroom's walls were pretty bare, and judging by the size of the room, it didn't seem that it was originally built to hold this many students. The children, all 11 or 12 years old, were dressed in the typical Mexican school uniform of a white button down shirt, blue slacks and black shoes for the boys, and the same shirt but with a blue, pleated skirt for the girls.

With only a few minutes left in class, Estrada asked if any of them would like to share with me how the violence of the city had affected them personally. I asked the students if any of them had heard gunshots at some point over the last five years and all of them instantly raised their hand. One of the children (the school's principal asked that the child's name not be used in this story) was out with his mother shopping for shoes when an armed robber walked in and pointed his gun at the face of the person working behind the cash register. That left the 11-year-old boy shocked. "My mom and I ran to the back of the store to hide and wait for the man to leave," he recalled.

According to Estrada, the father of one student was assassinated, while another student's dad was kidnapped, has been missing for a year, and is presumed dead. These are students who lived in a relatively calm neighborhood of the city, but had obviously still suffered from the violence. And according to Estrada, this trauma has affected their behavior.

“It’s becoming increasingly difficult to discipline the children,” Estrada said. “We have kids who are very aggressive. We have kids who are emotionally hurt. The insecurity has seriously and directly affected the families of this school.”

Because of the violence, Estrada was forced to change what she teaches. She is now obligated to teach her students what to do in the case of a shootout. The municipal government also stepped in and tried to help instructors with classroom management. Last year, it implemented Escuela Segura*,* or Secure School. The government sent out information to teachers throughout the city on how to keep the children safe in different circumstances. Even members of the federal police force have visited the school and spoken directly to kids on how to avoid dangerous situations. This is something that five or 10 years ago a teacher would have never thought they’d have to do, Estrada said. Several of her students have undergone therapy to deal with the trauma they’ve experienced.

On the surface, the children didn’t seem traumatized to me. I was surprised at how open they were in sharing their experiences; about the violent acts they’ve witnessed or have happened to them directly. On the surface, they seemed almost desensitized.

“In reality, I see a lot of anxiety and anxiety attacks in the children,” psychologist Andres de Anda said in a phone interview. “They usually suffer from panic attacks, or shortness of breathing or even a lack of sleep in some cases.”

De Anda works for Juntos: Instituto de Desarrollo Familiar, or Juntos: Institute of Family Development, a private practice dedicated to working with families in Juarez. De Anda, who had ample experience working with children in the

city, is invited to schools, from elementary to high school, and teaches the students different relaxation techniques and ways to deal with fear and anxiety. The violence has made kids increasingly fearful of strangers and public places. Some of his patients have even expressed trepidation of going to the movies for fear that it will be set on fire. "The fear begins to cover itself in different layers. It's disguising itself," de Anda said. This terror is the main reason that children exhibit depression or aggression. De Anda mainly works with children who have been victims of a crime, who have had parents or family members killed, or have been with their parents during a carjacking or house break-in. "It's very difficult to tell these kids not to be fearful," de Anda said. In reality, Juarez has become a city where living in fear is merited, a scarred city. And even as it gets "safer", overcoming this fear is something that will take its citizens, especially its children, years.

Wrong Place, Wrong Time

Two years ago, during the height of violence, Aide Grijalva, a mother of two, was leaving work with her 11-year-old daughter Valeria. As she left the parking lot, she reached a red light. She reached another, and a third. She suddenly began hearing loud pops, about six or eight in all. It felt as if someone was banging on the trunk of her car, she recalled. "I looked into the rearview mirror and noticed that everyone was running towards us," Grijalva said. "I remember screaming at Valeria, 'those are gunshots! Get down now'." Two masked, armed men had fired into the car just two behind theirs. In a panic, cars began driving through the red light, trying to avoid the gunmen. "You get so scared in that moment," Grijalva said. "We're all just trying to get away." But Valeria didn't cry. She was left in shock, and upon getting

back home told everyone about what happened. Over the last four years, Juarez has turned into a city where innocent people often get caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even schools, thought of as a sanctuary for kids, haven't been spared.

