



Educator Sees 'Games' Played During Visit to U.S.-Mexico Border

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STAMFORD - Stamford resident Karen Arms used one word to describe what she saw during a trip to the U.S.-Mexico border.

Games.

They go on constantly, said Arms, director of the Institute for Children, Youth and Families at the University of Connecticut in Stamford. Border Patrol agents sometimes see people trying to cross illegally but don't intercept out of sympathy, she said. Those who are deported often try their luck again a day or two later.

"It's unbelievable," she said. Arms, 71, traveled to the border as part of Grove's International Conference on Marriage and the Family, which this year focused on immigration. During the weeklong trip in April, she saw how U.S. agents patrol the border near Tucson, Ariz., spoke with Mexicans near the border and crossed it by foot to get back into the United States.

Arms, who has a doctorate in early childhood education, said she was surprised to learn about the different rules and how little they deter Mexicans and others from crossing the border illegally. She learned that a person can be apprehended as many as 19 times for crossing the border illegally before being sent to jail.

Maria Valencia, spokeswoman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Washington, D.C., said such cases are rare, but it is possible for certain people to be given permission for a "voluntary return" a number of times, most often if they are minors with a clean background. But Valencia said border patrol is not a game - it's a skilled operation with trained employees and the latest technology.

"We know what our mission is and we are there to fulfill that mission," she said. "As far as any person crossing illegally, they will try whatever tactic they can. . . . But as soon as we detect someone, they will be apprehended. It's just a matter of time."

Since the fiscal year started in October, the agency has apprehended 886,410 people at the 1,952-mile border with Mexico, Valencia said. In 2004, an average of 660,000

passengers, legal and illegal, crossed the border daily across 35 points of entry, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a nonprofit think-tank. Of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, 6.2 million are from Mexico, according to the institute. Congress has spent months debating what to do with this population and how to better secure the border.

Arms said she met a 16-year-old Mexican boy near the border and learned why people continue to risk their lives to enter the United States. "He said, 'My father can't work, my grandfather can't work. I'm the only hope for my family or we will die from starvation,' " she said.

In 2003, 40 percent of Mexicans lived below the poverty line, according to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook. In the 1980s, the average American earned four times as much as the average Mexican. The difference is now 16 to 1 and growing, said the Rev. John Fife, who spent decades working near the border and was a speaker at the conference Arms attended.

"You can't build enough walls to stop the migration of people across that kind of differential in economics," Fife told the conference. "It is not possible. We know that from history of migration."

Last year, 473 people died along the southern border, Valencia said. Since October, 278 deaths have been recorded. Since 1994, more than 3,000 deaths have been documented along the border, but many more likely were never reported, said the Rev. Delle McCormick, executive director of BorderLinks, a nonprofit, binational organization in Tucson that organizes educational seminars along the border. Thousands more are injured and the rate of death and suffering continues to climb as Border Patrol agents step up enforcement, she said.

"As they extend the wall deeper into the desert, more and more people are taking the more dangerous routes into the U.S.," McCormick said. McCormick, 55, said she completed an organized walk in May that many migrants take to enter the United States. Her group had church officials, medical personnel and others to provide food, transportation and medical care, but still is recovering from the physical and emotional toll of the six-day, 75-mile desert trek, McCormick said. People trying to cross the border often walk in old shoes and many carry their children, McCormick said. She saw baby bottles, family photographs and women's clothing on the path - items people lost or had to throw out as the walk got more difficult.

Valencia said her agency regularly runs advertisements warning of the dangers of crossing the desert. As it does every year, the agency increased its announcements in April because 100-degree temperatures drive up rates of heatstroke, dehydration and death, she said.

Arms said she learned about the poverty in Mexico when she saw shacks that people live in. She showed a documentary about border crossings to her family and class at UConn, hoping to help people understand the role economics plays in illegal immigration. "To me it was so logical to approach it from an economic standpoint than a barrier standpoint," she said. "Fences are never going to do it."