

Activists Show Immigration Film

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By Tony Burchyns (tburchyns@morganhilltimes.com)

Morgan Hill - "Who are these people, and why do they risk their lives to enter the United States?" asks the narrator in the 33-minute documentary "Dying to Live: A Migrant's Journey."

It's an engrossing question, said Catholic activist Mario Banuelos, who showed high school students the film Thursday to put a human face on immigration issues.

"Now that we've had the elections and Congress passed the Secure Fence Act, the 700-mile long fence along the Mexican border, it's going to come back for debate in January when the new Congress comes in," said Banuelos, a Morgan Hill resident and a member of St. Catherine's social justice committee.

It's easy to rattle off statistics, Banuelos said, "pros and cons about immigration." But putting an actual face to the issue is more difficult. "We want our community to know our own immigrant story," he said.

It's the story of Mexican migrants seeking living wages in California and throughout the Southwest. Locally, in 2000, 15 percent of Morgan Hill's total population was foreign born, 26 percent didn't speak English at home and 27 percent were Latino.

"We want a road to legalization for all the illegal immigrants who are here. We want them to be able to come out of the shadows and be able to come out with dignity and be functional in our society," Banuelos said.

It's a visibly Catholic viewpoint as the issue rages on. On Tuesday, a senior Roman Catholic cardinal at the Vatican criticized the Bush administration's plan to build the 700-mile fence, calling it "inhumane." For all intents and purposes, the message is being repeated at St. Catherine's parish hall.

"We all have an immigration story, and we need to have some kind of immigration reform," said Janet Leach, who works at the Learning and Loving Education Center on Church Street, a Catholic nonprofit group that provides educational outreach to low-income immigrant women and their children. "The laws are really different from when most of the European immigrants came here."

Her words allude to a post 9-11 environment where vigilantes hunt migrants at the border and impoverished job-seekers continue to be confused as terrorists. "Dying to Live," released in 2005 by Jesuits, seeks to touch a chord in anybody whose family came to the United States for social, political, economic or religious reasons.

Produced by Daniel Groody, assistant professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, and his cousin, former NBC radio host Bill Groody, the documentary profiles Mexican immigrants who struggle to cross the deadly Arizona desert, through an area known as the Devil's Highway. It also includes dramatic images photographed by Pulitzer prize-winner Don Bartletti of the Los Angeles Times, showing migrants who travel by freight train to reach far-away jobs.

"It's a very accurate" depiction, said Morgan Hill resident Juan Diaz, who illegally crossed the border in 1974. Diaz said he walked across hills and beaches and hid under bridges waiting for a van to pick him up and take him to Los Angeles where he could disappear - and support his family.

If "humanity" was the film's message, it wasn't lost on 17-year-old Cecilia Sinohui. The Sobrato High School senior led 20 students to a San Jose civil rights march in April when tens of thousands of California students boycotted classes to protest federal immigration proposals.

"It was the point where I grew up," said Sinohui, who wrote her college essays on that experience for Santa Clara University, UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz. "It made me realize what I wanted to do with my life, fight for social justice and help the people who can't help themselves."

Tony Burchyns covers Morgan Hill for The Times. Reach him at (408)



Immigrant farmworkers labor the fields to make enough money to support their families in Mexico and other Latin countries.

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