

Children of the Colonias



10 students from the
Southwest United States Border

Conference

March 16-17, 2000

“America has a responsibility to all of its citizens. For too long, our fellow Americans living in Southwest Border ‘Colonia’ communities have faced impoverished living conditions without basic road, water, power and other services that most of us take for granted.”

- - - Silvestre Reyes

I have prepared this “Children of Colonias” report to raise your awareness of the deplorable living conditions children in these communities face every day in their neighborhoods, and ask that you join my efforts to make their living situation a cause for immediate action.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Silvestre Reyes', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Silvestre Reyes
Member of Congress
16th District of Texas

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Executive Summary

The Children of the Colonias Conference held on March 16-17th, was a two day event to bring the issues of colonias to our nation's capitol. For the first time, it brought ten teenagers growing up in colonias along the Southwest border to Washington, D.C. to give testimony about the circumstances of their lives in these communities. "Colonia" is a Spanish term for "neighborhood" or "community." The term refers primarily to unincorporated settlements along the Southwest U.S. border that lack basic water and sewer systems, power connections, paved roads, safe and sanitary housing, accessible health care, and adequate educational, recreational, and employment opportunities. There are approximately 2,000 colonias along the U.S.-Mexico Border in California, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Texas has the largest number of colonias with approximately 400,000 colonia residents between the Texas towns of El Paso and Brownsville alone. These American citizens are living without the basic services that most Americans take for granted.

The conference allowed these teenagers from colonias in the Texas cities of El Paso and McAllen to meet with their Congressional Representatives, learn about the legislative process and our federal government, and most importantly, offer oral and written testimony to Members of Congress and the Administration. The purpose of this testimony was to provide a powerful picture from the eyes of these youth, about the various needs and challenges faced by these young Americans and their families.

The origination of this Children of the Colonias conference began as part of a Kellogg Foundation grant administered by Southwest Texas State University, to study the needs and challenges of colonias. The ten students from El Paso and McAllen colonias were selected over two years ago to document and describe the third world living conditions they endure in their homes and neighborhoods. Colonia students from El Paso and McAllen were selected to participate in this project and provided with 35mm cameras to begin documenting on film their surroundings with thousands of photographs. Furthermore, they were asked to write down and describe their observations and thoughts about their environment. At the same time, Southwest Texas State University published a newsletter and established a website to disseminate the work of these children and to provide other relevant information about conditions within colonias. To fully dramatize the plight of our colonia citizens, a full-length film documentary "The Forgotten Americans" was produced to capture the essence of these communities, the people who live there, and their day-to-day struggle to survive and live. The Washington, D.C. premier of this film was shown in conjunction with the conference, on Friday, March 20th, at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History with the children of the colonias as honored guests.

While the underlying causes of the development of colonias was not the focus of the conference, it is important to know their background. Colonias originated primarily from a desperate lack of affordable housing and historical neglect of our border communities. This situation encouraged

unscrupulous land development in unincorporated communities, illegal subdivisions, and fraudulent promises of future utilities and improvements, resulting in unregulated and unsafe construction.

With that basis of understanding, the following report includes background information on the abominable conditions found in colonias and demographic information which provides an important context for the testimony of the teenage witnesses. Some of the most significant statistics are as follows: 85 percent of colonia residents are U.S. citizens, 36 percent are children, 40 percent have less than a ninth-grade education, 43 percent are at or below poverty, 26 percent lack adequate heating, 24 percent do not have safe drinking water systems, and 44 percent report flooding due to unpaved streets and an absence of drainage systems.

The testimony of the children graphically describes the daily obstacles each of them face. Repeatedly, these students relay the challenge of living without running water. They speak of the frightening conditions of flooding to their homes from unpaved roads and the dangerous condition of no sidewalks or street lighting. They convey that health care is lacking due to their geographic isolation, lack of community care, and the prohibitive cost of health services without insurance. Moreover, they communicate the high incidence of communicable disease because of poor sewage and trash disposal services. Repeatedly, they describe the lack of emergency and public safety due to their remote locations and an absence of street signs and addresses. They have a concern for public safety and law enforcement because of an absence of extracurricular outlets including a lack of parks, sports facilities, and community centers. Furthermore, they discuss the challenge of having inadequate transportation to school, the inordinate time they have to spend to commute, and because of a lack of access to computers, the disadvantages they face in completing their course work. Universally, they told of the cramped and ramshackle housing for themselves and their families.

Through all of this testimony, the children confirmed the lack of basic water and sewer systems, power connections, paved roads, safe and sanitary housing, accessible health care, and adequate educational, recreational, and employment opportunities. They described in great detail the difficulties residents face when having to deal with poor housing and the health risks of drawing from contaminated water or not having water at all.

Within the course of the testimony, the children raised important questions of how they can obtain assistance to rectify these problems and improve the quality of life of their communities. Furthermore, they provided recommendations including hooking up colonia homes to proper water and sewage facilities, creating planned affordable housing, reassessing colonias in terms of their size, needs, and status, using Census 2000 data to insure adequate planning, and addressing the multitude of issues confronting these communities.

This report assembles the testimony and information compiled from these students during their visit to Washington. It provides an opportunity for our nation's leaders to learn of a population of American citizens that has for too long been forgotten. This report provides powerful documentation from our nation's youth about the need to take immediate action to give them the opportunity to succeed we expect for all American children.

Colonia Facts

Colonias are subdivisions in unincorporated areas with inadequate infrastructure and inhabited by residents with very low incomes.

- In Texas in 1995, there were 1,436 colonias with more than 340,000 residents.
- Four counties in Texas hold 82% of Colonia development: Cameron, El Paso, Hidalgo, and Webb.
- Cities within these counties are among the fastest growing in the nation. Laredo in Webb County is the second-fastest growing city in the nation, and McAllen in Hidalgo county is the third-fastest growing city in the nation. Brownsville-Harlingen in Cameron County is the seventh-fastest growing metropolitan area in the U.S.

Demographics

- 43% of all colonia residents live at or below the poverty level. The family income is averaged at \$12,675 for a family of four;
- Colonias are an affordable housing option. In Texas, 67% of families earning \$10,000 or less pay excessive housing costs; however, in Texas border counties with colonias, only 50% of families earning \$10,000 or less pay excessive housing cost.

Housing

- 85% of colonia households own their own homes;
- In 1990, 50% of colonia households in rural counties and 20% of colonias in urban counties had incomplete plumbing facilities in their homes.

People

- Children make up a large percentage of the people living in colonias, 36.6%;
- People aged 65 and over make up a small percentage of people living in colonias, 9.7%;
- More than 75% of colonia residents were born in the United States and 85% are United States citizens;
- Most households in colonias are two-parent households;
- Females head only 6.6% of all colonia households. The state rate for female-headed households is 15.2%;
- Of those females that head their own household, an overwhelming 93% live alone;
- 17% of colonia residents receive public assistance income;
- 65% of colonia residents have no health insurance.

Education

- Over 40% of colonia residents have less than a ninth-grade education. More than 50% drop out before their senior year in high school;
- The dropout rate among young people in the colonias is decreasing. 12% of people aged 18-24 have less than a ninth-grade education;
- In surveys conducted by the Center for Housing and Urban Development, colonia residents rank education for their children as their most important priority.

Health

- The health problems of children and adults residing in colonias are widespread. The University of Texas Systems Texas-New Mexico Border Health Office reported the following rates of selected viral diseases in colonia residents per 100,000 population:
 - Hepatitis A: 43.9%
 - Salmonellosis: 21.3%
 - Shigellosis: 18.0%
 - Tuberculosis: 28.1%

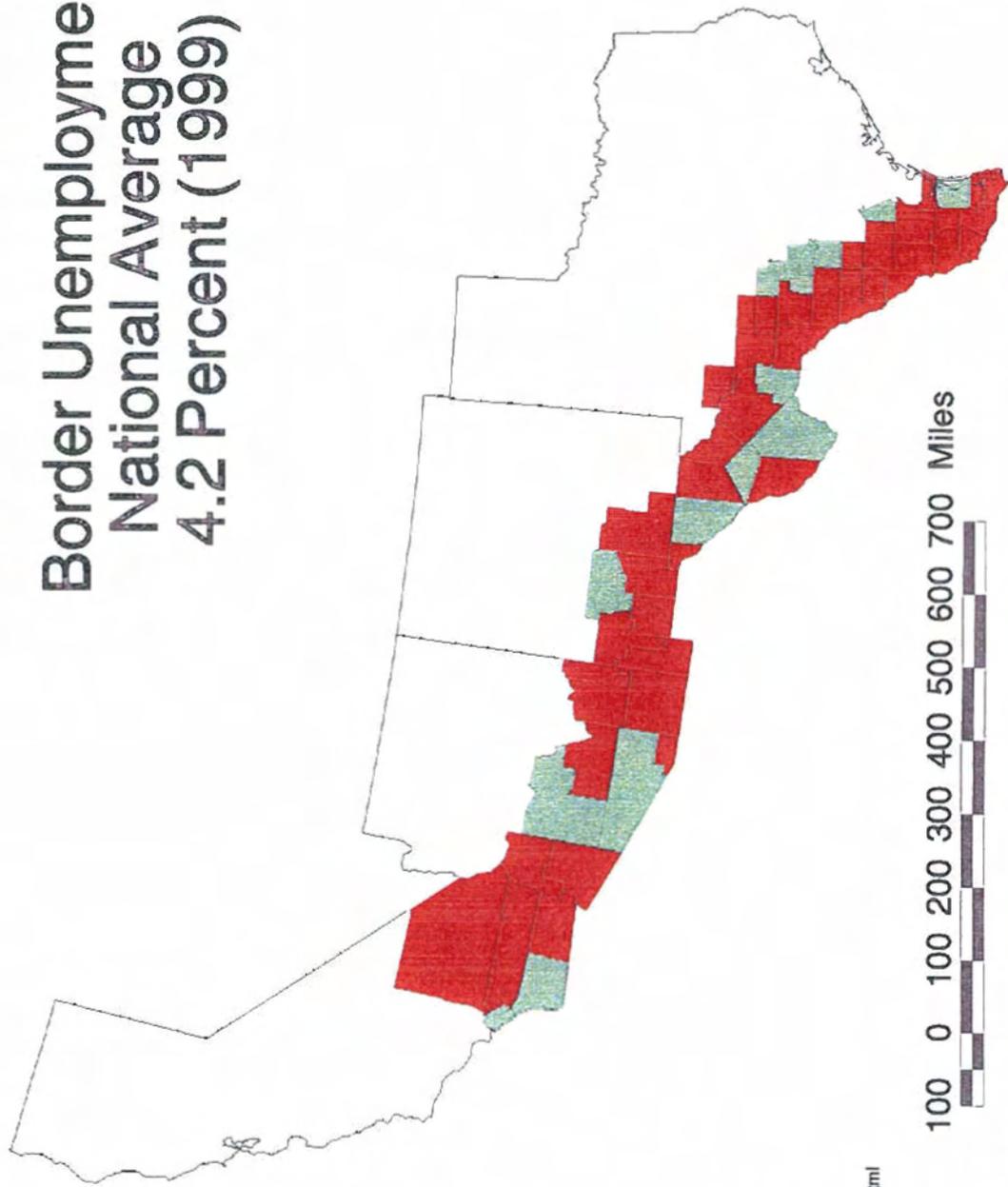
The information gathered here was culled from:

Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. *Texas Colonias: A Thumbnail Sketch of the Conditions, Issues, Challenges and Opportunities*. N.D.

Policy Research Project on Colonia Housing and Infrastructure. *Colonia Housing and Infrastructure*, 3 vols. LBJ School of Public Affairs, Austin, TX, 1998.

Salinas, Exiquio. Texas Department of Human Services. *Colonias Factbook*. Austin, TX, June 1998.

