

Episode 14: Witness Radio

How Walls, Deterrence & Title 42 Only Serve to Embolden Organized Crime Dora Rodriguez's tell-all tale of Surviving the Sonoran Desert

Sarah: On Monday, May 23, 2022, as the world awaited the long-fought for lifting of Title 42, the United Nations dropped the bomb that there are now more than 100 Million people forcibly displaced worldwide. That means 1 in every 100 people on the planet right now has been driven from their birthplace by war, conflict, crippling poverty, weather-related disasters – 80% of these people are in the Global South.

In the Americas, Title 42, an obscure public health provision under the US Centers for Disease Control, was invoked by the Trump administration in March 2020 in the guise of controlling COVID-19. But what it really did was put an immediate end to the right to seek asylum from persecution at US southern ports of entry. Title 42 cut off one route to lawful migration, trapping brown, Black, and poor people on the other side of the US line.

The abuse of Title 42 has persisted under Biden.

To date, Title 42 is to blame for expelling roughly 2 million people back to the harms they fled without any due process under the law. It has turned untold numbers of the world's most vulnerable people into sitting ducks for cartel violence and organized crime. Under constant threat in Mexican border towns, waiting their turn to request protection for now years on end, many legitimate asylum seekers have been pushed to try their luck in the unpredictable Rio Grande, or by scaling the now 30-ft border wall, or by hiking through the Sonoran desert – one of the hottest places on earth.

Many won't make it.

While I was in the Arizona borderlands in the fall of 2021, conducting research for my forthcoming book, *The First Solution*, I spoke to a person who did survive the desert trek – but only just. Her name is Dora Rodriguez, and her tragic tale, which sparked a movement in the 1980s, stands as a profound example of the failure of the now decades-long US borderlands strategy of deterring migration by taking measures most cruel.

The political abuse of Title 42 is just the latest manifestation of that strategy, which has cost the lives of so many already. Sadly, it was not rescinded on May 23rd as it should have been. Now others will be forced to follow in Dora's footsteps.

Here is her story...

Radio Wave

Dora: I was born in El Salvador. Really, my childhood was very, very poor. But, but for the most part, I was a happy child. And it never occurred to me that I was going to leave my country.

Sarah: Dora grew up in what was known as a Christian Base community, built by the community members themselves with the financial and spiritual support of the Maryknoll Sisters, a group of Roman Catholic religious women who, from their founding in 1912, have devoted their lives in service to the needs of the poor, the ailing, and the marginalized throughout the world.

Dora: For us, they were our angels.

Madre Magdalena, as we call, she made a big impact in our lives, a beautiful person. So we were so in love with her and her good heart.

Sarah: In addition to helping build sturdy homes for the community, the sisters organized youth groups...

Dora: Her and I and other young kids organized a church group. The purpose of our group was just to get together, learn about God and she would teach us about the Bible and also do community service. So that went on for almost four years.

Sarah: But that all came to a crashing halt on the night Dora graduated from high school.

Dora: The night of my graduation, that's when the war began in El Salvador.

That night there was a party celebrating. It was bombing everywhere. We heard gunshots. The music stopped. We were under the tables. The light went off. So from that night on, things never got better. The military will have their presence everywhere, in every community. They will start getting kids out of their houses for no reason.

The thing that really pushed me to leave my country was that from this church group, we had a leader. His name was Rene. And I remember it like it was yesterday, we were just leaving the meeting with Madre Magdalena. It was almost like 9:00 and we left Rene at his house, we got home, and then I heard gunshots. And then I heard screaming and yelling. And then, like an hour later, everything was quiet. We walked towards the direction where the gunshots were. And we found out that they had killed Rene. That night was really terrified because I knew that there were prosecuting people my age, especially if you were organized by an American nun.

Sarah: Following the 1979 Sandinista party victory in Nicaragua, El Salvador became ground zero for containing the so-called communist threat in the western hemisphere. The US-backed

military regimes in the region labeled anyone who participated in labor unions, student protests, or in Christian base communities, such as Dora's, as insurgents and a threat to the status quo. Entire communities became victims of state-sponsored violence, as did the liberation theologians of the Catholic Church who, straying from the Church's historical role in the region – to help the rich maintain their power – now saw the poverty, injustice, and oppression of the majority at the hands of an elite minority as a social injustice and a destabilizing force that needed rectifying. So anyone associated with the liberation Church, like Dora, became a target.

