

The Magic Chef

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It's 103 degrees and my son, Nelson and I are at Sam's Club in El Paso. The goal? To meet Dr. Eva Moya from UTEP and buy a freezer for a migrant shelter in Juárez named Respetitrans. Originally it was a shelter for transgender migrants but now there are roughly 240 migrants there, mostly families and only one freezer.

This is part of an extraordinary program called Dignity Mission which was started by Jack and Cheryl Ferrell in Placitas, New Mexico. When I first met them, they were putting together loads of food and clothing to take to El Paso and unload in Dr. Moya's garage. She and her volunteers would then take everything across the border to different shelters.

When I visited the Ferrells for a second time, the program had grown enormously. They and other volunteers were loading a large U Haul with roughly three tons of food and clothing.

On my first trip Dr. Moya and I took a load across to two shelters and I could see the dozens of families at Respetitrans. When she mentioned the issue of the freezer, I agreed to help.

Now we're leaving Sam's Club - they don't have anything in stock – and headed to Home Depot where we are lucky to find two very helpful employees, Turi and Victoria who lead us to the freezer area, then point up about five levels to where our Magic Chef freezer sits, towering over us. They block off the aisle for safety reasons and then Turi ascends via a crane to get our prize.

After squeezing the freezer into the back of my car, we head to Juárez. The first challenge is to work our way into the Friday afternoon line of traffic headed south across the border bridge. As I've learned in

previous bridge crossings, there is no such thing as courtesy in Juárez-related traffic or letting someone from a side street into the main line

The second challenge is always Mexican customs. We get a green light in the customs lane but then an officer notices the huge load in my car and appears at our window. When I flash the Home Depot receipt, however, he just waves me through. The Magic Chef price of \$247.89 falls below their \$400 threshold. Nonetheless, crossing through Mexican customs is always the most nerve wracking part of these trips.

The multi-story Respetitrans building is close to the border bridge and there is a narrow street next to its entrance where we can park in the shade. As I mentioned earlier, it's 103 degrees so I am rapidly wearing down. A crowd gathers. Most of these migrants are from the central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras but we also meet a family from Ecuador and several from the state of Michoacan in Mexico. There are 24 newly arrived families and Eva gives each one a back pack filled with basics hygienic items.

Grecia Herrera, the manager helps us. A ice cream vender named Emilio watches from across the street; most of the kids are already enjoying his popsicles. It's a moment of extreme happiness as the Magic Chef is unloaded and carried inside to be installed and as the newly arrived families open their backpacks. I want to stay, sit somewhere where it is cool, watch the installation of the Magic Chef, wait for the first ice cubes to appear, interview the migrants, take more photos but the heat has ground me down and night is coming. It's time to get back in the airconditioned Subaru and head for El Paso.

Buying the Magic Chef is just a drop in the bucket compared to the needs of just this one building with its 240 migrants but it's a positive, visible gesture. Nelson, Dr. Moya and I feel a moment of satisfaction, knowing at the same time that there is more to do. A stove. Furniture. More back packs. More food. Children's shoes.

Vice President Kamala Harris has now visited the border, even though only to the US side. Former US Senator Ken Salazar will make a fine Ambassador to Mexico. The Biden administration will ease its restrictions and maybe shelters like the excellent one in Deming will be able to reopen. Nonetheless, humanity on the border will always be dependent on people like Dr Moya and Grecia Herrera. It's an honor to be able to work with them.

Morgan Smith has been writing about border issues for many years and can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.