On Jan. 12, 2012, a man being chased by a group of gunmen sought refuge in Escuela Primaria Cuauhtemoc, in Juarez' Morelos neighborhood. It was around one in the afternoon when both the man being chased – who was already wounded according to reports – and the assailants broke into the school. The assassins shot the man dead. The attack occurred during school hours and hundreds of children and their teachers witnessed the murder. Outside of the school, parents waiting for their children also saw what happened. The victim – who was not immediately identified – was left face up on the school's basketball court with nine gunshot wounds. What can a school, a supposed haven for children, do to prevent this from happening? To start, they can turn the schools into small "forts".

A Mexican Tradition

Back at Escuela 28 de Octubre, a seven-foot wrought iron fence protected the school's grounds from the outside. I needed prior permission from the principal before I was let in. Upon reaching the gate, I pressed a buzzer, much like those found in apartment complexes, and that solicited a crackly voice through the speaker. A loud buzz signaled that the gate was now open. I stepped inside. Smiling kids on their recess break greeted me with shy smiles as they sat on benches that lined the cement walkway that led to the courtyard and classrooms. One of them even complimented me on my glasses. Some kids were enjoying snacks while others were playing soccer on the blacktop. Groups of girls arm in arm, skipped throughout the

school, and group of boys threw an American football around off to the side. The school wasn't very big, with only about 456 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. The cafeteria, which was really nothing more than a food stand, had a line of kids holding out their *pesos* wanting to buy nachos, beans, a hamburger or just a piece of candy. It was early January and the kids had just returned from their holiday break. On this day, the school was celebrating *"Dia de los Reyes Magos",* or the Epiphany. Observed throughout Mexico and much of Latin America, it is the day when the three wise men followed the star to Bethlehem, bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh for Jesus. One of the day's traditions is a feast that includes, *"la rosca de reyes",* or a sweetbread decorated with dried fruit. A teacher brought the *rosca* today and while the kids were on their break, the faculty and staff enjoyed their meal in the faculty lounge. Baked traditionally inside the bread is a miniature, plastic Jesus, and the person who ends up with it must host a party the following month. "Would you like a piece?" I was asked by one of the teachers as she extended a small slice on a napkin. I smiled but declined the treat.

To me, these scenes seemed natural, peaceful. They conjured up images of what life was once like in Juarez. The smiling kids, the adults carrying out a Mexican tradition made it easy to forget that outside this "fort" was a city that's suffering, one that's had to endure the pain of countless murders in four years. The responsibility of schools and their teachers is much greater now. They're required to not only develop their students academically, but to also make sure that they make it home safely everyday. And they're usually forced to do it with fewer resources.

Javier Carrillo is the principal of Escuela 28 de Octubre*.* I was sitting with him in his office after recess ended and he began talking about how parents do not allow their children off school grounds for any reason, which forced him to cancel all of the school's planned field trips. "In previous years, we would take the kids to museums or plays," Carrillo said. "All of this affects what a school has planned for the development of the kids." Before becoming principal three years ago, Carrillo was a teacher here for 17 years. "This was a real peaceful place," Carrillo said of the neighborhood the school is located in, Alameda*.* It's a newer community. The houses that line the streets outside of the school looked like new, despite the graffiti on the walls. The school is only a half-mile from the Rio Grande and is just south of El Paso. "We used to take field trips to the river," Carrillo recalled. "To go look for insects."

Now, instead he has been seeing his students play *sicario,* or hit man. It's a game that's become popular among kids, where they take everyday materials and make guns and run around pretending to be assassins, which forced him to ask his teachers not to allow their students to play the violent game*.* Carrillo kept throwing the word, *"tejido social"* around*,* or the city's social fabric, and how it was badly frayed. But much like Seade, Carrillo sees this moment of renewed social confidence as a turning point for the city and its children. He argued that the school is trying to do its part in repairing the fabric of Juarez, even if it's only within its walls. "This school is formative," Carrillo said. "We're forming citizens here. People with good ideas and good manners." In her classroom, Estrada preached civics and ethics more than ever and stressed to her students that within these walls, they were in a safe place. "Before class begins, I always tell them that our classroom is hermetic,"

Estrada said. "I really want the environment to be comfortable, healthy and safe as much as possible."

The educational system of Juarez remains severely strained, but all levels of government have made efforts to strengthen it. Juarez still suffers from high drop out rates, especially among high school students. According to the Department of Education, the dropout rate for high school students in the city is at 16 percent but many more drop out before that, while 38 percent of kids between 14 and 18-years-old have yet to finish primary education, or sixth grade. These adolescents are either forced out of school to provide money for their families or neither work nor study. Colloquially, these kids are known as *nini's,* meaning "*ni estudian, ni trabajan"* (they neither work nor study). The risk of these kids turning to a life of crime is much higher if they're out on the streets with no one to look after them.

