Q&A: Interview with David Spener

By Vincent Bosquez - Special to the Express-News

Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border
By David Spener
Cornell University Press, $24.95

Many working-class Mexican migrants make the surreptitious journey into the United States every day looking for work or to reunite with family members. They cross the border illegally, many with the aid of human smugglers known as coyotes.

David Spener, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Trinity University, has drawn on interviews with migrants, coyotes and border officials to produce an in-depth, scholarly look into Mexican migration in his new book, "Clandestine Crossings."

Spener recently agreed to an interview with the Express-News.

Q. You mention the term "global apartheid" in your book. Can you expand on what that means when it comes to the Texas-Mexico border?

A. It's a term I use quite purposely, and I recognize that it will likely create some controversy. It basically points out that in our legal and law enforcement system here, we do lots of things to non-nationals that would not be acceptable to do to nationals of the U.S. We would regard those things as being gross violations of human rights if they were done to people who were U.S. citizens.

Q. What are some of those "gross violations"?

A. If you substitute nationality for race, global apartheid is a system that works very similarly to the way the old apartheid system worked in South Africa; people who don't belong to the privileged group are systematically treated differently, denied certain rights, have their movements controlled.

Q. In your research, how effective have you found the Border Patrol to be in curbing the tide of illegal crossings?

A. There are different layers of effectiveness. The Border Patrol is effective in assisting local law enforcement agencies along the Southwest border and in a lot of communities when local law enforcement does not have sufficient personnel to take care of everything, so it serves an important function there.
It's not very effective in terms of preventing or deterring undocumented migration, and that doesn't have anything to do with the quality of the personnel but with the overall enforcement strategy that's established by U.S. policymakers. It's not that the Border Patrol is ineffective, or that agents aren't trained well, or they're not professional or honorable; it's that the task they've been given is not a task that can realistically be carried out.

Q. You write about "Operation Wetback," a politically incorrect term if I ever heard one. What was the nucleus behind it?

A. During the early 1950s, you had many, if not more, undocumented people working in the fields as you had working under the government-sanctioned Bracero Program. That was because there weren't enough contracts available at the time under the program to meet the needs of everyone who wanted to work, and Texas wasn't really a part of the program at the time. To solve the perception problem of having too many illegals workers, the Immigration and Naturalization Service made a big show of rounding up all the "wetbacks," as they called them. In a series of raids staged around the country, they rounded up somewhere over a million undocumented Mexicans who were not part of the Bracero Program and deported them. Growers in South Texas were up in arms about this because their crops were going to rot in the fields without these laborers.

Q. You have traveled some of the routes that Mexicans have traveled to get into Texas. What did you experience?

A. I've been on those routes in the summer when it's been unbelievably hot and you just wonder how anybody gets through it alive. There's a lot of dense brush and cactus all over the place. It made real for me just how heroic the efforts of these migrants are who are going through all these things. What they go through to survive and to provide for their families is really quite amazing.

Vincent Bosquez is the president of the Society of Latino and Hispanic Writers of San Antonio and the director of public relations at Palo Alto College.

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