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Sundance documentaries explore immigration

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PARK CITY, Utah (Reuters) -- Amid all the glitz at the Sundance Film Festival's debut weekend, three obscure filmmakers managed to win fans with their work on illegal immigration along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The paparazzi chased "Friends with Money" star Jennifer Aniston, and the comedy "Little Miss Sunshine" fetched around \$10 million from distributor Fox Searchlight to become the first major movie sale at the festival.

But it was Mexican documentarian Tin Dirdamal's "DeNADIE," Joseph Mathew's documentary "Crossing Arizona" and Pablo Veliz's drama "La Tragedia de Macario" that tugged at heartstrings.

Following the packed-house premiere of "Crossing Arizona," Mathew told Reuters he sensed that his film, which tells of immigrants' struggle with dehydration and death in the Arizona desert and efforts to stop them, touched audiences.

Mathew said he initially saw the documentary as a way to illustrate the plight of immigrants from Mexico and Central America.

But he broadened his scope after U.S. political debate grew and opponents of illegal immigration formed groups like the Minuteman Project, a band of citizens who volunteer to patrol the border that critics said raised fears of vigilantism.

Still, he said the big-picture political debates about homeland security and how to stop the flood of immigrants overshadow a more immediate

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Joseph Mathew directed "Crossing Arizona," one of three Sundance films about illegal immigration.

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need.

"The discourse needs to go to humanitarian efforts," he said.

In a separate interview, Minuteman Project organizer Chris Simcox agreed. "Until there's a solution, there must be humanitarian efforts ... that will provide water and food," he told Reuters.

Each year, more than 1 million undocumented migrants try to slip across the mountains and deserts along the 2,000-mile (3,200-km) U.S.-Mexico border in search of work in the United States. At least 464 died making the journey last year, many from dehydration.

A look south

While "Crossing Arizona" focuses on issues well-covered in the U.S. media, "DeNADIE" and "La Tragedia de Macario" look at the problem from the perspective of the immigrants.

Through all these south-of-the-border stories runs a theme of poverty-stricken people longing for better jobs in the United States as construction workers and domestic laborers.

Some cross the border and achieve at least part of their dreams. Many do not. But they all need help that seems sorely lacking, according to these films and their filmmakers.

"Macario" tells of a Mexican peasant worker who leaves his town with little but his faith in God and determination to make it to the United States, where he hopes to find work.

"DeNADIE" is Dirdamal's look at Central Americans who often fail to get to the U.S.-Mexican border because they are stopped by gang members who beat, rape and sometimes kill them.

An engineer by training, Dirdamal was so moved by the immigrants that he picked up a digital camera to document their stories. He said he wants the film to be seen in the United States so people will look at these men and women as more than construction and domestic workers.

Another documentary, "Letters from the Other Side," is playing at the Slamdance Film Festival, which runs concurrently with the more widely watched Sundance.

"Letters" tells of the women and children who are left in Mexico when their husbands travel north seeking better jobs. Often, their lives worsen when the men fail to send money home or forget them altogether.

"Their voice is one that is left out, but it's a voice that needs to be heard," said "Letters" filmmaker Heather Courtney.

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