

# Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation

A documentary film by Director Paul Kakert and Writer Colleen Bradford Krantz

Produced by Storytellers International

## Synopsis

When the bodies of eleven Central Americans and Mexicans were found inside a freight car in Denison, Iowa, a hardened Immigration and Naturalization Services investigator was assigned to the case. He found his professional detachment gradually melting away as he befriended a young Guatemalan victim's brother while hunting for the smugglers who locked the group inside the sweltering railcar. Eight years after their deadly journey, immigration remains a hotly contested issue, with President Barack Obama promising major changes in immigration policy.

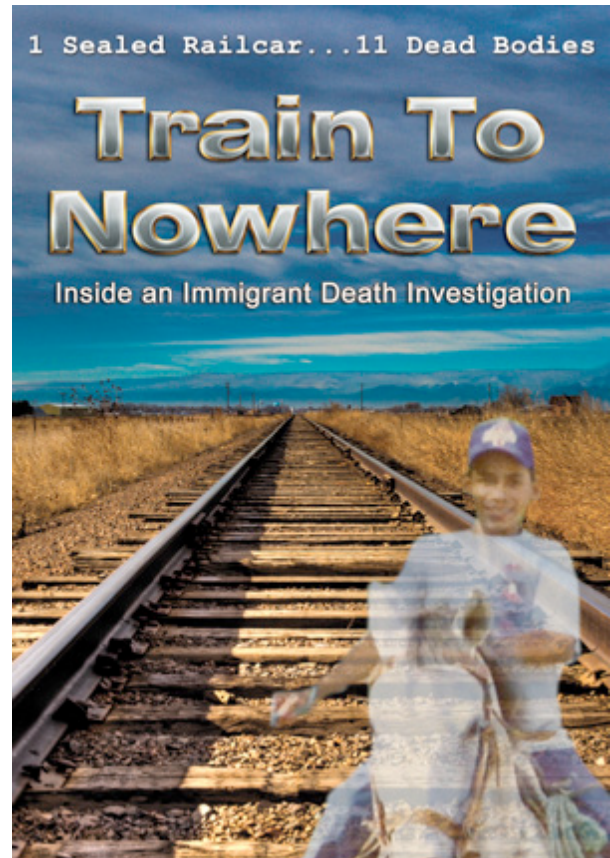
The documentary, 'Train to Nowhere; Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation,' offers an honest, but compassionate look at the deaths of the eleven undocumented immigrants. The documentary breaks free of the standard immigration story in examining the case from various viewpoints: that of the immigration agent, the brother of a victim from Guatemala, and a one-time train conductor imprisoned for working with the smugglers. Viewers will see beyond the superficial levels of the people involved in the story and understand the complexities of their personalities and the situation. The immigration agent himself is the grandson of an undocumented immigrant. He remembers traveling to Idaho as a boy for the sugar beet harvest. The former train conductor, once paid to help slip people into the United States by train, has a new career in which he helped build a section of the new border wall. The older brother, once an undocumented immigrant himself, begged his little brother to remain in Central America even as the older man's financial situation showed the younger man what could be achieved. These kinds of situations make immigration a complex issue, far from black and white.

'Train to Nowhere; Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation' takes the viewers from the streets of southern Texas, to a Guatemalan farm, to the Iowa town where the bodies were found. Using medical experts and scientists, it also describes what those horrific last hours would have been like for the people locked in the railcar. This film is about our shared humanity - the ambitions and hopes of those who would allow a smuggler to lock them inside a railcar, and about those left behind to ask, 'Where did we go wrong?'

## Director's Statement

By Paul Kakert

Colleen Bradford-Krantz, who wrote and co-produced the film, presented the idea for this film to me. Her passion for the story and her incredible research to discover the details and people involved really appealed to me. I was also drawn to the shocking Midwest story on a topic that is becoming more commonplace in the lives of everyone across the country, not simply the border states. I knew this was a film that would have great regional interest but would also have something to offer on the national and international scene. Perhaps the most compelling reason for me to make the film was that it focused on the people. I want to tell stories of human drama in my films, and the characters we meet in Train To Nowhere tell incredible personal stories. To truly share in the character's experiences is a priceless quality I want to deliver in every film I make.



