

An excerpt from 'Weekly' scribe Margaret Regan's new book featuring dispatches from the Arizona-Mexico border

by Margaret Regan

Josseline shivered as she stepped over the stones and ducked under the mesquites. She was in Arizona, land of heat and sun, but on this late-January day in 2008, it was cold and damp. The temperature was in the 50s, and the night before it had dropped to near freezing. A winter rain had fallen, and now the desert path was slippery and wet, even more treacherous than it had been before.

Josseline was 7 miles north of the Mexican border, near the old ranching town of Arivaca, in prime Sonoran Desert. It was a wonderland of cactus and mesquite, beautiful but dangerous, with trails threading through isolated canyons and up and down hills studded with rocks. She had to get through this perilous place to get to her mother.

A little girl with a big name—Josseline Jamileth Hernández Quinteros—she was 5 feet tall and 100 pounds. At 14, young as she was, she had an important responsibility: It was her job to bring her little brother, age 10, safely to their mother in Los Angeles. The Hernández kids had never been away from home before, and already, they'd been traveling for weeks. Now they were almost there, just days away from their mother's embrace.

The family hadn't been together in a long time. Their father, Santos, was living somewhere in Maryland; their mother, Sonia, in California. Both parents were undocumented, working in the shadows. Back home in El Salvador, the kids lived with relatives, and in the years their mom was gone, Josseline had become a little mother to her brother. Finally, Sonia had worked long enough and hard enough to save up the money to send for the children. She'd arranged for Josseline and her brother to come north with adults they knew from home, people she trusted.

The group had crossed from El Salvador into Guatemala, then traveled 2,000 miles from the southern tip of Mexico to the north. The trip had been arduous. They'd skimped on food, slept in buses or, when they were lucky, in casas de huéspedes, the cheap flophouses that cater to poor travelers. In Mexico, the migrants feared the federales, the national police, and now, in the United States, they were trying to evade the Border Patrol, the dreaded migra.

But here in the borderlands, they were in the hands of a professional. Like the thousands of other undocumented migrants pouring into Arizona—jumping over walls, trekking across mountains, hiking through deserts—their group had contracted with a coyote, a smuggler paid to spirit them over the international line. The coyote's fee, many thousands of dollars, was to pay for Josseline and her brother to be taken from El Salvador all the way to their mother in Los Angeles. So far, everything had gone according to plan. They had slipped over the border from Mexico, near Sasabe, 20 miles from here, and had spent a couple of days picking their way through this strange desert, where spiky cacti clawed at the skin and the rocky trail blistered the feet. The coyote insisted on a fast pace. They still had a hike of 20 miles ahead of them, out to the northbound highway, Interstate 19, where their ride would meet them and take them deep into the United States.

Josseline (pronounced YO-suh-leen) pulled her two jackets closer in the cold. She was wearing everything she had brought with her from home. Underneath the jackets, she had on a tank top, better suited to Arizona's searing summers than its chilly winters, and she'd pulled a pair of sweatpants over her jeans. Her clothes betrayed her girly tastes. One jacket was lined in pink. Her sneakers were a wild bright green, a totally cool pair of shoes that were turning out to be not even close to adequate for the difficult path she was walking. A little white beaded bracelet circled her wrist. Best of all were her sweats, a pair of "butt pants" with the word "Hollywood" emblazoned on the rear. Josseline planned to have them on when she arrived in the land of movie stars.

She tried to pay attention to the twists and turns in the footpath, to obey the guide, to keep up with the group. But by the time they got to Cedar Canyon, she was lagging. She was beginning to feel sick. She'd been on the road for weeks and out in the open for days, sleeping on the damp ground. Maybe she'd skimped on drinking water, giving what she had to her little brother. Maybe she'd swallowed some of the slimy green water that pools in the cow ponds dotting this ranch country. Whatever the reason, Josseline started vomiting. She crouched down and emptied her belly, retching again and again, then lay back on the ground. Resting didn't help. She was too weak to stand up, let alone hike this rollercoaster trail out to the road.

It was a problem. The group was on a strict schedule. They had that ride to catch, and the longer they lingered here, the more likely they'd be caught. The coyote had a decision to make, and this is the one he made: He would leave the young girl behind, alone in the desert. He told her not to worry. They were in a remote canyon that was little-traveled, but the Border Patrol

would soon find her. Nearby, he claimed, were some pistas, platforms that la migra used as landing pads for their helicopters. Surely they'd be by soon, and they would take care of her. Her little brother cried and begged to stay with her. But Josseline was his big sister, and Josseline insisted that he go. As he recounted later, she told him, "Tú tienes que seguir a donde está Mamá." You have to keep going and get to Mom.