Dora: My mom, of course, started getting very worried, and my aunt and my uncle in California started putting that in my head that I should leave the country, that it was dangerous for me. I was always very loud, you know, and talking about injustice and what was not right. And so they really got very scared and they offered me money.

Sarah: Dora's first trip to the US border was with five friends, all age-mates, all fleeing the violence that had rocked their quiet community. Within a week, they were in Tijuana, Mexico, where they hired a smuggler to get them into the US at San Ysidro.

Dora: I jumped the fence and as soon as we jumped, the lights came on and we heard voices and it was Border Patrol. So we were arrested and I was sent back to El Salvador within the same week. Back in the day, if you were from Central America, they would take us to a processing center. And, you know, we never saw a judge, they just take your name... it's almost like what's going on now.

Sarah: So no due process.

Dora: Not at that time, no. I didn't even know what asylum was. I didn't know nothing about that. So in a week I was back in my country. I remember getting in a plane with a lot of deportees and my shoes full of mud and my pants all wet and terrified and fearful because I thought, now the government knows I left; I'm going back, and what are they going to do with us? But thankfully, nothing happened. I got back to my house, to my mother. And I hide. For months. I didn't want nobody to know that I was back. And then when Monsignor Romero got killed in March, it was another horrible, scary moment for us.

Sarah: On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero, an outspoken champion of the poor and downtrodden, was shot through the heart while celebrating Mass. A 1993 United Nations investigation concluded that the assassination was orchestrated by a right-wing politician with links to El Salvador's military.

In December of that same year, three Maryknoll Sisters and lay missionary – all sisters of Dora's Madre Magdalena – fell victim to the escalating violence toward Church members. They were kidnapped upon leaving the airport in San Salvador, they were raped and shot in the head at close range, execution style. Their bodies, recovered two days later, had been hidden in shallow graves.

Dora's second attempt to flee to the US preceded that incident. This time, she tried getting into the US with the help of a smuggler.

Dora: Because things were not getting better, we said, *okay, well, let's try now but with the guide*. My family in Los Angeles send me \$2500. And that's how I paid this Salvadorean guy. They had an announcement on television, in the newspaper, everywhere, we will take you to Los Angeles, easy trip. We will take you by airplane from the border. You don't have to ever suffer.

Sarah: They advertised on TV?

Dora: Oh yes. It was everywhere: on the television, in the newspaper. And they were saying, you know, we will take care of you. All these false promises.

Sarah: Her family paid the smuggler half the money up front. The other half would be paid upon successful completion of the voyage. That was the deal. They embarked in June. The trip through Mexico took 10 days. But first they had to get across the Mexican border with Guatemala.

Dora: When we got to Chiapas, if you don't have legal papers to cross to Mexico, you have to cross the river in large tubes. And I don't know how to swim, but I tied myself to one of them and I crossed. So we crossed to this rundown nasty hotel. They kept us there for a couple nights and then they rented a big bus, brought us to the border.

We walked fields and fields of cotton, and they're very dangerous because there are pesticides in there. They keep giving the little ones medicine to go to sleep so they wouldn't cry. And it was 45 of us from El Salvador in our group.

Sarah: They arrived at the border with Yuma, Arizona. No sooner had the group of 45 jumped another waterway, I assume it was the Colorado river, when lights flashed on again. Helicopters appeared out of nowhere, descending from the sky, they scattered the group in all directions. This was followed by sirens and a plethora of Border Patrol vehicles.

Dora: That was so crazy, everybody running all over the place not knowing where to run. And I remember lights here, lights here, cars and trucks and helicopters.

Sarah: Even in 1980, the border was militarized and equipped with surveillance devices in the easier-to-cross, more residential areas. This was to make border crossers more visible and enable border patrol apprehensions. Dora's second attempt to get to safety met with the same end.

Dora: We were caught right away.