I want all of my films to entertain while also being informative and thought provoking. In the case of Train to Nowhere, the very nature of the content is already thought provoking. That was perhaps our biggest challenge with this film; to let the actual story itself unfold without injecting our personal viewpoints into the film. Remaining neutral in our tone was of paramount importance. I believe we've done an excellent job of this as the film does not promote one belief over another on the very impassioned illegal immigration debate. One viewer commented that the film has a "CSI" quality, and that is an accurate statement. We follow the events in a very factual manner and give equal voice to the actual people involved who experienced this event from the side of immigration law enforcement, the relatives of the immigrants, and even the smugglers who were arrested for their involvement. We realize that people will come to this film with thoughts on illegal immigration already, so this film is focused on the human drama involved. My hope is that people do not see this as an immigration film, but rather a film about people and the decisions they make to deal with their very personal life situations; decisions that, in this case, proved devastating. I do not believe you can watch this film and not walk away wanting to discuss the people or decisions that are presented.

Storytellers International is my non-profit organization that makes all of my filmmaking possible. The goal of the organization is to bring a world of stories to our local, regional, and national audience through thought provoking and entertaining documentary films. I would encourage viewers to visit the site and sign up for free updates so they can be informed as we release new films. I would also encourage those who may wish to get involved to contact me from the site. There are plenty of opportunities to help through funding or volunteer service.

## Resumes



**Paul Kakert:** Director, Co-Producer, Cinematographer/DP, Editor, Sound Editor  
Paul Kakert has owned and operated a video and multimedia production company in Iowa since 1991 and has produced videos and 3D animations for broadcast, federal government, non-profit organizations, higher education, and corporate businesses throughout the United States. Paul founded Storytellers International in 2009. The non-profit organization produces feature length documentary films, telling stories from around the world. As President and Director of all productions for the organization, his goal is to build an online, fanatic audience for documentary films through his community website DocumentaryTV.com. In addition to promoting the films he and other independent producers create; the organization actively solicits story ideas from a growing community at DocumentaryTV.com. Anyone can pitch a story they would like to see SI produce. Paul's goal is to inspire the public to tell him what is important to them, and most importantly, to hear from those who are close to the stories and the people involved. To date, films by Storytellers have taken Paul to India and Kosovo and throughout the US to meet his vision of bringing a world of stories to a US audience.



**Colleen Bradford Krantz:** Writer, Co-Producer, Publicist  
Colleen worked as a reporter at daily metro newspapers for a decade (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, The Des Moines Register) before turning to freelance journalism. She is author of a blog about immigration and holds a journalism degree from Iowa State with a minor in political science.

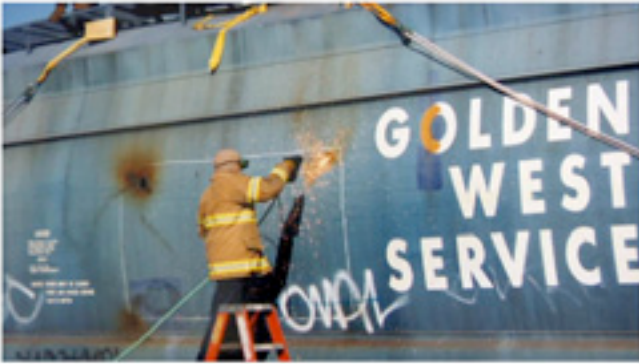
FREELANCE JOURNALIST (August 2005 to current)  
THE DES MOINES REGISTER, Metro Iowa Reporter (December 1999 to August 2005)  
MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL, Metro Reporter (October 1997 to November 1999)

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Metro Reporter (January 1996 to August 1997)

WASHINGTON POST, Metro Intern (May 1995 to August 1995)

OMAHA WORLD-HERALD, Metro and Copy Editor Intern (May 1994 to August 1994)

## Production & Promotional Stills



Investigators cut into the rail car in Des Moines, IA.



