

Believe in the **POWER** of the **MOUSE**
and Learn Outside the Box!

Rio Salado College Online

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Postcards From the Edge

Hi, Mom! I'm crossing the border!
By Jimmy Magahern

Rudy Adler steps into the den of his parents' house, a sprawling, ranch-style home in an old-moneyed section of Paradise Valley, and pulls up some scanned digital photos on his PowerBook.

"This is a nice one," he says, staring at a shot of what looks like an empty stretch of highway in the desert with seven men standing on the other side of the road, emerging from some bushes.

"We heard this story a lot when we were down there. Someone's standing lookout on one side of the highway, waiting for all the cars to disappear from sight. Then they give the signal, and all these guys come out from crouching in the bushes and run across the road. That's why we never saw any people while we were driving -- and we drove all around these highways all summer."

Then Adler comes upon his favorite, a shot of a young guy and his girlfriend standing sardine-like in one of the minuscule rooms the migrant houses -- temporary shelters used by Mexicans preparing to cross the U.S. border -- typically offer for couples. "You find a lot of these tiny, condensed rooms," Adler says. "It's really only big enough for a bed. But I love the way he's standing there, brushing his girlfriend's hair."

There's a certain dignity in the way the young woman holds her head up, smiling Mona Lisa-like, in the cramped, dimly lighted room, and devotion in the steady expression of the young man brushing her hair. Behind them, tacked up to a small shelf crowded with cologne and deodorant bottles, is a small banner that reads, in English -- and, for some reason, backward -- "God Bless America."

Adler, a graduate from the University of Arizona's business school, is reviewing the first seven rolls of film he's gotten back from an ambitious summer project he's just completed with Brett Huneycutt, a buddy he's known since elementary school in Phoenix, and Victoria Criado, a mutual friend.

The trio of scary-smart 24-year-olds -- Huneycutt's both a Rhodes and Fulbright scholar now pursuing an M.Phil. degree in economics at Oxford University near London, and Criado is a Puerto Rico-born prodigy who interned on the U.N. Business Council before taking a lucrative job as an analyst specializing in Latin American markets on Wall Street, where Adler also worked -- spent a good part of this summer tooling around the border towns from Arizona to Texas, passing out disposable cameras to Mexican migrants preparing to cross the desert.

It's an idea the three cooked up in the midst of shooting an amateur documentary film along the U.S.-Mexico border on illegal immigration. Long a hot topic in the Southwest, with an estimated 1.1 million illegal immigrants apprehended in the United States last year (and half of those entering at the Arizona border), the immigration issue began heating up again in September when Governor Janet Napolitano agreed to send the southern Arizona counties \$1.5 million in emergency aid to step up law enforcement, repair fences along the border and, in a grisly subtext to the measure, handle "costs related to illegal immigrants' deaths." Since 1998, more than 2,500 people have died making that often four-day hike across the Sonoran Desert, some buried unceremoniously in unmarked graves in Tucson's Evergreen Cemetery.

Frustrated from trying to find a fresh angle from which to address the eternally debated topic, the three friends wondered: What if they could put cameras into the hands of the Mexicans preparing to cross the border themselves? Obviously they couldn't part with their \$2,500 Panasonic camcorder -- placed in such desperate hands, that would only end up being re-sold to an American tourist before the end of the day.



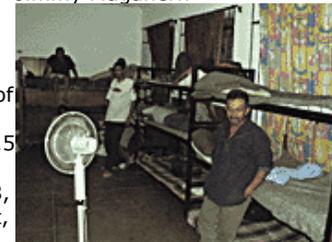
An assortment of photos taken by both migrants and Minutemen, to be included in an upcoming art exhibit.

courtesy of Rudy Adler



The crew of the Border Film Project (borderfilmproject.com), from left: Rudy Adler, Victoria Criado and Brett Huneycutt.

Jimmy Magahern



Inside the migrant house in Nogales, the men rest up for the long hikes across the desert or recover from just being deported.