Sarah: Same end, same story. Dora and the others were returned to El Salvador without delay. But the smugglers' deal was payment in full on arrival to the interior of the US. In other words,

they would bring Dora and the others back to the US again if caught, detained, and deported, as many times as it took to get them across the line, and at no extra cost.

Dora: The fear that, oh my gosh, they already killed Monsignor Romero and my affiliation with the Maryknoll Sisters also was very dangerous.

Sarah: So Dora fled war and violence and threats to her young life in her country of origin for a third time in June 1980 – at the height of summer.

Dora: By the second trip with the smugglers, we were all friends, we all knew each other. We have developed relationships. We were all happy when we got to see each other back in the smugglers' office.

It was the same routine, we got on the bus, we got to the border, we swim the river. We used the same nasty, rundown motel, women and men altogether because there was no separation of rooms, and all they wanted to do was save money.

When we were in the bus in Mexico sometimes, they would take us out of the bus, the smugglers, and make us walk for like six hours in the heat, because it was already the summer and it was horribly hot. And then, they would make us walk in these fields to avoid the Federales. So they told us, keep walking. Somebody is going to guide you through the areas and then the bus will meet you on the other side. So, they did that a couple times, whenever they thought it was a checkpoint in Mexico.

Within a week of the journey in Mexico, we were at the border of Sonoita.

It's where is the Organ Pipe Monument, this beautiful park. Course, we didn't know anything of that. I didn't know anything about where we were going. The story was told to us was that we were going to get to a place, jump the barrier and a helicopter was going to be waiting for us to take us to California.

The night of June 28th of 1980, we slept under a tree in the town of Sonoita and it was a very lonely area. And then we noticed that the Salvadorean smugglers were separating us and they separated the women with the children that night. And they send them through Yuma. Because now I think they knew exactly what they were doing, they knew where they were gonna cross us, you know, in the danger and the heat. But they didn't tell us anything. And they made us sleep in a truck with the heat for two nights. They were waiting for the right time for us to cross. And it was very hot and unbearable and we didn't even have enough food and appropriate shoes, clothing. They never told us that we needed a lot of water to cross the desert. So a lot of women had high heels when we started crossing. We all had our luggage of clothing, carrying it with us.

And they told us that when you cross within half an hour, there's going to be the road and somebody is going to be waiting for you guys in an airplane. So that was an evil, evil, evil lie.

They said, okay, we're ready to go. It was 26 of us. It was a lot of young people like me in their teens, 19, 17, pregnant women, couples. We jumped the barbed wire. It was not a wall at that time. The smugglers, they hired two Mexican smugglers: a young kid, like, in the twenties and his father, his father was in the sixties.

But within the first hour, the kid got lost. He didn't know where he was walking with us because it was pitch dark. But 117 degrees. And the breeze was just like a fire in your face. And then we start walking and you can start hearing everybody screaming because the cactus were getting in our feet and our shoes.

There is one cactus in this desert that is called Cholla, and it's a really mean cactus, because he jumps on you and it gets your skin. And when you're trying to pull it off, it pulls up your skin.

We knew we're in trouble. We didn't have any much water because each of us had only one gallon of water, but we carrying all these luggages. We didn't know where we were going, we were not prepared for the heat. And everybody was thirsty already.

The first night, past midnight, we had the first death of a woman who was very heavy and she had a heart attack because of the heat. Within an hour she was gone.

So we start panicking and all of us under a tree with all the luggage, crying. And this part already was not even a full night of journey yet. And this guy, the young guy, when he saw that, he got very scared and he left.

Sarah: He abandoned you?

Dora: He left his father with us. So his father did the whole journey with us. He was arrested and processed and did 15 years of prison for smuggling, and then for creating this horrible death in the desert. But the son was never found that I know.

Sarah: Which raises an interesting question, at least in my mind. The smuggler was arrested and did time for murder. But if – like European nations welcoming Ukrainians fleeing war, right now – the US had welcomed Salvadoreans fleeing war, as well as Guatemalan indigenous people fleeing genocide, then Dora would not have been pushed to hire a smuggler. Indeed, there would be no market niche opened to encourage people smuggling. She would not have had to walk through the Sonoran desert – one of the hottest places on Earth – in the middle of a heat wave in the middle of the summer. But the US did not welcome refugees. So the business of trafficking people across the border began to boom. And people died. The smuggler was vilified and took the fall for what could be considered a crime caused by the US government and its anti-immigrant policies.