Border Unemployment National Average 4.2 Percent (1999)



Unemployment
 < 4.2 Percent
 > 4.2 Percent

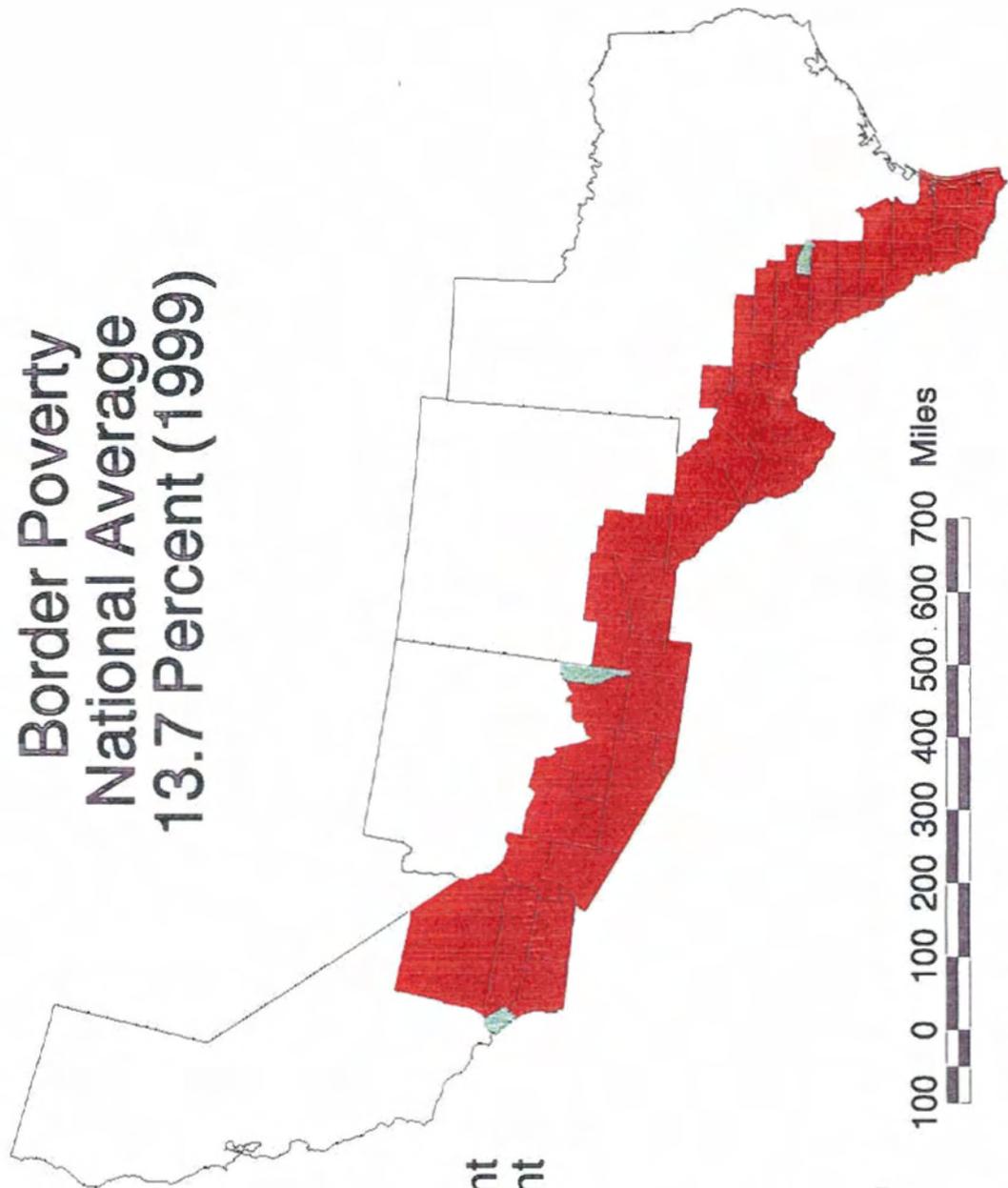
State of California - Employment Development Dept.
 Labor Market Information
www.calmis.cehwnet.gov/htmlfile/country/coashm.htm

Arizona Department of Economic Security
 Division of Employee Services and Support
 Research Administration
www.de.state.az.us/links/economic/weppage/page4.html

New Mexico Department of Labor
 Economic Research and Analysis
 Table A - Civilian Labor Force Employment
 Unemployment Rates
www.twc.state.tx.us/lmi/lfs...unemployment/unemploymenthome.html

Texas Workforce Commission
 South Central Regional Office
 Fort Worth, Texas
 March, 2000

Border Poverty National Average 13.7 Percent (1999)



Poverty
 < 13.7 Percent
 > 13.7 Percent

State of California - Employment Development Dept.
 Labor Market Information
www.calmis.ca.gov/wet.gov/htmlfile/county/coe.htm .htm

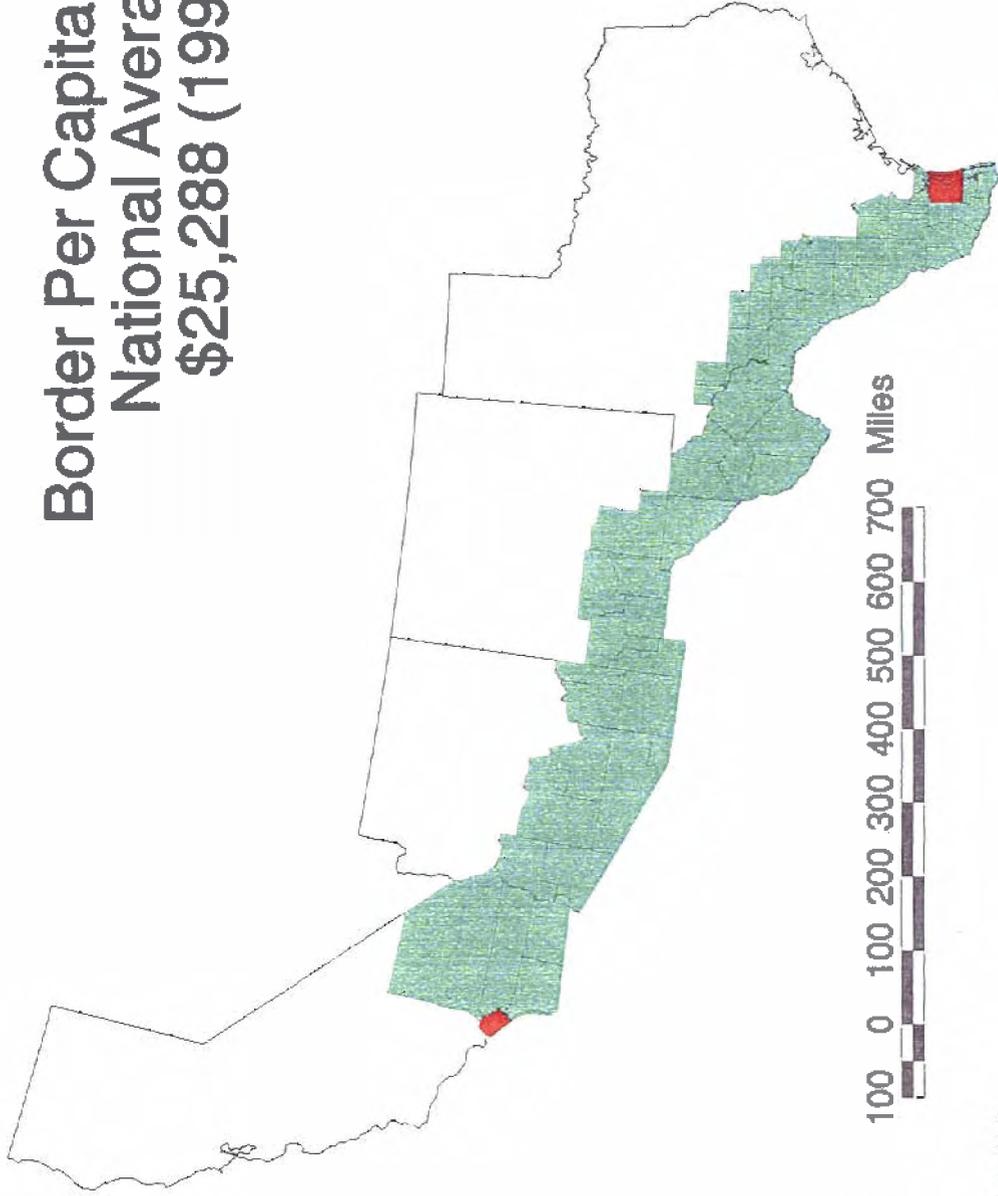
Arizona Department of Economic Security
 Division of Employee Services and Support
 Research Administration
 Economic Analysis
www.de.state.az.us/links/economic/wepage/page4.html

New Mexico Department of Labor
 Economic Research and Analysis
 Table A - Civilian Labor Force Employment
 Unemployment Rates
www.twc.state.nm.us/lmi/lfs...unemployment/unemploymenthome.html

Texas Workforce Commission
 Fort Worth, Texas
 March, 2000



Border Per Capita Income National Average \$25,288 (1997)



Per Capita Income
 < \$25,288
 > \$25,288

State of California - Employment Development Dept.
 Labor Market Information
www.calmis.cahwnet.gov/htmlfile/county/co.shim.htm

Arizona Department of Economic Security
 Division of Employee Services and Support
 Research Administration
www.ds.state.az.us/links/economic/webpage/page4.html

New Mexico Department of Labor
 Economic Research and Analysis
 Table A - Civilian Labor Force Employment

Texas Workforce Commission
 Unemployment Rates
www.twc.state.tx.us/ml/ifs...unemployment/unemploymenthome.html

South Central Regional Office
 Fort Worth, Texas
 March, 2000

Agenda
Children of the Colonias
Capitol Hill Conference
March 16 & 17, 2000

Thursday, March 16

- 12:56 p.m.** Arrival of El Paso and McAllen Children of Colonias students, teachers and parents.
- 1:30 - 2:00 p.m** Students and teachers check in at Hotel and proceed to Capitol Hill.
- 2:00 -3:00 p.m.** Representatives Reyes and Hinojosa host an informal luncheon for students and teachers.
1539 Longworth House Office Building.
- 2:30 -2:45 p.m.** Photo opportunity at the luncheon. Photographer will be taking photos of the luncheon.
- 3:15 - 3:40 p.m.** Press Conference with Representatives Reyes, Hinojosa, and Members of the Congressional Border and Hispanic Caucus to discuss colonia conference, colonia hearing, and colonia documentary "The Forgotten Americans."
340 Cannon House Office Building.
- 3:45 - 5:30 p.m.** Hearing convened by Representatives Reyes. Congressional Members and Administration Officials take student testimony.
340 Cannon House Office Building.
- Issues: Improved infrastructure, EMS services, paved and signed roads and streets, parks and recreation, computers in schools and homes, electric power, wiring, water, and sewage.
- 4:15 - 4:30 p.m.** Photo opportunity at the Hearing. Photographer will be taking photos of the hearing.
- 6:00 p.m.** Post Hearing dinner and return to Hotel.

Friday, March 17

- 8:00 - 9:30 a.m.** Tour of the White House for students and teachers.
White House South East Visitors Gate.
- 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.** Meeting with Maria Echaveste, White House Deputy Chief of Staff.
White House West Wing.
- 12:00 p.m.** Photo on the Capitol Steps with Representatives Reyes and Hinojosa.
- 12:15 p.m.** Lunch in Longworth Cafeteria.
- 1:15 p.m.** Tour Capitol and Air and Space Museum.
- 5:00 p.m.** Return to Capitol Hill and Hotel.
- 7:00 p.m.** Smithsonian premier of "The Forgotten Americans."
Smithsonian Institute National Museum of American History.
14th Street and Constitution.

