

The Dallas Morning News

dallasnews.com

SUNDAY PROFILE

41

Sunday, September 12, 2010

22A

# The conscience of S. Texas' colonias

## Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

By STEFANIE GILBERTSON  
Special Contributor

**CORPUS CHRISTI** — The meeting on Saturday night in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas — the "colonias" — where the poorest and most underserved people in the state live, was not a formal meeting. It was a meeting of friends and neighbors in a modest, one-story house with a few people who had gathered for the first time in the neighborhood. They were there to talk about the need for basic services in the area.

It was a meeting of friends and neighbors in a modest, one-story house with a few people who had gathered for the first time in the neighborhood. They were there to talk about the need for basic services in the area.

With Corpus Christi Bay still in the headlines, the need for basic services in the area is a pressing issue. The area is a no man's land, a place where the poorest and most underserved people in the state live.

"We need to bring basic services to the area," said one of the people at the meeting.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.

The meeting was held in the living room of a small, one-story house in a neighborhood of South Texas.



Photo by G. Coleman for the Dallas Morning News

### About the writer

Stefanie Gilbertson is a freelance writer and author of the book "The Conscience of S. Texas' Colonias." She has written for various publications and is currently working on a new book.

### Colonias territory

On the outskirts of the town, Lopez found a lot of people who were not getting the same services as those in the town. They were in a no man's land, a place where the poorest and most underserved people in the state live.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

Stefanie Gilbertson is a freelance writer and author of the book "The Conscience of S. Texas' Colonias." She has written for various publications and is currently working on a new book.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

### Rebel works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez is a rebel who works to bring basic services to the area. He is a man who has seen the need for basic services in the area and is working to bring them to the people who need them.

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land

Lopez, a Rebel, works to bring basic services to no man's land



Comments 3 | Recommend 6

# Rebel defends the forgotten people of Texas' colonias

12:05 PM CDT on Sunday, September 12, 2010

By STEPHANIE ELIZONDO GRIEST / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

CORPUS CHRISTI – Depending on whom you ask, Lionel Lopez is either Jiminy Cricket – the "conscience of South Texas" – or else the region's most unrelenting pest. A sienna-skinned man with broad-rimmed glasses, he wears his hair slicked back and razors his moustache straight. Sixty-six years of sun lines burrow deep into his face. When I climb into his Ford F-150 one morning, he flicks off the norteño music jangling on the radio before grinning. "Are you ready to go to Mexico, mija?"

We won't be traveling within 145 miles of the border today, but Lionel Lopez is speaking metaphorically. He means that, in less than 20 minutes, we'll be witnessing poverty so desperate, it will seem we had departed the United States long ago.

With Corpus Christi Bay glittering behind our backs, we ride Cesar Chávez Memorial Highway out of town. Along the way, we pass half a dozen oil and gas refineries, a futuristic forest of metal trees belching blue-gray smoke into an otherwise cloudless sky. The landscape grows increasingly rural, which – in this swath of Texas – means cotton fields, oil wells, and very little else. A retired firefighter, Lopez knows the region intimately.

"We used to ride around in the ambulances a lot, and I saw the conditions people were living in out here. I saw their shacks. I saw their dirt roads. I saw their suffering."

Upon investigation, he learned they were residents of colonias, the unincorporated communities that began cropping up in the borderlands in the 1950s, when developers foisted off cheap plots of land with no running water, sewage systems, electricity hookups, fire hydrants or paved roads to low-income families. Such communities have not only proliferated in the 60 years since, they've migrated north – to areas surrounding Corpus Christi, Austin and Houston. Some even consider Sandbranch, the historically African-American neighborhood 14 miles southeast of downtown Dallas, to be a colonia, as it lacks so many basic services. The secretary of state's office has counted nearly 2,300



Photos by COURTNEY PERRY/DMN  
**Esteban Aguilar** (right) tells community activist **Lionel Lopez** (left) about how his house shakes when trains pass on the nearby railroad in Banquete, a colonia outside Corpus Christi. Aguilar's daughter, **Mary Jane Aguilar** (center) lives with her father and helps take care of him. Lopez periodically checks in with them, inquiring about water quality and any pressing needs they have.

colonias housing more than 400,000 Texans.

pressing needs they have.