Interview with Alonzo Martinez, retired immigration officer/investigator.

# Deaths lead to justice

**Ceremony honors illegal immigrants who died in train car**

By Elizabeth Kuttler  
The Gazette

**CEDAR RAPIDS** — A task force charged with investigating the deaths of 11 illegal immigrants found in a train car in Denison in October 2002 were honored Sunday at a National Crime Victims' Rights Week ceremony in Cedar Rapids.

Alonzo Martinez Jr. and his team spent a year trying to prosecute the smugglers who sent the four women and seven men to their deaths trapped in a train car. Rosemary Amerena worked to match DNA from the victims to their relatives in four Central American states.

"It was a journey of tragedy that turned into a journey of justice," said U.S. Attorney Charles Larson, who introduced task force members Martinez from Omaha, and Amerena, Ruben Banda, Lupina Gorman, Rodolfo Navarro, Anselmo Gama and Arnaldo Cortez from Brownsville, Texas.

Martinez said what was supposed to be a one-hour train ride for the victims ended after four months, when their decomposing bodies were found in a hopper car in Denison. The victims paid as much as \$1,700 to smugglers for transportation into the United States. The 11 boarded the train in June in Harlingen, Texas, for a one-hour ride that was supposed to circumvent a border patrol checkpoint in Kingsville.

They had no water, no food and few personal items with them, he said.

Twenty-five illegals in another car were caught, Martinez said. They knew about the 11 but did not tell, Martinez said. "They thought the 11 were the lucky ones — they didn't get caught."

The train continued from Kingsville to El Reno, Okla., where the train sat for four months. "The smugglers lost track of it," Martinez said.

He estimated they all died within 24 hours of leaving Kingsville. "They went to sleep and passed out," he said.

The only opening to the covered hopper car was a hatch at the top.

The job of collecting DNA evidence to identify the victims fell to FBI agent Rosemary Amerena. After media reports, families with missing relatives contacted law enforcement.

Amerena traveled to Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador to collect DNA samples.

"Initially they were nameless faces," Amerena said. "But once you meet the family it becomes real." Eleven people died but hundreds were affected by their death.

"One family in Honduras lost three people," Amerena said.

Families of all 11 victims were located.

"It's the kind of case you wake up at night thinking about," Martinez said. "Still."

Of the 18 smugglers caught, 11 have been sentenced, three are awaiting sentencing and two are fugitives. "As long as any of us are still working," Martinez said of his task force, "we'll continue to be on the lookout for these people," Martinez said.

Elizabeth Kuttler photo/The Gazette

Contact the writer: (515) 281-6200 or [kuttler@gaazette.com](mailto:kuttler@gaazette.com)



Iowa newspaper article from 2004 following the prison sentencing of the smugglers.

## 'Train to Nowhere' recounts immigration-smuggling tragedy

Documentary will premiere in Denison Saturday

By **BETSY SIMON**  
Times Herald Staff Writer

Thursday, September 30, 2010

DENISON — Dozens of railcars have passed through Denison in the last eight years, but none have been etched on Colleen Bradford Krantz's mind like the one that carried 11 dead Central American and Mexican illegal immigrants into town on Oct. 15, 2002.

For eight years, while the event fell prey to the public's short-term memory, Krantz, an Adel resident and former Des Moines Register journalist, could never seem forget the story of what she deemed "the train to nowhere."

"Before I left the Des Moines Register five years ago, I was working for them in eastern Iowa and didn't have much to do with the story when it broke, but it always seemed to stick with me for some reason," she said. "When I decided to leave the paper and stay at home with my kids, I started writing a book proposal on the subject."