Jimmy Magahern

But among them, they certainly had enough in savings to buy a bunch of \$8 disposable cameras. What if, instead of completing the film documentary -- at least for the moment -- they passed out a few hundred single-use cameras and persuaded the migrants to take pictures of their adventure crossing the desert, and then send the cameras back, in enclosed, self-addressed stamped envelopes? There's a good chance whatever they got back would make for one killer art gallery exhibit.

That's how Adler, Huneycutt and Criado spent the better half of their summer vacations: passing out cameras in places known to shelter would-be illegal immigrants -- migrant houses, agencies providing water and desert-survival necessities, and even stores specializing in migrant gear, like backpacks and heavy-duty shoes -- instructing the migrants to use the cameras to document anything along their treacherous journeys they found significant. "Documenting the Undocumented" was the catchy title they gave the project to sell it to potential galleries.

Toward the last couple weeks of their project, they also began passing out cameras to the Minutemen, the controversial citizen-patrol group on the U.S. side whose volunteer members sit on lawn chairs all night and call the Border Patrol whenever they spot a migrant. In their early incarnation, the Minutemen attracted headlines for their forceful measures, which sometimes included lining up the migrants at gunpoint and waiting for Border Patrol to arrive (at one point, even President Bush called them "vigilantes"). Now, Adler says, the Minutemen pretty much just call in locations on their walkie-talkies and keep a lower profile -- although almost all of them still carry concealed-weapons permits, a fact not lost on the better-informed migrants.

Rudy Adler has a kind of *Fraggle Rock* vision of what he hopes the cameras returned by both the migrants and the Minutemen will bear out: that the common qualities shared by the peaceful, willing worker creatures and the monstrous, country-guarding Gorgs outweigh their differences.

"What I think is going to happen is you'll see a lot of similarities between the two groups," he says, considering the two polar extremes with which most participants in the border debate align themselves.

"Hopefully, it'll get both the left and right to calm down a bit, and see the people on both sides are just people."

"Do you wanna see inside a migrant house?" Brett Huneycutt asks, smiling.

There's nothing particularly inviting about the ramshackle house on the impossibly steep hill just off the central drag in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico.

Fused to the rocky hillside with a mixture of stucco, wood, and, as in many border *colonia* houses, a little used tire, the Casa Juan Bosco, run by a couple named Francisco and Gilda as a temporary flophouse for as many as 50 migrants attempting to cross the Mexico-U.S. border at a time, is hardly the type of place you'd expect to find a privileged Brophy Prep grad like Huneycutt. Brett Huneycutt, on summer vacation from his masters studies at Oxford, where students come to dinner in robes à la Harry Potter?

And yet, there he is, beaming -- after getting the couple's permission to enter the house -- like he's just moved to the front of the line at his favorite Disneyland attraction.

"C'mon!" Huneycutt says excitedly, trudging up the steep stone walkway. "They said we can talk a while."

Huneycutt is here with Criado -- Adler has stayed behind on this trip -- to pass out about 22 disposable cameras to Francisco and Gilda and the migrants packed inside the house.

To the uninitiated, walking into a migrant house can be a startling experience, like walking into a *Time* photo album of some bleak Baghdad prison camp.

Inside the open door of the packed Casa Juan Bosco, sacked out on 33 bunk beds stacked three high along every wall of a room the size of an average studio apartment, a tired, sweaty pack of men either preparing for a harrowing run across the border or recovering from a deportation stare back through narrowed, suspicious eyes.



Customs agent Tina Hurley: "What goes on around us is terrible . . . but right here, it's so lovely."

Jimmy Magahern



The Grupo Beta men giggle over who gets to stand by Victoria Criado (center, with Brett Huneycutt, left): "It's like they never really mature."

Jimmy Magahern



Jorge, a migrant caught and returned to Nogales, spends time with his girlfriend before attempting to cross the border yet again.

Details

Who / What:
"Documenting the Undocumented"

There's no radio or TV in the room, only the weak hum of a standing fan. And apart from the faint snores from some of the more worn-out workers -- it's only 9 p.m. on a Tuesday, but a lot of these men are resting up for a journey that typically begins after midnight -- the room falls deathly silent as soon as Huneycutt and Criado enter.

It's an intimidating scene, to say the least.

