

## Crossing the Line

- By Ramón Bannister

In this story, Kena Cubed, Inc. finally reveals the topic of the series for Volume 2, which is “Immigration across various U.S. states.” As an introduction to the topic, this Part 2 will be an in-depth look at the launch of the Minute Man Project (MMP), an event that garnered much national press. It began officially in April of 2004 in the heart of Tombstone, Arizona; unofficially various groups began years before 2004. Let's travel a few years back in time to learn their perspective and the perspectives of everyone involved. Again, the point here is to present different points of view, some conservative, some liberal, and some in between. Keep in mind that all interviews took place in 2004.



**Figure 1: Minute Man Project participants tracking immigrants across the border. Dan Flunker is second from left with binoculars. ©Ramón Bannister**

### Tracking and Enforcing the Law: The Minute Man Project

As I walked amidst dry air, desert cacti and small shrubs, a strong wind descended upon everyone, kicking up stinging dust into our faces and eyes. It was getting worse by the hour. But Dan Flunker wasn't dismayed. It was just a typical day out in the hot Arizona sun as he looked through his binoculars to track movements of potential undocumented immigrants.

“I can see them, they're wearing dark-navy clothes, hiding next to the railroad tracks...They're real[ly]

hard to see. Yeah they're going around the back side. But they're not coming over. You know why? 'Cause we're here! [giggles.]”

Flunker is from Houston, Texas, and he was one of many persons who volunteered for the Minute Man Project stationed in groups right next to the fence marking the border between Arizona and Mexico.

By the project's end, 857 people from all over the country went to "spot" and "track" undocumented immigrants crossing the border into Arizona throughout the month of April in 2004. The Minute Man Project had been criticized by human rights groups who argued that the participants are neither trained nor have the legal authority to patrol the U.S./Mexico border. Many were worried that the project could result in violence since participants were not restricted from carrying hand guns. Fortunately, violence did not occur, but there were legal observers from the ACLU and other human rights activists making sure Minute Man participants did not violate people's constitutional rights.

Human rights groups charged that tracking activities conducted by untrained citizens do not solve the issue of illegal immigration. Project participants agreed, but said they advocate for the

enforcement of the law, and wanted the federal government to support the Border Patrol by providing more funds that can be used to acquire more resources such as extra field agents. The project was designed to send a message to Washington D.C. policy makers, congressmen, and (then) President Bush, who labeled the MMP participants as "vigilantes."

In 2004 I spoke with Kat Rodriguez, the director for the Coalition of Human Rights (its official name is Coalición de Derechos Humanos),<sup>1</sup> a human rights group in Tucson, Arizona, who explained why she was worried about the project. In her answer, she mentions one of the co-organizers of the MMP, Chris Simcox.

"There's nothing wrong with advocating for the enforcement of the law. The problem is, 1) they don't have the right to do law enforcement's job. Nobody has the right to ask the immigration status of anyone else, other than immigration officials. 2) The other thing is [that] we don't know who these people are. Chris Simcox says that there's 1000 of them coming and that there's just too many to do proper background checks. So, he can't even vouch for who they are. He's made statements making it clear that he's not willing to accept any liability. So, the problem is that we don't know who's coming and if in fact they do intend to follow the law. They're coming out, many of them armed. Some of them come from groups with obvious anti-immigrant sentiments. And that's a danger for the people who live in the community, and that's a danger for migrants who are in the desert."

I wanted to get an impression of who these Minute Man participants were, so I interviewed many of them. Most are responsible citizens like you and me. They have written their congressmen and the white house, and all felt ignored by their government representatives. Jim Gilchrist, another co-organizer of the project and the main media contact, was adamant that neither he nor the participants are racists, an accusation commonly heard. He emphasized the fact that his son-in-law is Mexican and that his grandson is half-Mexican.

Interestingly, I recorded an informal conversation between minute man volunteers on April 4, 2004, amidst the 40 MPH gusts of sand paper blowing and eating away at our clothing. They were discussing what to do about the activity on the Mexican side of the border. They began talking about a newspaper article printed on that day with a picture of two participants. The main person, Steve, eventually asked me to stop recording.

