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Janet Jarman

Photos That Cross Borders and Challenge Perceptions

By David Gonzalez Apr. 16, 2014 4

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Beyond prizes, page views or any other measure of prestige, Janet Jarman has a newfound appreciation for the impact of photojournalism. A project that began 18 years ago in a Mexican dump has taken her on a journey across borders with a family whose lives illustrate the complexities of immigration. But rather than be content that it will reach some abstract audience, she is excited that the project is being used by teachers and medical professionals in North Carolina to understand the lives of Latin American immigrants who are remaking the region.

"Marisol: The American Dream" started when Ms. Jarman encountered an 8-year-old girl whose family scavenged in a dump in Matamoros, Mexico. But it gained depth when the girl's family moved to the United States and confronted the social, economic and educational challenges of so many others who had come before. Through persistence — and luck — Ms. Jarman has put together a body of work that offers insights into the lives of others while challenging our perceptions of them.

She is now part of an interdisciplinary team at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill that received a federal grant to explore how medical professionals look at — and interact with — immigrants, using her photos to spark discussion and introspection.

"This was a story about an enormous topic, so what could I do that was different?" said Ms. Jarman, who lives in Mexico City. "But this got to the essence of why I entered journalism in the first place, to bring people together and help us recognize our common humanity."


Marisol, in flowered shirt, enjoying an outing with her mother, Andrés and all of her sisters and their families. They attended a public dance featuring Mexican bands. Because of financial constraints, Marisol and Andrés rarely go out. Texas. 2011. Janet Jarman

Not that it started out that way. Ms. Jarman had taken a break from journalism to undertake graduate studies in London, concentrating on environmental and developmental issues in Latin America, especially in the aftermath of the North American Free Trade Agreement. She had traveled in 1995 to Brownsville, Tex., where a group of activist nuns showed her areas affected by pollution. They insisted she visit a dump across the border in Matamoros, a smoky place where people survived scavenging for recyclable materials.

Marisol was 8 when she first met Ms. Jarman, who spotted the girl after meeting her mother, Eloisa.

"Marisol was about 30 meters from her, waiting atop the hood of a truck, gazing into the distance," she said. "They were waiting for another big truck to come to the dump. The sun was setting, and I asked her mom if I could take her picture. She said: 'Marisol, let the lady photograph you. Maybe you'll be famous one day!' I stayed for an hour, and they invited me to their house."

Ms. Jarman stayed four days, learning about their lives. Eloisa lived next to the dump with her nine children, while her husband, Vinicio, was a farmworker in the United States. The plan was that he would come back one day to take his family north. A few months later, he did just that. Though Ms. Jarman did not learn of their move until afterward, it gave her the chance to undertake a more ambitious project that illustrated why a family moves and what happens once it does.

She tracked down the family in Florida, working on a strawberry farm and living in a trailer. The parents worked so hard, they did not have the time or the freedom to get to know their new community.

"The mother would come home with a stinging reaction on her face from the pesticides since she was out in the sun a lot," Ms. Jarman said. "She said it was harder than the work she had in Mexico."


Marisol outdoors to wash industrial trucks with Andrés, despite their divorce proceedings. As the couple had more children, Marisol needed to start working to help the family financially. Her father skis from time to time, but she was proud to make her own money. Texas. 2012. Janet Jarman

She stayed long enough to accompany Marisol on the bus to her first day at school.

"There were a lot of other migrant kids just like her, and an Anglo teacher," Ms. Jarman said. "I think they all seemed pretty scared and intimidated that first day. For all good reasons."

In the coming years, the family moved to Texas. Tensions at home led Eloisa to get a divorce. She and her children lived in a house, next to Anglo neighbors who would not let their daughter, Mary, play in the Mexican family's yard. Instead, Mary and Cristina, Marisol's younger sister, hung out by a fence.

"Here were these two girls from totally different cultures," Ms. Jarman said. "One crossed this huge border, only to arrive at this fence. They had crossed the physical border only to get to a country where there were more social barriers that might be more limiting than geographic borders."

That image might have been the end of the story had it not been for an editor who several years later took an interest in it and suggested that Ms. Jarman find Marisol, who by then was in middle school. Her home life was more chaotic, and that assignment ended with Ms. Jarman watching the family lose its home, the one haven that had provided stability.

"She became closed and isolated and quiet," Ms. Jarman recalled of that trip. "She had started dating and was surrounded by sisters and there were a lot of babies. Her sisters had not finished high school. She said she did not want to be like them."

But she was.


Marisol helping her father in her prepare a sacrificial sheep for a village party he held in honor of her visit. Most residents here raise sheep and goats and grow corn, alfalfa, chiles and tomatoes. Marisol said she could never endure the hard physical labor performed by women in Andrés's village, Hidalgo, Mexico. 2007. Janet Jarman

She had her first child, Carlos, who was born with medical problems. The child's father, Andrés, washed cars at an auto dealership and was saving money to return to his hometown in Mexico and open a carwash. Marisol had a second child and felt pressured to move to Mexico, too, a prospect that alarmed her, because she wanted to be close to American schools and doctors.

"She was scared to live in Mexico," Ms. Jarman said. "I saw a lot of issues that applied to immigrant families. With Andrés, it was not about the American dream but the Mexican dream. He just wanted to move back, and that's what so many don't understand."

A third child came, and so did a divorce. The couple stayed working together washing cars, which made Ms. Jarman wonder if the relationship was over. She got a call not long ago from Marisol: She and Andrés had reconciled and were remarrying.

The experience with the project has been as complicated as life itself.

"When I first started this project I thought it was too limited to the Matamoros part," Ms. Jarman said. "I always wanted to do an immigration project that went over time and struggled with the macro themes. What can I do that was different? How can I say something new?"


A county clerk assisted Marisol as she applied for United States passports for her three children, all American citizens by birth. Marisol had achieved legal residency in the United States, allowing her the flexibility to travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States. Texas. 2011. Janet Jarman

The answer came when Mimi Chapman, a professor in the school of social work at the University of North Carolina, came across the Marisol photos, which Ms. Jarman had once exhibited at the university, her alma mater. Dr. Chapman, who had been working with teachers to sensitize them to the needs of the growing local immigrant population, had a gut feeling the images could spark discussion.

"How can they make a difference in school?" Dr. Chapman said. "What does it look like to be a parent with two or three jobs? There's one picture of Marisol's mother looking exhausted after a day in the strawberry fields. Teachers sometimes wondered why parents did not supervise their kids better, why the kid would be alone at a football game. But that picture, everybody can identify with being tired. But people also realize their judgments and life experiences are different."

Dr. Chapman is now the lead investigator in an interdisciplinary group that received $300,000 from the National Institutes of Health to do similar work in a pilot study with pediatricians and specialists in adolescent medicine. The goal is to have medical professionals examine their own expectations — implicit biases — of what immigrant parents and children can or cannot do.

"These images prompt you to re-evaluate your thinking," Dr. Chapman said. "Stories like the one Janet tells, over the long term, allow you to engage in a complex way over the long term."

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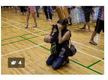
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