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0:27-0:54 [Molly] “Hello everyone, and welcome back to Seeking Refuge, a podcast sharing the human stories of refugees. Today, we'll be speaking with Sebastian, a student at the University of Texas at El Paso, who has extensive experience with the U.S.-Mexico border. Today, Sebastian will share his personal journey, his insights on navigating the border, and his experiences researching migration and border studies. Your hosts for today are Diana Clark and Maggie Austin.”

0:54-1:03 [music]

1:03-1:05 [Diana] “Hi, Sebastian, how are you doing today?”

1:05-1:07 [Sebastian] “Good. Thank you for having me here. Very excited.”

1:07-1:16 [Diana] “Yeah, we're excited to have you too. So first off, we just wanted to get to know you a little bit. So, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you grew up?”

1:16-2:15 [Sebastian] “Yeah, of course. So I was born in El Paso, Texas. Both my parents are Mexican, and they never really migrated to the US. So most of my life, I've been living in Ciudad Juarez, which is literally on the other side of the river. I pretty much grew up there until I was in high school. That's when I started going into high school in El Paso. For those who don't know about the border, a lot of students cross every day to go to... to school. I myself do that now that I'm at UTEP. I still live in Juarez with my parents and cross every day to get my education. I mean, it was, while I was crossing that the caravans of migrants started arriving seeking asylum during high school, before COVID, that I started getting invested in this topic of asylum and migration. But yeah, pretty much. I live in Juarez with my family. I cross every day to go to El Paso, to be with friends, to go to school, of course, to work, and then I come back and just kind of sleep. That's the everyday life I have... not only me, but many people here in this region.”

2:15-2:23 [Diana] “Wow. So, besides being a kind of separation between your family life and the rest of your life, what other ways has the border been involved in your life?”

2:23-3:12 [Sebastian] “I mean, I feel it very much dictates everything I do in my life, what I have access to, what I don't. Thankfully, I have the opportunity and privilege to cross every day and

to obtain even an education in the U.S., right? That's not something everyone can get. But I mean, it pretty much dictates my relationship with anyone in my surroundings, right? In the academic sense, doing everything here in the U.S., and then all the family and responsibilities I have in Mexico. But they're very much connected as well. The border is, especially El Paso and Juarez, very much connected culturally and economically. I love to, you know, spend the time here, buy stuff here in El Paso, and then go to eat in Juarez at a much cheaper and better place. So yeah, I mean, honestly, mobility, everything I do, the education I've been able to obtain has been pretty much dictated by my access to both countries.”

3:12-3:22 [Diana] “Yeah, and so since you've been crossing so often for the past years of your life, has there been a change in that process, or how has that looked over time?”

3:22-4:07 [Sebastian] “I would say the access—well, the time and how everything changes—depends on if you have a car, or if you're crossing walking. And then if you have a car, if you have, like, an express lane, it's called the SENTRI right here. I've experienced everything, right? When I started high school, I pretty much had to wait three hours in line walking in the summer and the winter, pretty much in lines to just access and go to school. Then in college, in my car, also just like hours, up to three, four hours in my car, just again, waiting to go. The lines... The lines get brutal here, and then I was able to obtain my SENTRI so that reduced the time like crazy. The time you spend there and how you move, it depends on what you have access to. Fortunately, I've had access to the most convenient way of crossing the border, but that's not the reality for most other people.”

4:07-4:14 [Diana] “So you mentioned a SENTRI. What is the process of getting that and is it an intense process?”

4:14-4:54 [Sebastian] “At first, it is a bit. Well, you apply, you pay a fee, and then they kind of look you up and do research on you that you don't have, like, any shady connections. As a student, it's more accessible to get, and as an American, it's more accessible to get. I've heard that if you're just only a Mexican citizen, it becomes a more... a longer process. And with COVID happening, it really delayed a lot of applications that happened during those COVID years. So at least for now, they're barely getting to those COVID appointments they had. But, it really depends, I feel, on the border, who you are. A lot of the times, I'm fortunate enough to be an American citizen and a student, so both really helped in my application.”