But this is approximately the pair's 25th trip to the border this summer. And, like a late-season episode of *The Real World*, whatever uncomfortableness they might have felt at the beginning of the project seems to have given way to getting real.

Within minutes, the fresh-faced Huneycutt is cracking jokes with a rough-looking mustachioed man who initially slides down from his bunk with the scowl of an angry desperado from an early Robert Rodriguez Western.

"I asked him, 'So what do you do?'" Huneycutt says, attempting to translate between giggles. "And he said, 'I'm a *pollero*,' meaning he works as a chicken-keeper. But *pollero* is also the word Mexicans use for coyote. So we were both laughing -- at the irony, I guess."

After another joke, Huneycutt is slapping the short, ruddy-faced man on the shoulder, laughing in his infectious, high-pitched rat-a-tat giggle, and the prison scowls surrounding the room turn into easy smiles.

"The joke loses something in translation," is all Huneycutt says, before switching back to Spanish, the language he first learned at Brophy and has loved ever since.

Huneycutt, who's part English and German and part Taiwanese (but in his heart, Criado jokes, a "Mexican wanna-be"), says he hopes the pictures that come back from the migrants will give others a sense of what the people he's met over the summer are really like, and help "humanize an incredibly divisive political issue," as it certainly already has for him.

"I like to think our audience for this project is someone like my mother," he says. "You know, they're not sure what to think of complicated political issues. But, like, when they see things from a more one-on-one, personal perspective, it cuts through."

Later, in the car ride back with Huneycutt to the Motel 6 on the Arizona side of the border, Criado feels compelled to share one aspect of the migrant house visit that really cut through for her.

"That room," she says flatly, "smelled like ass! I'm sorry!"

Huneycutt and Criado probably wouldn't be in Nogales if it wasn't for a couple of conversations they both had last spring with Adler, Huneycutt's childhood pal.

Adler, already disillusioned with the business fields open to him with his B.A. in finance, had just finished up a 13-month internship at the prestigious Portland ad agency Wieden+Kennedy, and was itching to try his hand at "something that would let me apply my skills, and also my philosophical ideas," he says. Plus, he adds with a smile, "It seemed better than getting a job. You're not young forever."

It's an early Monday afternoon in late September, and Adler, in flip-flops, cargo shorts and a green Old Town Canoe tee shirt, is kicking around his folks' house, where he's been living since returning from Portland. He's thinking of moving to New York again, not to work in finance -- his Wall Street gig was, he says, "the worst three months" of his life -- but hopefully, this time, to score a job in a video production house.

Today, however, his dad has saddled him with the job of paying the pool guy and the glass installer, when they finish up their work around the property.

Adler says he and Huneycutt came up with the idea of doing a documentary on immigration last spring while planning out their summers. Adler wanted to make a documentary film. Huneycutt, who had previously spent time in El Salvador to write his undergraduate thesis on migrant remittances and their effects on small businesses there, wanted to explore Arizona's border situation with Mexico. "The natural intersection for us was a film about immigration."

Criado, whom Huneycutt had met at Boston College and Adler got to know while working on a political art project in New York, came onto the team by a weird stroke of synchronicity. Bored with her Wall Street job as a Latin America market analyst for Deutsche Bank, Criado e-mailed Adler saying she needed a more creative challenge, and was interested in working on a film.

"I told her, 'Brett and I are making a film. Why don't you quit your job and come with us?' And she did!"

Fueled by Criado's and Huneycutt's passion for and knowledge about all things Mexican, and by Adler's desire to use film for social good (his assignment as part of Wieden+Kennedy's youth team was to develop and launch ad campaigns for "people we

considered to be righteous"), the three friends set off on a series of trips to border towns stretching from Arizona to Texas, determined to examine the explosive immigration situation from all possible vantage points.

They interviewed the migrants and the various human rights groups working to reduce deaths across the desert. They trained their camera on the Border Patrol agents and the Minutemen. They flew to Washington, D.C., to catch politicians coloring the immigration debate, like Senators Orrin Hatch, John McCain and Jon Kyl.

