

Verónica Gabriela Cárdenas is a documentary photographer and video and photo journalist based in the Rio Grande Valley who frequently contributes with *The New York Times*, *Texas Tribune*, *NPR*, *Reuters*, and others. We at Worldwide Documentaries have the privilege of seeing Vero's work firsthand, as they have been an integral part of the storytelling process that went into our 2020 film, *Oh Mercy*, as well as our upcoming film, *Running To Stand Still*, both which focus on the humanitarian crisis as it continues to unfold on the U.S./Mexico border.



Recently, when filming on the border, Director Bob Bilheimer and Director of Photography Craig Braden sat down with Vero to have a conversation about the things they see on the border, and the reasons why they're able to keep pushing through all of the mental and emotional roadblocks that come with being close to the situation, so long as they can continue to tell the migrants' stories.

When recalling the beginning of Vero's love for documentation, they told a story about how they, their siblings and friends, would pretend they were stars on a radio show, using cassettes to do so. Then, at Christmas when Vero was ten, their mom gifted them their first mini cassette recorder, and Vero pretended to be a journalist—"a tiny journalist," to be specific. A few years later, they were given a typewriter. And then a disposable camera.

In 2009, "I began photographing birds, butterflies, flowers, and things like that. Then my mom told me one day, 'hey, you know, I think it would be a good idea for you to maybe take photos of your aunts, but not posing for the camera, but just having coffee in the morning,'" Vero recalled, remembering that they thought it was a great idea. "We didn't know that was actually documentary photography."

After that, Vero started taking photos in the street, and then went to Oaxaca, where they started photographing the people in the villages. They remembered that the people there didn't speak Spanish but rather spoke their own languages, and Vero had someone translate for them so they could have conversations. "I fell in love with the people," they said. This experience really drove their interest in photography, and they remembered wanting to be a National Geographic photographer.

“I wanted for my photography to have more of a purpose,” Vero said. “I wanted to somehow give back. So from there I started working with migrants.”



From there, Vero started a series called “Traveling Souls,” where they began collecting shoes that belonged to asylum seekers at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, then photographing the shoes in places where the migrants had traveled. They would photograph the shoes at the port of entry, at the river, at the cemetery. Upon learning the migrants' stories, Vero learned firsthand accounts of “La Bestia,” or, “The Beast,” a freight train that takes migrants to the U.S. border and is also often referred to as “The Train of Death.” Vero, in order to accurately tell the stories of the migrants through their photography, rode La Bestia. “I needed to know what it was like to travel as a migrant or as closely as how a migrant would travel,” they said.

“There are trains that are like boxes and there are some where you have to travel on top,” Vero said, recalling the moment that they decided whether to stay inside the train or to climb to the top, a moment that has stuck out in their life ever since. “It was like an internal conflict going on, and I saw women with young kids getting on top, and that was a moment where I’m like, ‘go.’ If they’re doing it, you have absolutely no excuse not to do this.”

“You hear terrible stories about people that travel on La Bestia. Either they get pushed, or they just roll over because they’re falling asleep. They’ll lose a limb, they’ll get raped, or in the worst cases, they die,” Vero said. They felt safer, in this instance, because they were traveling with a migrant caravan. Because the caravans weren’t as widely known then as they are now, the group was quite small, between 250 and 400 people, as Vero recalled. “Because they were smaller, the organizer was able to interview the people that wanted to join us. They even had a group of people that were security that would take care of the whole caravan. Somebody was always awake taking care of everybody.”

Since Vero's work mainly revolves around the lives of migrants and asylum seekers on the border, the emotional aspect of their work is sure to become taxing at times. Vero explained that, as an immigrant themselves, there's an added layer of emotion that comes with their work. "I might have not gone through what the migrants I am taking photos of have gone through. But in a way, it's still there. It's inevitable to feel completely detached from the situation, and for anybody that is covering immigration, it's difficult. But I think that being an immigrant yourself can add another layer of, you know, difficulty," Vero said.

When asked about idols or other storytellers that have inspired their work, Vero had a list at the ready. "I am always looking at people's work," they said, citing Lindsey Addario as one of the earliest influences on Vero's work, as well as Ed Kashi, who now mentors Vero, and Lynn Johnson, who is also a mentor of theirs. "When it comes to immigration work, I became very familiar with John Moore's work, along the border."

"I do think that images have the power to change the course of things," Vero said, when Dir. Bilhemier asked if they think one photo has the power to change the world, which they weren't too sure about. They recalled the time where the photo by John Moore, of the little girl crying while her mother was searched, went viral. Vero had met Moore that day in person, who wanted to take a picture that would really show what was happening as families were being separated, even though most of that was happening behind closed doors and not right on the border. "He just knew which photo he needed to get, Vero recalled, remembering the day this happened in 2018. "It was shortly after that image and the video, with the voices of the kids crying, that they—I'm not going to say stop because that went on still for a little longer—but they weren't separating that many families after that. So I do think that images have the power to change the course of things."

"I'm not sure if art can change the world, but it can definitely change someone's world," they said.

Keep up with Veronica's work through their [website](#) or their [Instagram](#), and please stay tuned to see their work featured in [our upcoming film](#), *Running To Stand Still*.