4:54-5:09 [Diana] “For sure, for sure. So you speak of your education as being both in Mexico and also in Texas, so where has that led to where you are now at UTEP, and the types of things that you're interested in at UTEP?”

5:09-5:45 [Sebastian] “Oh, for sure. Well, having both educations has helped me be able to interact with material from both countries—well, both languages, I would say—better, which is an advantage I'm really grateful for. And, being a part here of the border has really shaped what I want to study and what I want to pursue academically. If I wasn't here, I don't think I would be as exposed and interested in migration and subsequently asylum and human rights as I am right now. So definitely, UTEP has really helped me to kind of focus and think about what I want to do academically and how I can impact my community.”

5:45-5:48 [Maggie] “So, what kinds of research have you done?”

5:48-7:40 [Sebastian] “So, mostly migration research. Last summer, I was involved in the National Science Foundation research for undergrads. The research was for migrants, for migration, pretty much, and border communities. And this was taken both by UTEP and NMSU, the New Mexico State University. It's like a joint program. I was the only UTEP student, so I not only had the role to kind of make sense of migration in my community, but also explain to other people from other universities, other parts of the country, ‘Hey, this is how the border works. This is what it looks like. It's not necessarily how it looks into the news, but this is what we're seeing right now.’ So that opened my eyes to appreciating the border more, because crossing every day might sound crazy. It's a very unique experience, but for me, it's just whatever. You know, I remember when you guys told me about the topics we were going to talk about, I at first kind of struggled showcasing how special the border is, because for me, it's just an everyday thing. But, in trying to explain it, it gave me a new perspective and showcased how special it is in the world. And so, that summer, I also researched migration. We were getting a lot of people at the border. I started getting interested in formal clandestine shelters for migrants and on abuses by the states towards migrants, which are very, unfortunately, very common in Mexico throughout the country. I finished the program, did a couple of presentations, published a newspaper article in Chiapas Paralelo, and I, you know, kept being involved in the topic as much as I could. This summer, I served as an undergrad research assistant for our anthropology chair, Dr. Slack, and that, you know, helped me develop more of my research and want to focus it more. Now I've been volunteering in shelters and that, while it's not research, it helps me be like, kept up with what's happening with concepts of asylum and migration and how everything changes, because it honestly changes very, very, very quickly. It's sometimes very hard to keep up with the underground, with all the policy that's changing.”

7:40-7:46 [Maggie] “Yeah, so you mentioned clandestine shelters? I've never heard that term. What does that mean?”

7:46-8:48 [Sebastian] “Oh, sure. It's, um, shelters that are not recognized by the government and operate sometimes illegally. I got interested in the topic because, at first, I wanted to research, like, networks, social networks people have, and by, you know, conducting interviews, that's

when I first became aware of it and the abuses people had suffered at these shelters. Not all the shelters that are not approved by the government are clandestine, but these clandestine shelters do try to, like, hide from the government and the activities they do. Most of these shelters that I've seen, you know, charge people to stay there. You know, charge them for food. They don't give them proper treatment. There's no proper ventilation, and here at the border, here at the desert, you need that, because it gets horrible in the summers. So, yeah, I was just very much concerned with abuses people were suffering, and that also led me to studying and observing what the state was doing about it, and the abuses the state themselves conducted towards people."

8:38-8:45 [Maggie] "So, you also mentioned that you volunteer in a shelter. What do you do volunteering in shelters?"

8:45-9:02 [Sebastian] "Oh, yeah, I volunteer with Hope Border Institute, and basically I fill out intakes for medical forms. I myself don't want to be, like, a med student or anything, but I do have, like, doctors and nurses who treat migrants of medical needs, which is something that is sometimes lacking at many places."

9:02-9:08 [Maggie] "So, when you did that summer research that you mentioned, what exactly was the process like? What did you do?"

