

## **“I GUESS THEY’LL HAVE TO ARREST ME, TOO”**

### **ON THE BORDER WITH SHIRLEY JEWELL**

by Mark Adams, Coordinator, Frontera de Cristo

“I guess they’ll have to arrest me, too.”

These words are prophetic words.

These words are healing words.

These words lifted my spirits when I was very discouraged.

And these words were the last words I expected to hear from Shirley Jewell, the 92-year-old founding member of Frontera de Cristo whom I was visiting on July 2, 2019.

When I arrived that day in Shirley’s living room, she almost immediately asked me, “Mark, what is the matter? You look so down.” Shirley has always shown me and my family such care and concern, but that day she was visibly worried about me.

I shared with her that I had just learned that our government was going to retry Scott Warren, a professor of Arizona State University and a volunteer with No More Deaths. He had been arrested and charged with two counts of criminal conspiracy in the furtherance of illegal entry and harboring of two men from Honduras who were in distress in the Sonoran Desert.

Earlier in the summer, Joca Gallegos and I had responded to the call from our sister organization No More Deaths for clergy to be present at Scott’s first trial in which he testified. It was one of the most spiritual experiences I have ever had. With deep humility and calmness, Scott shared without fear about his life-giving actions. His testimony was grounded in three things: reverence for creation, the importance of recognizing the dignity of every human being, and the practice of hospitality found in almost every spiritual tradition.

Ten people on the jury voted to acquit him and two voted to convict. Despite the lopsided tally, our government announced earlier that day to retry him. I told Shirley how disappointed I was in our government, first of all to try him in the first place, threatening him with 20 years in prison and a \$200,000 fine, but then after such a lopsided hung jury to decide to spend so much more time and energy and money to retry him for doing what Jesus, in Matthew 25, clearly said we are to do. I lamented that our government was increasingly declaring that it was illegal to be Christian.

Shirley looked at me and said: “Well, I guess that they are going to have to arrest me, too.”

She went on to tell me how over the years she had opened her doors to many people who were in transit, providing food, water, a listening ear, prayer, a phone to call loved ones. She said she never asked if they had papers to be in the country legally, she only saw human beings that God called her to love. These surprising words broke through my despair and unleashed a fountain of hope and challenged me not to lose faith.

Shirley grew up on a ranch in New Mexico and when she was a child, many of her friends spoke Spanish. She also took Spanish in high school and college, so when she and her husband John

moved to Douglas, Arizona, in the 1960s, she was glad to be able to communicate with people in both English and Spanish. Both Shirley and John were educators by vocation; she was a teacher at Stevenson Elementary School and he was one of the first teachers at Cochise College.

They joined First Presbyterian Church. Shirley sang in the choir, was a leader in the Presbyterian Women's group, and served as an elected elder of the church.

In 1984, when leaders of the national Presbyterian churches of Mexico and the United States were looking for leaders in Douglas to help found a binational ministry and to create a new model of being in ministry together, Shirley said yes.

Over the years, she has told me over and over again that she didn't know why she was asked because "I didn't really know much and didn't think I had anything to offer, except maybe knowing a little Spanish." But Shirley said yes.

In an interview with Steve Zeoli in 2023, she mentioned not knowing what to expect, but that the "excitement of being part of something new...just imagining what could happen...the two countries and churches maybe getting together somehow and understanding each other. So that was a nice thing, I thought, getting together our cultures, understanding one another. We lived right next door. Why not know each other and understand one another?"



Shirley being interviewed by Steve Zeoli in her living room, August 2023

To this day, the core tenet of Frontera de Cristo is cultivating relationships and understanding across borders as we seek to respond in faith to the realities of migration and the realities of the drug culture.

Shirley cherished the unexpected relationships which she formed over the years through the ministry of Frontera de Cristo. Amelia del Pozo, a single mother from San Luis Potosi, was

another of the early founders of Frontera de Cristo and a strong leader of the ministry for many years. The first Presbyterian worship services in Agua Prieta were held in her apartment in 1985.



Mara Salazar, Café Justo Manager, and Shirley Jewell, FDC Board Member, meet during the construction of the coffee shop.

“Amelia was a leader of leaders and a real go getter. You didn’t fool her. And she corrected quite a few men, too.” Shirley shared while remembering how this binational feminine duo of Frontera de Cristo sometimes encountered pushbacks from the macho culture. “There were so many things that we were not supposed to do as women, but God called us to be in this ministry and we were on a journey together.”

Shirley, together with Amelia and other early strong women leaders, set a path to take away obstacles for female leadership in the ministry. Because they said yes to God, they opened the door for Frontera de Cristo to be blessed by incredible female leaders throughout the years.

In 2016, when Shirley was serving her last active term on the Frontera de Cristo Board of Directors, she met Mara, Amelia’s granddaughter, for the first time as a grown-up, at the construction site of Café Justo y Más, a partnership of Café Justo, the CATPSIC drug rehab center, and Frontera de Cristo.

Mara was the first manager of the Café Justo coffee co-operative, and was overseeing the construction of the coffee shop. She currently serves on the Board of Frontera de Cristo.

Reflecting on the founding of Café Justo y Más, Shirley said: “I think it is marvelous. It’s a place where everybody meets. It’s a place also where we as US Americans who know nothing about Mexico meet and can begin to get to know the rich culture and faith of the Mexican people. [It is a place] where folks from Mexico can know who we are as Anglo Christians, and we can learn from them.”

Over the years, almost without fail, one of the first things Shirley asks me when I arrive for a visit is “how are we doing?” While she has not been able to be as active over the last years as she would have liked to have been in the ministry, she continues to hold the ministry deep in her heart and in her prayers.

“Being a part of Frontera de Cristo has just been marvelous. It has been perhaps not *the most* marvelous part of my life but *one of the most* marvelous parts of my life. It’s absolutely wonderful to have two languages going at the same time and there are no finer people than the people from Mexico I have worked with—very loving and giving.



FDC founding member Shirley Jewell with Doña Soraida Santiago, founding member of the Café Justo cooperative.



Rosario Viesca Dávila and Shirley enjoy each other's company at Frontera de Cristo's 40th anniversary celebration in October 2024.

"I thought I was doing something God wanted me to do. I think God expects us to love everyone, even though we are not always very lovable. But we are called to take care of one another and do what we can. I'm so happy that I have been a part of Frontera de Cristo. And I think that God is as well."

When Shirley said yes to God's call to be a part of a crazy thing called binational ministry, she did not imagine what it would become. The seeds that she and Amelia planted—as have many other women and men who said yes—have grown into many different plants and have borne fruit way beyond what they could ever have imagined.

"It's a dream came true. I didn't really have that dream 'til I got here."

Shirley died on January 21st at the age of 98 in the home where she and John raised their daughters. During the last weeks of her life, she rested in the living room where throughout the years she welcomed friends, family, the hungry, the thirsty, and friends she had never met before. She received the loving care of her daughters Robin and Wendy with the support of hospice.

During a recent visit, before I left, I asked Shirley what she would like us to pray for. She said, "Frontera de Cristo and my daughters. Pray that they will be okay when I am gone. Don't pray for me, I am in God's hands."

Please join us in thanksgiving for the life and ministry of Shirley Jewell—"Well done, good and faithful servant."