UCSD-TV Special Tells Stories of Border Crossers Caught in San Diego Wildfires

Profiles four victims, including exclusive family interviews and a survivor’s 9-1-1 calls for help

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Last October San Diego County was ravaged by wildfires that left a scar on the region's landscape and residents. Although the devastation earned headlines and an outpouring of sympathy from around the world, part of the story remained untold - until now. On May 19 at 8 p.m., UCSD-TV premieres The Devil's Breath, a heartbreaking account of the border crossers who were trapped and burned during San Diego's 2007 wildfires. The program will air multiple times on UCSD-TV and will also be available for free viewing on-line at www.ucsd.tv after the premiere date.

Titled The Devil's Breath after the Native American name for the infamous Santa Ana winds that fueled the fires, this half-hour news special profiles four of the seven undocumented migrants who died in the Harris Fire, which raged across San Diego's East County and the border region on October 21, 2007. The program brings the victims' stories to life through interviews with their traveling companions, the health care providers who treated them, the family members they left behind, visits to the sites where they perished, and audio of one survivor's frantic 9-1-1 calls for help.

The program's first segment introduces Juan Carlos Bautista, whose body was located ten days after the fire by The Desert Angels, a volunteer search and rescue group based in San Diego. Bautista, originally from the Mexican southern state of Chiapas, was crossing the border illegally to return to his construction job in San Marcos. He traveled with six other men, including Pedro and Jose Luis, who share the story of the group's harrowing escape and their ultimately failed efforts to get help for Bautista, who was injured and unable to continue the journey to safety.

Next is the story of Maria Guadalupe Beltran, a Vista resident and mother of four who had returned to Mexico to attend her father's funeral. She and her brother Nicholas were both critically injured, along with the coyote who escorted them, after re-entering the U.S. on foot near Tecate.

They were airlifted out and treated at the UCSD Burn Center. After two weeks in a coma, Maria died at the hospital, with her partner and high school sweetheart Felipe Mercado at her side.

Areli Peralta, a 25-year-old woman from the state of Guerrero, Mexico, and her husband Ruben Santos Ramirez are the final victims profiled in The Devil's Breath. They left their small village with another young couple to start new lives in the U.S.. Their bodies were found in a scorched ravine days after the fire and remained unidentified in the morgue for months until DNA results could confirm their identities. Peralta's grieving father, Concepción Peralta Ramirez, shares his struggle to search for answers and eventually lay his daughter and her husband to rest.

The program also addresses some of the issues that have emerged from this tragedy, including the emergency response to the border crossers' pleas for help, the language barriers they encountered, delays in
recovering and identifying the bodies found in San Diego’s backcountry, and the cost of medical treatment for the uninsured victims. Representatives from the San Diego Sheriff’s Department, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Medical Examiner’s Office, and the Binational Emergency Medical Committee are featured throughout the program.

Laura Castañeda, an award-winning local journalist and producer of The Devil’s Breath, has covered the border since 1990. "It opened my eyes to a lot of truths about immigration," she stated. "With The Devil’s Breath, I really just wanted people of all races, ages, political affiliations, and on both sides of the immigration fence to see the faces on these victims and their families. Many folks across the country or even in other parts of California, Arizona and Texas don’t understand the border region. It’s a complicated life."

Castañeda spent many hours with the survivors, families of the victims, volunteers, and officials who responded in the hours, days, weeks and months after the fires. "It was probably one of the most challenging stories in my career," she commented. "Not only to gain access to the victims and their families but also to convince them to share their stories. Most were and are very fearful of suddenly being thrust into the public spotlight."

UCSD-TV offers programming unlike anything else in San Diego. UCSD-TV airs on Cox and Time Warner Ch. 135, Time Warner North County Ch.18, and UHF (no cable) Ch. 35. For more information, program schedules and more, visit www.ucsd.tv.

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