About 30 years ago, Lopez asked his wife, Juanita, if he could take a bag of groceries to some needy residents he met on an ambulance run. Although they were squeezing nickels to support their own five children, she agreed. That bag evolved into turkeys at Thanksgiving. Toys at Christmas. Ice during heat waves. Soon, the two were organizing clothing drives for the colonias. Teaching classes on life skills.

Gradually, they realized how unhealthy residents were, compared to their neighbors back in Corpus. A 2006 study of three Nueces County colonias by Texas A&M-Corpus Christi showed that 27 percent of residents suffered from gastrointestinal illnesses such as worms or hepatitis; 28 percent endured respiratory problems including bronchitis or tuberculosis; and 28 percent had skin infections like ringworm and scabies.

So the Lopezes got political. They started calling the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), demanding that area creeks and water wells be tested for toxins. They petitioned the Texas Water Development Board and South Texas Water Authority for the installation of fire hydrants (or at least cisterns). They lobbied lawmakers for sanitary sewage systems. They even founded a nonprofit called the South Texas Colonia Initiative to make their requests more official.

The Lopezes repeatedly battle the same foe: the odometer. Most federal and state programs earmarked for colonias primarily finance projects for communities closer to the border.

"We are in no man's land out here," Lopez says, shaking his head. "Our people are the forgotten ones."

Colonia territory

On the outskirts of Robs-town, Lopez hangs left at an Exxon gas station and rumbles down a county road. The land here is so level, you could shoot marbles across it, but in time, some flat-topped hills crest the horizon.

"The little kids call this their mountain," he says as we draw near.

In fact, it's a hazardous-waste facility with an Orwellian name: U.S. Ecology Texas. It is owned by U.S. Ecology Inc., the same company that – under a different name – shuttered a chemical waste plant in Winona, Texas, in 1997, after hundreds of area residents filed and settled a personal-injury lawsuit against it.

Lopez has tried to rally opposition here, as well, but too many people applaud the jobs the facility brings to the cash-starved region.

We are entering colonia territory. Single- and double-wides abound, as do campers and trailers – many on the verge of collapse. Linens undulate in the wind while vehicle carcasses rust in the sun.

"That one there used to belong to an old man named Mr. Vera," Lopez says, pointing to an abandoned camper enclosed by a fence. "He used a bucket for a toilet and cooked his meals outside. One day, I brought him some ice and found him sitting in his underwear. I said, 'Mr. Vera, why are you naked?' and he said, 'Today is wash day.' "

Several miles from the waste dump is a new, privately owned prison. When Lopez learned that it had applied for a TCEQ permit to release up to 150,000 gallons of treated wastewater a day into nearby

Petronila Creek, he organized an outcry. The prison cleaned the waterway in response, hauling out decades of debris, but the creek still floods in heavy rain.

"A month or so ago, this was all doo-doo water from septic tanks," Lopez says, snapping photos. "Kids swim here in the summer and they get sores all over their bodies. Livestock drink it and get sick."

At Lopez's urging, geologist Rick Hay of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi recently tested Petronila Creek for bacterial contamination commonly associated with fecal matter. Hay said he discovered its levels to be between seven and 11 times the state regulatory limit. TCEQ, meanwhile, found E. coli in certain segments of the creek, and plans to continue testing on a quarterly basis to determine its source and whether it is a health risk.

Back in the truck, I search for something explaining Lopez's devotion to this mission: a political button, say, or a rosary. A bundle of sage. Anything. But the sole adornment is a lanyard dangling from the rearview mirror that reads "SOUTH TEXAS COLONIA INITIATIVE" beneath Lopez's grinning photo.

"I go to church," he concedes, "but that's not it. When you see something like this, you just have to do something about it. If we don't help each other out, who will?"

Lopez was born the third of six children on a ranch 20 miles outside Corpus. His moral compass aligned early. "All of us Mexicans went to school at the ranch while the Anglos went to another school. We didn't question it until we got older, when we realized we had to go to the bathroom outside and they didn't."

According to Juanita, whom he married right after high school, his activism took root at his first job at a door company. "All the Mexican workers there were treated badly, and they went to Lionel for help," she said. "He has always been pro-union; he has always been like a rebel."

Lopez joined the Corpus Christi Fire Department in the early 1970s and worked there for 23 years, until the night a meatpacking plant caught fire. The chief needed two men to combat the flames from inside. Lopez volunteered. "Everything was OK until the bell on my air pack started ringing, which meant I was running out of oxygen. So I turned to tell my partner we needed to go, and there was this huge orange ball rolling toward us. All of a sudden – BLAM!"