9:08-10:21 [Sebastian] "So, first, we were educated about, you know, the history of migration, the history of the border, and it's embarrassing to admit, but I was very ignorant about it, about a lot of things. Being here, you hear a lot of, you know, rhetoric, right? A lot of stories of, 'Oh, people are lazy. People don't want to work. They're going to steal our jobs,' all that stuff. So, you're very much confused about what's going on. You just hear, like, secondhand gossip. So first we were, you know, introduced to the border, getting a better sense of the history of the border, of the history of migration, and then getting caught up on more recent developments at the time. From there, we were introduced slowly but surely to the process of interviewing and conducting interviews and building surveys, and from there, we pretty much chose the topics that most interested us. For me, that became clandestine shelters and abuses by the state. So, it was, like, a lot of learning, and even to this day, I learn new things. Everything keeps changing. I learn how to talk to people better. I learn how to approach different situations. Continuing with this education, I know what to know, what to not know, what's true, what's not true... which is something that's very important to know, especially about migration, with how political it is at the moment. But yeah, I feel migration is constantly changing, so you can never stop learning about it."

10:21-10:40 [Diana] "I have a question to cut in. So you mentioned the truth, and that is a loaded word, like you said, in the border area, how do you go about finding the truth, or what has been

that process of you going through information or learning that has really led you to what you believe and what I'm sure is the truth?"

10:40-11:43 [Sebastian] "So, yeah, the truth is a very loaded question, and it depends on what you're asking more than anything. So, like the example I gave of people calling, you know, migrants, lazy or that they're invading us, all that? Once you talk to migrants and hear their experiences, and hear the reasons why they migrated, the job opportunities they have here at the border or throughout any other countries they come through, you get a better sense of how the policy affects the day to day life of people that are crossing. On the other side, you also need to kind of understand the policy and the terminology and the definitions. Something that's been very concerning to me as of late, and that's been very affected by the elections that are happening, is that many migrants are being classified as illegal—especially ones that are seeking asylum. And technically, those who are seeking asylum are in the country legally until they get their hearing, right? So stuff like that, understanding the policy, understanding the people that are migrating themselves, you get a better perspective of why things are happening and how policy actually affects people. And this is something most don't get to see or experience, so it is difficult to combat that misinformation, I would say."

11:43-11:50 [Maggie] "So, what was the process like, of, like, interviewing the migrants? Did you... How did you go about that?"

11:50-12:38 [Sebastian] "Oh, yeah. So we would be taken to shelters in both Juarez, El Paso, and even Las Cruces, and we would pretty much just approach people. We'd be like, 'Hey, we're doing surveys. We're students. If you want to participate, let us know.' We would read them, you know, the procedures: 'If you don't want to answer a question, if you're uncomfortable, if you want to finish the survey at any time, let us know. And from there, we would go with the questions. We would use a survey, but often than not, some questions, people wanted to talk more about them, right? More about their experiences, more about how they felt. So we would honestly, at the end of the survey, it would be like, all scribbled with, like, the notes we would take and things people wanted us to, like, record. At first, it can be a bit intimidating just going out there and just talking to people, but the more you do it, the more you know how to go about it. And definitely having all these experiences have helped me just approach people and be like, 'Hey, how are you feeling? How's... how's everything?'"

12:38-12:45 [Maggie] "What are the most interesting stories that you've heard from migrants, or what are just the most interesting things you learned from that process?"

12:45-13:43 [Sebastian] "The most interesting thing, and something I was not expecting, is that many people just want to be heard. Their stories, their individual stories, are not often heard. They're more seen as a statistic, as a political tool—all those other things—but they're often not

seen as human beings. And it's something that I already knew, but once you're there, it really hits different. So, definitely people wanting to be heard and people sharing their experiences is something very unique and very nice to see sometimes. But, more often they're not: those experiences are not nice, I'd say. They do often suffer abuse by the hands of different, like, actors and entities throughout their journey. So, a lot of those stories are not the nicest, but sometimes people just want to talk about it and get it off their chest, because they... they've not had a chance to talk about it. And some people just want to be heard, like I said, and that's something that really taught me, because based on the topic, one would think they would be very hesitant to speak, but I found the opposite being true most of the time. Sometimes people just want to be able to share their stories.”