Dora: We keep walking, and we left the body behind just, we bury her with her own stuff. Say a prayer around her.

Sarah: Do you remember her name?

Dora: Berta.

We slept, I believe, for a while, you know, after we got away from her, because we didn't want to be close to a dead body.

We slept for a couple hours, gained a little bit of my strength and we keep walking before the sun came up. I'm sure, by 9:00, or so, and we could not walk anymore because the heat – one of the hottest summer in Arizona according to history. It was the heat wave that was happening. The experts tell us the ground was 120 degrees, where we were laying down, trying to find some relief under the Palo Verde tree. If you see those Palo Verde trees, they're beautiful, but they have no shade.

So it went on and on for the second day, and we started losing more people. One woman was in rollers, she had rollers in her hair because she thought as soon as she cross, she was going to take it out, she was going to meet her husband. And she, I mean, she never met him; she died in the desert.

And then by the third day, we were in a horrible, horrible shape. More people have already died. We do not have any more water. We start drinking our own... urine, and shaving lotions, anything that we could get hold of that was liquid.

Some people was already having a lot of delusions, thinking that it was lakes, that there were water around us and pouring sand in their mouth.

And we knew. We knew that they lied to us.

So the Salvadorean smugglers, one of them went to Yuma. The other two of them, Carlos and Elias, they were with us and they went through a whole journey with us because they didn't know where to go, they couldn't get out either.

The men left us. They said, well, we gotta go find some help. Carlos stayed behind. And he said, I want to be here for the women. I want to take care of them. But we all women were very uncomfortable with him. But we didn't have any choice.

And with my group, it was three sisters. It was a 12, a 14, and 16. And you know, every time I tell my story, this is the part that I still struggle to say, because they were robbed, you know, so young. And their mother had saved so much money in Los Angeles for five years to bring her daughters to her.

But Carlos, I truly believe that he did rape the sisters and he killed them.

I was under a tree, I crawled myself into a Palo Verde tree. Because I remember hearing this screaming and me not able to get up, not able to open my eyes and just listening and listening. And he was saying that he will kill us all.

Sarah: Carlos?

Dora: Yeah. I remember, I heard all that was going on. And I could hear him saying, oh, I'm not going to touch Dora, she's a good person. And she's dead anyway. I'm not going to go over there. But that's what I think saved me.

By the end of the third day, everything was so horrible. It's just like a horrible nightmare.

You think that you are walking in the right direction and you're just going in circles. If you're lost, you're lost because you cannot find direction.

The fourth day, a couple, a guy and a girl, Antolina and Pepe, they got out to the highway, because all this was happening a mile away from the highway. And they got caught. But they did not tell immigrations that there were more people inside, because they were scared.

The Border Patrol told her, I don't believe that you're by yourself, because Salvadorean people never travel alone, because you guys are from far, far away and you are usually in a big group. And they were right. So finally at the end of the day she told them that it was more people in the desert. So they knew that there were going to be a lot of death.

By the fifth day, I remember passing out, waking up, passing out, waking up, and I think I was passing to my death, because I remember seeing the skies so blue, blue, blue, blue. I had never, ever seen the sky so beautiful blue, dark blue like the ocean, and stars, it was just so beautiful. And it was noon when we were rescued. But that was my dream.

A couple hours before, I do remember grabbing the Bible and screaming one of the verses that my mom taught me. I think it's verse 92, where it says "Nothing will strike you, on your left and your right". It was a verse that I read for protection.

The next thing I knew I woke up to a Border Patrol screaming in my face, wake up, wake up, don't go, don't go. And I woke up and I keep asking for water. And he said, no, no, no water. Just, you know, a little bit in your lips.

I mean, I was from head to toe with thorns everywhere. My mouth, of course, blistered, and my throat and my face. I had to cut my hair very, very short because it was, it was burned from the

sun. You know, when it is when you are in the split ends but it is like to the top of your hair and I had to trim my hair very, very short after that.