The other travelers grabbed the wailing boy and walked on, leaving his sister alone in the cold and dark. She had only her clothes to keep her warm. On her first night alone, the temperature dropped below freezing, to 29 degrees. By the weekend, when her brother arrived safely in Los Angeles and sounded the alarm, Arivaca had warmed up—to 37 degrees.

Three weeks later, Dan Millis was getting ready to go out on desert patrol. He was filling up a big plastic box with nonperishables for migrants—granola bars, applesauce, Gatorade—and new socks, something the weary walkers always seemed to need. He tossed the box into his car and then loaded up dozens of gallons of water. A former high school teacher, Dan, 28, was an outdoors enthusiast who was spending a year volunteering with No More Deaths, a Tucson group determined to stop the deaths of migrants in the Arizona deserts.

As the United States clamped down on the urban crossings, desperate travelers were pushing into ever more remote wilderness and dying out there in record numbers. So the No More Deaths folks began hiking the backcountry in the Arivaca borderlands, an hour and a half southwest of Tucson, setting out water and food in the rugged hills. Sometimes they'd meet up with migrants who were lost or sick, and they would provide first aid. But sometimes they found a body.

Before he left town, Dan studied the trail map. He could see that several heavily traveled Arivaca trails converged on a single ridge, and he wanted to drop his load there, where it would do the most good. Three buddies were coming along to help, but the goods they were packing would be heavy—each gallon jug of water weighed almost 8 1/2 pounds—so he wanted to get his car as close to the ridge as he could. The map showed that a dirt ranch road edged near the drop spot, but the volunteers would have to hike up Cedar Canyon, where they'd never been before. Dan didn't know whether the canyon would even be passable, but he decided to give it a shot.

He had heard about Josseline Hernández. When the girl's little brother arrived in Los Angeles

without her, her distraught family had called the Salvadoran consul in Nogales, a border town, and the consul connected them with Coalición de Derechos Humanos, a human-rights organization in Tucson. Derechos compiles annual lists of the desert's dead, and tries to help the families of the missing. The coalition's Kat Rodriguez gets two or three reports of lost migrants a month. Josseline's mother couldn't even talk to her—"She was coming undone"—but the uncle gave Kat a description of the teenager and her clothes, including the distinctive green shoes Josseline was so proud of. Kat always asked for pictures of the loved one smiling; teeth, after all, can be used to identify a corpse.

The family sent Kat photos that pictured Josseline in a uniform and cap, banging the cymbals in a parade with her high school marching band; Josseline posing in fashionable capris and a tank top; Josseline standing forlornly in her church, with flowers, lit candles and a statue of the Virgin Mary behind her. The pictures showed her black hair and eyes and her warm brown skin—morena, the consul called it—but in every one, she was serious and unsmiling, a young girl with heavy responsibilities.

Kat organized the images and identifying info into a color flier headlined "Menordetenida o desaparecida" (Female minor detained or disappeared). Kat sent her report to the Pima County medical examiner, in case he had a matching body in his morgue, and activists from the Samaritans immigrant-aid group checked the hospitals and detention centers. Other volunteers went out looking for her. They didn't have much to go on. The coyote had told the family Josseline was nearpistas, or platforms; no one was quite sure what he meant since there were no structures in the desert. And the flier stated, erroneously as it turned out, that the girl had last been seen near Nogales, miles from where she'd been walking.

Dan Millis hadn't gotten involved in the searches. Hunts for missing migrants are needle-in-a-haystack affairs, typically conducted by well-meaning amateurs who don't know search-and-rescue techniques. Sometimes the volunteers get injured themselves. Even BORSTAR, the Border Patrol's search, trauma and rescue unit, can't help when there's too little information. Far better, Dan thought, to stick to the work he knew would do some good, putting out food and water for the living. So he and his companions drove down to Arivaca and started into Cedar Canyon, lugging the water jugs and the box of goodies, traipsing a narrow path between looming rocky walls. There was an old dam back in there, along a wash, and he and his buds had to scramble up over the concrete. They'd been walking maybe 20 minutes when up ahead, Dan spotted a pair of bright green shoes.

He didn't think of Josseline at first. Or of death. The owner of the shoes had to be around, he reasoned, maybe hiding. He began calling out the standard No More Deaths chant, designed to reassure fearful migrants. "¡Hola, hermanos! Somos amigos de la iglesia. Tenemos comida y agua." Hello, brothers! We're friends from the church. We have food and water.

Then, suddenly, he saw her. She was lying on a rock, under a bush, her hands raised up near her head, her feet plunged into water that had pooled in a cavity in the stone.

"I saw her teeth," he said months later. "I knew she was dead. It was a horrible feeling. I told my friends to stop.

"The body was intact," he went on, reciting details of the scene in a monotone. "She had taken off two jackets and hung them on a rock. She had a tank top on and sweatpants. Her feet were in the water." The little pearl bracelet was on her wrist. But Josseline's little brother had said his sister was wearing jeans, and this girl had on sweatpants.

