



A WEEK BEHIND THE ASYLUM LINES IN TIJUANA

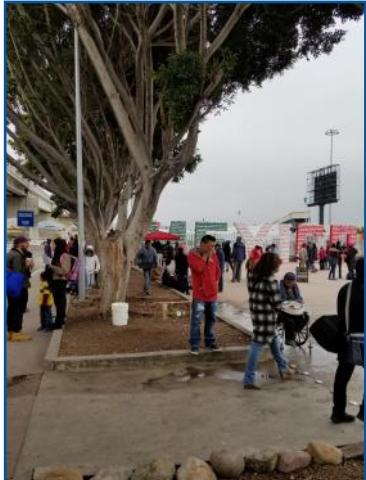


What's a privileged, English-speaking 59-year-old, former Tar Heel sorority girl doing volunteering with a small non-profit project based in Tijuana that shares space with a couple of home-grown organizations? Yep, I found myself asking the same question. What in the heck had I signed up to do?



We've all read about the border crisis and it continues to be a "hot topic" and sometimes even a "flavor of the protestor month" on occasion. Time passes, other stories take precedence on the center stage.

STAY AWAKE – I'm here to tell you the border crisis is still there, and it is worse. If I hadn't seen it myself, I would never have believed it – never.



GATHERING AT THE PLAZA:

In the mornings, around 7 am, the plaza on the Tijuana side of the San Ysidro border crossing starts to wake-up. Street vendors set up shop and men, women, children of all ages suddenly appear. Some have suitcases, and others arrive with nothing more than a paper bag. All begin to mill around the plaza waiting patiently. Like clockwork, two backyard tents appear, then a couple of women begin setting up for what will become several hours of tense waiting to see if today might be the day one's "number" is called, and a life is changed.

THE LIST:

It's called **The List** and it is surprisingly well-organized, given that no government agency (Mexican or American) officially claims responsibility for its existence. The legality of the list is questionable since both US and international law allow for those fleeing persecution to seek asylum at any time, regardless of the method of entry. There is no numerical quota for those seeking asylum in the U.S.

With the tacit support of the US and Mexican governments, the list is run entirely by other asylum seekers who have been in Tijuana long enough to know the ropes and how the system works. The "list keepers," usually women, oversee



Photo courtesy of *This American Life*

adding the names of new arrivals to the list. In addition, these women relay the numbers and names at the top of the list once the Mexican authorities have been advised by the US how many asylum seekers can be processed that day. The tents are the power base. This is where all the action happens. Everyone congregates around the area, with some adding their names to the list and seeking answers for the first time; while others come to see how far they have moved up the list.

Like *Lord of the Flies*, new arrivals quickly learn that there is a loose governance structure where veteran asylum seekers take the lead in preventing this made-up asylum process from breaking down and becoming complete chaos. There are unwritten rules that must be followed if you are going to make it. You can't "cut" the line, but if you have some sort of emergency, you can try to make your case to the veteran list keepers at the tents. If the case is compelling, there may be a vote to determine if a person's reasoning is strong enough to support moving them to the front. I'm wondering if a couple I met from Cameroon were voted "in" and allowed to cut the list. She is seven months pregnant with twins, and she has traveled non-stop from Bolivia to Tijuana. Her husband is a teacher from the English-speaking part of Cameroon, and both were severely beaten on multiple occasions by the French-

speaking military authority. They lost their first child when the wife miscarried after being beaten unconscious by military soldiers. When I met her, she hadn't seen a doctor and was having severe abdominal pains.



OUR PROJECT:

The couple from Cameroon are some of the lucky ones. They heard about our project because we work the crowd each morning introducing ourselves. We invite asylum seekers to our office to hear a talk about how asylum works, as well as what to expect when their number is finally called, and they go to the border. Each afternoon, our project provides one-on-one



consultations with immigration attorneys and, depending on the week, there is a medical clinic available to see anyone who is in need. We offer lunch to those who come to our office, and in the evening another of the non-profit organizations in our building offers free hot food. The week we volunteered, we served several hundred people who had travelled from at least 15 different countries all over the world.