Steve – "You know, I just wish they'd raised it up. You know, I love it that they got my scalp. But to cut the flag off [in frame of picture], that's almost sinful. If they just raised the camera and got the flag because that's what it was all about.

[Steve, describing picture in newspaper] "That's Jack. **This guy is the most prejudicial, Mexican-hatin' guy I have ever seen in a long time.** [Emphasis mine.] His vehicle is over here and he starts to talk..." [interrupted by another MMP participant] "He's that guy from Texas isn't he?" [1 st person Steve] "I said, 'What's your name?' And he said, 'Stewart.' I said 'Well Stewart'" [Steve gets out of his truck, turns to me and says,] 'let me get out - Stop recording this!'"

Minute Man participants held rallies at key sites, such as one in front of the Border Patrol station in Douglas, Arizona. There were many counter-protestors at each of these rallies, and I was there

when a patriotic Minute Man from Iowa, Jerry Dear (JD), and an articulate well-known human rights organizer from California, Armando Navarro (AN), had a friendly exchange in front of numerous media personnel.

AN – “...that are very upset with the kind of policies that represent the Minute Man Project, and we're here to make sure you understand that there will be resistance to what we consider to be racist and very bigoted type of orientation that the Minute Man Project has. I'm not accusing you of being a racist. But I'm saying that, there's a saying in Spanish. 'Dime con quien andas y te digo quien eres. Tell me who you're with and I'll tell you who you are.' Unfortunately, some of the volunteers that are coming into the Minute Man Project, with good ideas perhaps and ideals, they're working with Chris Simcox, Glen Spencer, Roger Barnet. All these people have a history of being vigilantes, being armed, creating problems for the immigrants, violating human rights and civil rights. So, this is a word of caution for you, because I don't think you want to associate with people that are essentially paramilitary types that are violating the law, violating human rights. And this is the thing that we're trying to tell you. We are opposed at this. This is a democracy. We perceive these people, especially the militias, to be domestic terrorists.

JD – “And we are now working with our congressmen and our president, and we're going to try to get this resolved.

AN – “I would urge you, like we're saying, that's a position that we are calling for major immigration reform. Because the solution does not lie in using the power of the weapon or vigilanteism in the deserts of Arizona or anywhere along the border. It lies in the Congress of the United States and the Congress of Mexico, and that's where the resolution needs to take place. It needs to be a major restructuring of the economic policies of both countries. And as long as you have poverty in Mexico, and you have an insatiable hunger for cheap labor that this country is dependent upon, you're going to have the influx that we're having right now. So the solution lies with having this administration that perhaps some of you have closer ties than we have, to make sure that it gets off as you know what, and begins to move aggressively to try to resolve the situation by having major immigration reform.”

Armando proceeded to invite Jerry to a rally on the Mexican side of the border; but Jerry respectfully declined the offer, implying that he would “pass on” the information to others. This was an interesting exchange because it was probably the only occasion during the entire Minute Man Project that a human rights activist publicly confronted a Minute Man participant.

The important point we have to remember is that the will to live is much stronger than the disincentive of law enforcement personnel who will apprehend the immigrants. Often, immigrants' only option is to cross miles and miles of desert with very few resources and jump the fence. Then, they must cross still more miles of dry desert before reaching a town like Tombstone, where much of the population is anti-immigrant, confrontational and sometimes downright dangerous (more on this in another part of this series). So what's an immigrant to do when reaching a large metropolitan city like Tucson? Who can they trust? None other than the people at the soup kitchen.

So, I asked Brian Flag, a tall, affable man who runs the biggest soup kitchen in Tucson, Arizona, how many undocumented people pass through there every day. Many undocumented immigrants

go to the kitchen to get hot soup, a sack lunch, and free clothing donated by the Tucson community.

Brian - "We serve about 600 single bag lunches every day. We do about 250 family bags. We think that everybody is a human being and we don't care what kind of stupid paper they have in their pocket. We serve everybody. We try to act like Jesus as an idea. And I don't think Jesus cares about what papers people have in their pocket. I don't know how many people are undocumented, but a real significant amount of people. Maybe even half, maybe more than half. Like in this area where we live here in Tucson, it's like Mexico has crossed the border. And a whole lot of that is undocumented. And people have to come here, because they need jobs."