13:43-13:50 [Diana] “So going back previously to your discussion about abuses by the state, what overall struck you from those findings?”

13:50-14:38 [Sebastian] “It's very common, I'll just say that much. It's very normalized at a point, unfortunately—not that they expect it sometimes, especially if they're not, like, familiar with the process, but, once it happens, they kind of know how their journey is going to be like, unfortunately. It's... migrants are a very vulnerable population, all traversing through Mexico, and many times, the state takes advantage of that vulnerability—both state and criminal organizations. But, at least in the context of Mexico, which I'm comfortable talking about, the state sometimes works with criminal organizations in exploiting people and violating their human rights, which is, unfortunately, very common, but yeah. I mean, I hope that with the new presidency and the new president, things change. I really hope.”

14:38-14:48 [Diana] “Do you have any specific policy changes or examples of policy changes that you can think of that really showcased how dynamic policy at the border is?”

14:48-17:30 [Sebastian] “Yes, of course. So, during the Trump presidency, we saw the MPP, the Migrant Protection Protocol, also known as the ‘Remain in Mexico’ protocol, and that basically forced people seeking asylum to stay on the Mexican side. That's where you saw a lot of pictures of people, you know, at the wall, people waiting at the bridges. That's where you saw, like, the most, like, sensationalized aspects of migration that you know have contributed to, you know, the political debates. But, now, as of last year and presently, we have what is CBP One. So it is an app people seeking asylum have to use to get... you know, to be able to present themselves at the bridge and be able to get a court date eventually. And this app was introduced so they could... people could file their, you know, information in the app, and randomly, they would be selected to present themselves on the U.S. side. So that was the idea. At first, this app only worked at the border region as well. So, that's where you would see a lot of people in Juarez, Tijuana, Matamoros, waiting for their appointment. An issue was that places like Juarez didn't have the infrastructure to hold so many people at the same time, and everyone had to arrive to Juarez or

any other border city to ask for that appointment. So that's when you saw the rise of governmental infrastructure, civil society and NGOs stepping up to help people and informal and clandestine shelters as well, because there was simply not the structure to hold that many people in the same place. Throughout this year, we've seen CBP One being... you can be able to do CBP One appointments in places like Mexico City and Guadalajara and more recently, Tapachula. So now we're seeing less people here at the border. The numbers have dropped drastically. Once you saw shelters, like, full max capacity. Now, you see a lot of spaces open because they've allowed people migrating to apply for asylum when entering Mexico. So now that has changed a lot, and changed, of course, the people who are here at the border today. Not everyone who's migrated knows about CBP one or knows about the process. So we still have people here in Juarez, for example, you know, applying. Not everyone has access to phones as well. You do need a phone. You do need a phone number. And if you have a phone, it can, you know, easily be stolen. It happens as well: those types of setbacks for people. If you're in a place where you cannot access the Internet, then it becomes very difficult to, you know, do the CBP One appointment, which is again, crucial if you're seeking asylum. But, we have seen less people coming to the border because they have other places where they can, you know, apply for asylum. So that has been a big change, I think, at least in the past year. We don't know what will happen in, like, the next year, if I'm being honest. It has changed so much. But at least for now, that's the biggest change we've seen.”

17:30-17:45 [Diana] “Yeah, that's a great example, and it's okay if you don't know this. But I'm curious, was allowing for the asylum appointments in other Mexican cities? Was that an agreement between the U.S. government in Mexico to try to discourage the migrants from going all the way to the U.S. or, do you know?”

17:45-18:07 [Sebastian] “I want to say probably. It's not necessarily, like, a specific city, but it was more, like, the range where you had to be, because the U.S. government controlled where you could geographically, where you could apply. And again, as long as you have a phone now and you're within Mexico, you can. But I think it has been a move by the U.S. government to not have as many people at the border.”

18:07-18:12 [Diana] “Okay, do you know what your future plans are? Can we ask you what your future plans are?”

