

MAKING CONNECTIONS AND BEING PRESENT

by Ruth Noel and Ray Nosbaum, FDC Volunteers



Ruth and Ray at the FDC office in Douglas

SINCE 2022, RAY AND I HAVE volunteered in DouglaPrieta (Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico). We are hosted by Frontera de Cristo, and volunteer principally, but not solely, at the Migrant Resource Center (MRC) in Agua Prieta, which is co-directed by Frontera de Cristo and CAME (Centro de Atención al Migrante "Exodus"). The MRC serves both those seeking asylum and those who have been denied permission to remain in the United States and have been returned to Mexico.

The whole time and experience at the border is special, a separate spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical experience than we have at home. This difference raises questions for us. How do we hold our experiences at the border together with what we experience at home? In both places, the people make the space—and it is all different. Our physical body and what it carries inside is the only connection to it all. It is hard to share even a little of it, let alone all of it, especially when there is pain and confusion in both places.

At the border, migrants experience the trauma of displacement, violence, and crossing the US/Mexico border. At home, people experience the trauma of the rising costs of housing and poor housing conditions that impact health and create uncertainty and instability. In both places, there can be a sense of not being safe or protected due to feeling profiled, treated unfairly, or not having access to resources because of one's personal appearance, behavior, citizenship, and/or economic status. We believe there is consent on our parts to be present to all of this, and even though we experience the chaos and pain it causes, we commit to bringing the "Beloved Community," as Martin Luther King, Jr. frequently talked about.

DouglaPrieta is a gift because it allows us to experience the camaraderie of being with other people on a daily basis, something that is often lacking back home where time with people is frequently only on Zoom. Life in DouglaPrieta is also slower-paced, perhaps because we do not schedule as many activities for ourselves, making it more likely we can focus, listen, and be fully present to whomever we are with, wherever we go. We take time to hear folks' stories, hopes, gratitude, resilience, frustration, fears, pain, grief and/or occasionally anger, and when appropriate, share ours.

Serving at the MRC is a lesson in expecting the unexpected, in how to be present in the moment, and in being flexible. Frequently, when we arrive at MRC for our shift, we are unsure who or what situations we will encounter. Things can be hectic, making it difficult to be fully present to folks. If lots of



Ruth & Ray at the MRC with Sr Maribel, Sr Lourdes, and Kim

people arrive around the same time with various requests/needs to be met, and we are preparing a meal at the time, this is especially difficult. How do we give full attention to one person when there are the needs of all to consider? When language is a challenge, like it is for Ray, there is such a feeling of inadequacy, yet somehow everyone is able to get by, enjoy each other, and be willing to get to know each other better.

While engaged in these direct and immediate activities, we are constantly trying to understand the position/role of MRC in the context of the whole USA/Mexican migrant picture and trying to make the MRC a beacon of light for migrants who pass through Agua Prieta. How can we not be grateful for the many blessings we have when those whose lives have been uprooted by fear of or actual experience of violence, coupled with the universal desire for the best for their children, express gratitude to the MRC staff, to other volunteers, and to us for a warm welcome, a meal, a shower, a change of clothing, or medical assistance?

The border and its impact *cannot* be ignored! We experienced such a contrast each day as we walked both ways across the border. To enter Mexico, we did not need to show our ID and were quickly waved through. If we were bringing small amounts of donated items across to the MRC, Mexican customs agents briefly looked, and we were on our way. There was never a wait of more than a minute or two. To enter the United States, however, would usually take 5–10 minutes, depending on the line, although a few times it took 30–45 minutes. To pass through the guarded turnstile, we had to show ID before being able to continue to the main entry. There our pictures were taken, our passports were scanned, and we were asked if we had anything to declare. Had we had anything our bag would have been scanned as well. For those people driving across the border to the US, it is more complicated, sometimes resulting in waits of 2 hours or more. The border crossing can be such a disruption to local people's lives.

As we returned to the US from Mexico, we passed by the migrants whom we had served at the MRC, who are seeking asylum and living on the street. Of course, they would see us, and we would often wave to each other. What did they feel seeing us pass so easily simply because we were US citizens and could go wherever we wanted?



Ruth, Miriam Maldonado, and Bridich, coordinating some of the services provided at the MRC



Ruth and Ray with Bridich Saragos, Assistant Coordinator of the MRC

It is such a privilege to get to know, share, and learn from the dedicated and amazing people we meet—the staff, volunteers, migrants, friends, and the people who live in Douglas Prieta. We stay in contact with friends and colleagues while back at home, and look forward to reconnecting when we return. We also try to bring home the lessons of direct face-to-face experience by scheduling more in-person meetings with colleagues at home. Additionally, people at home are so genuine in wanting to know about our experience at the border that it helps us feel like we are ambassadors to both places. Is it a wonder that we keep returning to Douglas Prieta? □