Children of Colonias Hearing Panelists

Members of Congress

Chairman - The Honorable Silvestre Reyes
The Honorable Ruben Hinojosa
The Honorable Robert Menendez
The Honorable Grace F. Napolitano
The Honorable Solomon Ortiz
The Honorable Ed Pastor
The Honorable Ciro D. Rodriguez
The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard

Officials of the Administration

The Honorable Saul Ramirez
Deputy Secretary
Department of Housing and Urban Development

Ms. Eva Plaza
Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity
Department of Housing and Urban Development

Ms. Ida Hernandez
Chief Financial Officer
Office of the Vice President

Lieutenant Colonel Rogelio Rodriguez
Chief of Staff
Selective Service

Ms. Patricia Montoya
Commissioner, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration on Children, Youth, and Families

Special Guests

Mr. George Peña
Dallas County Adult Literacy Council

Mr. Joseph R. Kaiser
Social Services Manager
City of San Antonio
Department of Community Initiatives

Teachers and Parents

Sandra Buhaya - East Montana Vista Middle School - El Paso, Texas

Esperanza Salinas - Monte-Alto Jr. High - Monte-Alto, Texas

Maria Contreras - Parent - El Paso, Texas

Patricia Garza - Parent - Edcouch, Texas

Gloria Dominguez - Parent - Edcouch, Texas

Elsa Dominguez - Parent - Edcouch, Texas

Staff Members

Maurice J. Kurland - Legislative Assistant for Colonia Issues/Hearing Coordinator -
Congressman Silvestre Reyes

Melissa Maldonado - Legislative Assistant - Congressman Ruben Hinojosa

Julissa Ozuna - Southwest Texas State University Grant Coordinator

Sandra Peralta - Southwest Texas State University Grant Specialist

Galen L. Dickey - Southwest Texas State University Grant Specialist

Photographic Consultant

Alan Pogue - Photographer

**WITNESS LIST
CHILDREN OF THE COLONIAS HEARING
STUDENT PRESENTATIONS**

March 16, 2000

Room 340, Cannon House Office Building

**Ms. Alicia Contreras, 10th Grade
Americas High School**

**Mr. Ubaldo Fernandez, 8th Grade
Clarke Middle School**

**Mr. Chris Herrera, 8th Grade
East Montana Middle**

**Ms. Janet Dunbar, 8th Grade
East Montana Middle**

**Mr. Gilbert Vasquez, 7th Grade
Clarke Middle School**

**Mr. Martin Rivas, 9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School**

**Mr. Cesar Dominguez, 9th Grade
Science Academy of South Texas**

**Ms. Graciela Sanchez, 9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School**

**Ms. Amandalina Guevara, 9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School**

**Ms. Patricia Garza, 9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School**

Accompanying the students is Children of the Colonias Coordinator, Dr. Jaime Chahin, Acting Dean of Applied Arts of Southwest Texas State University.

Introductory Remarks
Congressman Silvestre Reyes
Hearing - "Children of the Colonias"
March 16, 2000
3:45 - 5:30 p.m.

Good afternoon. I want to welcome everyone here. We are here to listen to the profound stories of a special group of America's children. They are 10 students from the Southwest Border from my district in El Paso and from the Rio Grande Valley who live in colonias.

They were selected nearly 18 months ago to participate in a special project to document their lives as Children of the Colonias. After taking photographs of their communities, and writing down their observations, they have traveled to our nation's capitol to tell us what life is like for them and their families along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Colonias is a Spanish term for "neighborhood" or "community". However, its true meaning is a term for communities found along the U.S. Southwest border which suffer from a shocking absence of safe drinking water supplies, proper sewage treatment, power, roads, transportation, education and health services. We literally have hundreds of thousands of Americans living in these third world conditions. These colonias are found along the U.S. - Mexico border in California, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Texas has the unfortunate distinction of having the largest number of colonias with nearly 1400 found along the border of Mexico.

Colonias developed due to a desperate lack of affordable housing and historical neglect of our border communities along with unscrupulous land developers, illegal subdivisions, extremely cheap land, fraudulent promises of future utilities and improvements, and unregulated building.

These communities are predominantly Hispanic and suffer from a variety of social problems including deteriorating environmental and health conditions, inadequate education and training, and poor employment opportunities. With growing populations, these Colonia residents are a huge body of citizens whose future is being harmed.

With America's unprecedented prosperity today, it is mind-boggling that our fellow citizens live in such deplorable conditions up and down the border. This is truly a national disgrace.

While some legislative initiatives and federal dollars have been directed toward addressing the issue of colonias, the efforts have not been coordinated and the resources have been grossly inadequate.

Through the eyes of a young person, this reality offers little hope.

For this reason, it is important for Congress and the Administration to hear from our young citizens from the colonias who came so far to be here in Washington today.

Their visit coincides with the premier showing of "The Forgotten Americans" a documentary about Colonias showing at the Carmichael Theater of the Smithsonian this Friday at 7:00 p.m.

Their stories, along with the ones shown in this documentary, truly highlight the tremendous need for us to apply immediate remedy. I want to offer my appreciation to these young people for traveling here to Washington to advocate for their families and communities. You are bringing light to a problem that for too long has been unknown or ignored.

I also want to specifically extend a personal thank you to Dr. Jaime Chahin, the Dean of the College of Applied Arts at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas for having the vision and determination to collect the stories of these children and make sure they were heard. I appreciate his work and that of his staff, in developing a project where a multi-media approach was used to convey the deplorable circumstances found in colonias.

In addition to the documentary, this project included a quarterly newsletter and a virtual tour panoramic website. Even more impressive, each of our student witnesses were provided cameras through the generosity of Southwestern Bell to take photographs of their communities. These powerful still photos were then incorporated in the book "Children of the Colonias Project: Through Our Own Lenses." I have been provided with a copy of this book, and invite everyone to take a look at the stark images contained in this wonderful publication.

In closing, let me say that for too long, the circumstances of the colonias have been unknown, ignored and exploited. Every Member of Congress needs to listen to these stories to fully understand the magnitude of this problem and vow to commit the necessary resources to make sure that these Americans are no longer forgotten.

I therefore welcome today's testimony, and encourage everyone to visit afterwards with these students and their supportive parents and teachers who have come so far to tell learn how our colonia citizens cope and are attempting to overcome their circumstances. Each of them shows tremendous courage and commitment to come to our nation's capitol to make a difference for themselves, their families, El Paso and other border communities with colonias.

The crisis of the colonias requires not only a comprehension of the problem but a proper commitment of resources to transform the lives of our colonia citizens. It requires not only our attention and willingness to listen, but direct and committed action.

We owe it to these students, their families, parents, teachers, neighbors and friends to provide better lives and improved opportunities. With adequate resources, we can and must transform our colonias into safe and secure neighborhoods where our children's future is unlimited. All children must be given an equal opportunity to live healthy and safe lives, where they can obtain an education and find work to lead productive lives, no matter where they live.

Our nation has the strength and prosperity to make a difference in these children's lives, and we should make sure the American dream is a reality for these children.

Thank you.

Statement of Ms. Alicia Contreras
10th Grade
Americas High School

In the mornings I usually see my mom before I go to school. Then, I turn up the volume on my sisters' radio. I regularly have it on the station Power 102. At this time it is about 6:45 am. The "Breakfast Club" is on and that is what I listen to while I go to the bathroom and take care of all my personal needs. After I am done, I change from my pajamas to my school clothes, put on my shoes, wet my hair, let it dry, brush it and style it.

I fix my backpack, turn off the radio and leave to the bus stop. I wait for the bus to go to school. When it finally comes we go to school in a very crowded bus. I eat breakfast at school and then we go to the first class of the day. We only go to 4 periods of classes each day so we go to the same class every other day. After the day ends and I get home, I do my homework. I then watch TV and listen to the radio, because there is nowhere to go here at Sparks. There are no recreation areas, except for the little park by the center. Sure, it entertains the little kids but what about the big kids?

Teenagers deserve a place to go, too. The park isn't exciting for us. We need a place to go to after school. The closest theater is Tinseltown but we can't get there by walking, it is too far. Our parents are too busy to drive us to the theater or they just don't have a car. We need something close enough that we could walk to.

If there is a medical emergency, if someone is dying or a kid is very sick, there are no close hospitals or clinics near here. The pediatrician comes to the community center every Wednesday only. I know that ambulances and fire trucks come an hour later after the incident. We need more paved roads. The firemen and ambulance do not know our streets in Sparks.

Our roads are dirt roads and cars get stuck when it rains here. Our community needs something done about the arroyo. Once when it rained here really hard one of our neighbors lost their brick wall and several others, like us, almost lost our trailer homes. The arroyo overflowed and almost took our home with it. Sometimes it is not the rain but the fault of the mini-sewer plant that is next to Sparks. The plant lets go of the dirty water every time it rains causing more flooding. The plant gets away with it. One time the plant let water out and it tipped my grandmother's trailer, but we were lucky it didn't take it.

Hopefully, I will graduate from high school in 2 years. By that time, I would like to see positive changes here in Sparks. By the time I finish college I want to see Sparks better than it is today. I would like to live here without worrying the rain might flood my home. I want to be able to live here knowing my children will have somewhere to go and have fun without getting in trouble. I want to be able to get to a hospital fast, at least within 15 minutes. With more recreational areas there won't be as much tagging as there is now. It will also give us somewhere to go during the summer and vacation time during school years.

Statement of Mr. Ubaldo Fernandez
8th Grade
Clarke Middle School

Living in the colonias is not much different than living in the city or in the suburbs. We have to wake up early, go to school, come back and, of course, we get weekends off and three months of vacation throughout the year. My day begins at daybreak, approximately six in the morning. After my alarm clock buzzes for about ten minutes, I finally decide to get up. My feet drag me slowly towards the restroom, where I let the bladder do its thing. I then proceed to take a quick shower to get those nasty eye bugars out. After getting dressed and combing the little hair I have, I squeeze half a lemon's juice and shake some salt into a V8 juice. My taste buds savor the vitamin rich drink on the bus ride to school.

After a tortuous day at school, I look forward to basketball practice. Even though it can be, and usually is exhausting, I enjoy spending two hours every weekday playing basketball. As soon as I reach my house, I get something to eat, grab my BB rifle, kiss my mom goodbye, and race to my camarada Raul's house. There we demolish coke cans without potent BB rifles. Other times we trade our valuable football cards with each other. Some days Raul comes over to my canton so that I can humiliate him in a little game of one-on-one basketball.

Some of my most cherished time is spent on the weekends. After school on Friday a group of my friends and I get together at Tinseltown to enjoy the newest movie along with some popcorn and a gigantic coke, which always makes you want to urinate during the best part of the movie. Saturday, I wake up at seven in the morning to prepare myself to go to work at my uncle's truck lube shop. At work I help my uncles grease trucks, do chores and change tires. I actually have fun at work, plus it gives me some spare cash to get my dream car.

Sunday is the worst day of the weekend. The day starts early when my mom has to pry the blankets of my back and forces me to get up. I have to sweep and mop half my house and dust my room. When that is over with, our whole family hops on our Windstar and we ride on over to my abuelita's house. Tia Adelita always has a feast prepared for us. It usually consists of the classic rice with frijoles and some other greasy food, it may be unhealthy, but it is delectable.

Without a doubt, the three months per year of vacation that I get are well spent. The first week of each vacation my family and I usually go to visit family in Mexico. I really appreciate the little time that I spend with my family in the small town of Delicias. In Delicias, I do everything from roller-blading in the plaza to helping my Tio make cheese at his Queseria. The remaining three weeks of my vacation I spend working at my uncles truck lube shop. Every day that I go to work with my uncles, I get a little closer to having my candy apple red 1976 Mustang Coupe.