To try and combat this, President Calderon implemented a federal program, "Todos Somos Juarez", or "We Are All Juarez", which infused more than $400 million into the city. Among the project's goals are to build more green spaces, sports facilities, and schools throughout the city. But according to Payan, the UTEP professor, the progress has been slow to come. "Juarenses were very frustrated because they expected the federal government to come and fix it all, but it takes a while," he said. "You have to build it." The federal initiative came after the massacre of 16 people between the ages of 15-20 in a case of mistaken identity when 18 gunmen riding in seven SUVs attacked a birthday party in the Villas de Salvarcar neighborhood of the city. Allegedly, the attackers were under the impression that they were going after one of the city's rival gangs. Todos Somos Juarez has garnered

mixed results. The city now has more schools and more parks, but the initiative did little to slow the violence immediately after its inception. On Jan. 23, 2011, seven people were killed before a soccer match on one of the many fields built with program money. Despite this, "Todos Somos Juarez" demonstrates that the future of Juarez, at least on the surface, remains high on President Calderon's agenda. Calderon has visited the violence-plagued border city seven times over his six-year term, including a visit this February, touting the federal government's role in the city's increased security and decline in homicides.

But there is only so much that teachers, principals, or government programs can do in the development of a child, argued Carrillo. He, Estrada, and de Anda all agreed that the majority of the responsibility falls on the parents and de Anda said they often fail to live up to that commitment. When he visits schools, parents are usually the ones not receptive to his recommendations, even if it could potentially help their children. He also believed that parents should do more at limiting their kids' exposure to violent images. It's not uncommon for parents to be at home with their children and having a shootout occur in their neighborhood only to take their kids to see the dead body minutes after the bullets cease.

And Aide Grijalva, mother of 11-year-old Valeria, agreed that parents should do more. She doesn't let Valeria watch nightly newscasts, which usually consist of a running tally of the day's murders, often accompanied by grisly images. Valeria always wants to be current on the day's events, Grijalva said.

"But if on the news they were showing violent images, I wouldn't let her watch. I tell her 'there is no reason to watch this. Watching this isn't good for anyone.'"

Reporting Juarez

It was the first week of January when Alfredo Varela, a reporter for the city's Canal 44*,* a local television news station, received a call that there had been a murder in the city's Campestre district, a once swanky part of Juarez where the rich lived lavishly, but that is now filled with empty, dilapidated mansions. Upon arriving, Varela and his cameraman got out of the car and began walking towards the corpse, which had been set on fire and burned alive. You could still see the pain in his eyes, Varela recalled. "The body was still smoking," he said. "I asked my cameraman not to film the corpse, but he began filming anyway."

Varela is tired of these scenes. He's tired of what he's seen on a daily basis. He has been one of Canal 44's television reporters for the last five years and if anyone knows firsthand the downward spiral Juarez has been on, it's him. Since the violence began to climb in 2008, he's reported more than 1,200 murders for the TV station, and his greying eyes show it.

Varela, and other reporters in the city have a responsibility to the people of Juarez, to tell them what is happening around them, and many have done their job admirably, even at the expense of their safety. But reporters have also had to adapt how they report on the city, and Varela argued that journalists must be more responsible in deciding which images to publish.

On that day, he invited me to an Applebee's in Juarez, on a street full of American businesses that makes the city resemble El Paso. He was upbeat and talkative, but when he brought up being on the field, his eyes looked down and his voice got lower, almost as if he remembered the last dead body he saw. "It's a number that's just too high," Varela said about the amount of death he's had to cover. "In the beginning, I had a very hard time sleeping but not anymore. I've gotten used to it."

Varela was in his 50s, and had a resonant voice that made it easy to understand how he made it into television and radio. He was born and raised in Juarez, and he knows a remarkable amount of the city's history that he shared with me between bites of his pancakes. His cheerfulness came through when he began recalling Juarez' golden years. He's arguably one of the city's hardest working reporters. Before heading to his job as reporter at the television station, he hosts a daily news radio show called "Blanco y Negro'", or Black and White, from 1-3 p.m., on Radio Canon 800, an AM station in the city. On the show, Varela and three co-hosts discuss the city's current events, namely those relating to insecurity, and also take calls from listeners. That's where he was headed after lunch and he invited me to go along with him. We hopped into his beat up Chrysler and headed to the station.