In the end, the whole thing just became too mind-numbingly complicated, like the immigration issue itself. The three became overwhelmed by the complexity of viewpoints they'd captured on camera, and Adler was left with more than 60 hours of video clips to comb through. There's some gold, like the Minutemen pep talk they caught on tape, where the leader proclaims, "We do not give away the American dream; we hold it up as a shining example for all of the world to reach for in their *own countries*." Some is totally irrelevant, like the 20 minutes they filmed at an ostrich ranch on the way to Tucson, which Adler later edited into a rap video, just for fun.

"I'll need to go through it all, figure out what the best footage is, and then see what it *wants* to be," Adler says, admitting that at the moment, none of them can quite wrap their arms around exactly what the film will be about. "Right now, I just need to take a break from it."

Fortunately, about midway through the film project, the team hit upon the idea of distributing the disposable cameras, an idea modeled on an experiment Adler had participated in at Wieden+Kennedy, where 100 cameras were sent out to people in Tokyo, Amsterdam, London and three other cities with the instruction: "Take pictures of things you think are perfect."

In this case, however, the recipients would likely be photographing quite the opposite.

Once the cameras were returned, in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelopes, the photos would be developed, blown up and displayed as an art exhibit in various galleries across the U.S. and Mexico.

Huneycutt, the economics major, came up with the clever incentive scheme to get the amateur photographers to return the cameras. Noticing that a certain retail giant (that Huneycutt prefers not to name, for fear of implying sponsorship) had stores near every one of the border towns they visited, he suggested they include a gift card from the chain in the packets containing the cameras. The card, the recipients were told, would only be activated -- with a \$50 deposit -- once the cameras were sent back.

Best yet, for all three of these stressed-out high achievers, it was a welcome no-brainer. All Adler, Huneycutt and Criado had to do was get the cameras into the right hands and then keep checking the post office box. At worst, it was a numbers game. "We figure if we distribute about 300, we'll get 40 back," says Adler. "We're expecting there'll maybe be one great shot on each roll, so it'll probably be a 40-piece exhibit."

For Adler, in fact, it was a double no-brainer. "We don't even want to Photoshop the pictures," he says. "We want to just present them as is, just blown up to different sizes, some big, some small."

Galleries in Scottsdale and Tucson have already shown interest -- more than they've yet received from any potential distributors on the film.

"It's been an easier sell," Adler says. "It's amazing how just the simple idea of passing out cameras to migrants seems to capture everyone's imagination."

The first few times the team passed out cameras to the brave souls preparing their trek across the border, Huneycutt says there was something "magical" about the empowered look in their eyes.

Take pictures of the people going with you, they'd tell the migrants. The challenging parts of the trip. The obstacles, and the victorious moments. Whatever seems important to you.

"Just seeing the migrant pick up the camera," Huneycutt says, driving away from the Casa Juan Bosco, "and look at it, and take his first picture . . ."

From the back seat of the car, Criado interrupts his reverie. "Yeah, but after you give the spiel 500 times," she grumbles, "it's not so 'magical' anymore."

While Adler, Huneycutt and Criado may have started this project full of brilliant, exhaustively educated views on the complex issues surrounding border relations and impassioned ideals regarding what their own artistic efforts might contribute to the debate, at this point in the game, any traces of pretense seem to have evaporated.

Over some late-night tostadas at one of the bigger outdoor food stands in Nogales after leaving the migrant house, Huneycutt and Criado barely exchange a word about politics or economics or even the heart-rending social conditions they've just seen.

Instead, they talk and cut up about some of the characters they met tonight, a group Huneycutt warmly characterizes as "some interesting dudes."

"There were a couple of crazies tonight," Huneycutt says, smiling. "Like that one guy who tried to speak English? At first, I thought he just couldn't get anything out of his mouth in English that made sense. But then when he switched to Spanish, he *still* didn't say anything that made sense!"

They both laugh. "Of course, he had just gotten back from being deported," Huneycutt says, taking a swig of his Coca-Cola Light. "It usually takes a while to get their minds clear."