Whenever I think of my future, I picture myself living in a nice house with my family in a small colonia in El Paso. I would like to have a little clinic to help people in the colonias that do not have enough money to pay the overpriced hospital bills. Hopefully, by then I will be a reconstructive surgeon, capable of repairing deformities, burns and nasty scars. I also hope that by then I'll have my 1967 Mustang Coupe. In conclusion, children of the colonias live lives very similar to those of other children. We go to school, have fun, go on vacations and have dreams.

Statement of Mr. Chris Herrera
8th Grade
East Montana Middle School

To use a well-known cliché, "A day without water, would be like a day without sunshine." Lack of water is one of our main problems in our community. Many homes still lack running water. I will fully discuss my community's special needs, such as more medical attention, water utilities, and also sewer connections. This is my community and the lack of these things affects my family, my friend's families and my neighbors. I want to further my education, so I can improve my neighborhood because I want to make a difference.

First we will have to take into consideration that East Montana Community isn't really known in this part of East El Paso, TX. For example, my teacher went to a meeting in Houston and they asked her "Where is El Paso?" They thought El Paso was a part of Mexico. She got angry when they asked her that ridiculous question. When I first moved to East Montana, I found out that my own street wasn't even registered in the city records. I became quite alarmed. We had no water connections; we only had electricity.

My aunt and uncle moved to East Montana community in 1989. Within a year later, my uncle died due to lack of medical attention in this area. Because the street was not registered the ambulance could not find the address. My uncle Esequiel died at home; he couldn't be saved. My uncle was shot in the chest by a rival co-worker in the same construction business.

Furthermore, I will be attending Mountain View High School next year. I plan to join ROTC when I am a freshman, and throughout my senior year I will strive for superior grades. When I graduate, I will enlist in the Marines. I am planning to attend college while in the Marines. I would also like to attend UCLA or Florida State after four years of military service. I plan to be an advocate-arbitrator and my study area in college will be in economics, pre-law, and sociology. My goal is to return to my community after my education is completed to help out "Mi querida colonia de East Montana," in whatever manner I can.

Statement of Ms. Janet Dunbar
8th Grade
East Montana Middle School

In the following paragraphs I will be describing many things about my life. Some things I will describe are my typical days, weekdays, and weekends; my summers and last but not least how I expect my life to be in five to 10 years. My regular day begins at 6:30 in the morning. My mom wakes me up to go to school. So, very lazily I get up and get dressed. We wear uniforms so I don't have to worry about what to wear to school. I make a cup of chocolate for each of my two brothers and myself. After I eat breakfast, my brother and I get in his truck and pick up my cousins to go to school. School begins at 8:00 am. If we get there early, my cousin and me walk around and talk. I go to my morning classes 1st through 4th period. We have lunch at 12:45 p.m. which most of the time the food is "ughky". We continue our afternoon classes and school ends at 3:45 p.m. My cousin and I walk home; it is a long way; it is about a 30-minute walk. This describes my daily weekdays.

On weekends I wake-up at 12:00 noon. I usually don't do anything because there is no clubs or parks around where I live. I clean my room, sweep and wash dishes. On Sunday I wake up at 8:00 a.m. because we go to church. Mass finishes at 10:00 a.m. I like to read. I help my mom with lunch and dinner.

During the summer months, I go to movies, the mall, Western Playland, or party all week. I call my friends on the phone and see what they want to do. If there is nothing to do I take advantage and relax and eat junk food and watch TV. I am describing a perfect couch potato. Usually, the last month of summer vacation I go to Juarez, Mexico, and stay with my grandma and learn new things from her, like cooking.

I have many dreams for the future. One dream is to graduate from high school and get a scholarship to go to a good college. I expect to study to become a veterinarian. After I start my career, I would like to get married and have children. How I live right now is okay but I do wish I could make some changes. I wish my community could get more parks, clubs and centers. Once, a park was started here but it was never finished, it only has a swing set, a slide and some monkey bars. This would be better if it had more entertainment. I also would like for our school to have more money for better cafeteria food and better bus transportation. Like myself, many students walk home. It is tiring and sometimes unsafe.

In my colonia, there is a need for a lot of things. For example, we don't have running water. I think this is something the government should help us with. The government needs to establish more programs for working skills to help us. I have lived here 8 years and I know that little by little everything will get better.

Statement of Mr. Gilbert Vasquez
7th Grade
Clarke Middle School

When I was a little boy, where I live there was nothing here except for three or four other houses. There was not that many houses, then things started to build. They were building roads, stores, parks, and a community center. People started to live here, so it started to change.

When I was small I liked to play with blocks so when I grow up I want to build houses for the homeless and the poor. When I went to the park it was boring, so I was thinking a swimming pool with a big diving board would be nice. I would also like to have a big movie theater like Tinseltown, and a bigger stores. A bridge that goes over the arroyo would be nice so that when it rains cars could drive over it instead of through it. Since it is so dark at night, I think that we need some more lampposts.

Thank you for what I have to say.

Statement of Mr. Martin Rivas
9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Today I will be talking about a typical week for colonia kids around Monte Alto, Texas, where most of my friends live. Most of these things are average typical things that most kids would do but there is some different. Also, I will be talking about some of my ideas that can improve colonia kids. There are many changes that you can do to help improve colonia kids. Finally I will be talking about how I see my self in the future and Monte Alto future also.

This is an average week for me. Every Monday through Friday is mostly the same. Around 7:10 the bus picks me up and takes me to Monte Alto and drops off the high school student and then we get back to the buses and go to Edcouch-Elsa High School, because Monte Alto dose not have a high school. Every day most of us are outside the band hall or in the cafeteria waiting for the 7:50 bell to ring so we can get to class. Then we have the usual 3 classes. My classes are World Geography, English, Speech and Band. Even though these are good classes I would prefer some classes that could help me in my college education in the future. Then we all wait for the 1:00 bell for our favorite break-lunch. I usually sit with the band students talking about stuff that happened today. And now my favorite period-band. In band I play the bari sax and we are usually for concert season. And most of the week after school I am either waiting for my sister to come out of work or I am in the freshmen meetings. Every Wednesday, I go to C.C.D. at Sacred Heart Church in Elsa, Texas and have a youth mass and after that we get to the class and discuss what was said in mass and after that I talk to my friends.

Now, my favorite days, Saturday and Sunday. Saturday is like every Saturday; I usually eat sleep and relax most of the day. Every Sunday is like this: we go to our grandma's house and eat with the family. We can sometimes get wild if it gets to boring. Around here to have some fun you have to go to Weslaco, McAllen, or any other big city to have some fun here. Then we go back home and relax. Around 5:45 we go to the church for the weekly mass. So that's a typical week for me.

Now I will talk about some improvements that can be made to help colonia kids. Some students have access to transportation others walk. The students that are walking have a real good chance of getting hit by a car or an 18-wheeler. Luckily we haven't had any cases, but to decrease the chances we need access to sidewalks. Instead on walking on the roads they can access to the sidewalks for there own safety. We have dirt roads, and rocky roads. When it rain people have a hard time driving due that there is less traction on the road. People get in accidents with other cars or they swerve into the drainage ditch or fences. To improve roads we need the roads to be paved.

Athletics is very important here in Monte Alto and students stay a long time for practice. When they are going home all they can see is pitch black. What we need is some access to some lights. Students can be kidnapped, get hit by a car, or females even be raped with little or no lights at all. Next we need access to local police and medical stations. I have a good reason for this. A couple years back a man got stabbed and came to my house and asked for help. He was losing a lot of

blood, so we called 911. We waited for 30 minutes for them to come but they didn't come we called back and they told us that they could not find us so we had to give directions to my house. 30 minutes later they finally came to my house. Imagine if there was a gang fight, how would people call 911 if they are not going to come an hour later. These are some of my ideas that can improve colonia kids in how they live.

Also people down here need cheaper insurance especially in health care. A lot of people do not have any insurance for health around here so sometimes people do not go to the hospitals to get better because of the high rates they charge. People cannot afford to pay the bills the hospital sends. Checkups can cost \$100 per checkups and \$1000 and higher for more severe cases. To help people afford insurance for health they need cheaper. Down here it can get really hot and we might not get rain for months. So most people down here need some source of a fan. Even though it can get so hot, people won't get a fan because they don't have enough or any money at all. These houses may contain a baby and you know how a baby is. If it gets to hot it can lead to death. Also some of the elderly have retirement money for the future but some don't. The elderly are not like a 35-year-old male or female who can take the heat. They need some sort of fan for them. Also if it gets to hot It may cause death for them.

Computers are the future to me and to many others. Here, in Monte Alto, to use a computer you must go to the community center before 5:00 P.M., if you don't have a computer at home. Here there are very few families with computers. Monte Alto high school students have to go to Edcouch-Elsa High School to go to class. Most teachers require that the paper must be typed for them to get a good grade or a grade at all. Most MA (Monte Alto) students have some sort of after school activity. And if they need to use a computer they must they must go to the library during there pass period to use a computer and all the time they have is 30 minutes before they have to go to practice. The library closes around 5:00, but practice ends at 7:00 so they have no time to finish their work. We need some sort of center so that the students can use a computer after their 7:00 practice. In Edcouch-Elsa they has a technology center where people and students can use computers for any purpose. This will make Monte Alto a well technology colonia.

Finally, I will be talking about my future and Monte Alto's future. In the future, I plan to have a computer and major in computer programming and computer science. I would come back to Monte Alto and try to improve the technology level. Also, I would like to see Monte Alto with more than one store and maybe some grocery stores. Plus, I would like to see Monte Alto with access to a park or some sort of entertainment that will make Monte Alto more interesting. Monte Alto has no local government, so it would be good to see the town with one.

Thank you for your time and for listening to me, and I hope you can make changes to Monte Alto to help improve the lives of colonia kids. Thank you.

Statement of Mr. Cesar Dominguez
9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Many people in the Valley live in poor living conditions, and they may not have much to look forward to in life. I will try to explain how my life is and how the lives of these people would be affected with some help. Every day, I wake up and wonder if there will be something interesting to do or something new or fun. I get dressed and get ready for school and walk outside to see absolutely nothing different. I always hoped that there would someday be something other than the usual, but no, the only thing I see is the mechanic shop across the street where Cruz and his son work hard on the old cars that come by to get repaired. Every day always starts and ends about the same.

At 7:00 am, I walk to the Monte Alto ISD Campus where I wait for the South Texas ISD school bus that will pick me up at 7:15 am. We are about seven students that travel on this bus, which will take us to the Edcouch-Elsa High School Campus where we arrive at about 7:30 am. There, we board another bus that will take us to the Science Academy and Med. High in Mercedes where we arrive at about 8:30 am. I have two sets of classes every other day. My favorite class is Technology Systems. We build mouse-trap cars and have to find the mechanical advantage by having to do a lot of physics. In the future I hope that one day I will create something that will encourage the growth and prosperity of my community. People in my community need job skills involving the technology of today. It is my hope that one day the children of colonias will no longer have to financially suffer their whole lives due to the fact that most of their income depends on fieldwork.

My weekends are different in that I sleep until about 12:00 noon, and then I wake up and see tv, while little kids are outside having fun and playing with their friends, throwing the football around or playing basketball. I really don't think sports are much fun, but they are O.K.

Sometimes I walk outside just to see them play around. My family is very happy in Monte Alto because it is so quiet and peaceful. Some the streets at Monte Alto are paved, but the majority are not. I don't know why they did not pave them. They installed new drainage pipes, but this just made the streets that were paved worse because there are lumps where they re-paved over the holes that they made. My street, which is Trimble Street, is always dark at night. I have friends that are scared to go through this street at night. The only time I went through it was when I was riding my bike and it scared me to death. The thing that scared me the most were the dogs. We have many stray dogs. I just closed my eyes and pedaled hard and fast. Having no lights on the streets poses a threat for everyone because it creates a good opportunity for people with bad intentions to try something. You never know what could be lurking in the dark.