The topic of discussion on that day's show was the difference between journalism in Mexico and the U.S. Once the show wrapped up, he got ready to go to Canal 44, where on a typical day, he works from 4-11 p.m., and usually travels up to 100 kilometers a day covering the city. He offered me a ride to the international bridge when he began talking about the responsibility of journalists in the recovery

of Juarez. He argued that reporters better the city by providing Juarenses an honest glimpse of what's happening around them, but he stressed to me the increased difficulty journalists face in reporting on the city. Soldiers and federal police officers often don't provide much, if any, information to reporters. "Then we're left looking for neighbors or witnesses," Varela told me. "But people are very afraid. People don't want to say anything at all. Even if they saw something, they will say nothing to avoid getting in difficult circumstances."

Another restraint on the city's journalists is the cartels themselves. Criminal organizations don't want their activities grabbing headlines or attracting too much attention. When cartels feel that reporters have said too much, they're quick to respond, often violently. This has led to Mexico becoming one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.

According to the International Press Institute's 2012 rankings for most dangerous countries for reporters, Mexico nabbed the unenviable top spot. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 24 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2004 in which the motive of the killing has been determined. There have also 28 reporters killed in which the motive was never known.

In September 2010, Luis Carlos Santiago, a 21-year-old photojournalist for el Diario de Juarez was gunned down in the parking lot of a shopping mall on his way to lunch. Santiago had only been working for the paper for two weeks when he was killed and he became the second journalist el Diario has lost to the drug violence. Santiago's death prompted the newspaper to publish an editorial the next day titled,

"Que quieren de nosotros?", or "what do you want from us?". The question was directed to the criminal organizations, which in the piece were referred to as the "de facto authorities" of Juarez. The editorial asked drug cartels what the newspaper should or shouldn't publish in order to avoid any more losses to their newsroom. The editorial received international attention and shed light on just how much power criminal organizations in the country have. This power puts news directors or news organization owners, like Canal 44s Arnoldo Cabada, in a bind. They often must ask themselves to what extent should reporters risk their safety in trying to report a story.

It's this very question that Cabada has been asking himself everyday for four years. He's been the owner of Canal 44 since its inception in 1980 and before that was a television reporter in the city for 20 years. He's 77 and, much like Varela, has seen the city he's covered for more than 50 years slowly crumble before his eyes. In January, he invited me into his office at the Canal 44 headquarters, and even at his age, his voice resonated with authority and he wasn't shy about describing to me journalism's role in the city. "We have the responsibility of guiding the people of Juarez," Cabada told me. "And asking those who have already committed grave mistakes, that all of those who live in this border city have the right to live. We have the right to life."

He continuously praised his reporters and said how proud he was of the work they've done in the city despite the dire circumstances. For four years his reporters have worked in an air of uncertainty, lived in a "vortex of insecurity", as he called it, and unsure of where each day will take them. "The news is happening on

every corner," Cabada said. "While they're out there they always have to be looking out for themselves because no one ever knows what could happen." Canal 44, like many other media organizations in the city, grants its reporters ample editorial freedom to pursue a story they deem newsworthy. Aside from the danger this freedom could potentially put them in, they must also use it responsibly. They must determine to what extent they provide a real representation of the city, or if they're just using the violence as a way to sell more papers or attract more viewers.

For Varela, it's not the fear of reporting, but the constant reporting of death and despair that haunts him. "When you're reporting one violent crime after another after another after another, you begin to ask yourself, 'what am I doing'?" Varela said. "But that's the reality." He's an optimist by nature and he cited the declining number of murders as progress, a way out for journalists having to continually report on death and distress and instead contribute to the upswing of the city. Varela wished nothing more than to tell stories unrelated to the violence. He understood that for now that isn't realistic, that the city hasn't fully turned the corner, but he wished that the city's reporters would go about it in a more sensible way.

"They need to contribute to the betterment of the city," Varela said. "And to not report on so much death." But it's those scenes, like that of the still-smoking body he didn't want his cameraman to record, that attract viewers. These grisly images are often found on front pages of local newspapers and nightly newscasts and if they're gruesome enough, they make international headlines too.

