

## **Women Leaders on the Border**

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With 2025 coming to an end, I want to recognize and thank a number of women who are leaders on the US-Mexican border, women who receive little recognition but who are vital to the wellbeing of thousands. It has been a special privilege working with them.

### **Grecia Herrera**

“Persistencia” or persistence. That is a driving force for Grecia Herrera who founded the migrant shelter, Respettrans in November 2018. Located in the center of Juárez, it was originally intended to be a shelter for transgender migrants. That didn’t work out so the focus turned to families.

At its peak, Respettrans housed as many as several hundred migrants, all waiting for their initial asylum hearings. What is extraordinary about this facility is that, given Grecia’s day job as a nurse, the migrants are basically in charge of everything – cooking, cleanliness, discipline.

There was a school for the kids with a focus on learning English and getting prepared for life in the US.

Now the number of migrants has been greatly reduced; asylum is no longer a realistic option for them. What comes next? Converting the space to a shelter for women who have been abused perhaps? Herrera is persistent – unstoppable in fact – and she will find a solution.

### **Dr. Eva Moya.**

Eva Moya was a first generation college student at the University of Texas at El Paso and was initially admitted on a probationary basis because of her English. She now has a PhD, is the Chair of the Department of Social Work, and is the key person in the El Paso area on migrant issues. In 2026, she will be working with Grecia on ways to possibly repurpose Respettrans as well as continuing her leadership on issues of the homeless and migrants in the El Paso-Juárez region.

### **Eunice Herrera.**

Like Eva Moya, Eunice Herrera was a first-generation student at UTEP. Her parents have ministries in both Ascención, Mexico and El Paso and helped found La Casa de Amor Para Niños in Palomas, Mexico together with Jim and Pat Noble from Santa Fe. Eunice was a board member of La Casa even as a

teenager and continues her service, even though she is now a practicing attorney and a partner in Santa Fe law firm of Vrapí Weeks.

In September she was named one of Forty under Forty by the Santa Fe Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

One of her goals for 2026 is to see that all the high school seniors La Casa is supporting with scholarships in Palomas get admitted to college. This is a major challenge because many, especially the young men, tend to drop out before graduating from high school. Some will need tutoring in order to be able to pass the admission test.

### **Sandra Magallanes**

Sandra crossed the border at Las Chepas some fifteen miles west of Palomas, Mexico in 1990 and spent years struggling to survive in the US. This included a stint working in a meat packing plant where a slab of frozen beef slammed into her shoulder, causing permanent damage.

Finally, she received her US citizenship on June 25, 2021. She says, "I am an immigrant like many are but the United States is truly my home."

Sandra has been the key supporter on migrants in Palomas as well as Deming. What will come next in 2026 given the closing of the border?

### **Angelica Parra.**

We met Angelica at the border wall between Sunland Park, New Mexico and Anapra, Mexico on December 24, 2020. She was handing food and clothing through the bars of the wall to families on the Mexican side. Born in Mexico, she worked as a police officer in Juárez for thirteen years before coming to the United States and becoming a member of the US Border Patrol. Now she has had to take a medical retirement because of job-related injuries.

Her goal now is to assist a colony of Tarahumara Indians who live in the Sierra south of Palomas.

### **Lorena Solares.**

For twelve years, Lorena was the teacher at the tiny school for Tarahumara Indians on the west edge of Juárez and lived in a tiny casita next to the school building. I always felt this was exhausting and potentially dangerous work and am pleased that she has been re-assigned to Chihuahua where her family lives and where she can continue working on a master's degree. She is also teaching in a school for indigenous children, a larger one than the one in Juárez. This is uniquely challenging work because many do not speak Spanish, only their indigenous dialect. She, more than anyone, is up to that task.

### **Ivonne Romero**

Ivonne, the long-time owner of the Pink Store in Palomas has always been a community leader. Her store not only offers fine meals for Americans who have crossed the border for medical or dental appointments but has an enormous array of art and gifts from all over Mexico. For years, her stores ( she has one in Silver City as well.) have been major outlets for artisans throughout Mexico.

In 2026, she will be hosting a monthly market that will provide for the needs of local citizens.

**Cecilia Vazquez.**

Cecilia is a Mixteca Indian who migrated to the Anapra area just west of Juárez from an impoverished part of the state of Oaxaca in hopes of finding a better life for herself and her family. Every day, you can find her just south of the Santa Teresa Port of Entry, trying to make a living selling various trinkets to those who are waiting in their cars to enter the United States. The weather is always brutal – blazing hot in summer and a sharp biting wind in the winter – but her determination to survive is what makes her special.

**Guadalupe “ Lupe” Ayala**

Lupe and her now-deceased husband, Beto started a second mental asylum, Punto Zero on the west edge of Juárez in 2017 and it now houses thirty to forty patients, many of whom are older, have been abandoned, and need residential care. Even though she has formed an important relationship with a powerful Colorado NGO, Missions Ministries – it has built a women’s dormitory, a kitchen and dining area and a bathing facility for her – her life is a day -to-day struggle financially and logistically. Now, however, a father and son team from El Paso, Art Romero and Art Romero, Jr. have stepped in and are helping raise money. The key to survival, however, is the sheer tenacity and determination of this woman.

Mexico now has its first woman president, Claudia Sheinbaum and she is pushing for more opportunities for women. I hope she will learn about and come to support the ones I have cited above because they are the leaders of today.

Morgan Smith travels to the border at least monthly to document conditions there and assist a number of humanitarian organizations. He can be reached at [Morgan-smit@comcast.net](mailto:Morgan-smit@comcast.net).