

# Un Gran Esfuerzo para Sobrevivir

By

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## Un Gran Esfuerzo para Sobrevivir

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### **Abstract**

*Un gran esfuerzo para sobrevivir* is an exhibition about what immigrants crossing into the United States experience as they risk everything for a better life, job, education, or freedom from danger. The installation has a trail of sand simulating the path that undocumented individuals often take to cross the border in hopes of the American dream. Casted feet made of sand are arranged to show the stride and funneling of bodies as they move toward their destination. Overhead, speakers can be heard playing recordings stories and experiences being shared by individuals who have survived the danger of the journey. The exhibition highlights the hardships experienced, and the resilience necessary to overcome.

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## **Introduction**

*Un gran esfuerzo para sobrevivir* is an exhibition inspired by immigrants. Many young people strive to better their living situation. They yearn for an education to enrich their lives and incomes that can properly support their loved ones. Immigrants from Mexico venture out to cross the border despite the heavy militarization and dangerous terrain. In most cases the living situation is dangerous with few opportunities for a living wage or education. Most of Mexico's population falls below the poverty line, making it necessary for children to abandon their schooling to find jobs in order to support their families.

## **Family Impact**

At the age of 14, my father decided to cross over into the U.S. He didn't know his final destination and didn't speak a word of English. He was in search of a better life for his family. He was in the U.S. for only two months before the border patrol raided his workplace on an Arizona farm. They dropped him off in Juarez, Chihuahua, kept his money and left him with just the clothes on his back. Having felt humiliated, he waited half a year before setting out again, this time with one of his older brothers.

Feeling more confident about the journey, he focused on how the money he would make in the U.S. could help his parents back home. The drive to keep his parents afloat back home helped him stay motivated to continue returning to the U.S. for temporary work. My father saw how the remittances from his work was making it possible for his family to begin to thrive. My grandparents had 12 children and my grandfather worked the land and raised livestock. During this time in Mexico, the income they made was not enough to support a family of such a large size. My father was only allowed to finish third grade before the needs of the family called for him to work the fields with the rest of the family. Listening to his stories, we could feel the

sense of pride from how he had been able to help his family from so far away. He often repeated his vow, that his kids would never have to go through the struggles he did growing up.

Over the period of a couple of decades, my father was deported so many times that he lost count around 14. He went as far as burning his fingerprints off to be sure that they could never identify him if he got deported again. He taught us that anything we want in life, must be achieved with hard work and to not be scared to take necessary risks. If he would have let the first deportation defeat him, we would never be living here in the U.S. I was greatly inspired by his resilience.

Me and my sister never had to fear deportation, but we still had to deal with the discrimination leveled against Mexicans. Yes, we are American by birth, but we were raised in a Mexican household, with the same principles my parents were taught. Being positioned between two worlds has been hard on us. We must be more American than the Americans and more Mexican than the Mexicans. We always had a feeling of not having a legitimate place of belonging. I suspect this is a common sentiment among many immigrants. Growing up, in order to not be scrutinized by society, we had to assimilate, but did so without losing who we are and where we come from. At school, we would often get suspended for speaking Spanish, and at home, would get in trouble for speaking English.

### **Themes**

Many Americans do not understand the severity of the impact that the drug cartels have on the Mexican people's daily lives. Many of those that I interviewed mentioned the violence is always present, if associates of the cartel hear you say the wrong thing or do something they do not like, it will be answered with threats or worse. One of the individuals interviewed mentioned

having lost a loved one because of the affiliation with the cartels. Families face obstacles such as resisting the temptation not to fall into working for cartels. There is a scarcity of work and the work that is available does not pay enough to properly support families. The resulting desperation leads some to work for cartels to earn more but sacrifice their way of living for one that is dominated by fear and violence. Tensions because of the border exacerbate the problem, and fuel contempt and unwillingness to understand the underlying causes.