Not knowing where the book might go, Krantz partnered one year ago with film director Paul Kakert, president of the Davenport-based Storytellers International, to turn her search for answers into the newly completed documentary, "Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation" — a story of a U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service officer's hunt for those responsible for the 11 deaths.

The public is invited to this weekend's three free, advanced film screenings.

A Saturday screening is scheduled for 3 p.m. at the Donna Reed Performing Arts Center in Denison, where Chad Elliot, a Coon Rapids-based musician who composed the film's music, will also perform.

There will also be two screenings on Sunday — one at 3 p.m. in the Iowa Public Television's Maytag Auditorium in Johnston, where Elliot will perform again, and another at 2 p.m. in the Figge Art Museum, 225 W. Second St. in Davenport.

Iowa Public Television will also air the film at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 12 — three days before the eighth anniversary of the discovery at the Denison PSC/ADM plant.

"It was Iowa Public Television's idea to show it near the anniversary," Krantz said. "They decided on that date three or four months ago, and told us to make that our target date for completion. They even talked about showing it on the actual anniversary, but I think there might have been scheduling conflicts."

Krantz decided to bring "Train to Nowhere" to the big screen when publishers first shied away from her nonfiction book proposal because of a previous lack of sales for books on immigration.

That's when she brought Kakert on board to direct the documentary, which started filming in Denison, Des Moines, Ankeny and Iowa City with a grant for a couple of thousand dollars from Humanities Iowa, which has covered part of the film's \$15,000 price tag thus far.

Kakert said the workload has been divided mostly between himself and Krantz, but it's been worth it.

"The film is produced by Storyteller's International, but the film actually found me," he said. "When Colleen approached me about it, I loosely remembered the event and thought it was the kind of film Storytellers should make."



Byron Acevedo, 18, of Guatemala, was one of the 11 illegal immigrants found in a railcar in Denison in 2002. Former Des Moines Register journalist Colleen Krantz focuses on how Acevedo came to his untimely death onboard the train in her film, "Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation."



Eliseo Acevedo, a U.S. citizen and brother of Byron Acevedo, talks with Colleen Krantz about the search and discovery of his brother, who was one of 11 illegal immigrants found dead in a railcar in Denison in 2002. His interview is included in Krantz's documentary, "Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation," which debuts this weekend.

What's intriguing, he said, is that the documentary is not the typical immigration story.

"We went out of the way to make sure it's neutral. No political or personal views were involved," Kakert said. "It's a very different story that looks at where these people came from, which provides a twist not usually found in a story like this."

Unlike Kakert, whose career is built on what he sees through a camera lens, "Train to Nowhere" is Krantz's first crack at a career as an independent journalist and her first time in broadcast media, after 10 years of newspaper reporting.

And if film production wasn't enough, Krantz, 37, couldn't let go of her hope to find a publisher for her book, which she managed to do about two years ago.

Entitled "Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation," the book is scheduled for release this spring.

Krantz, an Iowa State University journalism graduate, based her works on conversations with border guards and federal agents involved in the case, who helped piece together the victims' path from Mexico, where they were loaded by smugglers into a grain hopper bound for the U.S.

The smugglers lost track of the hopper, which crossed the U.S.-Mexican border undetected by authorities, and continued on to Oklahoma, where it was stored for four months before it made its way to Iowa with the victims still inside.

It was later discovered that the victims, ranging in ages from 10 to 40, were unable to release the hatch inside the rail car, leading to their deaths by dehydration and hyperthermia.

The victims were identified with help from DNA test and the FBI and returned to their home countries.

Nearly a year after the remains were found, charges were brought against two of the four persons believed to have connections to the smuggling ring.

Juan Fernando Licea-Cedillo, of Mexico, was sentenced to 292 months imprisonment.

Former train conductor Arnulfo Flores, of Kingsville, Texas, was sentenced to 41 months behind bars for providing train schedules to the smugglers.

