

## “La migración no es un delito”

by Kallie Welton



Spending six days in the desert along the southern border with a small group from Missouri and three School Sisters of Notre Dame, and in solidarity with people who have left their homes in Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico and trekked in the most difficult conditions for weeks, sometimes months in pursuit of safety and better lives, was like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. It was nerve-wracking,

humbling, alarming, beautiful, emotional and unforgettable. In short, it was life changing.

I witnessed the impact that current U.S. immigration policies are having on people on our first day in Arizona when we saw

“Operation Streamline” in play in the court system in Tucson where migrants go through to determine whether they will be deported or sentenced to jail time. Several groups of migrants seated in plastic chairs with looks of confusion on their faces waited for the judge to speak. He spoke quickly and quietly

asking the migrants to stand when their names were called. Chains on their ankles dragged on the floor when they stood. Handcuffs made it a struggle to push the hair from their faces. The judge proclaimed that they would all be deported as first-time offenders. The judge moved to the next group, told them their rights and asked if they understood. “Si” señor.” He then asked if they entered the country illegally to which they all pleaded guilty as instructed by their lawyers. There were over 40 immigrants in the court room. The room was cleared out in 35

minutes. It took 35 minutes to decide the fate of more than 40 people.



I saw the tremendous support from a variety of shelters, Catholic Charities, the Red Cross, and a group called Green Valley Samaritans, who bring water and food into the desert for migrants. One day we cleaned 300 cots supplied by the Red Cross and helped prepare additional sleeping accommodations for the

overflow of people. The remainder of the day we sorted boxes and boxes of donated clothes.

I experienced that the ministry of the School Sisters is never done. With “a love that gives everything again and again,” sisters work with children and families at refuge shelters in Arizona and Mexico and women’s co-ops. After sharing breakfast with some women and children at a respite center in Agua Prieta, we gave the kids colorful stuffed animals and dolls made by sisters in Baltimore. One of the girls began undressing the doll so she could give her a bath. Two of the other girls had already named their dolls, Maravilla and Maravella. The colorful dinosaurs brought a playful moment to some boys.



In addition to organizations, individuals looking to ease the hardship and pain immigrants are subjected to, offer support. Poncho, a man who was deported after living in the U.S. for 40 years, now drives his own emergency vehicle in Mexico to aid other migrants. He transported us while we were in Mexico.

On a hike through the desert to leave water, we saw crosses marking the places where people had died. We all would say, “Uno, dos, tres presente!” and then say the name of the person. It was like we were presenting them to God. On our last day, we participated in a desert ceremony to remember and pray for those who had died on their journey.

I come home grateful for the sisters who provided this opportunity and for the work they do. I have a deeper compassion for people caught at the border and a clearer understanding of the unjust treatment perpetrated by the





U.S. government. I understand the importance of knowledge and seeking truth. There are so many misconceptions circulating that it's hard to know what is real and what is not. If everyone could see how loving and warm the people on the other side of the wall are, then I am sure things would be different. The stereotypes that the administration and news outlets portray could not be farther from the truth. These people are not just coming to the U.S. on a whim. They are risking everything – walking hundreds of miles in the most extreme elements - for that small glimmer of hope that they may get to a place where they are free from political persecution and gang violence, and where they can find safety and put food on the table for themselves and their family.

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