He awoke to find himself pinned beneath a metal door. His buddies were standing on top of it, searching for him. By the time they dragged him to safety, he had sustained injuries to his head, spine, shoulders and knees, and many of his teeth were shattered. He retired soon after, but rather than relax with his family, which includes 13 grandchildren, he delved into colonia advocacy fulltime.

'Everyone is hiding'

The landscape is turning feral now. Nopales sprout from rooftops. Mesquite trees grow out instead of up, fusing together like brush. Birds of prey soar overhead. A skilled hunter could live off game alone out here: deer, turkey, javelina and nilgai roam wild. But while the view is beautiful, residents seem determined to obstruct it. They seal their windows with aluminum foil, blankets, even planks of wood, and fortify their yards with fences.

"It's like everyone is hiding," Lopez observes.

Up ahead is a colonia called Country Estates West. Its road has all but disintegrated. Lopez slows to 15 mph to navigate its cavernous potholes. We pass by families living in aluminum shacks, in barns, in campers, in anything offering walls and a ceiling. Many people recognize Lopez's truck and wave. The vast majority of colonia residents are second- and third-generation Mexican-Americans, but Lopez has noticed more and more black and Anglo families moving here in recent years.

After a time, we come upon some men standing in a clearing. One charges our truck. Sun-cooked and curly-haired, he is twenty-something and unhappy to see us. In a gruff Texan brogue, he asks why we're on his property. His party surrounds us. One man has a gun in his pocket.

All my instincts say to throw that Ford in reverse and split. Lopez, however, hops out and proffers a business card. "We came to ask about your water services."

The eldest man, who declines to give his name, reads the card aloud. Perhaps 50 years old, he has white and blond hair and a belly protruding over dirt-encrusted jeans. Something appears to have clawed the left side of his face repeatedly.

"Well, welcome to the bayou!" he exclaims. "What can I tell you?"

As the younger men head into the woods to "shoot 100 rounds," he shows us his homestead. His son lives in a nearby camper featuring a Confederate flag in its window; he sleeps in an 8-by-10 wood hut.

"This whole area floods once or twice a year and turns into a great big lake. We have to climb up atop our truck and wait until the water goes down. Once, I got sick with worms and had to chew tobacco until they went away."

He and his son used to work at the prison, but he got injured and his son got fired. They live off his disability now, which averages \$12,000 a year – enough for auto expenses, property taxes and a diet of canned soup and sandwiches, but not for heat. Those scratches on his face are from trying to shave this morning, when temperatures dipped into the 30s.

Lopez asks a few more questions, then politely takes his leave. "So that was the Country Estates," he says, laughing dryly as we return to the main road.

It's nearly 3 p.m. Lopez has yet to break for lunch or even coffee. At my insistence, he pulls into a Robstown restaurant called Rolando's. As soon as we are seated, waitresses swarm our table – not to take our order, but to issue their own, in a flurry of English and Spanish. One suffers from blood circulation so poor her leg has turned purple; another has a mother on kidney dialysis. Can he help?

Lopez bounds back to his truck and returns with pamphlets about a free prescription-drug program. After offering to enroll them, he promises to arrange for transportation next time they visit a clinic.

Over heaping plates of carne guisada, rice and beans, Lopez rattles off his goals for the upcoming year. He wants a septic tank for every family and a fire hydrant in every colonia. He wants more creeks tested for toxicity. Above all, he wants a community center from which to better organize his constituency. To accomplish all that, however, he'd need a squadron.

"We'll need grant writers. We'll need carpenters. Electricians. Plumbers. Toxicologists," he sighs, then rolls

up a corn tortilla. "But who is going to do all that work for free?"

Who, that is, besides him? About the writer

Stephanie Elizondo Griest has mingled with the Russian Mafia, polished Chinese propaganda and belly-danced with Cuban rumba queens.

These adventures inspired her award-winning memoirs *Around the Bloc: My Life in Moscow, Beijing, and Havana*; *Mexican Enough: My Life Between the Borderlines*; and the guidebook *100 Places Every Woman Should Go*. She has won a Hodder Fellowship to Princeton, a Richard Margolis Award for Social Justice Reporting, and a Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Gold Prize.

Visit her website at [www.mexicanenough.com](http://www.mexicanenough.com).