While Huneycutt has been searching for the next Che Guevara between the bunks in the sweaty migrant houses and instead finding Cheech Marin, Victoria Criado has learned she can't wear a skirt to a visit with even the noblest-sounding of migrant's-rights groups south of the border.

Earlier today, at the tiny border town of Sasabe -- population 32 -- about 40 miles west of Nogales, Huneycutt and Criado delivered cameras to the little office building run by Grupo Beta, a group sponsored by the Mexican government that tries to discourage migrants from crossing and offers food and water to those who insist on trying anyway.

As group member Juan Quintero gives Huneycutt his own spiel on the humanitarian efforts of the organization -- "It's really hard to talk people out of going," Huneycutt translates. "We tell them that thousands of people are dying in the desert, but a lot of them do it anyway" -- the five other men crowded into the small building laugh and make crude sexual comments about Criado as if none of them realizes she speaks perfect Spanish.

"They're just a bunch of clowns," Criado says afterward, walking back toward the border station while the Grupo Beta men laugh loudly in the distance. "I find that a lot with Latin American men when they get in groups. It's like they never really mature. With American men, at least they're not so obvious."

Back home, Adler admits the team has knowingly used Criado's eye-candy appeal -- which today is shown off by a V-necked turquoise blouse and a long, flowing hair style -- to gain entry into the predominantly male-run migrant houses and border agencies they've visited this summer. "Brett and I can only be so charming," Adler says. "But having a cute girl just opens up a lot of doors."

Now, however, Criado -- who says her relationships with both Adler and Huneycutt are so platonic, she's been able to sleep undisturbed with them in the same hotel rooms -- is clearly tired of playing the sex-kitten role. Not to mention dealing with the machismo she encounters constantly from the men in the border towns.

"The whole time we were there, they were saying really vulgar things around me," she says just after leaving Grupo Beta. "And now they're all joking, because when they said goodbye to me, they were all watching me walking away. *Ugh!*"

Just past the border inspection station on the Arizona side of Sasabe, sitting on the front patio of the quaint red brick customs house that looks out over the desert, U.S. customs agent Tina Hurley, taking a break from her novel (S.M. Stirling's *The Protector's War*), shares some peppery girl talk with Criado about the Grupo Beta men, whom Hurley suspects might be doing some moonlighting as coyotes on the side.

"Once in a while, I see their wives come down, wearing perfect fingernails, like they never work, and driving brand spankin' new Explorers," she says. "And I'm looking at these guys thinking, 'Let's see: Your salary is, what, \$250 a month? Uh-huh!'"

Hurley, meanwhile, has managed to make her own little paradise just yards away from what's become the busiest and most treacherous migrant crossing section along the border.

"What goes on around us is terrible," she says. "Dead bodies, high-speed chases, stolen cars, helicopters, fugitives -- it all happens here, every day."

"But right here, it's so lovely," she adds, sitting with her open novel beside a barbecue grill in front of the customs house, which looks like a full-scale replica of a toy train station from a model railroad set. "I used to work in Nogales, which was frightful. But I've been here for three months now, and I feel like I've died and went to heaven!"

Early in the documentary project, the team members say, it appeared much more cut-and-dried to the migrant-championing idealists just who were the heroes and villains in the immigration issue.

Humanitarian groups like Grupo Beta, No More Deaths and Humane Borders, good.

Anti-immigrant forces like the Minutemen, Representative J.D. Hayworth and Senator Jon Kyl, bad.

Now that they've hung around the border towns long enough, though, Adler, Huneycutt and Criado have seen good and bad, caring and calloused, on both sides of the barbed-wire fence. Which is, in the end, what they hope will come out in the photo exhibit: the real people, both flawed and, in their own ways, noble, who are each trying to deal with a situation they can all agree needs repair.

"It would be easy to do a Michael Moore thing, and just preach to the choir about how messed-up U.S. border policy is," says Adler. "But we also want the left to see who the Minutemen are -- just like we want the right to see the migrants, and see that they're just good people trying to earn money."

Adler says he's long wanted to do a piece on a group that liberals despise and somehow make them look like regular folk. "Somebody they thought they'd hate, but then kind of humanize them."

The Minutemen, he says, make the perfect subjects.

