The Killing Fields of Juarez: Grabbing the World's Attention

by Rene Leon

Local reporter and author Diana Washington Valdez has dedicated much of her time to an investigation into Juarez’ dark secret: the killings of hundreds and hundreds of women in just over a decades time. Read about the dangers she faced and how her work is inspiring Hollywood.

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The Borderland will be in the Hollywood spotlight this month, but the mood should be anything but glamorous.

“Bordertown” a new film starring Jennifer Lopez, Antonio Banderas and Martin Sheen, is set to open later this month. It is based on the mysterious disappearance and murders of approximately 470 women and girls in Ciudad Juarez since 1993.

El Paso journalist Diana Washington Valdez has spent years investigating and documenting the deaths, which are being called femicides, or gender murders.

Her book “The Killing Fields: Harvest of Women” is an in-depth look at the homicidal plague that has gripped the Mexican city for over a decade, and it serves as a foundation for “Bordertown”, as well as an upcoming documentary.

To tell the story, Valdez spent years studying evidence, interviewing victims’ families and Mexican authorities, and touring Ciudad Juarez. She visited the places where the women worked and lived, as well as the locations where they were last seen and where their bodies were eventually found. She joined the families and other volunteers in sweeps both in the center and on the edges of the city, hoping to find the missing victims or, more dreadfully, their remains.

It took Valdez five years to investigate and write the first version of “The Killing Fields,” which was initially published in Spanish in 2005. She spent another two years working on developing updated material for the English version, published in 2006.

In between assignments for her job as a reporter for the El Paso Times, Valdez says she spent every spare moment of her time working on her investigation. “Whenever I took vacation, my vacation was to go over there,” she says of her time spent traveling to Juarez, Chihuahua and Mexico City.
Though she has received praise for her work, Valdez says she also received several threats. “I can’t go back to Ciudad Juarez,” she says. “I knew it would happen in time,” she adds, “but I consider myself very fortunate because other people have been killed down there who have been involved in investigating this or advocating or had some kind of role.”

Valdez says she received several menacing phone messages after she began her work. Some were of conversations recorded in restaurants, which she believes were probably hers, while others were more chilling; there was a recording of a child screaming, “Mommy, no! Mommy, no!” and another recording of an electric saw with the sound of a TV newscast in English in the background. “That was scary,” Valdez admits.

In addition to the threats on her life, Valdez says certain individuals, some within the Mexican government, have sought to discredit her book. At first, the authorities denied a public response, she says, but last year, as the government was about to release its official report on the slayings, a federal official in charge of the investigation told La Reforma, a major Mexican newspaper, that he was going to refute, point by point, everything that was in Valdez’ book. “I didn’t think his job was to refute my book,” she says. “It was to investigate murders.”

Outside the opposition of the government, she says there was a three-day campaign in one of the newspapers in Mexico City aimed at countering the book. In the state of Chihuahua, someone was going into bookstores and buying all the copies of the book to keep it from circulating.

Valdez says she chose to do the book her way, opting to write it first then seek publication instead of pitching the idea to publishing houses and writing it under their direction. “I had a certain way that I wanted to do it,” she says, adding that she had been asked by some prospective publishers to make it more of a narrative-style book. “I didn’t want to do that. I wanted it to be pretty straight-forward, told from a first-person voice. I wanted it to be a document of facts, and not a ‘good read’ necessarily.”

That approach proved to be successful for Valdez. In its first week of sales, the English publication of the book was the top seller at local Barnes & Noble Stores. It is now in the national distribution system and is available through a variety of outlets, including www.amazon.com, www.barnesandnoble.com, and www.target.com.
After her book’s initial publication in Spanish, Valdez says she was contacted by a representative of Academy Award-nominated film director, Gregory Nava. He told her Nava had hoped to use her manuscript as material for a movie about the murders, which he had looked into doing years before in the late 1990s. That first project never got off the ground, but Nava’s interest never faded. As the murders continued, he was also able get Jennifer Lopez interested in the project.

While Valdez’ work will play a major part in an accurate portrayal of the story on screen, she says she won’t profit from the film. “I didn’t charge him (Nava) anything for it,” Valdez says. “There’s no big contract here or that sort of thing.”

A documentary based directly on Valdez’ investigation is also being released this year. The film, titled “Border Echoes,” is produced by Lorena Mendez-Quiroga, a friend of Valdez who works as a television producer in California. Valdez says Mendez-Quiroga has been working on the murders for eight or nine years. “I met her along the way,” she says, “and we just hit it off and started working together.”

Valdez says HBO wanted the film, but it was not sold to them because of the possibility that it would have been shelved for some time. “[Mendez-Quiroga] wants to show it to as many audiences as possible,” she says. The film is now being prepared to enter the Oscar race in the documentary film category.

With her book being widely read by audiences in the Borderland and around the nation and with two Hollywood films focusing on the tragedies just across the Rio Grande, Valdez is happy with the work to which she has devoted years of her life.

“I feel satisfied,” she says. “I was able to fulfill my goals, which were to find out what was going on and to let the whole world know about it.”

[Editor’s Note: On the day this article was filed, Juarez officials announced that residents discovered a woman’s body in a bush near the Cathedral in Downtown Juarez. Apparently dead for six hours, she was nude, had been sexually assaulted multiple times and was killed by a blow to the head. Police said she was between 20 and 23 years old.]