Thirteen of us survived and 13 dead. And within that dead, it was a woman that was seven months pregnant. It was pretty odd number, because 13 survived and 13 died.

I remember seeing horses, helicopters and people all over the place. It was scattered all over and our clothing everywhere at this wash, it's called the Alamo wash.

Yeah, we took the helicopter but it was the Border Patrol to the town of Ajo. And we spent seven days getting better for the hydration and everything.

And then after we got better, they took us to the jail in Tucson. Because the government was asking for \$2500 bond for each of us, which we didn't have. But the community, and that's why Tucson is so special to me, because the community embrace us.

Our tragedy was in the news everywhere in the world, every newspaper that you can imagine. Everybody knew about this group of Salvadoreans because they had never seen something like that before.

But that was the beginning. And then after that it was hundreds of thousands of people fleeing our country due to the war.

Sarah: By now, you've likely seen the images of refugees running from the war in Ukraine, being met in train stations and at the borders of neighboring countries by folks like you and me, holding signs, saying "room available for family of three" or "for a single woman" or "ride available to Berlin." The community of Tucson reacted much like that...

Dora: We were released from the jail within 24 hours because all the churches got together with John Fife. He started a movement due to our group, the Sanctuary Movement, they paid for our bonds.

And then we didn't have a place to go. So the Spanish radio, called Radio Fiesta, started asking for families that will want to sponsor these Salvadoreans. And it was just amazing. That jail, the parking lot was overwhelming with people, of course with cameras and TV channels and all that. But with people who wanted to open the door for us.

I was taken by a Mexican family with four kids and the husband and the wife, and I lived with them for a year. Because we had to stay, we were witnesses, you know, for this horrible thing that had happened. So we were not allowed to leave Tucson.

Sarah: I first learned about Dora Rodriguez through the migrant shelter she began in Sasabe, Mexico with the network of humanitarians in Tucson, Arizona; then through the work of her support program for detained refugees, Salvavision. It was only later that I understood her to be one of the survivors of the horrible tragedy that sparked the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s.

On hearing *that* story, I realized I was sitting in the company of a woman of incredible strength, inner power, empathy, and resilience – all characteristics I believe any nation would want to embrace. To think that they were nearly squandered, nearly destroyed and buried with her in the desert. I couldn't help but think about all the human potential that has been wasted because of US border management strategies. I asked her: After the trauma of having your life threatened as a teen, of living under the violence of war and being forced to flee your family and home, of being abandoned and left to suffer a most excruciatingly death in the desert, of hearing your friends being raped and murdered and not being able to stop it, after bouncing back from death's door, How do you heal? How do you go on?

This is what she had to say...

Dora: In the beginning, I did have nightmares. I went through a lot. But I always been a woman of faith and the way I believe that I have worked that trauma was to start getting involved.

So I started getting involved with the Sanctuary Movement in, like, 1984. By then I was already married. My husband had bought a little house. I was already sponsoring families from Guatemala. Because my faith was telling me: You were given a second chance. You got to do something with that.

I had, God, about 117 kids they went through my house...

Sarah: You're kidding me.

Dora: ...back and forth, back and forth, for respite. Some will stay for a year, some of them stay for two months or a month. It was called therapeutic foster care.

And, you know, I was never this open to my story to anybody for years. And I think that was a place in my heart, in my life, that I was guarding and I did not want to touch. It still hurts, it's still there, you know, and I don't think it's never going to go away until the day I pass, because it's something that marks you for life. And it's more so the loss of people that I became so friendly in sisterhood. And sometimes it's the guilt. I have a lot of guilt and say, Why do you choose me when there were more deserving people than me who die in that tragedy?

But in 2016, when things got really bad, and we were called rapists, killers, all those horrible names. I thought, this is my time. I got to speak out. This is not okay. Because here I am, a survivor, a migrant, I am not a rapist. I am not a criminal. I contributed to this society and I am a good human being.

So I created Salvavision with my daughter, my baby. So she's my right hand.

From 2016 to present, we have not stopped. So what Salvavision does, first of all I start providing support to detainees, by going to the detention centers. And I was doing intakes, going every Monday to interview them and, you know, hoping that they get legal representation.

