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IMMIGRATION: GRIM CASELOAD AT THE BORDER

By Ana Campoy
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For months, Lori Baker has been poring over the remains of 171 humans here in her Baylor University laboratory, hoping to learn who each one was.

So far, the forensic anthropologist has identified just three.

Ms. Baker, 44 years old, is part of a group of volunteer scientists and immigrant-rights activists who are helping Brooks County officials identify dozens of unknown people who die each year in the south Texas brush trying to sneak across the U.S.-Mexico border.

It is a tough task for Ms. Baker, an associate anthropology professor at Baylor who devotes her off-hours to the project. All she has to work with are highly composed and incomplete remains – often bones gnawed on by coyotes and bobcats.

Even after she extracts DNA from the bodies, Ms. Baker hopes that the relatives of the deceased, likely living hundreds of miles away in Mexico or Central America, have reported them missing or submitted DNA samples so she can make a match. Often, they haven't.

"It is depressing and overwhelming sometimes," said Ms. Baker, who has been doing this work since the early 2000s. "We have the remains of so many individuals that we're trying to identify."

South Texas has emerged as one of the busiest – and deadliest – migrant crossing points in recent years. From October 2013 to this past August, more than 100 people were found dead in the Rio Grande Valley, fewer than the 149 deaths recorded in the same period a year earlier, but still the highest toll along the entire Southwest border.

Most of them died in Brooks County, about 80 miles north of Mexico, which is part of a well-worn route taken by immigrants trying to evade a highway checkpoint.

Until recently, remains found in the county, one of Texas' poorest, mostly were buried in unmarked graves. Now, thanks to a \$150,000 state grant, Brooks County officials are sending bodies to nearby Webb County for analysis because it doesn't have a medical examiner.

Ms. Baker has assumed the grim job of identifying those previously buried remains. In June, she and a team of students and anthropologists from Baylor and the University of Indianapolis disinterred 54 bodies from a cemetery in Falfurrias, the Brooks County seat, where local authorities had buried them. In 2013, they unearthed 70 other remains from the same cemetery.

The workers, all volunteers, have spent about \$75,000 of their own money in transportation, lodging, and equipment to conduct the exhumations. "I don't have the words

to say how grateful this department is" for the volunteers, said Benny Martinez, Brooks County's chief deputy sheriff.

Eddie Canales, an organizer with South Texas Human Rights Center, a Falfurrias-based nonprofit, often hears from families who suspect a loved one died in the area while trying to sneak into the U.S. He acts as an investigator and translator, helping them narrow down where their relatives disappeared.

"To them it's a real shot in the dark," Mr. Canales said.

At her Baylor lab, Ms. Baker is doing her part to help. On a recent afternoon, a nearly complete skeleton, a rare find, was spread out on a stainless steel table. Next to it was a large plastic bag filled with a thick mat of dark brown hair and an aluminum packet containing two Dolac pills, a pain medicine.

"Unfortunately we don't have any pieces of clothing to match with what someone would have been documented as wearing when they left," she said.

Donning latex gloves, Ms. Baker gently lifted the skull from the blue and red ladybug-pattern cushion where it lay to avoid damage. "We try to pick cheerful fabrics," she said, as she began her examination.

The skull features, characteristic of people of Native American, European and African descent, suggested someone from Latin America. The porosity of the femur bones showed malnourishment. It probably was a woman, Ms. Baker surmised, given the wide angle of a notch in the hip bone.

She later would extract a sliver of bone to obtain DNA and study the concentration of different elements in it, a potential indication of where the individual lived. Even after the detailed analysis, Ms. Baker's chances of identifying the remains are slim.

She enters her findings into a database, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, which matches the deceased with people reported missing. But because relatives back in Latin America can't easily file a missing-person report in the U.S. – even electronically – it is rare for her to find a match.

Ms. Baker brokered an agreement to run the contents of the database, which is funded by the National Institute of Justice, against lists compiled by Mexican officials of migrants believed to have disappeared near the border, a change she believes could vastly improve the identification rate.

Meanwhile, she and her students are manually cross-checking cases with a small collection of DNA samples gathered by immigrant advocacy groups.

Audrey Murchland, an anthropology major who has been helping Ms. Baker dig up and process the bodies, said she sometimes takes breaks to cry. But she says she presses on because giving families closure is worth the heartbreaking work.

"It means a lot to people to get their loved ones back," she said.