Now, there are some days when the weather is gloomy, and nobody is outside playing except for some kids. I start to think, why are they letting the kids go outside instead of getting their kids inside where it's dry. My neighbors have a son, and I was looking outside on day like this and saw him playing away in the grass. "How could this be?" I asked myself. This child has no shoes nor a jacket on. The temperature was very low, and I was even cold inside my house. Either this

kid is stronger than me, or he is used to this cold weather. With weather like this I could only think of two things: the gangs of dogs and kids like my neighbor's that would be outside.

Here in my community, actually in the Valley in South Texas, the weather is usually hot, but on some occasions like the one I just described, the cold weather might sneak up on us and take us by surprise. On that day, the whole day is cold, in the low 40's, to be exact. That day was also the last day of school for my sisters here in Monte Alto before Christmas vacation. There was a big problem at school that day because some of the kids did not have a jacket. The majority of the kids here in Monte Alto are below the poverty level, so buying a jacket when we have warm weather does not make sense since money is scarce, and nobody thinks of the days that the cold weather will strike.

The majority of the people in Monte Alto need assistance from the government. The people need jobs, food, and other necessities that are required to live a decent life and to prosper. Many people all around the Valley are like this, not only in Monte Alto. Sometimes it gets really cold in the Rio Grande Valley, and that is the time when people need the help the most. Sometimes it might get too hot, and they might dehydrate or even die because, with elderly people and young children, dehydration takes its toll with diarrhea and vomiting. Sometimes in the Valley, drives are held to get fans for the hot weather or to get coats and heaters for the cold weather. We can't keep on having drives like this for the rest of our lives. People need help so they may go on their own after getting better financially.

And no matter where I go to college, I will always come back to Monte Alto to encourage the children in the colonias to stay in school and to go through with their education and in return help the community better itself. In hopes that this essay will give you a picture as to how life is in the colonias in the lower Rio Grande Valley, I thank you for your time and would like for you to know that we appreciate any help that you could provide to better our lives.

Statement of Ms. Graciela Sánchez
9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Think it's an easy life? Well, sorry, it isn't. Life in places like colonias isn't as easy as you may think it is. The community isn't as safe as it can be. The families who live in these colonias don't spend a lot of time at their colonias because there isn't a lot to do there. Today, I would like to tell you about the conditions in these colonias to see if you can help or do something about these conditions.

When I was a little girl, my house wasn't as good as I wanted it to be. I've always wanted a big house with a lot of plants in the front and a backyard. All I had was a two-room house. One room was the kitchen and the living room together, and the other room was my parents' room and the bathroom. My two sisters had one bed in the living room. They slept together while I slept with my parents until my mom got pregnant. I was a seventh grader when my mom decided to leave my dad. She took me out of school and left to San Antonio, Texas, without telling my dad. While I was over there, I didn't go to school for two months and wanted to come back to Monte Alto, Texas. Now I'm back and living with my older sister. I live with my two sisters and their kids. My house now is always a rowdy place to live in because if it's not one kid yelling or screaming, it's another, but what am I to do?

Living here at the colonia of Monte Alto isn't as safe as it could possibly be. To start with, some of the roads are not paved. The roads that are not paved get real messy when it rains. There are also some places that get flooded, and some of my relatives used to live in some of those places, but now they have moved to a place with everything they need. Where they used to live, they didn't even have running water. They had to have these big barrels filled with water so they could take a shower and do what they needed with the water. They even had to have the restroom outside in a portable. Well, enough about that. Here at the colonia of Monte Alto, we only have four stores, and these stores are neighborhood grocery stores. Which is to say that we don't have any stores where we can buy clothes or other necessities. To buy some clothes, we have to drive a long way to get to the closest store.

Well, I want to tell you that I have plans for myself and the community of Monte Alto. I would like to finish school and go to a college to study to be a school counselor. I want to be a counselor because I've always loved to give my friends advice, and I always listen to what they tell me about their problems. I think colonias need a lot of changes. For instance, colonias need more places for kids to hang out. The only thing my colonia has is a basketball court, and the only people that go to play there are some teenagers. Wouldn't you think that smaller kids would like to have some fun time, too? Well, I do, and I don't think they need to travel so much just to spend some fun time with their families. The colonias in the Valley need a lot of improvements. These special needs I have mentioned require an intensive investment by you, our representatives, to help us overcome poverty and academic failure because of our educational system. With your help, we can effectively educate and help ourselves.

Thank you for allowing me to express my opinions. Hopefully you can do something to help us. I really appreciate you listening to me!

Statement of Ms. Amandalina Guevara
9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Everyday is a new experience and a new life, but no matter how many times you start a hard life, you can change things. There are some things that we are so used to that they stick to the bottom of our bones. My life, you can say, is like this.

One of my greatest joys in my life is to wake up everyday. The first thing I do is pray and thank God for a new day. Every morning I wake up at 6:30 a.m. to do personal stuff and then get everything ready for school. Around 7:00 a.m. the bus comes and picks us up and drops us at school. What I like to do is dance in the school drill team and read, but most of all I like to spend time with my family. That's what makes me happy—being with family. My mother, father, and three sisters always eat dinner together everyday. It is a time to share the things we have done each day. On weekends our cousins join us, and we share an extended family BBQ with our relatives.

I would now like you to know about the conditions of our home. My home consists of two bedrooms: One is for my mom and dad while my three sisters and I share the other one. We do not have running water in our house, but our neighbors are kind enough to let us use their water source, and we connect a water hose to our house so as to be able to heat water on the stove for our many needs.

My parents went to school in Mexico and believe very strongly in our getting a good education so we can better our lives. I have a sister who is already a junior in high school, and another is in the 10th grade. My younger sister is in the 7th grade. My mother provides a good home for us, and my father works hard everyday in his job as a mason.

I would like to tell you about the conditions in the community that I live in. Our community hurts badly. The environment is one of much need. People can see a good front, but it is like a child's hands—it looks clean on the outside, but when you look close, the back is full of dirt. Our community is hurt everyday by trash and by standing water in potholes on the streets. The massive amount of trash brings mosquitoes, flies, and maggots, and with it come diseases. Diseases such as dengue fever and encephalitis strike our children because of these conditions in our neighborhoods. Some students in our school also have contracted tuberculosis due to these deplorable conditions in our community.

What I have mentioned here are critical issues in our colonias. Too many of us also lack good health care because it is not affordable. Parents cannot pay for the high cost of medical care in the hospitals. Perhaps you can help by providing a health plan that parents of children in colonias can afford. We could really use your help in this area.

Thank you for listening to me, and I hope that you will take my concerns into consideration.

Statement of Ms. Patricia Garza
9th Grade
Edcouch-Elsa High School

Good afternoon. My name is Patricia Lyzette Garza, and I am a 15-year-old high school student from Monte Alto, Texas. I am here to give you a clear perspective on life in the "colonias."

Take a minute to imagine something that a young student sees everyday. Imagine traveling down a busy street in a city, then suddenly taking a turn down a dusty, bumpy road into one of the poorest colonias around. All around you are ruddy, crudely constructed shacks that are little more than patch works of old boards and cardboard. You come to a stop at one of these humble dwellings, a two-room shack with a dirt floor that floods when it rains. The family outhouse sits on one side, practically joined to the home: its roof, a dingy, wrinkled piece of canvas securely tied with a rope; its door, a raggedly sheet blowing with the wind. Many children do not have to envision such a scenario. They live in these conditions everyday of most of their young life. This is reality. These conditions are terrible, but many people have somehow learned to live with them.

My week is always the same. On Monday I get ready to go to school. My mother drops me off at Monte Alto ISD, which is only 2 blocks away, and I wait for the bus. After a short ride to Elsa, we arrive at school.

My first class is Spanish. Even though I'm Mexican, I still don't know how to speak the traditional language of my ancestors. After Spanish, it's on to English G/T. Next is lunch, and then it's on to keyboarding. The bad thing about that class is that we cannot use the Internet. Many of us in that class cannot get access to computers at home. The last class I have is band. I am first chair in concert band, which is quite an accomplishment for a freshman from Monte Alto.

After school, my grandmother always needs help with her home daycare. I help make dinner and then go home to do my homework. It is practically the same thing everyday. On special occasions, my whole family gets together for a barbecue. My uncle Rene always has new stories or jokes to tell. My cousin, Monica Del Toro, is going to Stanford University in California. We are all very proud of her, but we hardly get to see her because it is too expensive to travel and visit her, so we just stay in touch by writing letters and e-mail. We also talk on the phone. Our family is a lot closer than most.

Now I will speak about the problems in my community of Monte Alto. There are many unpaved roads in Monte Alto. Our county commissioner, Sylvia Handy, has gotten the main roads paved, but this only happens every 4 years because of elections. We need sidewalks on all of our roads. Children walking home from school are always in danger of getting hit by a car when they are on the road. Cars are always speeding down Lackland Boulevard, a street near the school, and it is also the street that I live on. Children, whose parents are either at work or do not have a car, have to walk all the way home with the threat of mangy dogs biting them or speeding cars hitting them. Many of the children that I see walking home every day are between the ages of 5 and 12. They have too many books in their arms or in their backpacks that they could not possibly fight off an attacking dog or move out of the way of an on coming car. This is why we urgently need

sidewalks. A couple of years ago, a young boy was hit by a car while riding his bike on the road. He lost his memory for a while and was paralyzed for over a year. He has recovered, but it could have been much worse. None of this would have happened if we had sidewalks. We do not want this to happen again.

I was very active in sports while at Monte Alto. But all we have is inadequate equipment that is dangerous. We do not have a track here. There are many people who sprain their ankles. We could really use a track so people can walk there during the afternoons instead of having to walk on the dangerous streets. I have a very good reason for this. On February 25 of this year, some students were with a coach from Monte Alto. They were the long distance runners, and they were being driven about 3 miles out of Monte Alto to run on the highway to get their work out. They were hit in the back of the truck. None of them were seriously hurt. But it may have been worse. This is why we seriously need a track. I hope that you will take my thoughts and ideas into consideration. We do not want sympathy but help. I hope that I have given you a good perspective on how life in the colonias is. I was lucky to be born into a strong and loving family that cares about my education. Some children aren't so lucky. Thank you for your time.