THE LINE:

Currently, it takes over a month to get to the front of the line. In the past, the wait has been as long as ten weeks to make it to the front of the line. Those with higher numbers anxiously wait in hopes that today might be the day their lives change forever. They hope that today is when they are finally allowed to go to the US border to tell their personal story. They are eager to share what propelled them to leave their home country where they have lived their entire lives and travel for weeks through different countries to get to Tijuana. Many have walked through the bush, staying in camps, and some were detained, fingerprinted and



questioned by US officials in other countries along the way.



Around 8 am, someone begins calling “the numbers,” and those families lucky enough to be selected for the day begin their wait to load onto vans to be transported to the US border by the Mexican Border Patrol. On our first day, there were

about 25 names were called. Another day 50 or so, then about 5 names after that. It's a U.S. capacity issue, we're told. During our week in Tijuana, less than 100 people were permitted to cross the border, and **The List** continues to grow. There were about 3,000 individuals waiting to be called on the day we left Mexico.

The “lucky ones” are a mixed lot. Those who are “in the know” come dressed in their warmest

layer of clothing closest to their skin. Those who don't know any better are dressed in sandals or t-shirts with a jacket as their outer layer of clothing. Often, these families aren't sure what to expect, they just know they can't go home. They are unaware that if the US denies their asylum request, they will be deported back to their home country – the very place they are fleeing.

PREPARATION FOR ENTRY INTO THE US:

As soon as our organization spots the families called for the day, we work quickly to explain a few critical points:

Prepare to have US officials try and separate the family. To try and prevent that, we help them complete a paper that asks the US government to keep the family together, and we make sure the family has birth certificates showing parentage otherwise, there is a good chance the family will be separated.

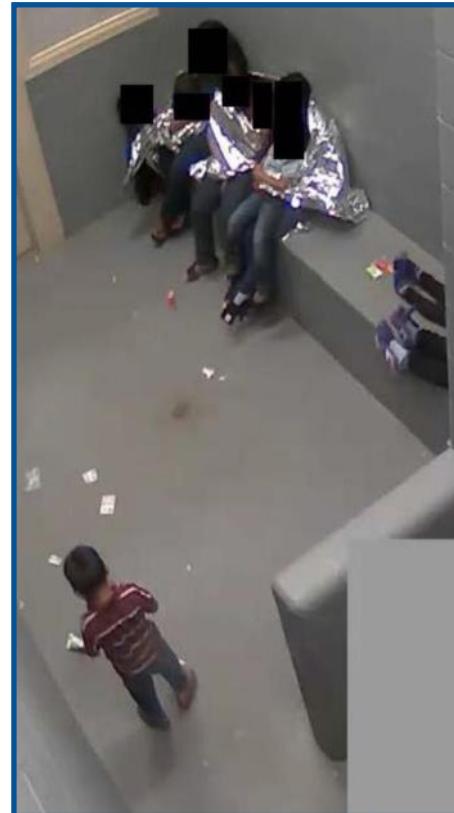


Photo courtesy of Irc.org

US Customs and Border Patrol will confiscate the family's belongings and direct each person to shed all clothing except the layer of clothes closest to the body – anything else is collected and held in a separate location.

Understand that the family will be put into a windowless room that is kept at 48.2 degrees Fahrenheit. The room has no furniture or bedding and is lit 24 hours a day. It is likely the family will stay in that room anywhere from 2 – 14 days. In Spanish, the room is called a "hielera", meaning ice box.

If the family has a US Contact, we **use a Sharpie Pen to write the US contact's name and telephone number** on their arm because telephones and other devices are also confiscated by the US authorities. We also use Sharpie pens to write parent contact information on the arms of children, in the event the family is separated.

Unaccompanied minors: Should avoid the list because Mexican authorities often place these people into a system that ultimately results in deportation back to the home country under the theory that the minor should be "reunited" with his or her family – regardless of the reasons for the minor's departure from the home country (often a result of domestic or gang violence).