18:12-20:09 [Sebastian] “For sure. I applied for the Fulbright in Panama, because a lot of people do mention that Panama is—like especially the Darien Gap, not Panama itself, but the Darien Gap—is a very difficult place to traverse, and unfortunately, a lot of death occurs there. And recently I saw that they were putting, you know, fences and barbed wire in the Darien Gap. And, I mean, already here at the border, and especially in Texas, we're seeing a lot of that happening...a lot of obstacles to... for people not to cross. So I, you know, I kind of have

experience with that. So I was like, might as well give it a shot over there, and kind of understand how migration is... if it's going to change based on what's happening in Panama. I've also heard that the U.S. wants to start, like, programs in different countries for migrants to stay in those countries, rather than to go to the U.S. And Panama is one of those countries they've selected. So it's going to be very interesting observing, not in Mexico, but in other places, how those types of programs are functioning. And hopefully after that—if I get accepted, of course—after that, I do want to pursue a doctorate in psychology–sociology, not psychology, sociology—because, I mean, I feel these topics are important, and often than not, the border is very much just ignored or used for political purposes, but it's not really understood. And I would also like to promote more education for people in this area as well. I'm honestly very grateful that I've been able to have the education I've had at UTEP, and the understanding... the new understanding I have of the border. Before, it was just, like, a boring city in the desert, but now it's very much a really dynamic and very interesting place where a lot of things are happening. So I really want to showcase that to future students and future generations, and for people to better understand what migration and asylum and human rights are within our country as well, and how that all that is shaped. Yeah, just to promote more Latinos in education honestly.”

20:09-20:13 [Diana] “That's amazing. That is so inspiring. Thank you so much for sharing.”

20:13-20:14 [Sebastian] “Of course.”

20:14-20:17 [Diana] “Is there anything else that you'd like to share, Sebastian?”

20:17-21:57 [Sebastian] “Sure. Well, I... I've said this before, but the border is very misunderstood and especially Ciudad Juarez, for a while, it's been seen as a really violent place, where... from hearing, like, the narratives here, like, in El Paso and, like, other parts of the U.S., a lot of people think, like, if you cross, you'll get, like, shot or whatever and that's it. But, that's really not the case. Juarez has had its period of violence, of course, but I think it's building back, and I think people should experience the border, one way or another and see what is happening here, and see how special and interesting and dynamic and fluid the cities are, and understand better, you know, everything that's going on. I know migration is a very important topic right now in politics, so I think it's very important for people to better understand that a lot of these people coming to the U.S. are seeking asylum, are not here illegally, and they're looking for a better life, and they're escaping violence and persecution from their countries of origin. So I think there has to be more discussions about asylum in this country and how it is perceived, because migrants at large are just seen as... they're kind of getting bunched together with, like, illegal migrants. And most of these migrants, you know, are here legally. So I think it's a very dangerous discourse to have... a very dangerous outlook to have in just like migration as a whole, and it's a very simplified version of migration as well, that on the long run, I feel will be

very problematic. So, I think these discussions of asylum and migration really need to be had, not just here, which you know, where it's happening, but all throughout the country.”

21:57-22:05 [Diana] “Definitely. Thank you so much, Sebastian, for your time, and we're really looking forward to hearing all the great things that you do in the future.”

22:05- 22:07 [Sebastian] “Awesome. Well, thank you, you guys for having me here.”

22:07-22:16 [music]

22:16-23:12 [Molly] “That was Sebastian, sharing his unique perspective as a student from both El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, discussing his experiences navigating life across the U.S.-Mexico border. If you liked this episode, be sure to like, subscribe, rate and review us in the comments below. If you'd like to get in touch with us, email us at seekingrefugepodcast@gmail.com, or at our University of South Carolina email address, sosrpa@mailbox.sc.edu. You can find us on social media at [refugepodcast](#) on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. This show is produced by undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina. Your hosts for this week were Diana Clark and Maggie Austin. This episode was edited by Molly Mims and produced by Charlie Winston. Our executive producers are Diana Clark and Thrisha Mote. As always, thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you in the next one.”

23:12-23:16 [music]