The Image of Juarez, the Murder Capital of the World

This over-saturation of ultraviolent images had made the city's road to recovery much rockier, argued Seade, president of the Chamber of Commerce.

According to him, the reputation of Juarez has suffered dramatically, not only because of the extreme violence but also because of the media's portrayal that followed. Even as the violence decreases, tourists, especially those from El Paso, are still terrified of crossing the border. Businesses are reluctant of moving to Juarez, and this has made Seade's job almost impossible. He's fighting for the improvement of Juarez from two different fronts. On one, he has to find ways to attract businesses to a city that has lost so many in four years, and on the other he's left trying to repair the perception of Juarez.

On Feb. 21 of this year, a woman walking alongside two of her grandchildren on East Overland Ave. in downtown El Paso was struck in the leg by a bullet. El Paso Mayor John Cook immediately declared that the bullet must have come from Juarez because of a shootout happening south of the border at around the same time. According to police reports, the woman said she heard one loud, lone pop before feeling the bullet strike her leg. El Paso authorities went into damage control, with Mayor Cook touting El Paso as one of the safest cities in the country.

He later admitted in a press conference that it wasn't completely certain that the bullet came from Juarez, but stated, "It's more than coincidence that at the same time there would be a shootout and have a bullet land in El Paso. It's illogical to say that it came from here."

Without complete knowledge of the incident, El Paso authorities quickly placed the blame on its southern neighbor. Juarez Mayor Hector Murguia denied the reports that the bullet could have come from Juarez, saying in a press conference that, "the distance was much too far," from the ongoing shootout. But whether it's true or not, the damage to Juarez had been done. The story had gone viral. It made headlines in most major national newspapers and the dialogue about spillover violence from Mexico became a pressing issue again.

This prompted Seade to write a letter to the Chief of Police of El Paso. "Just to ask him how exactly he came to the conclusion that the bullet had reached El Paso," Seade said. "A lot of people think that this is the reality (of Juarez). But the truth is that it's not."

Seade believes that most stories coming out of Juarez are factual, but also argues that there are media outlets that take advantage of the city. "There is a lot of yellow journalism that is extorting the city because of the events that have been happening," Seade said. It's planted the idea that as soon as someone crosses into Juarez, they'll find themselves in a shootout, and this is especially true amongst El Paso residents. The symbiotic relationship that the sister cities once had has become damaged, leading El Pasoans to distance themselves from their violence-plagued neighbors. El Paso residents that once crossed over to visit family members, go shopping, to the market or eat are now opting to stay north of the Rio Grande. This has had drastic effects on the economy of the city, Seade said. According to a study by the Chamber of Commerce, Juarenses are spending upwards of $2,500 dollars in

El Paso, “while at the same time El Pasoans are spending $500, potentially less, in Juarez,” Seade said.

Business Lost

In the past, Americans would also cross the border to seek medical attention. Ricardo Ramos, a dentist in the city and professor of medicine at the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez, has personally felt the effects of El Pasoans desire to stay away. “I’ve lost over 70 percent of my patients in the last five years,” said Ramos in an interview. “Without patients, there is no money.” Originally from Tamaulipas state, Ramos moved to Juarez more than 30 years ago and has had his private practice in the border city since. But the decline of business in Juarez is not all, nor mostly, El Paso’s fault. The city has seen more than 10,000 businesses shuttered over the last three years -- not only fleeing the violence but also because of one of the notorious side effects of the drug war: extortion.

Many business owners, under the threat of criminal organizations, are forced to pay a monthly “protection” fee or risk having their business burned down or being killed. This is something that, under Seade, the Chamber of Commerce has tried to combat. It began a program in which businesses were encouraged to file complaints after cases of extortion, something they were fearful to do. “We follow the extortion cases very closely to help resolve them,” Seade said. And according to a study by the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez, the city has seen a decline in the number of extortions -- the percentage has fallen from 15.5 percent in 2010 to 10.9 percent in 2011.

