Background
A humanitarian crisis has developed in South Texas due to the increase in migrant deaths, with Brooks County at its epicenter. Although located 75 miles north of the US-Mexico border (Figure 1), a Border Patrol checkpoint (Figure 2) is located in Falfurrias, Brooks County where many migrants perish trying to circumvent the checkpoint. Since 2011 the Brook County Sheriff's Office (BCSO) has recovered the remains of 438 suspected migrants, though it is likely this statistic is a gross underestimate as many missing migrants have undoubtedly not been discovered due to the vast, sparsely populated brush terrain. Historically, most of these victims were buried as ‘unknowns’ without DNA collection or any other attempt at identification.

In 2013 and 2014 Baylor University and the University of Indianapolis exhumed many of these presumed migrants from Sacred Heart Cemetery in Brooks County (Figure 3). Since 2013, Operation Identification (OpID), located at the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State (FACTS), has received 197 sets of remains most of which were exhumed from Sacred Heart.

OpID aims to facilitate the identification and repatriation of human remains found along or near the South Texas border through scientific analysis and collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations utilizing a holistic anthropological approach towards identification.

Biocultural Approach to Identification and Repatriation
OpID incorporates a holistic anthropological approach towards identification including traditional osteological, dental, isotopic, genetic, and histological analyses

- A biological profile including sex, ancestry, age, and stature is developed using population specific methods when available (e.g., Spradley et al. 2015)
- A complete series of dental radiographs is taken
- Case background, demographics, individualizing characteristics, and cleaned personal effects are uploaded to the National Missing and Unidentified Person system (NamUs)
- DNA sample(s) are submitted to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification (UNCHI) in accordance with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedures.

Biocultural lines of evidence (Birkby et al. 2008), including analyses of missing persons reports for comparison of antemortem and postmortem data, and the examination of personal effects have contributed to the production of identification hypotheses for several cases, which are used by local and international non-governmental organizations to locate family reference samples for genetic comparison.

Personal effects and biocultural modifications (Figures 4-9) can also facilitate closure for the families and acceptance of an identification through genetic association. Additionally, FACTS recently provided a space for viewing the deceased for family members who are unable to accompany their loved ones to the decedent’s country of origin to attend funeral rites. Social workers and members of the religious community have been present to assist family members, as well as forensic anthropologists to explain the scientific analyses that led to identification.

Numbers to Names
Despite public perception and the assumption that most migrant are from Mexico, information from missing persons reports collected by the South Texas Human Rights Center and identifications of the OpID remains suggests the majority of migrants entering Texas are from Central America (Figure 10). Of the 18 positively identified individuals, only four are Mexican (Figure 11).

Continuing Efforts
Students and faculty continue to work with the BCSO conducting pedestrian searches and recovery of human remains (Figure 11). OpID project will be returning to Sacred Heart Cemetery to finish exhumations at the beginning of 2017.

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References

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