

Nation is facing a refugee crisis, not an immigration crisis, says writer

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The Central American children's efforts to reach the U.S.-Mexico border often come with great risks to their health and safety, Nazario explained. Pictured above are a young child's hands, dismembered while attempting to ride atop the infamous Mexican freight train known as "The Beast."

The more than 66,000 unaccompanied Central American immigrant

children who have crossed the United States' southern border since October present the nation with a refugee crisis, not an immigration crisis, according to Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Sonia Nazario.

During a President's Lecture at Rice Sept. 25 in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, Nazario presented her case for why the U.S. needs to take a new approach to solving this crisis.

"This is such an important issue here in Texas," Nazario underscored in her opening remarks in the Anderson-Clarke Center's Hudspeth Auditorium. "You have the second-largest undocumented population in the country, nearly 7 percent of everyone in the state is undocumented and 40 percent of the population is Latino/Hispanic."

Raised in Kansas and Argentina, Nazario has spent more than 20 years reporting and writing about social issues, most recently as a projects reporter for the Los Angeles Times. She has won numerous national journalism and book awards tackling some of this country's most intractable issues: hunger, drug addiction and immigration.

In 2003, Nazario won a Pulitzer Prize for "Enrique's Journey," her story of a Honduran boy's struggle to find his mother in the U.S. The previous year, Nazario spent three months riding atop the infamous Mexican freight train known as "The Beast" to relive Enrique's harrowing journey.

Millions of single moms come to the U.S. from Mexico and Central America because they can't feed their [children](#) more than once a day, Nazario said. The mothers leave their children behind for what they believe will be a short separation, but which actually stretches into five or 10 years. While the mothers are able to send money back, eventually the children's anguish over their missing mother becomes unbearable and they set out on their own to find them.

The impetus for "Enrique's Journey" was born in Nazario's kitchen one morning when her housekeeper, Carmen, confided in her about having left four of her children behind in Guatemala. "I asked myself, What kind of desperation could it possibly take for a mom to walk away from her children and go 2,000 miles north?" Nazario said. "She (Carmen) had no idea when or even if she was going to see these children again. And I asked myself, What choice would you make, Sonia?"

Today, the children are coming not only to reunify, but out of fear for their lives, Nazario said. She cited a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees survey of 440 unaccompanied children that found that for six out of 10, the primary motivator was fleeing violence. Violence has flourished under the narcotics cartels' stranglehold on the three countries – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – that are sending the most children to the U.S.

"Honduras now, for the last three years, has had the No. 1 homicide rate in the world. It has a body count second only to Syria, which we know has a raging civil war," Nazario said. "Children are particularly being targeted by these narcos and gangs. In Enrique's old neighborhood, they are found kidnapped, beheaded, skinned alive."

Nazario believes the only approach that will permanently slow the flow of migrants is not greater border enforcement, but to bring every foreign policy and economic development tool the United States has at its disposal to try and improve conditions in Mexico and Central America. "We need a solution that allows most migrants to stay where they really want to be, which is in their home countries," she said.

Rice University President David Leebron introduced Nazario's lecture by highlighting the Hispanic community's contributions to Rice and the city of Houston. He noted that Rice attracts one of the highest percentages of Hispanic students among the country's elite universities.

"Houston is a city without an ethnic majority. That helps makes us a strong, dynamic metropolis," Leebron said. "At the nexus of this cosmopolitan city, the Hispanic contribution is great, whether on the City Council, in the county sheriff's office or in heading up our colleges and business, the Hispanic community here is making sure that our future is bright. Today, we celebrate that even as we acknowledge and discuss issues that are difficult and sometimes divisive among us."

Provided by Rice University

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