Seade initially became interested in running for president of CANACO, as the chamber is known by its initials in Spanish, and helping the city's businesses after his own company began to suffer because of the violence. He was born and raised in Juarez and studied engineering at the University of Texas at El Paso. After graduating from UTEP, much to the dismay of his father, Jose, Alejandro decided to pursue a career in media instead of engineering. He began his career by working at a web-hosting company where he helped build and launch websites. After several years, he branched off and began *Enfiestate!,* a glossy magazine dedicated to both El Paso's and Juarez' socialites. .

The idea, he said, was to send photographers to all the clubs, bars and restaurants in Juarez and take photographs of the clients. But once the struggle for Juarez began, his business, like myriad others in the city, began to feel the repercussions. Most of the money for the magazine comes from advertising and after the closing of so many businesses the magazine began to lose revenue. "I never thought that the insecurity of the city would ever affect me personally," Seade said. "I asked myself, 'if all I do is sell advertising, how much of an impact could warring drug cartels have on business?'" Once he realized the impact, he ran for president of the Chamber of Commerce and was re-elected this March to his second one-year term.

Seade is charismatic and fluent in both English and Spanish. He is married with two children, including a newborn daughter, and lives in a newly built house on El Paso's west side. He still commutes to Juarez everyday, and insisted that he moved his family to El Paso so his children could receive a better education.

Even with a family and home in El Paso, Seade chose a job that would have him crossing the border everyday. He felt a responsibility to Juarez. Along with focusing on reducing extortion, he has also tried to help the city's businesses with a plan to relieve certain taxes on everyday household appliances that are imported to Juarez, especially because these same products cost significantly less in El Paso, which leads Juarenses and their money north of the border. Despite his efforts, the violence left Juarez' businesses in a mess that will take years for it to fully recover from.

The Chamber of Commerce, who at one point had more than 10,000 member businesses, has seen the number dwindle to 1,700 because of the violence. But Seade thinks that 2012 will be a better year for Juarez. "Little by little, the economy is starting to improve," Seade said. "But we are going to need some sort of jump-start in order to get the city back to 100 percent. It won't take a year. It may be three or four, but we will get back to the city that this once was." For now, he just needs to figure out what to do with the abandoned racetrack.

The Dichotomy of Juarez

Back at El Corralito, Seade wrapped up his lunch and he, and those in his party, headed towards the exit. It was late afternoon and the restaurant was still packed with diners. Families, co-workers on their break and a group of older women were among those eating out that day. Maybe it was the fact that Christmas was only a few weeks away that had so many people dining out, or maybe people were deciding to not let fear dictate their lives. Or, just maybe, they felt that things were actually starting to improve in Juarez. Frankly, it was difficult to tell.

My dad and I were offered a ride to the Santa Fe international bridge by one of the men at the table, Ismael Herrera. He's a tortilla factory owner in the city. Over the last three years, my dad has taken to walking across the border instead of driving. He believes it's safer that way. Herrera handed the man who was watching his car in the parking lot 10 *pesos*, or a little less than one dollar.

As we pulled away, I noticed more people walking into the restaurant. The scene hardly seemed like that of the most dangerous city in the world. As we pulled in closer to downtown Juarez, where the bridge is located, the amount of people ambling the streets surprised me. Many would have expected a ghost town, although I was told that at night it becomes one. But people were out at the market, at food stands, in church. Everyone was headed somewhere. But the sight of the "for rent" or "for sale" signs found on so many of the city's buildings brought me back from my reverie.

The city looked worse than it did so many years ago, when I couldn't stand coming. But I didn't feel that disdain on that trip. Nor did I feel the fear that kept me away the last four years. I felt a sense of hope. Hope for a city that's had to deal with so much loss and anguish. Juarez is now trying to prove to the world that it's resilient, that its people haven't given up, and will continue to fight for a better city. I just hoped the people have the stamina, because the result of this struggle is largely in the balance. Herrera got us as close to the bridge as he could; about two blocks away, and dropped us off. Nowhere was the dichotomy of the city more obvious than near the bridge.

My dad and I started walking towards El Paso and we passed a street vendor offering tacos out of his small cart and two Mexican soldiers with assault rifles attached at the hip. We paid the three-*peso* fee to cross back and began the five-minute hike. Growing up, my dad always stressed to me to be thankful for what Juarez had provided us. He's had his business there for so long, after all, but living in El Paso made it easy to neglect Juarez. But as we arrived in El Paso and were greeted by the large sign that reads, "Welcome to Texas", I think I finally understood what he meant.

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VITA

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