We provide the families with heavy socks since many of them arrive with thin, cotton ankle socks, and we try to make sure everyone has a warm sweater as the first layer of clothing, closest to the body.

Given the short period of time we have each morning, we do our best to explain the credible fear and asylum process. If there is time, we make sure they know to put the most detailed facts forward which meet our definition of asylum, and we remind them that being consistent in conveying the narrative is critical to winning at the first stage of the process.

We explain that if they “win” the first part (called passing a credible fear interview), they will either be moved to a detention center (often a privately operated prison) to await their day in court before an Immigration Judge, or they may be returned to Mexico under a new, controversial plan that returns some families back to Mexico to wait for their hearing. A lucky few might be able to leave the detention center by being fitted with an ankle bracelet to keep the family accountable to the US government. Most don’t understand that it can take months and even years before the Immigration Judge hears a family’s case. Further, those individuals who are returned to Mexico to wait for their court dates are left in a strange land where they may wait for months without support or resources. Often, they lack the opportunity for competent legal counsel.



These new policies have caused confusion, pain and heartache for everyone, including Mexicans living in Tijuana who are seeing their city fast becoming a holding bin for everyone fleeing from harm in their home countries. These people often have very few resources, so feeding themselves and finding shelter are top priorities daily. Shelters and non-profit centers offering food and housing are stretched beyond imagination. There are few organizations working to help these individuals and so this crisis continues to grow with no end in sight.

REFLECTIONS:

When I reflect on my week at the border, it underscores America’s misguided priorities. Not only are we requiring asylum seekers to wait at the border, we are deliberately holding them in cold, windowless rooms while they wait to talk to an American official about why they are fleeing their country. In many cases their “reward”, if the official believes them, is to move

them to a detention center or to return them back to Mexico where they must wait months for a hearing before an Immigration Judge.

In 22 years of immigration law practice, most of the clients I see don't wish to leave their countries, but they feel desperate and fear for their lives. They hope for peace and an opportunity to feed and care for their families without worrying about death or serious harm.

Why not rethink the current investments in border issues? Take the billions being spent on building a wall that many doubt will yield the intended result and instead, invest in a Marshall Plan approach to strengthening our neighbors in Central America so that they don't feel compelled to flee their homes.



REGARDLESS, EVERYONE deserves to be treated with the human dignity – everyone deserves a chance to make their case for protection in the United States.

Don't close your eyes or ears to this crisis. Listen for the quiet whisper of your child's friend or take notice of the downcast gaze of your office cleaner or even your neighbor and act now.

If you would like to help, these are some suggestions:

Al Otro Lado (AOL) is a non-profit organization based in California and operates the Tijuana project for which I volunteered. <https://alotrolado.org/take-action/donate/>

The address is: Post Office Box 32578, Los Angeles, CA 90032

The Southern Poverty Law Center has a project called southeast immigrant freedom initiative that provides legal representation to detained immigrants being held in the South. This is a worthy project as the Immigration Courts in the South have some of the lowest asylum approval numbers of any other part of the country. <https://www.splcenter.org/our-issues/immigrant-justice/southeast-immigrant-freedom-initiative-en>.

The address is: 400 Washington Avenue, Washington, DC 36104 (designate Southeast Immigrant Freedom Initiative on your contribution)

If you'd like to more information on ways to support the Al Otro Lado project where I volunteered, feel free to reach out to me directly:

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SO, what did this old sorority gal learn from the experience? I learned that relevance is what you make it. If you can't speak Spanish and you aren't up-to-speed on today's nuanced asylum, you are still important to the process. Genuine concern, kind words, coupled with a cautionary touch to the arm or shoulder can put almost anyone at ease. Listening without judgment can create the space for real breakthroughs in bringing an asylum seeker's narrative to the forefront. Most importantly, educating and connecting all of us to the work going on in Tijuana is critical to the process if we want to see changes.