Questions Posed by Witnesses

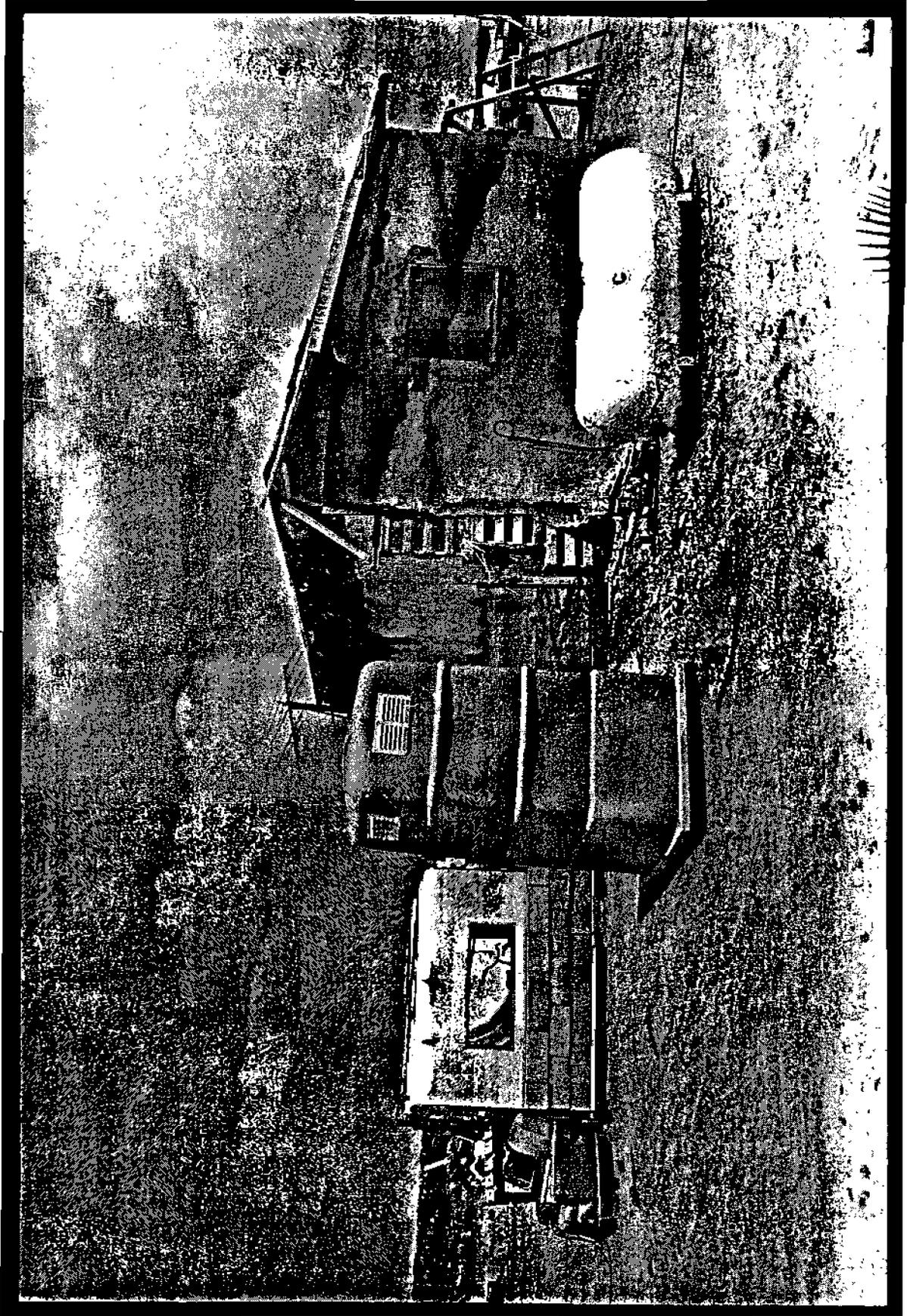
- How can you remove the prison facilities that are so close to our community? Several prisoners have escaped and hidden in our community. We feel unsafe.
- How can we stop the sewer plant from releasing dirty water and flooding our community?
- What are you planning to do to help the people in my colonia with the problems I described above?
- How are you planning to do this?
- How much will the project cost?
- How long will it take to accomplish it?
- How will the colonia residents benefit?
- Will it cost the residents money?
- How can the residents lobby to get a local hospital closer to our community?
- How can we get shopping centers with grocery stores?
- We need an ambulance with a pharmacy site; how can we bring this about?
- When can we get a sewage plan?
- We need a public library. How can the residents approach the city government?
- How can we bring about a permanent fire department with paramedics?
- Are you aware of all the diseases associated with the trash that pose a threat to the colonias?
- If so, what do you plan to do about them?
- Can you build baseball field, basketball, racquetball, and tennis courts for us kids to enjoy in our community? We can organize teams and keep us busy and athletically active.

Children of Colonias Conference Policy Recommendations

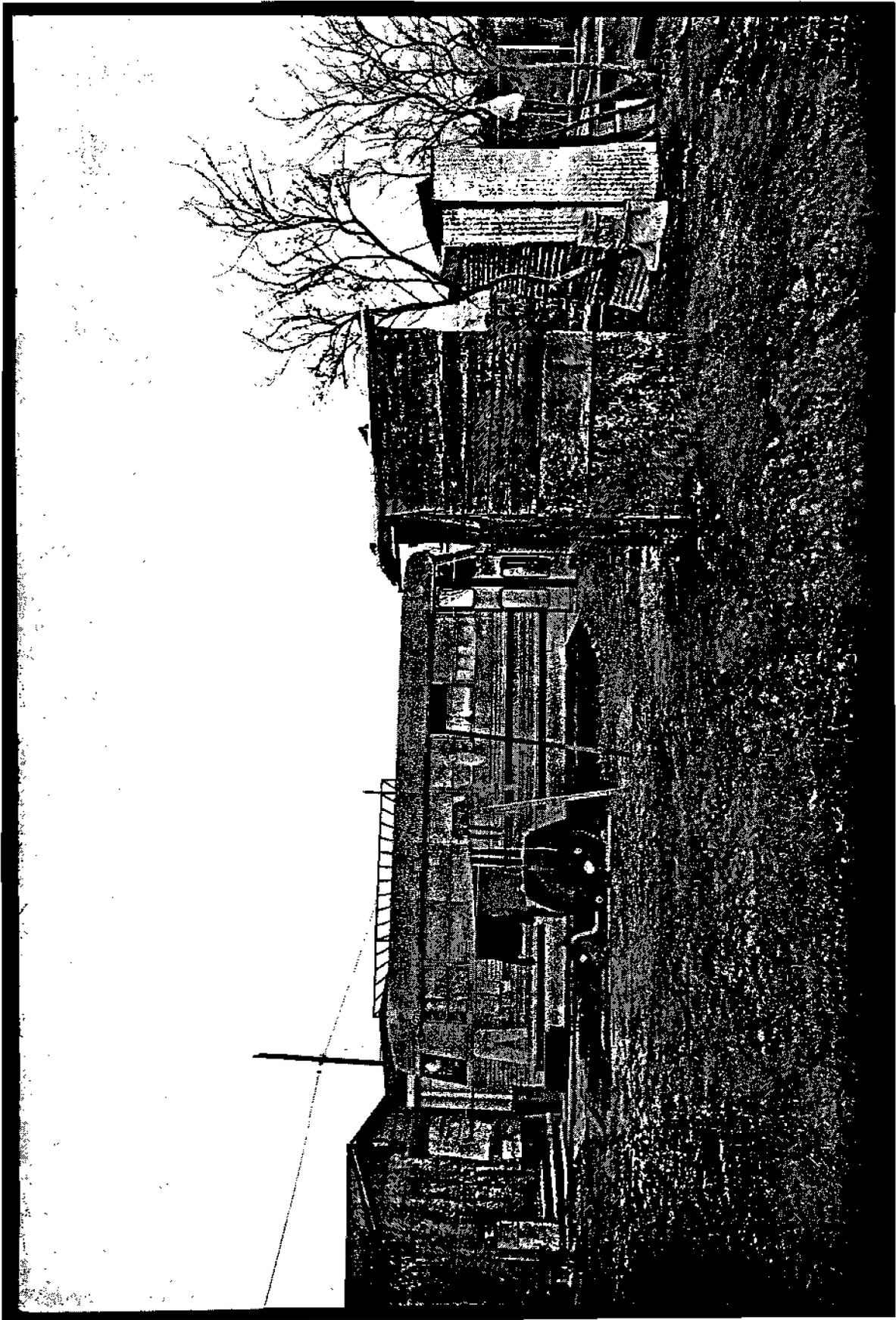
1. Enact a policy that defines hooking up impoverished houses to waste water disposal system as a public benefit.
2. Plan for efficient and compact publicly subsidized development areas with prebuilt infrastructure where land purchasers may build their own housing with the provision that it will meet HUD colonias standards within 3-5 years.
3. Establish a Binational Health Commission to address the health issues of the medically under served areas of the U.S.-Mexico border.
4. Reassess colonias in terms of their size, needs, and status using 2000 Census data to insure adequate planning and incorporation issues.
5. Coordinate federal, state, and local programs and improvement efforts to fund and plan the 215,000 affordable housing units that are needed in the U.S.-Mexico border.
6. Screen and analyze the water supply for toxic waste for colonias that use wells as a water source.
7. Enact legislation that will appoint an arbitrator to resolve jurisdictional conflicts between various water and utility districts in counties along the U.S.-Mexico border.
8. Continue to expedite clarification of titles and liens on colonia properties and convert contracts for deed into deeds of trust.
9. Fund the development of detailed plats, maps, and other information resources of all colonias and surrounding developments to identify infrastructure needs and floods plains.
10. Establish a commission with comprehensive implementation oversight of housing, environmental, health, infrastructure, and education programs along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Photographs

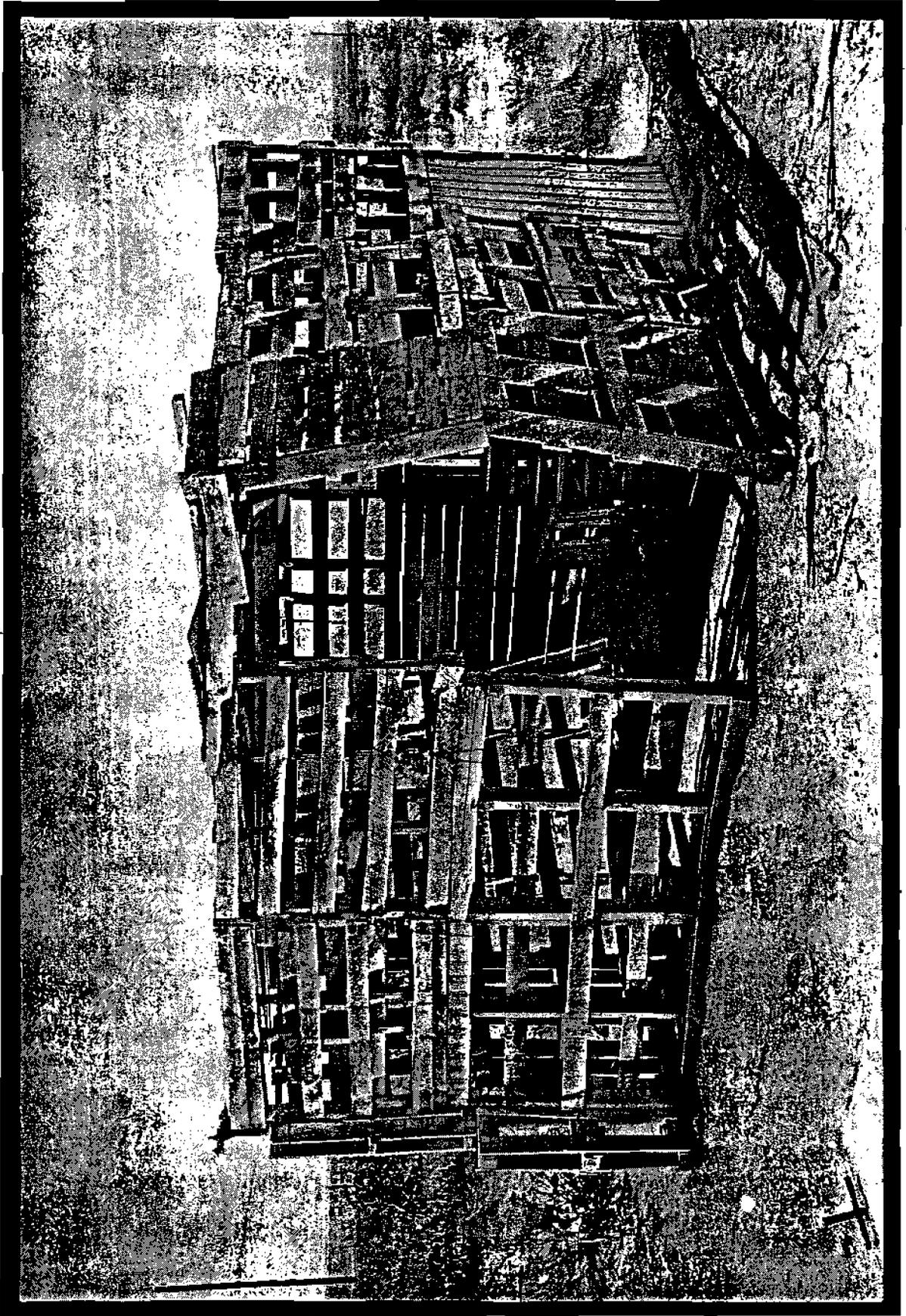
- A. 17051 Night School Road, Colonia East Clint near El Paso, Texas -- The walls of this pallet house have been covered with tar paper and a thin coat of cement.
- B. Colonia Cameron Park, north of Brownsville, Texas -- The bus is permanently parked in the back yard as an extra living area. One of the wooden structures is a toilet outhouse and the other is a shower.
- C. Colonia East Clint near El Paso, Texas -- A house made of packing pallets. The walls will be covered with tar paper. This is a first step.
- D. Monte Alto, Texas -- One of the photography students with camera and cabbages in front of her house. She belongs to one of the families who moved from a poor colonia to new houses like this one with the help of Project Azteca in San Juan.
- E. Children of the Colonias Hearing, Washington, DC -- Congressman Silvestre Reyes (third from left) expresses his concerns about the problems in the colonias to other panel members: (from left) Congressman Solomon Ortiz, HUD Deputy Secretary Saul Ramirez, HUD Assistant Secretary for Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity Eva Plaza, Chief Financial Officer of the Office of the Vice President Ida Hernandez, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Administration on Children, Youth and Families Commissioner Patricia Montoya.
- F. Children of the Colonias Hearing, Washington, DC - Student witnesses prepare to give their testimony. (From left to right) Ubaldo Fernandez, Chris Herrera, Janet Dunbar, Gilber Vasquez.
- G. U.S. Capitol, Washington, DC -- Colonias students, teachers and Congressman Reyes stand on the steps of the U.S. Capitol.