Rogelio Hernandez Ramos, of Mexico, was found in his home country, but Krantz said, before he's extradited, Mexico wants assurance Ramos won't receive the death penalty.

Only Guillermo Madrigal Ballesteros, of Mexico, remains a fugitive in the case, she said.

Krantz did nab an interview with Flores, following his early release from prison.

"He was a little reluctant to do the interview, but we went to Texas to talk to him, and I wasn't even sure it would happen until we sat down with him," she said.

Krantz said Flores doesn't blame himself for the 11 deaths, but she thinks his coming forward about it was his way of reaching out.

"He says in the documentary that he doesn't feel responsible for what happened because he didn't load the victims in the railcar, but I think part of his willingness to be in the documentary was a way of giving something to the families," she said.

But the story doesn't end there.

An interview with a Mexican-American immigration agent explains the criminal investigation that ensued.

But it's interviews with the family of victim Byron Acevedo, 10, of Guatemala, that Krantz said humanizes this story of inhumane treatment.

She said Acevedo's brother, Eliseo, a New York resident and one-time undocumented worker, explains the heartbreak he still suffers because of his brother's death.

"Eliseo talks about the months he couldn't find his brother, and he tears up when he talks about eventually having to bring his brother's body home," she said. "He had promised his mother that he would bring his little brother home to Guatemala, and he still struggles with the fact that he could only bring his body."

Immigration isn't a cut-and-dry issue, as Krantz learned during the film's production. She hopes viewers understand both sides of the debate by the time the credits roll.

"When people watch films on something that is so politically hot, I think they tend to watch it to see which side the producers are on, and turn it off when it's not on their side," she said. "We wanted to tell the story in way that people on either side would not turn away, and I think we did that."

"And maybe, if people watch the whole thing, it will open up their minds and allow them to learn something about why the other side feels the way it does about immigration issues. There is no simple answer to immigration."

## Munson: Adel writer refuses to give up on 11 victims

by KYLE MUNSON · kmunson@dmreg.com · October 1, 2010

**Adel, Ia.** - She couldn't get the story out of her head.

Colleen Bradford Krantz reported primarily from eastern Iowa when she worked at The Des Moines Register for about five years starting in 2000. But it turned out to be a western Iowa tragedy that she didn't cover that continued to haunt her after she left the newsroom to focus on raising a family.

Now that story, initially envisioned as a book, has become an hour-long TV documentary written and co-produced by Krantz, 37. "Train to Nowhere" will be screened around the state next week, then aired Oct. 12 on Iowa Public Television.

"I never thought of myself as a TV journalist," Krantz said this week in the middle of a sunny afternoon on her back deck south of Adel.

She and her husband, Darin, live on five scenic acres with their three kids (ages 2 to 7), three bottle-fed calves in the pasture and a couple of kittens angling to take up residence in the house for the winter.

An idyllic fall day on the deck is a world away from the grisly events of eight years ago that inspired Krantz's documentary.

Maybe you remember the basic outline of the border crossing gone horribly wrong: Eleven decomposed bodies were discovered on Oct. 14, 2002, locked inside a railroad grain car in Denison.

It was eventually determined that all 11 victims were undocumented immigrants from five different countries, smuggled aboard a train route that originated in Matamoros, Mexico. The group that came to be known as the "Denison 11" died from hyperthermia and dehydration that June in Texas.

Krantz kept wondering: What would it have been like to expect an hour-long jaunt, only to be left to an agonizing death stretching over as many as three sweltering days?

So she began to answer the question by researching a book and writing its initial chapters. She enlisted an agent. But at least one publisher warned that immigrant tragedy books don't sell well.

It wasn't quite a last-ditch effort, but close: Krantz eventually emailed the idea to IPTV, where she was met with interest and advice.

Here's where I didn't expect to give a sliver of positive press to the now-defunct Iowa Film Office, which collapsed amid financial scandal and became a political football. Krantz connected with her director and co-producer, Paul Kakert of Davenport, thanks to a referral from the film office.

