



RESTORING HUMAN DIGNITY

An amazing chain of events began several months ago at Villa Assumpta when **Roz Spruill**, a member of the reception desk staff since 2015, “wanted to be enlightened.” Her enlightenment spread to many sisters from different congregations in Baltimore, to sisters and volunteers in McAllen, Texas, to children on the southern border of Texas, to a high school graduate in Maryland, to School Sisters ministering in the Comunidad Enlaces de Esperanza in Arizona, reaching children along the Arizona border.

Roz explained that several months ago, at the St. Matthews Catholic Church rectory in Baltimore where she volunteers, another parish member, **Sister Mary Alice McCabe, SNDdN**, was talking about her work with the humanitarian crisis happening along the U.S. - Mexico border. Sister Mary Alice, who recently returned from 40 years of ministry in Brazil, has been assisting children and families in McAllen, Texas, a small town along the U.S. – Mexico border for a year or so now. She and many other sisters have been providing assistance at a humanitarian respite center there.

After days, sometimes months in the ICE detention centers in McAllen, a lucky few families and individuals out of the thousands seeking safety and a better life in the U.S. are allowed to enter the country to wait for further processing.



They are dropped off at the bus station located just across the street from the Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley's Humanitarian Respite Center and met by volunteers who bring them to the center. After undergoing weeks of hardship and dangerous conditions migrating to the U.S. border, followed by deplorable conditions in cages at the detention centers, families receive compassionate care in a safe environment at the respite center. The center provides legal orientation and general information, a meal and water, hygiene products and a shower, clean clothes, temporary shelter, medical supplies and assistance if needed, and transportation services.

Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J., runs the respite center. She was instrumental in its establishment five years ago to address the influx of immigrants coming to the U.S. fleeing persecution and gang violence. When asked what she is doing at the center, Sister Norma replied, "Restoring human dignity and hope."

Since then, more than 150,000 people have come through the respite center's doors, receiving food, shelter, medical attention and a place to stay before continuing their trek to connect with family and friends in the U.S.

How is it that upwards of 300 people per day streaming into the center can be tended to? "It's a miracle," says Sister Mary Alice. She explains that at the entrance of the center are a half dozen or more volunteers who welcome the refugees and help them place a call to their relatives in this country informing them of their arrival and if needed, requesting funds for transportation. "Every family has a contact

number for someone here in the U.S. In a day or two they are on their way."

One of the many bright points in this border story are the 40,000 volunteers who have been supporting the families and individuals at the respite center over the five years since it opened. Sister Mary Alice explains, "The volunteers are a marvelous array of people who come to help - from every walk of life: Rabbis, Muslims, Mormons, Shamans, Presbyterians, Baptists, college and high school students and even the "Winter Texans" who come over the winter months to volunteer." She adds, "You are part of a large group who want to help these people. The immigrants are so grateful."



Once Roz learned more about Sister Mary Alice's ministry and the treacherous conditions and harrowing experiences these people endure, especially the children, Roz thought of Sister Clara Beall, who for more than 30 years, ran the Hobby Shop at Villa Assumpta. Roz shared the plight of what was happening at the border and the trauma and scarring children endure. **Sister Clara Beall, SSND, 86**, rallied her team of a six-sister crew, two octogenarians and the others in their 90s - including two sisters who are 99 years old - that meet up on Mondays to create dinosaurs, dogs and dolls for children. The sisters have boxed up their third shipment of dozens and dozens of these carefully crafted items, which Sister Mary Alice McCabe, SNDDn picks up in Baltimore and transports to the children in McAllen.

