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Sandra Rodriguez Nieto Opens Up About the Mexican Drug War

POSTED BY JIMIN KIM ON FEBRUARY 28, 2014 IN NEWS | 431 VIEWS | LEAVE A RESPONSE

By Jimin Kim

Sandra Rodriguez Nieto is an [award winning journalist](#) who shared stories of her steadfast courage in covering the [drug war](#) in Mexico during the "My Life As..." lecture series Thursday night in the SAC Auditorium. The message was clear at the end of the speech — it's time for America to wake up and acknowledge what's happening in our neighbor to the South.

From 2003-2012, Nieto worked for "El Diario de Juarez," the leading daily newspaper of the troubled border town. She risked her life reporting on the drug cartels and exposing municipal [corruption](#), which as Nieto put it, allows criminals to act with "impunity." Now, as a member of Harvard's Nieman Fellows of distinguished journalists and with her new book, "[La Fabrica Del Crimen](#)" ("The Crime Factory"), she wants to enlighten the public and make them aware of the atrocities in her homeland.

Juarez has been wrought with bloodshed as rival cartels endlessly feud with one another for profit, reputation and territory. Over 10,000 people have died in Juarez alone in the past five years.

"The whole city is a battlefield," Nieto said.

Outgunned and outmanned, the Juarez police work alongside federal cops and the Mexican army.

"In 2008, [Juarez] became this battlefield for drug cartels who wanted to control the distribution routes of trucks. The federal government sent 8,000 troops. It was the first time I've seen soldiers in my city," she said.

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Although it may have been difficult for the audience to grasp the sheer chaos she dealt with, Nieto's bravery was unquestionably clear.

"My worst nightmare is to someday wake up and see the story of my city in the New York Times. No. I'm not gonna let any foreign reporter to tell the story of the city that I know because I know what is underneath the violence," Nieto said.



Sandra Rodriguez Nieto tells her story. Photo by Jimin Kim (Feb. 27, 2014).

While investigating the rampant murders, she realized that 97% of the cases were unsolved. To address this injustice, Nieto compiled a database to analyze the true nature of the homicides. She realized that many of the victims were impoverished kids who turned to a life of crime.

"The [victims] were not these drug lords like the Mexican government was saying. They were poor kids under 25 years and we were losing them by the hundreds," Nieto said.

She has also shown tremendous resolve amid the tragedy of countless journalists killed in Mexico. The cartels autonomously murder muckrakers like her who expose the corrupt underbelly of Juarez.

"On November 13th of 2008, my colleague, Armando Rodriguez who was covering the dispute for [Juarez] from the perspective of the cartels was killed. He was outside of his house with his little daughter in his car. Some guy just approached him and shot him in front of his daughter," Nieto said.

But Nieto said she wasn't going to give up her mission as a reporter after Rodriguez' death.

"I have to admit that I did it not only because I was angry or because I wanted to honor him, but also because it was a great story. The city was living its most important moment," she said.

The drug war seems like an insurmountable problem. Despite her heroism, Nieto is a realist, aware that a single voice isn't the solution. Her mission is humble, the most basic goal of journalism, which is to inform. Yet, with all of her experiences and the position she is now in, a simple messenger is a journalist of the highest order.

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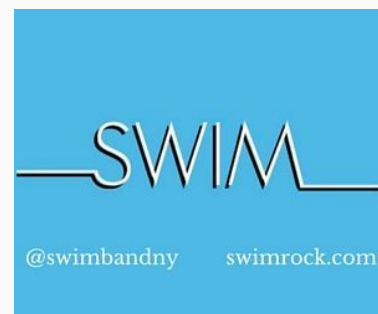
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"I am 40 years old and I haven't seen any advances in my country in my entire life. Just the opposite." Nieto said.

When Dean Miller, interviewer and Director of the Center for News Literacy, asked why she continues reporting, Nieto said she had an idea that "journalism can turn into change."

"But now, I realized that my worry is just to be a witness. Not to avoid them," Nieto said. "Not saving your country from disaster, but telling them."

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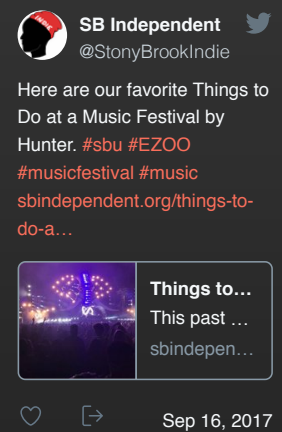
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