Alan Pogue



Alan P. Pagan

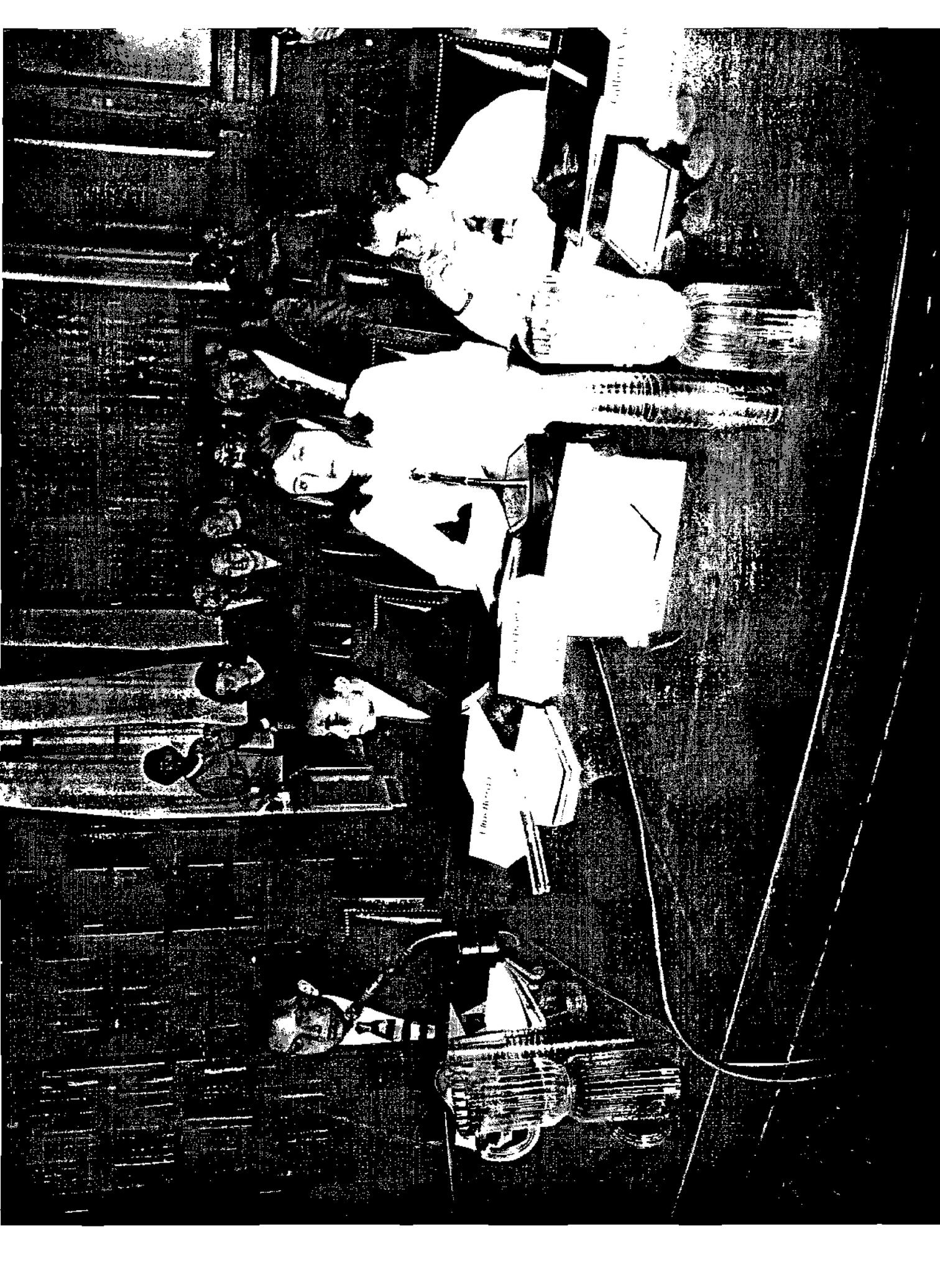


Alan Pogue



Alan Pope







Federal conference discusses border life



Photos by Bill Perry / Gannett News Service

Clarke School seventh-grader Gilbert Vasquez, from right, East Montana eighth-grader Janet Dunbar, East Montana eighth-grader Chris Herrera and Clarke eighth-

grader Ubaldo Fernandez waited to testify at a congressional hearing detailing deplorable colonia conditions of about 400,000 residents who live along the border.

El Paso kids tell Congress of colonias

By Steve DiMeglio

Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Sitting calmly in a hearing room across the street from the U.S. Capitol, fidgeting slightly with his dress shirt, tie and pressed slacks, all Gilbert Vasquez could think about Thursday was his El Paso home half a country away.

The seventh-grader from Clarke Middle School wasn't nervous despite being about to testify about his home at a conference of congressional and administration officials.

He spoke softly, but his message rang loud and clear — and it wasn't pretty.

"We need help," Vasquez said. "We need bigger parks,

better roads, and when it rains, it always floods. The last time, a car washed away. We have too many problems there, and it's very difficult living there."

Vasquez, who lives in the Sparks addition, was one of 10 middle- and high-school students from colonias in El Paso and Texas' lower Rio Grande Valley who described shocking conditions experienced daily by up to 400,000 people who live along the U.S.-Mexico border from El Paso to Brownsville.

Colonias are classified as impoverished, unregulated and illegal urban and rural subdivisions with inadequate sewage treatment and dangerous drinking water. Those



Rep. Silvestre Reyes, center, Rep. Solomon Ortiz, left, and Dr. Jaime Chahin attended the Children of Colonias Conference.

shortcomings — along with long-term exposure to pesticides, agricultural chemicals and lead-based paint — compound health problems, colo-

nia dwellers told the conference.

Inadequate garbage collec-

Please see **Colonias** 2A

Colonias

Continued from 1A

tion, limited transportation and the lack of affordable housing add to chronic cycles of poverty and disease.

"We don't have streets, we don't have street lights, and there are stray dogs and there's trash and broken glass all over the place, graffiti all over the walls, too," said Ubaldo Fernandez, an eighth-grader from Clarke Middle School who also lives in the Sparks colonia.

"I walk on dirt because we don't have paved roads," said Chris Herrera of Vista Colonia, an eighth-grader at East Montana Middle School. "You get used to all the stuff, but we need to get a grant to help us."

That's what's on the mind of Rep.

Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas. He convened the two-day Children of the Colonias Conference — along with Rep. Ruben Hinojosa, D-Texas, and other members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus — to document conditions of poverty and the worsening health and nutritional crises faced in Texas' border colonias.

"We wanted to put a face with the kids who live under very Third World conditions day in and day out so that members of Congress and the administration see this and know about this," Reyes said. "And we need to influence the appropriations process so that we can get more funding down there to people who need help."

"The El Paso area is a long ways from Washington, D.C., so we brought El Paso here with the kids."

The statistics — obtained from 2,000 colonias along the Texas border — are as shocking as the

stories the children told:

▶ 85 percent of colonia residents are U.S. citizens.

▶ 26 percent of colonia households lack adequate heating.

▶ 24 percent of colonia homes do not have safe drinking water systems.

▶ 44 percent report flooding because of unpaved streets and the absence of drainage systems.

▶ 43 percent of colonia residents live at or below the poverty line.

▶ 36 percent are children.

▶ 65 percent do not have health care.

▶ 40 percent have less than a ninth-grade education.

The list goes on.

"Each of these children shows tremendous courage and commitment to come to our nation's capital to make a difference for themselves, their families, El Paso and other border communities with colonias," Reyes said.

Participants in the two-day con-

ference included the Congressional Hispanic Caucus; Saul Ramirez, deputy secretary of Housing and Urban Development; Ida Hernandez of the Office of the Vice President; and Dr. Gumencindo Salas of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities.

The children were eager to take advantage of their trip to Washington. They planned to tour the White House and Capitol today and to visit the Air and Space Museum.

Saturday, they are to go to the Holocaust Museum and the Smithsonian Institution and get a night tour of the monuments. Sunday, they are to board an early flight out of Ronald Reagan National Airport and be home before noon.

Back home in the colonias.

"It's not too tough growing up where I do, but I'm glad I came here to tell people about it," Fernandez said. "I'm used to it. But it could be better."

Film takes close look at colonias

By Sonka Terfehr

El Paso Times

It's a problem that won't go away. Despite record budget surpluses and a booming economy, more than 400,000 Americans lived in Third World housing conditions along the U.S.-Mexico border last year, according to government estimates, most of them without running water, sewage systems and utilities.

More than 230 of these impoverished neighborhoods, called *colonias*, are located in the El Paso area, making it one of five counties that contain 80 percent of these unregulated and illegal subdivisions.

In an effort to find solutions, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded a \$994,000 research grant to Jaime Chahín, associate vice president of human resources and university affairs at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos.

The "Children of Las Colonias" research project examined the living conditions of families in colonias along the border.

"We have deplorable Third World conditions right here in the United States, and nobody seems to be concerned with them," Chahín said.

To enlighten the public — and lawmakers — the "Children of Las Colonias" project and acclaimed Austin filmmaker Hector Galán produced a one-hour documentary about the living conditions in the colonias, titled "The Forgotten Americans."

After its premiere last week at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the film will make its El Paso debut today at the El Paso Museum of Art.

"Americans don't like films about poverty," said Galán, president of Galán Productions. "I want people to be mad about it or to like



Courtesy of "Children of Colonias"

This is a home typical of colonias across the United States and Mexico. The "Children of Las Colonias" research project ex-

plored the living conditions of those who live in the colonias and produced the documentary, "The Forgotten Americans."

it. ... I want them to have an opinion. The worst thing that can happen is that people don't care."

Galán, who spent more than a year filming life in the colonias, said the "The Forgotten Americans" turned out to be "a unique piece," which relates complex stories about people trying to carve out their piece of the American dream.

