

Immigrants sneak in under storm's cover

Undocumented Honduran group reaches Brownsville, turns toward New Jersey

By *SERGIO CHAPA*
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July 21, 2005 — They were drenched from head to toe and shivering under the awning of a McDonald's as Hurricane Emily dumped cold rain around them, but the group of seven decided they needed to get moving.

They crossed Brownsville's International Boulevard, which had been emptied of its usual Wednesday morning traffic, and filed past out-of-town reporters and city workers who were clearing a fallen palm tree.

Nobody seemed to pay attention to the seven undocumented Honduran immigrants who had just swum across the Rio Grande with hopes of reaching relatives and jobs in New Jersey.

The six men and one woman said they left Honduras together and were robbed by Mexican police along the way, but they arrived safely in Brownsville with just the clothes on their backs.



“It took us 28 days to cross Mexico to get here,” one told The Brownsville Herald. “But it was worth it.”

The seven, who all were in their late teens and early 20s, declined to give their names. They said they knew a hurricane was crossing the area but were not afraid.

The group asked Police Sgt. William Dietrich for directions to the Good Neighbor Settlement House, a community center and soup kitchen. They hoped for a hot meal and to dry off but found it was closed because of the hurricane that blew through here late Tuesday and early Wednesday.

“A lot of them come by, I've had a lot of them come up and ask for it (Good Neighbor) before,” Dietrich said.

“They come through here, they hang out in Matamoros and hang out with the other illegals around here ... and learn about where to go. “

Police are not required to detain suspected undocumented immigrants unless they are believed to be involved in a crime or ask to be surrendered to Border Patrol officials.

A Tyler Street resident offered the group shelter from the rain and spirits remained high as they made plans to reach another community center across town.

Border Patrol officials and Brownsville police reported that the seven were among an unknown number of undocumented immigrants who tried to use Hurricane Emily as cover to illegally enter the United States.

Dietrich said he found another Honduran at West Sixth and Elizabeth Streets late Tuesday night.

“He was wet, soggy and hungry,” Dietrich said. “He hadn’t eaten since (Monday) and said a coyote dumped them here.”

Police turned the man over to the custody of federal immigration officials.

Although the immigrant denied there were others, Brownsville Police Sgt. Rey Rosas said two other Hondurans trying to shield themselves from the rain with trash bags flagged him down.

The two men were turned over to immigration officials and told authorities that they left two children huddling for warmth in the bathroom of a downtown park.

After an unsuccessful search of Lincoln Park, Rosas found three children and two adults from Honduras at the Fort Brown Municipal Golf Course. The group was taken to a makeshift shelter at Hanna High School.

Although figures were not available for the day’s arrest tally at presstime Wednesday, Roy Cervantes with the Rio Grande Valley Sector of the Border Patrol said Emily increased already dangerous border crossing conditions.

“The river is very dangerous regardless of weather conditions,” Cervantes said of the Rio Grande. “There are hidden currents, unseen objects and swift-moving waters.”

Border Patrol agents maintained their normal land patrols during the storm, but Cervantes said any immigrants who crossed the Rio Grande Tuesday night and Wednesday morning could have easily lost their lives in the faster-than-normal river flow.

Others, he said, were put in danger after being abandoned by smugglers.

Cervantes said two Mexican nationals used cell phones to call 911 from the brush of Brooks County Tuesday night after they got lost in the darkness and thunderstorms.

Border Patrol agents found the immigrants alive and well after a six-hour search. “Smugglers will take advantage of any situation to bring aliens,” Cervantes said.

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