Dan used his cell phone to call Sarah Roberts, a nurse active in No More Deaths who had helped coordinate Josseline's case. He told her about finding the body and the telltale green shoes and the sweatpants that didn't match up. Sarah got the message to Kat Rodriguez, who called the uncle, who questioned the brother one more time. This time, the little boy said, no, now he remembered: Josseline had put on her Hollywood butt pants. The news flew back over the cell phones to Dan. But the body was face-up, and he couldn't see any writing. He knew enough about police procedures not to disturb the scene.

Dan telephoned the sheriff. Then he and another volunteer, Clint, drove the hour into Arivaca, marking down their route through the tangle of ranch roads so that they could give the police detailed directions back to the canyon. It was getting cold, so they picked up some hot soup in town for the two volunteers who had stayed behind with the body. In the meantime, that pair, a Frenchwoman named Marie and a refugee-rights worker named Max, had twisted some branches into a cross and planted it in a pile of rocks. When Dan and Clint got back, all four volunteers held a vigil, sitting by the body and the makeshift shrine, waiting for the authorities to come.

In the late afternoon, two sheriff 's deputies finally arrived. They gently turned the body over. On the back of the pants was a single word: Hollywood.

Josseline completed her journey in a white plastic body bag. The deputies dragged her out along the trail, and lashed her corpse to a platform on the back of their SUV. It was dark by then, and they had to follow Dan's car out on the dirt roads, the two vehicles caravanning in an impromptu funeral procession. Once they hit Interstate 19, going north to Tucson up the broad Santa Cruz Valley, Dan noticed something strange in the sky. "It was the night of the full lunar eclipse," he remembered. "It was eerie to have the orange moon disappearing."

Josseline's father flew in from the East Coast in a panic. Hollywood pants don't carry much weight in the world of forensic identification, and her body was too far gone after three weeks in the elements to be identified by sight. So Josseline's dad paid a private lab to put together his DNA profile. The testing took weeks. In the interim, a coyote kept calling Josseline's mother, insisting that her daughter was not lost. If the family would only send him money, he promised, he would bring the girl to her alive and well. Sonia hesitated, not wanting to believe that her child was dead. But the DNA test, when it came in, was unequivocal. The probability that Santos was the father of the dead girl in the morgue was 99.988 percent. Armed with those results and a copy of the birth certificate, Pima County forensic anthropologist Bruce Anderson determined once and for all that this was the body of Josseline Hernández.

She was taken to California for burial. Her mother had no plans to return to El Salvador, and she wanted her daughter close.

Two months later, in the heat of late April, Father Bob Carney, a Catholic priest from Tucson, scrambled into Cedar Canyon to say a Mass for Josseline. He brought up the rear of 30 mourners, among them Josseline's aunts, uncles and cousins. Her parents were unable to grieve at the place where their daughter had died, and neither was her brother; as undocumented immigrants, they feared arrest. Tucson activists had turned up in large numbers. The death of the teenager had hit them hard. ("That case was hell," Kat Rodriguez would later say. "Every step of the way was agony.") The slow climb up the canyon was a reminder of what border crossers regularly endured. "People were getting scratched," Father Bob said later, "stumbling over the rocks. This is what she went through."

Josseline's relatives were the first to arrive at the rock where the body had been found. "All of a sudden, this wail went up through that valley and echoed," Father Carney said. "When I got there, they were truly grieving, and blaming themselves at the same time. All the emotions came pouring out in a heartrending wail."

The priest laid an altar cloth and his chalice on the rock, and said Mass among the prickly green plants, the canyon walls rising up behind him. As he broke the Communion bread, he intoned the biblical words, "Do this in memory of me."

The No More Deaths Phoenix chapter had made a pretty new cross for Josseline, all pink and white, painted with flowers and entwined with ribbons. After the service, Father Bob anointed the cross with oil, and told Josseline, he would later say, "How sorry I was, that we as a people, as a nation, would do this."

Josseline's mother had written a poem in Spanish for her daughter, and her words were transcribed on the base of the cross. They began with encouragement to other migrants who might come this way: "When you feel that the road has turned hard and difficult / Don't give yourself up as lost / Continue forward and seek God's help." But it ended with a lament for her daughter: "Te llevaremos siempre en el corazón." We'll carry you always in our hearts.

The priest had seen many horrors in the 10 years since he'd first blessed the bodies of eight young migrants piled up in an Arizona morgue, but for him, Josseline's tragedy stood out.

"For all of us, those who saw her, or saw her picture, she became so alive, so real," Father Bob said, beginning to cry as he spoke, months after the Mass in the desert. "We called her our sister, our daughter, our child. Every migrant is dear to us. But she was everybody. She was all of those thousands of people who suffered and died."