

## Julián Cardona, the conscience of Juárez

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“Julián, you have friends everywhere,” I said to Julián Cardona as he came running over to me. It was May 5, 2012 and we were taking photographs in an area of abandoned houses near downtown Juárez. A truck had pulled up next to Julián and I had watched him talk intently with the driver and a passenger.

He grabbed my arm. “No, you don’t understand. They’re cartel members, telling us we better leave. Let’s go.” We jumped in his car and raced off.

This was Julián, soft spoken, humble but always ready to go to the most dangerous places. Now this extraordinary photographer who documented Juárez in its darkest days is gone, a sudden death at far too early an age.

Born in Zacatecas in 1960, Julián came to Juárez at an early age and never left. When the author and colleague, Charles “Chuck” Bowden urged him to move to El Paso during the most dangerous years, he said, “No, this is my city. And the food is better.”

He grew up with grandparents, never got past the ninth grade, taught himself photography and worked as a photojournalist for El Fronterizo, El Diario and Reuters. He collaborated with Bowden on several books, had exhibits in Mexico, the United States and Europe and received the Cultural Freedom Prize from the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe in 2004.

My inspiration to work in Juárez came from Julián. A decade ago when I read Bowden’s book about Juárez entitled **Murder City**, I noted a photograph on page 162 of a man standing in the desert with a blanket over his shoulder. It was Julián’s photo of El Cholo, a patient at the mental asylum, Vision in Action. “I have to go there,” I said to myself.

It was early 2008 when Chuck and Julián stumbled across Vision in Action. Chuck later wrote, “Julián was entranced by the blankets drying on clumps of desert shrubs with the Uffington horse ( a huge white horse painted on the mountainside). Continuing he wrote that the horse was “a project financed by the late Amado Carrillo and near the horse on the same flank of the Sierra Juárez was the iguana intaglio, the symbol of the Juárez drug cartel ....”

Then, according to Bowden, “a stream of people came over the wall from the building to the east and they flocked around us. Of course, at that moment I knew nothing of them except they seemed crazy.”

It was Julián’s photography that brought recognition as well as financial support to this asylum, enabling it to continue caring for more than one hundred patients who would have otherwise been abandoned to the streets of Juárez.

As much as he loved Juárez, he was painfully honest about his city. When we first met, he drew me a map of Juárez. “The drug business has been divided in four parts,” he said as he worked away with his pen. “The Army gets a quarter, the local police a quarter, the state police a quarter and the federal police a quarter.”

A grim picture from a man who always spoke to the heart of the issue. A kind man, a friend, someone whose unflinching honesty and commitment will be deeply missed.