"The Minutemen are these mostly old guys who sit out in the desert in lawn chairs all night, from 6 p.m. 'til 8 in the morning. And it's pretty boring what they do, really.

"But during the day, it's actually a pretty cool community. They hang out at the VFW halls, and there's a bar, and they serve food, and all these guys sit around and talk. Almost all of them are ex-military, so they have all these stories to tell." A lot of them, Adler says, are just sweet old men who can't let go of being soldiers.

While Huneycutt is more critical of the Minutemen -- "Their mission statement is not racist, but the idea of the group attracts people who *could* be racist" -- he says he does admire their clear stance on the issue.

"A lot of people say they don't want immigrants, but they secretly do," he says. "They just want them to come through the desert and risk their lives to work here. It's one of those hear-no-evil, see-no-evil things: We chose to ignore it."

With the cameras clicking from both sides of the fence, Huneycutt says, "We're really hoping the photos shed light on truths that are otherwise covered up."

Back home in Paradise Valley, Adler has already been getting several of the disposable cameras back in the mail -- mostly from the migrants (the Minutemen didn't start getting their cameras until about a month and a half after the project began). And to his delight, the ratio of great photos per roll has been averaging much higher than any of them expected -- "more like three or four out of 27."

"This one will probably make the cut," he says, displaying a photo of a bleached white bone tossed among the rocks in a small clearing of grass and weeds. "It looks a little big to be a human bone, but you never know." Many of the migrants send back photos of the handmade crosses erected at the border towns proclaiming, "Van mas de 2,500. ¿Cuántos Mas?" ("There are more than 2,500. How many more?"). This particular migrant's photo forces the viewer to take a look at what may be, at least, one of their bones.

Next, some comic relief: a few photos from a roll taken by two young guys who photographed each other all the way from Altar to Phoenix, smiling and waving from various points along the trek.

"He looks like he's on vacation," Adler says, laughing. "He's got all these shots where he's like, 'Hi, Mom! I'm crossing the desert!'"

There's a surprisingly close-up shot of a Border Patrol helicopter seen from below -- "and these cameras don't have zoom," Adler points out. It's the last shot on that roll -- no background story as to how the camera made its way back to Adler. There's one of someone's horrendously blistered foot, like a still from a gross-out horror flick, or a Health Channel show.

Adler, Huneycutt and Criado have been touched by the photos, and their journey. Amazingly, it hasn't made them stridently righteous -- or, worse, sappy.

"Not to throw a pity party," Criado finally says late in the evening after the migrant house visit, almost apologizing for putting a damper on dinner, "but sometimes you wonder how much of life is determined by what side of the line you happen to be born on."

Huneycutt, who suddenly reveals he was adopted as a baby, says he's often had that thought himself. What direction would

his life have taken if his birth mother, who moved from Taiwan to Las Vegas right before having him, hadn't given up Huneycutt for adoption at six months? What if he hadn't been offered the outstanding schooling he received?

"When we were in Altar over the past weekend, we met these two really exceptional young men who were about our age, maybe 20," Huneycutt says. "And you could just tell by talking to them that they were really bright, even though they obviously didn't have the formal education we've had. They seemed not just smart, but incredibly wise, thoughtful, and with a really great presence.

"It's hard to say how much does talent and intelligence show through in someone like that, who's had no formal education ever in his life?"

Fifteen minutes later, idling the car through the border checkpoint heading back into Arizona, Huneycutt becomes just a little impatient with the customs agent asking more than the usual battery of questions about his place of residence and what business he has in Mexico.

"Where are you from?" the man asks.

"U.S.," Huneycutt answers. Said with just the right diction, it's usually all an American needs to announce to roll on into the country. But this agent asks him a second time, then stares back quizzically at Criado in the back seat.

"I'm a masters student at Oxford University," Huneycutt finally blurts out. "We're working on a documentary."

From the back seat, after the car pulls away, Criado busts out laughing at her would-be-Mexican friend's sudden display of aristocracy.

"I should have said, 'I'm from A-merrr-i-cah!'" she says in her best Spanish accent. "Hue Ess!"