This documentary represents a first foray for both of them - Krantz straying into video, Kakert launching his own nonprofit documentary company, Storytellers International.

"People couldn't believe we were making it," Kakert said of the reactions he and Krantz received while filming in Texas, where the Denison 11-type headlines have been more common.

The documentary ultimately became more of a character-driven study than an issues polemic. Krantz emphasized that she and Kakert aren't pulling a Michael Moore job, and they even test-screened their film for objectivity.

Byron Acevedo, at 18 the youngest of the victims, hailed from Guatemala and became one of Krantz's main characters. His older brother in New York, Eliseo Acevedo, provides some of the most heartfelt interview footage.

And now a book has materialized thanks to the documentary. Krantz finishes writing it this month, and Ice Cube Books of North Liberty plans to publish it next spring.

1 Sealed Railcar...11 Dead Bodies...No Answers



*Image courtesy of Storytellers International*

**W**hen the bodies of 11 Central Americans and Mexicans were found inside a freight car in Denison, Iowa, a hardened Immigration and Naturalization Services investigator was assigned to the case. He found his professional detachment gradually melting away as he befriended a young Guatemalan victim's brother while hunting for the smugglers who locked the group inside the sweltering railcar. Six years after their deadly journey, immigration remains a hotly contested issue, with President Barack Obama promising major changes in immigration policy.

*Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation*, focuses on this case from the "other" side—that of the government agent. In this case, the agent himself is the grandson of an undocumented immigrant. He remembers traveling to Idaho as a boy for the sugar beet harvest. This film is a piece about our shared humanity—the ambitions and hopes of those who would allow a smuggler to lock them inside a railcar, and the surprising sensitivity of an investigator whose life was changed by this case. Most importantly, the story of this agent and the man he befriends illustrate the complexities inherent in the immigration debate. Nothing is as black and white as it seems.



**Humanities Iowa** awarded a major grant for this film project. As this documentary nears its release to the public we would like to let you know more about this remarkable film and introduce you to the producer and director, Colleen Krantz and Paul Kakert.



**HI: Any thoughts on immigration in Iowa especially since the recent Postville events?**

CK: I think Iowans, in general, are big on personal responsibility; if you put yourself in a situation, you should be ready to accept the consequences. But they are, at the same time, compassionate, particularly to those people with whom they have developed a connection, whether through church, because of living on the same street, or from having children in school together. The result, in my opinion, is that many Iowans are torn between a belief that our laws should be followed, and an understanding that many undocumented immigrants are coming to the United States in an attempt to escape lives of poverty and hardship. The Postville raid magnified those feelings across the state. Neighbors watched neighbors being led away in handcuffs, and although some were glad to see the federal government enforcing the law, others felt uneasy, or even angered by the whole scene.

**HI: What's happening with the film now? Where can people find out more? Do you have any future projects planned?**

CK: We have completed the filming and are now in the editing phase. We expect to complete *Train to Nowhere* by mid-April, after which we hope to secure a broadcast home for the film. We are hoping to hold free public viewings in the Des Moines area, Denison, and Davenport, but have not yet set dates. We have had some publicity, with a resulting jump in internet traffic to our website. Our plans for the documentary have been featured or mentioned on immigration blogs and sites. People can find out more at [www.TrainToNowhereFilm.com](http://www.TrainToNowhereFilm.com).

After working for a decade as a newspaper reporter, this project represents my first foray into the world of film. I'm enjoying doing the work and hope to do more documentaries. I have begun talking with Paul Kakert about the possibility of working on another one with Storytellers International. We're still discussing what topics we might tackle.

**A few words from Director & Editor, Paul Kakert**

**What are each of your roles in the film?**

This film is truly Colleen's project. As the producer and writer, she is the driving force behind its production. Colleen learned of me through the Iowa Motion Picture Association. My role has been as director and editor, which essentially means I have shot all the footage and will be the person completing the final edit.