We have story after story after story. That's what I keep saying. All I want is people to spread the word. That what's going on in our borders is inhumane, is unacceptable. It's criminal.

By passing these horrible, inhumane policies, you know, in our government, they are sending our people into the hands of these criminals. All they want is their money.

So Salvavision really has started growing, you know, with this story. It to me is like, okay, keep saying your story because it will bring some changes.

I don't know, really, to be honest, if it will be a change. Because every president brings a different lie. Every administration will tell you all these promises and they're broken right away. In 41 years of history we're back almost to worse than before.

But I don't want to give up hope. The hope I will never give up is what we do to bring somebody out of that desert alive, to create a better path for them.

Sarah: So what do you do with a tragedy? This is what you do with a tragedy.

Dora: I just go back to how Casa Esperanza came along.

Sarah: Sure please!

Dora: So September 17 of 2020, I went to the remote town of Sasabe, Sonora, which is next to Sasabe, Arizona, which has no more than 1500 residents. Small, small town, there is no services.

Sarah: Uh-huh.

Dora: There is no buses, there is no medical services, there is no shelters, there is nothing but an empty plaza and trees and the organized crime. The cartel that is there waiting for the prey.

So I went to deliver donations. I was invited to go. So the director of an organization from Mexico, that is called Grupo Beta, and their mission is to protect migrants' rights. So he called me to his office when he saw us delivering donations in the street, and he said, I got to tell you what's going on in this little town. We are having 150 migrants expelled from the United States every single day, every single day.

Sarah: Into this town with no services.

Dora: Nothing. Nothing but the cartel. I said, tell me, how can we help you? How can we support you? And he said, All I want is for you guys to bring maybe a hot sandwich, a bottle of water and some snacks for these people. They have been arrested in that area, in the border. And they probably have spent days or weeks in the desert without eating. So right there – all he had to say to me...

Oh My God, one email did it! That's how amazing Tucson is and all these organizations. The response was incredible.

We start delivering twice a week, 700 bottles of water, 700 sandwiches, 700 of everything, and collecting shoes and clothing. And it was September, so the weather was fair, but then winter came and the massive deportations were non-stop. And I said one day, about two months into that, we are just putting a little band-aid in this huge wound. The world need to know what this government is doing. What they're doing is criminal. This is not okay. I was outraged.

So we called our friends from The Intercept. And then the local channels. We call our friend from NPR.

By the beginning of December, late November, we have the New York Times. She rode with us the whole day. So our pictures are in the face of the NYT, and the deportations slowed down, after the New York Times. From 150 a day to like 20 a day.

That's what I wanted to accomplish!

Sarah: Oh, that's brilliant!

If the government cannot take care of their people, that's where we come in. With our souls, with everything we have.

One day in January 2021, it was so, so cold. Migrants coming out from the desert with nothing, frozen, crying of cold. So I started thinking, how could I open a resource center in there? I organized a meeting with the mayor of the little town, and I said, you know, this is your home, but I can see the crisis that is happening in here. We will be providing the donations, everything. I just need your green light. I just need you to help me with this. And she said, "Let's do it Dora."

By the next meeting, she had ten women from the town. And they say, we want to help. So I tell you, it's been nothing but beautiful. And all these sister organizations came along: like Humane Borders, No More Death, Samaritans from Tucson, Samaritans from Green Valley, private donors. And they said, Dora, we're along with you.

So May 1st we open our beautiful resource center. We provide a hot meal. We have a bathroom where people can shower. We have now a medical team. They provide services to the citizens in the town, and also migrants. We have a children's program that is running with the local children, and now we're able to pay three local women \$300 a month to be present, because we can't be there every single day.

We've tried to maintain our donations in shoes and clothing so our migrants have their dignity back. Just being able to say, I am a human. I am not just somebody you process with 5 minutes and send them back and not even ask you, "are you okay?" We have people that had been lost in the desert for two weeks with no food, no water. Blisters in their feet and their mouths. And for the grace of God, they made it.

Sarah: What do you do with a tragedy? This is what you do with the tragedy. Too bad it took a tragedy. Dora Rodriguez, borderlands hero.

Dora: It's been a beautiful ride.