

Knox Presbyterian Supplies Essentials for El Paso Refugee Welcome Center Mission

Ask Joy and Jim Klas of Knox Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis what prompted them to drive a rented U-Haul truck from the Twin Cities to El Paso, Texas, with supplies for a group of welcome centers for refugees, Jim will tell you: "Joy has had a deep concern about the border crisis since the first reports of children being separated appeared."

"She has sought ways to help but we don't speak Spanish and we aren't lawyers. We have contributed some funds to some organizations, but she wanted to do something more hands-on. It is not possible to do anything directly with the detention facilities directly except for certain officials under court orders. She did a lot of research online and found the organization in El Paso."

The organization was a refugee welcome center run by volunteers from El Paso churches and overseen by Annunciation Catholic Church in El Paso. Joy communicated directly with them about their needs and opportunities. Knox Church became the collection point, with Knox staff and members providing many donations and valuable support in sorting, boxing and labeling the donations and packing the truck with jeans, underwear, shoelaces, socks, diapers, tote bags and some toiletries. The clothing items were for all ages/genders.

The collection effort was truly ecumenical, with donations from several Twin Cities area churches of different denominations, including The Table - a sister church also housed at Knox, along with friends and neighbors of church members and even one professional association based in Oklahoma.

After a trip of 1,585 miles over three days (at eight miles to the gallon), the supplies were distributed to two of the welcome centers in El Paso. Pictures of the delivery and the centers are not available as they keep a very low profile for security purposes. The buildings, converted warehouses, are not identified by any signs and cannot be accessed without prearrangements with the staff. The importance of the security measures was reinforced when the El Paso mass shooting occurred the morning after the delivery by an assailant targeting Mexicans. Fortunately, neither the Klases nor anyone associated with the welcome centers came under fire.

Jim's description of the centers: "Run by the El Paso churches, they receive refugees from the southern border that have been released from government custody pending further case review, because they can show family or sponsors capable of supporting them in the interim. However, the sponsors can be anywhere in the country. Without the welcome centers, the refugees would be released onto the streets of El Paso without aid. The centers help the refugees make contact with their families/sponsors to make travel arrangements. In the interim, they provide the refugees with housing, meals, clothing or other personal needs they may have, medical support, and other help. The facilities are spartan, but better than the street. There are similar types of facilities in many other border towns.

The centers in El Paso and elsewhere continue to need help. However, their exact needs change constantly. Anyone seeking to provide aid must make direct contact with the volunteer organizations to make sure they are providing what is actually needed and in the proper amounts and packaging. The easiest method to participate is to provide cash donations. That way the organizations can adapt on the fly to the needs of the moment. To make a donation to the El Paso welcome centers visit the website: <http://annunciationhouse.org/financial-donations/>.

The most important result of the trip to El Paso, beyond the actual supplies provided, was the recognition that there are things that anyone can do to help, even if you don't speak Spanish, aren't a lawyer and don't live near the border. It doesn't even take a truck or a trip. All it takes is a willingness to help.