**What were the challenges in producing the film?**

Anytime you are working with an event that happened years in the past, it's always a challenge to find enough relevant visuals to work with. We've had great luck finding television news coverage and investigation photographs to mix with our interview footage. But my challenges on the visual aspects pale in comparison to Colleen's challenges of tracking down all the people involved in the story and arranging interviews and building the basic story structure.

**When will it be ready for viewing on IPTV?**

We will complete the final edit in mid-April and hope to have it aired on IPTV shortly thereafter. We will also feature the film on [www.DocumentaryTV.com](http://www.DocumentaryTV.com), which is the film community website produced by Storytellers International.

# Train to Nowhere film: IPTV debuts a journey of inquiry

[Davenport](#) : [IA](#) : [USA](#) | Oct 11, 2010

By [BorderExplorer](#)

The emotionally charged national controversy over immigration takes an uncharacteristically calm position in the new documentary film debuting on Iowa Public Television this week, entitled [\*Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation\*](#).

The film investigates the horrific discovery that rocked Iowa and the nation in 2002 when authorities found eleven badly decomposed bodies sealed inside a freight car in rural Denison, Iowa. Who abandoned these Mexican and Central American undocumented immigrants in pursuit of a better life, leaving them to die a hellish death in a sweltering grain car? *Train to Nowhere* investigates that question, taking an in-depth look at the crime and at everyone it touched.

*Train to Nowhere's* tone is consistently nonjudgmental. Each player in the investigation is interviewed, and they all get a fair hearing: from the families of the deceased, to a key immigration agent, from a man charged in the case, to an FBI investigator. Each shares a unique point of view. And, as the stories unfold, so do the complexities of the issue of illegal immigration. But ultimately the viewer is left to grapple with that wider context: the push that drives the influx of migrants and the challenging push back they try to surmount.

No stone is left unturned in this crime investigation story. We trace the journey that brought the immigrants onboard the train and piece together what transpired next. Medical professionals reconstruct the ugly reality of death by dehydration and hyperthermia. The medical examiner recounts the process of identifying bodies, and we learn how they were returned. The fate of the perpetrators is revealed. The emotional aftermath of grief is palpable in the story of a brother whose frantic search encountered tragedy. The unlikely friendship he forges with the border patrol agent assigned to the case adds to the irony.

Production collaborators Paul Kakert and Colleen Bradford Kranz draw no conclusions and preach no political positions. And because of that, the general public --as well as educators of all kinds-- could find *Train to Nowhere* a useful resource as the nation addresses immigration reform. The extremely reasonably priced DVD may be [purchased](#) at the film's website. It also provides a free study guide download.

Nothing is as black and white in the immigration debate as it may seem, says the film. However, through *Train to Nowhere's* careful investigation and retelling of a tragic incident, it also shines a spotlight of clarity into some dark corners of our national immigration controversy. By introducing the players in this human drama, and by carefully helping us understand them, the film just might have the power to elicit critical thought and productive dialogue.

An appreciative audience of 150 at an advance screening in Davenport, Iowa yesterday interacted with Kakert and Krantz after viewing the film. Their discussion with viewers who reflected a variety of opinions on immigration opened up a dialogue that was fruitful and positive, participants said.

If it can accomplish that, then *Train to Nowhere* offers a journey of inquiry that is well worth climbing aboard. It airs on Iowa Public Television on Tuesday at 7 PM. It will appear next month at California's [Paso Digital Film Festival](#).

*This is a train worth catching.*

**The "Train to Nowhere: Inside an Immigrant Death Investigation" premiere Iowa broadcast on Iowa Public Television (PBS) includes showings at the following times/channels:** Tuesday, October 12 at 7:00 PM, on IPTV; Wednesday, October 13 at 8:00 PM on IPTV World; and Friday, October 15 at 9:00 AM on IPTV World.

BorderExplorer is based in El Paso, Texas, United States of America, and is Anchor for Allvoices