

Welcome to the Minuteman Project

MinuteWomen Fervent About Border Security

by Jennifer Kabbany - [North County Times](#)

Stopping illegal immigration is beyond a simple obsession for Penny Magnotto. It's a way of life.

For the past several years, since 9/11 in fact, Magnotto has dedicated most of her time and energy to causes and efforts meant to stop the flow of those who sneak across the United States-Mexico border illegally.

To that end, the 62-year-old Perris resident's days are filled with phone calls, faxes, e-mails, meetings, traveling, reading, research and protests.

She was one of the first women to join the **Minuteman Project**, a volunteer border patrol organization, and has traveled the country to forward the group's movement. She's camped out at the border many a night and has even taken fire from an AK-47 for her cause, she said.

Debate and emotions over illegal immigration have become major issues in local and national politics. For many Southwest County residents such as Magnotto, the subject is especially close to home. The border is less than 100 miles away from their communities, and Southern California is a hotbed for political rhetoric over illegal immigration.

But Magnotto certainly takes her role in the debate a step further than the average citizen. And she says she represents many strong women who are just as fervent as their male counterparts about securing the border.

"This immigration thing has completely enveloped me," said Magnotto, a spunky firebrand with short white hair, big blue eyes and palpable energy.

Magnotto said she often works with about 20 close friends who live in the area and are very passionate about stopping the flow of undocumented workers into the country.

"We are one dedicated bunch of Americans," she said. "We are very proactive because no one else is."

Magnotto said she was one of the original "Duckponders," a group of local residents who used to protest at Ynez and Rancho California roads each Saturday two years ago with signs against illegal immigration. There, she received honks of support as well as middle fingers and spitting, she said.

Although the weekly rallies aren't conducted anymore, Magnotto stays active in the cause on a daily basis.

One of the first things she said she does in the morning is make about six to 15 phone calls to senators, congressman, state legislators and governors asking them to do something about the border. She also faxes, e-mails and sends letters to various public officials and newspapers daily.

She's also had a hand in nearly every local debate and protest about illegal immigration, she said.

She was one of the many protesters who showed up at a Temecula rally two years ago to defend the U.S. Border Patrol after the agency came under fire for sweeps aimed at capturing illegal immigrants.

Last year, she was among a small group of protesters picketing outside the Vista office of U.S. Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Temecula, in opposition to his stance that the interior Border Patrol checkpoints are not effective and should be closed.

Earlier this year, she started up "Minutewomen on the Road," in which she and a friend in a recreational vehicle followed a caravan of Minutemen members during a 12-city tour to Washington, D.C., as the group worked to garner support for its get-tough border stance and pressure federal lawmakers to better enforce border security laws. The two women also visited several additional states on their return in order to recruit more members.

"We actually stopped in probably 16 to 18 states," Magnotto said. "We met with Minutemen, ate at Minutemen's homes, visited with congressmen."

Her companion on the trip was Murrieta resident Gayle Nyberg, 58, who puts together a Minuteman e-mail newsletter sent to about 700 members about every 10 days that focuses on current events pertaining to illegal immigration activities, news, protests, meetings and other issues.

Nyberg said she shares Magnotto's passion. Putting the newsletter together is her job, she said.

"I am a Minuteman 24/7," Nyberg said. "We are being invaded and our government doesn't care and encourages it. We are trying to wake up the people. It's the people who are going to make the difference."

Ken Lester, 75, who keeps watch of the U.S.-Mexico border from his home in Chula Vista, said he believes Magnotto and Nyberg are dedicated to their cause and take it very seriously.

Lester calls himself an "independent Minuteman" and said that in the last year he has called the U.S. Border Patrol 87 times to report people jumping over the border fence.

"When Penny and Gayle and some of the other ladies are at the border, they are working," Lester said. "It's not a social event. They are attentive and observing. ... They are passionate, whatever they do is for the overall good of the Minutemen and for the good of the country."

Both women were on hand to protest when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger stopped in Temecula in July. Magnotto protested his stance on illegal immigration by waving an American flag as well as a sign that read: "Arnold, you can't win with Mexico's guest workers."

This month, after State Senate Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, called Southern California's opponents of illegal immigration "crackers," Magnotto crushed one up and sent it to the lawmaker.

As a volunteer with the Minuteman Project, she's been to the border about 30 to 40 times, she said.

She said she and her comrades have been confronted with everything from drug smugglers to rocks thrown at them to a woman rushing across the border while in labor. When she and others spot someone crossing the border, they call U.S. Border Patrol agents; they do not get involved in detaining the person, she said.

She said her drive stems from a desire to protect America for her grandchildren, citing a statistic reported by Time magazine that roughly 3 million illegal immigrants enter the country each year. That averages out to about 12,000 a day, she said.

"It's so depressing, so frustrating," Magnotto said. "Everybody jokes about the government not getting anything done. ... We are passionate Americans who want this nation protected."

Armando Navarro, professor of ethnic studies at UC Riverside, said people like Magnotto who are "zealous" about the border often are looking for purpose in their lives. He said that typically those who are fervent within the immigration movement are retired or senior citizens, middle-class to lower-middle-class, and are susceptible to the movement "because of their own racism."

"What you are looking at right now is an interesting phenomenon," said Navarro, who is writing the book "U.S.-Mexico Border Crisis: The Rise of Nativist Armed Vigilantism."

"A nativist is any person who has a fear of foreigners," Navarro said. "(The movement) gives their life purpose, meaning, satisfaction. They can become dangerous people. These are the kind of people every movement ---- from the left or the right ---- needs to nurture its mobilization capacity."

Navarro said he believes people like Magnotto are misguided.

"Political movements are conceived from the womb of discontent and nurtured by adversity and conflict," he said. "From their perspective I think they can justify their arguments. They play into the game the administration plays with terrorism, that now Hezbollah can come in from the south. Some of these so-called zealots are hypercritical; they are driven by fear, anxiety."

Magnotto dismisses the notion that some may find her beliefs extreme to the point of racism.

"It's the only card they have to play," she said.

Born in Indiana, Magnotto has resided in California off and on. She lives alone in a makeshift barn house, keeping horses and selling antiques. Her biological father is Indianapolis 500 race car driver Billy DeVore, she said.

While her parents split up when she was young, Magnotto said she got a sense of adventure passed down in her genes.

"Any kind of competition ---- I'm there," she said. "It's in my blood."

Magnotto's stepfather was a captain in the U.S. Air Force, and the family moved all the time. Most of her life she worked in dentistry and the culinary industry. Lately, however, it's border security all the time.

"This is my first cause," she said, then laughed and added, "I think I am going crazy."

For Magnotto, her anti-illegal immigration efforts started after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

"I was truly touched," she said. "I remember the very instant, and that to me was absolutely devastating. ... For me it's a dual cause. There is no way to know who is coming across this border, or their impact on this country."

Despite everything she does, Magnotto is pessimistic about the outcome of her efforts.

She said she doesn't think elected officials want to protect the country's border. In fact, she said she believes that eventually the borders will be erased and the United States will merge with Canada and Mexico. That's why she fights so fervently, for her three grandchildren in Upland and everyone else's future generations, she said.

"She is very passionate about it, like many of us are," said Arne Chandler, a member of Temecula-based Citizen Activists for a Secure America. "We are just so passionate about what we want to leave to our grandchildren."

SOURCE: [North County Times](#)