The Border Patrol officially did not support the MMP, preferring instead that project participants leave law enforcement to trained officials. Andrea Zortman (AZ), spokesperson for the Tucson sector Border Patrol in 2004, explained.

"The Border Patrol does not support nor do we condone any civilian patrol or any vigilante group in the State of Arizona attempting to patrol our borders or anywhere in the United States.

RB – "I've heard that the officers in the field do actually support the Minute Man Project."

AZ – "The information you're receiving is incorrect. We do not support it at all. I speak for the entire Border Patrol when I'm telling you this right now."

But then I interviewed a Border Patrol agent who was to remain anonymous. He admitted that agents appreciated the efforts of citizens reporting the locations of undocumented immigrants. However, he expressed his concern that no one knew the identities of the Minute Man volunteers. He also said, "We need more agents and a better fence."

By the end of the Minute Man Project, organizers claimed that 335 undocumented immigrants had been detained by the Border Patrol because of the direct efforts of the Minute Man volunteers. There were plans to take the Minute Man Project to other states around the country, including patrolling the U.S. border w/ Canada. I don't think that ever happened on the same scale as in Arizona.

Project organizers declared their event a success, of course, and claimed they were responsible for a 98% reduction in illegal immigration. Their goal of attracting attention of lawmakers was successful because state Republican Tom Tancredo invited the organizers to give a speech in Washington D.C. for the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus. And according to Peter Nicholas and Robert Salladay of the L.A. Times, on April 28 th , 2004, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger made comments in support of the project in an interview with the KFI-AM radio station.

Below you can read more interviews I had with people on both sides of the fence. On the left you'll see MMP participants. On the right you'll see more of Brian Flagg's comments, and an interview of an undocumented immigrant who had crossed the border a few hours before I spoke with him. You can also review the resources mentioned below. And don't forget to **make your voice heard** on the Comment Forum.

If you're interested in knowing more about Minute Man Project activities, go to its website.<sup>2</sup> You'll find an in-depth article<sup>3</sup> about the man behind the organization, Jim Gilchrist, along with his non-profit financial statements and other resources for researchers who want more information.

The Coalition for Human Rights in Tucson, Arizona, directed by Kat Rodriguez, also has a website.<sup>4</sup> Click on the "Resources" link, and you'll find academic reports about immigrants who died while crossing the desert (current count is 206 deaths) as well as other reports. You'll also get to know the activities and advocacy the organization conducts.

## For Minute Man Project

Angia Butsen was a Minute Man participant who was patiently waiting to register with the project organizers in Tombstone, Arizona on April 1st.

"My parents were *legal* immigrants. They were from the Phillipines, and it took them *years* to come in. And at this point our laws are so liberal, allowing people to come into our country. They don't have to come in illegally. That is just a travesty in itself. We have *legal* immigrants, they are welcome. And we need immigrants here. But there are ways to do it and we have laws to support it. Again, I am an immigrant, my parents were legal immigrants. There are four races in my nature. I'm Fillipino, I'm Spanish, I'm Chinese, I'm Polynesian."

Her husband Jim answered my question about whether he feels compassion for undocumented immigrants.

"I'm 73 years old. And I just lost a job recently to an illegal contractor. He had people that couldn't even speak English on the job, and I lost the job. Like I said, I'm almost 73, so when you talk about compassion, you're talking to the wrong person."

Later that day, I spotted a man wearing a cowboy hat, boots and a hand gun in its holster. Due to Arizona's open carry law at the time, this was entirely legal. His name was Al

## Against Minute Man Project

This undocumented immigrant had illegally crossed the border that very morning. I interviewed him as he and other undocumented people were looking through the free clothing that the soup kitchen gives away to the poor. The interview was translated from Spanish.

Immigrant - "I came looking for what I can't find in Mexico. Mexico is a country that doesn't have the resources that the United States can offer. In Mexico, it is impossible to live on the salaries. And one has to seek better income to provide for the family. It is worth the sacrifice. And I invite all those who want to come to the United States to come. And the United States should give us more rights, should offer more opportunities to live better. Maybe they don't know what we need. We don't come to play games in the United States. We come suffering. So, they has people, and I'm not referring to their nationality, but they as people should understand that we come seeking what they have. We come to live better."

