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## Rolling Meadows teen's killing in Mexico sends dread through Mexican community

Some fear homeland's violence will prevent them from going back — even for a visit

December 28, 2011 | By Becky Schlikerman and Robert McCoppin, Chicago Tribune reporters

In a small town in western Mexico, Jazmin Reyes, 16, waited for her new boyfriend from the United States. She and Alexis Marron had been emailing each other for months, but when they finally met a few weeks ago, she said it was "love at first sight."

Marron, 18, a Rolling Meadows High School senior, had worked all summer so he could afford to visit relatives and see Reyes outside Guadalajara over Christmas. On Friday, he was driving with two friends to exchange Christmas gifts with her. He never made it.



Alexis Marron, slain last weekend in Mexico, is seen with his cousin Daniela... (Stacey Wescott, Chicago Tribune)

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Saturday morning, the charred remains of Marron and his two friends were found outside a remote ranch, in the trunk of a car that had been burned to a shell. Investigators could not explain what had happened. Relatives and friends were shocked by the seemingly random killing and could only blame it on the spreading scourge of violent crime in Mexico.

"We don't know what happened," Reyes said Tuesday. "I never expected this."

Such unthinkable crimes have sparked anxiety among some Mexican immigrants in the Chicago area, who fear they may never be able to return to their native country, even to visit.

Like many residents in the Coach Light Condominiums in Rolling Meadows, Marron's family came to the U.S. in the 1990s, friends said, following others from the small town of Quiringuicharo, some 90 miles southeast of Guadalajara in the state of Michoacan.

When they heard the terrible news, Marron's neighbors took up donations to help his grieving parents fly back to Mexico on Sunday to claim their son's remains. Unlit Christmas lights hung in the window of the family's condominium.

The Marrons usually returned to their native town to visit family and friends each Christmas. This year they couldn't afford to make the trip. But Alexis Marron was able to save enough money for the trip through his summer job as a runner at Mr. D's Sports Bar at Arlington Park, relatives said. On Dec. 3, he flew to Quiringuicharo to stay with his grandmother.

When he disappeared Friday, relatives made frantic phone calls in an effort to find him. Some gathered in the town square hoping for news.

By 7 a.m. Saturday, the victims' bodies were found in the nearby town of Ixtlan de los Hervores.

The other victims were identified by the Michoacan attorney general as Juan Pedro Estrada Osegueda and Raul Tellez Vazquez, 21, both of Quiringuicharo, though Tellez was originally from Los Angeles. They were found in a black 1997 Mercury Grand Marquis that belonged to Estrada, who was 24, according to Mexican news reports.

The town where the bodies were found is known for its hot springs but is far from the beaches that attract most of Mexico's tourists. The state of Michoacan has seen growing violence from drug cartels that has spread from near the country's border with the U.S.

Marron's uncle, Martin Zendejas, said through an interpreter that the family was in disbelief.

"We don't know what happened. He was a good boy, a good student, no drugs. He didn't run with gangs," said Zendejas, who speculated that Marron was robbed or mistaken for a drug trafficker.

Though the family had never felt in danger during previous visits to the area, the growing crime problem has prompted the increased presence of soldiers in the last couple of years, Zendejas said. He questioned why Mexican authorities seem unable to stop the violence. Though he still has a house in Quiringuicharo, he added, "I won't go back until they can control it."

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Marron had competed in football and gymnastics at Rolling Meadows and had applied to several colleges, relatives said.

Daniela Zendejas said she was so close to her cousin that she considered Marron a brother. They often traveled together to Rolling Meadows High, where she is also a senior.

"He was a very nice kid," she said. "He was smiling all day. He was always positive, thinking of his family. He loved his nieces."

She added that she's now scared to go back to Mexico.

Yolanda Ibanez, a neighbor of the Marrons, said Alexis Marron was friendly and respectful, always holding the door for her. She said the family attended St. Colette Church in Rolling Meadows.

Marron had an American passport, and friends said he was a U.S. citizen.

His classmates set up a Facebook page in his memory, and they plan a memorial for him at his locker when school resumes Tuesday. They planned to wear red, his trademark color.

Lydia Antonio, spokeswoman for the Embassy of Mexico in Washington, said she could not comment on the homicide investigation. "We profoundly lament and are saddened by this incident, and stand by Alexis' family and loved ones over their loss," she said.

Around 2007, lurid details of Mexican drug violence scared off many Americans, and reports of police corruption, mass killings and death squads helped spur a nose dive in tourism. But some in the travel industry say the number of visitors is now rising as Americans understand the violence is generally concentrated away from top tourist destinations.

"Are there some people not traveling to Mexico? Yeah. But my perception is the vast majority of people are smart enough to be able to discern reality," said Catherine Banks, vice president of Legacy Travel in Chicago. "There are (crimes) that happen in Chicago too. It doesn't mean Chicago is a bad place to travel to."

Still, the U.S. State Department cautions tourists about traveling in Mexico, in particular to border states and Michoacan — areas hit hard by drug violence.

*Staff reporter Brian Slodysko contributed.*

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