In order to keep up with the heavy demand for her intricate dolls and whimsical

animals, Sister Clara has set up in effect, an assembly line in the former chapel at Villa Assumpta. For hours at a time she cuts, pins and sews the many pieces needed for each item. Once sewn, she stacks the pieces in containers and brings them up to her team of interfaith helpers made up of SSND, Carmelites and SNDDn, every Monday morning, where sisters remove pins, turn the pieces that are inside-out, right-side in while others help stuff the items. The sisters also enjoy helping dress the dolls all the way down to their lace-trimmed bloomers. Sister Clara points out that the effort has helped these elderly sisters feel needed too. She then heads back to her workshop, where she carefully paints on faces, ties bows and braids the doll hair made of yarn before she packs up the items, 50 at a time, for the journey south.





Thanks to Roz, Sister Mary Alice and Sister Clara have become friends through their shared ministry of providing support to families on the border. Both celebrating their 60th jubilee this year, Sister Clara said, “You are my salvation!” Sister Mary Alice replied, “It’s mutual. You are mine too.” Sister Mary Alice describes how Sister Clara’s handmade dolls and animals are received by the children. Sisters take these special symbols of love to families who, after a brief stay at the respite center, are now boarding buses to meet family members or sponsors in the U.S. The sisters bend down to meet a child’s eyes when they present these small tokens of hope. “The children clutch the dolls and examine the intricate and colorful clothes. They talk to them. They show them off to everyone. And boys love the dinosaurs. Dinosaurs transcend cultures and really make sense to them.” Sister Clara smiled when she heard this and said, “The children know they are loved.”

The student in Baltimore touched by Roz’s desire to be enlightened is **Kallie Welton**, a recent high school graduate of Maryvale Prep, an SNDDn school in Baltimore. Kallie has been active in social justice work and is participating in the Mission Awareness Process (MAP) this month in Douglas, Arizona, an intercultural program sponsored by the Schools Sisters of Notre Dame of the Atlantic-Midwest Province. The MAP experience is designed to help participants learn more about migrant concerns while exploring life in a diverse border community. This week, Kallie is transporting Sister Clara’s dolls and toys for children at humanitarian centers in the Comunidad Enlaces de Esperanza, a blended, binational, bicultural community in the southeast corner of Arizona.



Sister Judy Bourg, SSND, who coordinates the MAP Arizona program, upon hearing about the handcrafted items said, “This is such a moving act of love of the sisters! What a sincere effort to relieve the pain of these children who are caught in the sins of our immigration system. So grateful to the sisters for offering such a meaningful gift for the children.”

School Sisters of Notre Dame have been ministering in Douglas – Agua Prieta for nine years. Sister Judy explains,

Our ministry here in the borderlands take many forms. We are involved in a humanitarian aid center and shelter for migrants and refugee families in Agua Prieta, Mexico, across the border from Douglas. We also work with a group of women who have formed a sewing and garden cooperative, and sponsor a small workshop where migrants learn to build furniture using recycled pallets. On the U.S. side our focus is on preventing deaths in the desert, by strategically placing bottles of water along the paths used by migrants, and in remembering those who have died during passage by placing memorial crosses at the places in the desert where they perished. The current humanitarian crisis has called us to become more involved in the migrant/refugee shelters in our area so we volunteer at and offer financial support to two shelters in Mexico and two respite centers in the U.S.

Sister Judy added, “These experiences have been moments of deep sadness, knowing that people have left their entire lives behind and have endured such hardship. They are also moments of joy, as we are able to accompany these people on their journey to new, and hopefully fuller and safer lives.”



We invite you to take a moment to read the latest Just Act, [“All Problems Solved”? A Call for Perspective and Policy Shift at the U.S. Border](#), to learn more about the detention camps at the U.S. southern border, and [use your Voter Voice](#) to speak out against the inhumane treatment of migrants. Also, please note, the School Sisters of Notre Dame of the Central Pacific Province are coordinating a new MAP program in San Antonio and Rio Grande City, Texas, accepting their first participants in July 2020. For further information on MAP South Texas Border, please contact Sister Regina Palacios at rpalacios@ssndcp.org. For further information on MAP Douglas, Arizona please contact Sister Judy Bourg at jbourg@ssndcp.org.