RB – "Was it difficult to cross the border? Is there a lot of vigilance?"

Immigrant – "Yes, there is. It's difficult to cross. It's that there are a lot of entryways. When once you're here, it's a single path that you will follow. You can come in from wherever you want, but it's the same destination. So, I imagine that those people who want to patrol the border don't understand

Phillips (AP) from Tennessee.

RB – “Why did you come armed?”

AP – “It's legal...I'm not gonna shoot anybody unless my life is threatened or my partner's life is threatened. I know the laws. And I hope I never have to draw it, ever. But if somebody's life is threatened you gotta protect it. I couldn't live with myself if I had the means to stop somebody from getting seriously hurt or killed and I didn't do it. We've also got Alcaida coming over. And there's drugs comin' over all the time. I don't mind immigration, if they don't break the law. But there's millions of them breaking the law. If I was to break a little law I'd be thrown in jail. And this is my country. If they want to come to this country, go through the process. I have nothing against people coming to this country if they do it legally. And I can understand some of them wantin' to get over here that bad. But there are laws. If we went to Mexico that way...No this is just for protection. There are rattlesnakes out there too you know...and coyotes.

“Do you know what we're doing, exactly? We're gonna take out our lounge chairs, sit down, and we're gonna enjoy the scenery, and if somebody happens to come over we're gonna call the border patrol. All we are, are extra pairs of eyes for the border patrol. That's all we are. And you keep looking at that [his gun], that has nothing to do with it. I could have carried it concealed. I have a concealed weapon [license], but it's too hot to conceal it. I don't need it, but...you never know. I carry it when I'm not on the border. It's legal. It's my right. But we're not looking for confrontation. We're just lookin' to, two more pairs of eyes, call the Border Patrol and they take care of it. No confrontation at all.”

I also met Lupe Morfín Moreno (LM), a woman from California whose father was a coyote, the slang word for smuggler of undocumented immigrants.

how much one is suffering. Because if they were in our shoes, if they know how much one suffers to survive in Mexico, then they would understand. And I tell those people to have more awareness, that we're not here to rob anyone or to take away anything from anyone. Can you imagine if there weren't undocumented immigrants here in the United States, where would the surplus be? Who would build the houses in which United States citizens live? Without Mexicans, I imagine that the United States would not function. This is a point of view that many have, many people know it, and the United States knows it, so I don't know why people make a fuss and say that we shouldn't come here. If someone comes here he comes here to work, to have a better life. Unfortunately, we were born in a country that doesn't have the economy that the United States has. We didn't choose where to live. But we did choose where to work, to live a better life.”

Here's what Brian Flag said about the MMP.

Brian – “Well, I think there's a lack of compassion. I think they're basically racists too. Because if they had brown skin and were from the other side of the border, chances are they'd be poor, but they'd have a family. And you got to feed your family! And in Mexico the wages are so bad. Who can feed their family in Mexico? So people come across the line. I think the Minute Men should be fighting the U.S. government, to make a fair and just economy in this country and on the other side of the border too. I mean the reason the economy is in a shambles in Mexico is because they're part of the global economy, which is to a huge extent run by this country, with its 50,000 nuclear warheads, big huge army and everything else. I think, the Minute Men, if they really cared about justice, would go fight this country, and make this country be more just and equitable.”

LM – “My father's family actually became one of the biggest smuggling rings from probably the early sixties into the early eighties. The only reason that the top ones, including my dad, stopped is because they did get caught and go to prison. I'm here because our president and Congress and our senate have totally let us down as far as securing our borders. The situation has totally gotten out of hand. I feel like I have an obligation to the American people and this country to help with the situation my family put this country in. I think we all need to do something.”

RB – “What is the solution to the problem of illegal immigration?”

LM – “We have to go after the employers. The employers *must* be fined. We have to stop giving entitlements to illegal aliens. I could see if we're giving entitlements to legal residents or citizens. But to give illegal aliens benefits when they're breaking our laws I find ludicrous and ridiculous. And we also must start enforcing our laws.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.minutemanproject.com/newsmanager/templates/mmp.asp?articleid=723&zoneid=24>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.minutemanproject.com/immigration-topics/Reconsidered.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.derechoshumanosaz.net/>