"For the richest country in the world, it's kind of shocking, and a lot of Americans are not even aware that colonias are not only a Mexican issue," he said.

Galán and Chahín hope the film will bring its message to the public, and more importantly, to key policy-makers at municipal, county, state and federal levels.

"The health and safety dangers resulting from lack of standard public services (in the colonias) require appropriate governmental agencies to enact and enforce policies to stop the spread of colonias and continued endangerment of American families," Chahín said.

As part of the "Children of Las Colonias" project, 10 colonia children from El Paso and Texas' lower Rio Grande Valley last week discussed their living conditions with a conference of congressional and administration

officials in Washington.

Rep. Silvestre Reyes, D-Texas, along with other members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, convened the two-day conference, which included the film's premiere at the Smithsonian.

"In addition to the presentations the children gave in Congress, this documentary is evidence that Third World housing also exists within our borders," Reyes said in a press release. "We must take action to improve the living conditions of the more than 400,000 people living in colonias."

More information on the "Children of Las Colonias" project, and the documentary "The Forgotten Americans," can be found on the Internet at www.lascolonias.org.

Make plans

- **What:** "The Forgotten Americans."
- **When:** 7:00 p.m. today.
- **Where:** El Paso Museum of Art auditorium, One Arts Festival Plaza.
- **How much:** Free.
- **Information:** 532-1707.

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MARCH 30, 2000

'Children of the Colonias' appear before Congress

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A group of 10 high school and middle school students from the colonias of El Paso County and Texas' Lower Rio Grande Valley appeared before the U.S. Congress recently in a first-ever conference featuring children's eye witness accounts of crisis in the Southwest border region colonias.

Colonias are generally classified as impoverished, unregulated and illegal urban and rural subdivisions with inadequate sewage treatment and dangerous drinking-water sources.

The young people described shocking conditions experienced daily by up to 400,000 people who live along the U.S./Mexico border between El Paso and Brownsville.

The two-day trip included a premier of the children's documentary entitled *The Forgotten Americans* which played at the Smithsonian Institute.

The absence of safe sources of drinking water and adequate sewage treatment compound health problems, along with long-term exposure to pesticides, agricultural chemicals and lead-based paint, the colonia dwellers told listeners.

Students, teachers and parents also told Congressional and Administration officials that these — along with inadequate garbage collection, limited transportation and lack of affordable housing — add to the chronic cycle of poverty and disease.

Educators noted that health complications experienced by school children from this environment lead to poor educational accomplishment.

"When children are continually suffering symptoms of illness, expectations for education are empty," said Congressman Silvestre Reyes, who organized the Colonias Conference, along with Congressman Ruben Hinojosa of McAllen, members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and Dr. Jaime Chahin of Southwest Texas State University.

Updated congressional statistics obtained on conditions in about 2,000 such communities in the Texas border region revealed that:

- 26 percent of colonia households do not have adequate heating.
- 24 percent of colonia homes are not connected to safe drinking water systems.
- 44 percent of colonias report flooding due to unpaved streets and the absence of drainage systems.

"Each of these children show tremendous courage and commitment to come to our nation's capitol to make a difference for themselves, their families, El Paso and other border communities with colonias," said Reyes.

Those who attended from El Paso County included: Residents of the Sparks Subdivision, Alicia Contreras, a sophomore at Americas High; Ubaldo Fernandez, 8th grader at Clarke Middle; and Gilbert Vasquez, 7th grader at Clarke; and two 8th graders from East Montana Middle School in East Montana, Janet Dunbar and Chris Herrera. They were accompanied by Maria Contreras, a parent, and Sandra Buhaya, EMMS teacher.

'Forgotten Americans' follows struggles in border colonias

Laredo Morning Times
April 9, 2000

BY CHUCK OWEN
Times staff writer

A moving new documentary follows the history, the circumstance, the plight and some recent successes of the colonias and their people along the Texas border.

The documentary was presented at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) Tuesday, April 4, titled "The Forgotten Americans," hosted by Dr. Ricardo Romo, president of UTSA and Dr. Jamie Chahin, acting dean, College of Applied Arts, Southwest Texas State University.

First shown at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. on March 17, "The Forgotten Americans" is about the people who live in the colonias along the Texas/Mexican border and their struggle for life and the American way.

Romo, in his introduction and welcome to the viewing Tuesday, said the film was about one of America's poorest groups and is a story about survival, courage and hope.

Under project director Jamie Chahin and producer Hector Galan, whom Chahin lauded as "one of the most brilliant in the United States," the film was made to create public awareness - to educate and inform communities and public policy-makers about the living conditions of children and families residing in Texas colonias.

It included interviews with state and federal policy makers and community leaders, identifying legislation or other initiatives that are being undertaken to address the needs of the children and families in colonias.

Galan is from Galan Productions Inc. Television Films.

"Colonia" is a Spanish term for "neighborhood" or "community." In Texas, "colonia" refers to an unincorporated settlement that often lacks basic water and sewer systems, paved roads and safe and sanitary housing.

"The plight of these colonia families has largely gone undocumented and unnoticed by policy makers as the social problems within these communities continue. These problems include a lack of educational, health care, and public resources," a colonia report reads.

The film was a collaborative

effort among many who have interest and experience in the colonias, including an advisory committee of scholars. Dr. Ricardo Romo and Dr. Blandina Cardenas from UTSA, and Dr. Arturo Madrid of Trinity University, who reviewed and evaluated the quality of the subject matter and authenticity of the film.

It was funded by a special grant of \$1 million from the Kellogg Foundation, a grant Galan attributed to Dr. Rosanna Rodriguez's influence.

Galan dedicated the film "to the many people of the colonias who opened their doors and let us go in."

Photographer Allan Pogue was credited with a significant part in the documentation through his selection of 100 colonia children who received cameras through the grant and went about shooting pictures of colonia daily life.

Pogue's interest in the photographic medium and social justice were mirrored while in service in Vietnam in the 1960s.

Ten of those children involved in the project subsequently testified in Washington before the National Hispanic Caucus, Chahin said.

The plan is to disseminate the documentary throughout the nation.

THE FILM

The film opens with the comment that the colonias are areas that don't appear on any maps and, for all practical purposes, don't exist in people's minds.

It then explains that many of these are people who constantly struggle in life while living in shacks, always searching for water, food and housing.

"This is the other America," the narrator says, "and it might not to happen in Texas."

When outsiders are told that more than 300,000 people live in these conditions, they say, "How could this be possible?"

In the preface, the film discusses the colonia people's search for the American dream along the Texas border, which is the fastest growing border region in the United States. "NAFTA's economic boom has not touched the colonias," they say.

There are 1,300 colonias that exist outside cities - people living many times in makeshift dwellings in areas with fancy names, such as "Greenway Farms" and "Sunny Skies."

They are people who make

\$3,000 to \$6,000 a year, but some, if they have one at all, have just one lone water tap, which doesn't run all the time. Most have to truck water in.

These are the people who start building their dream home, and after five to seven years, it hopefully is finished.

The film says that the colonia problem dates back to the 1950s, when colonias were an affordable housing option and a critical housing shortage fueled the development of colonias, but unscrupulous landowners took advantage of the poor, selling homes at low prices with promises of essentials that never materialized.

Ownership of the land was not a transfer of property rights, it was a "rent to own" contract for ownership with a small down payment and a small monthly payment. However, whenever the new "owner" missed a payment, he was kicked out and another "buyer" was brought in. But for many, this was the only opportunity to own a home.

Problems erupted at move-in - there was no water. Barrels were brought in to provide water for cooking, bathing and washing - and for watering any flowers they may have planted.

The tracts were not platted. Since Texas law requires platting before services are available, residents in these areas couldn't get water or electricity.

Some of the properties were on land that was in the 100-year flood plain, and when it rained they were either flooded or washed out. One area, "Green Valley Farms," was said to be in a dry lakebed.

One colonia dweller documented that when she goes to work she always takes a packed suitcase, just in case she will not be able to get back home that day.

"Affordable? I now know why," she said. She said they had to be evacuated twice in the last five years due to rising floodwater.

In most of these areas roads are non-existent, or the roads they have are impassable when

CONTINUED ON
NEXT PAGE

it rains.

The film shows one car trying to make a crossing of water and being washed downstream. Luckily the two occupants escape with their lives.

Because of flooding water and outhouses rather than inside bathrooms, many children suffer from diseases caused by floating excrement. One child was documented as having drowned in an outhouse hole. They saw his shoes, thinking he had thrown them in, but found that he still had the shoes on his feet.

High unemployment complicates the issue in the colonias.

The unemployment rate exceeds 20 percent, the film documents. Opportunities for employment are not good, with half those employed as migrant workers. Economic opportunity is limited, with a decline in manual farm labor needs throughout the country.

Their only hope now is that their kids will make it with an education and be able to find a good job. "People need to be mentored, not just told to pull themselves up by their boot straps," the narrator says.

Some of the kids also have a problem because of their living conditions. When they go to school they stand out from the other kids who have nice clothes and good living conditions, kids who have the capability of bathing every day, for example. The kids know.

One school principal said, "We try to make them feel good at school." She worried that they don't have a good place to do homework when they get home. For these kids, school is their only refuge. It is the place where they get two good meals a day, she said.

But it is not just a problem of homework. The kids have few places for recreation, and the pull of gangs and drugs is strong. Statistics show that more than half will not finish high school and less than one percent will go to college.

Yet, there are glimmers of hope in this bleak life. The film documents how one family has seen three of its children go off to college through work-study programs.

Last year, Blanca was the last one in the family to make it, bringing tears of joy to the film audience as they watched her receive her diploma, her mom and dad looking on. She told of her hope from the beginning that her parents would be able to make the trip to Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Former astronaut and Sen.

John Glenn received an honorary doctorate at the same ceremony.

Blanca said she knew that she would have a much harder time than her fellow students, but she had something they didn't have as much of — commitment and perseverance, she said. She learned that in the colonia, working two jobs while doing her academics and earning her degree.

Blanca said that while she was at Brown, her friends would say they would like to go home with her for a visit, and she would always say, "yes," but she meant "no," because of the conditions they would find in the colonia.

As to the fix for the colonia problem, a county judge said, "It is tough to see the need and not be able to fix it."

But help is on the way, largely because colonia residents started a grassroots effort to make their plight known and to improve their conditions.

The process of awareness started in the Texas legislature in the 1970s, when someone said, "We can't deport them, they are American citizens," responding to an uneducated legislator.

The first legislation had to do with the regulation of water and wastewater, but the regulations hurt more than helped because the homes could not meet the set standards.

Then counties were given the authority to stop the proliferation of colonias through House Bill 52, but along with authority and responsibility to fix the problem came little money. "Hundreds of colonias are competing for too little money," one county judge said.

In the film, State Rep. Henry

Cuellar from Laredo said, "The mood in the legislature has changed, but we have to keep working at it."

Because of grassroots efforts and the growing awareness of the problems in the colonias, the pendulum is beginning to swing. For example, *Protonoras* are being trained to train the residents in self-help and other needs. Communities are working together to help each other build homes and provide the infrastructure needs, such as water lines and sewage lines. Colonia residents are realizing that they too have a responsibility.

Reflecting on the colonia problem, Assistant Secretary for Housing and Urban Development and former Laredo mayor Saul Ramirez said in the documentary, "These colonias turned into a nightmare."

The narrator points out that some developers are still trying to get legislators to loosen the standards, which would be a step backward, he said.

Thanks to legislative efforts, tens of millions of dollars are becoming available to start to meet some of the needs in the colonias.

The question is: Will they ever catch up?

Public Broadcasting System (PBS) is now reviewing the documentary for public airing, which should occur within the next two to six months.

Copies of the films and other information are available through the Internet site www.lascolonias.org.

(Staff writer Chuck Owen can be reached at 728-2564 or by e-mail at chucko@lntonline.com)