The interviewees risk everything to find a better life in the U.S., with no expectation that Americans will understand the life they are running from. The current political situation tries to portray them as a hindrance to our country, some go as far as to demonize and call them criminals. The interviewees and their families are just wanting to survive and give their children the opportunity to achieve something greater with their lives. The fear of being deported is secondary compared to that of being forced into the service of a cartel. While in the U.S., they face the potential for losing their freedom every day when they leave their homes to go about living a normal life. For those that I interviewed, there is no other alternative than to take these risks.

Many of the interviewees that decide to pursue a higher education and attend college have even greater obstacles. These individuals do not qualify for the funding that many take for granted. Full-time students, working full-time jobs, sometimes even two jobs just to get through school is the norm. Traditionally in Mexican house holds the youngest child is accountable for the well-being of the parents, and often extend that care to nieces and nephews in need. Even with the odds stacked against them, they somehow find it in themselves to push forward and overcome.

## Exhibition

The choice of using sand for the trail is inspired by the path immigrants usually take to cross into the U.S. The craggy terrains of barren land filled with harsh stretches of desert, is one of the more dangerous barriers to overcome. The challenge of knowing you are about to tread into an unforgiving wilderness, combined with the uncertainty of survival leads many to travel in large groups.

Using sand to make the feet ties the person to the place, and the journey they must go through is embodied in the implied motion and groupings. The brittle nature of the castings shows how precarious their situation is, as some never make it their destination. My family history inspired me to make castings of feet. My great grandfather was a Tarahumara indigenous of Chihuahua. The name translates into light on your feet. Known for their endurance of running, they ran on foot from the Spanish and Aztecs, being displaced from their home and hiding in Copper Canyon.

I wanted the stories of immigrant students to be heard. I interviewed several students, some on Deferred Action for Children Arrivals (DACA) and some not on it. Their recounting of the experience of crossing over is played overhead, and when taken as a whole, simulate the cacophony of multitudes speaking at once. The interviewees discuss their dreams of finishing school and how they know with this education they will be able and help their families through any hardship. A recurring subject from these stories is how the drug cartel violence was a factor in moving.

The decision to make an installation instead of individual sculptures was not easy. This subject matter needs an enveloping presence, and creating an environment where the viewer is



transported to the desert achieves this. Submerging the viewer in this environment was crucial. In order for them to connect to the stories, they needed to be submerged into an environment they can readily identify. The use of sand covered foam to simulate rocks and the intense lighting simulate a desert environment. The delicacy of the feet on the sand brings balance to the viewer. Easing the feelings of the stories being told, especially those of violence. With such strong emotions being felt, one needs to ease into the subject matter which the visual of the sand helps to accomplish.

### **Role as an Artist**

Now that I am older, I now see and understand the struggles of immigrants. Many immigrants do not have a voice, and too few are willing to stand up for them. These are my people and I feel like I need to become a voice for them in order to help bring awareness and understanding on what they are fighting for.

Drawing from the experiences of my family and those of all the immigrants I've had the honor of meeting, I am inspired to dedicate this show to them. I became a voice for them to be heard by others. *Un gran esfuerzo para sobrevivir*, the title alone shows the perseverance of these immigrants, and the incredible resilience needed in order to survive and overcome. These words hold so much weight for the Mexican people. When Cesar Chavez fought for the immigrant field workers, they yelled "Si se puede!" An empowering phrase, that calls on us to never give up, and yes, we will overcome. I feel my title embodies the immigrant spirit that Mexicans have come to be associated with.

I can envision a future where immigrants get a fair path to citizenship, and it is my hope that my work can help to bring about that change in society. Stories have always been a strong

way of inspiring people and generating insight into the life of others. Growing up listening to the stories my father would tell me, always left me in awe of everything he went through. This is my way of finally taking a step toward giving back to my family and to all of the immigrants striving for that American dream.



Installation Overview 1



Installation Overview 2



Trail Close up 1



Trail Close up 2



Detail of foot (back)



Detail of foot (front)