

La Luz de la Esperanza

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It was a great pleasure to be in Palomas, Mexico again. People were wearing masks and the town looked surprisingly prosperous. Even though the Pink Store had few customers, there were stores open on the main street and even a new restaurant called Mr. Sushi, Estilo Sonora.

After a decade of border trips at least once a month, I hadn't been across since February and things can change rapidly. For example, I visited Reina Cisneros and her family, a family I have been helping for years and the boy, Rubén had grown so tall I didn't recognize him. He is the serious one of the family, the student and now is two years from completing high school. Can I find a way whereby he could go to college? His handsome older brother, Enrique dropped out before finishing high school, went to work in a bar and was stabbed in the neck and has barely survived.

The key, however, was finding Esperanza Lozoya and her food program, La Luz de la Esperanza. I first learned of Esperanza through her sister, Lupita Otero who ran a food bank in Columbus almost ten years ago. Their father, Andrew Sanchez was a humanitarian leader on the border and they obviously inherited his commitment.

The first time I met Esperanza, she and her daughter, Sofía were running a summer food bank by the park in Palomas and handing out some 600 lunch boxes a day.

Later we drove south from Palomas to two tiny rural communities – Colonia Modelo and Guadalupe Victoria, carrying beans and medicine as well as new shoes that had been donated by Nina Houle, a generous woman in Santa Fe who owns a shoe store called On Your Feet. Esperanza has made a lifetime commitment to the poor in this area and was also a very savvy traveler in an area that can be dangerous for women travelers.

For safety reasons, she didn't announce her arrival time in advance and continued on to El Entronque where we met Manuel Hinojos, the Police Comandante who sent an officer with us back to Colonia Modelo. He always provided her with protection when she went into these rural areas.

What I remember most was visiting a filthy camp for migrant workers at the edge of Guadalupe Victoria, not far from the prosperous homes of the local farmers who had brought in the migrants to work their crops. It was shameful.

Esperanza then moved to the mountains south of Palomas and I didn't see her for years. Now she is back in Palomas, has fixed up the building where she had previously had a lunch program for seniors and is once again helping the poor in Palomas.

Food is an issue everywhere. My wife and I work as volunteers with the Food Depot in Santa Fe and often there are as many as 500 cars lined up for a box of food on the distribution days. The problem is obviously much worse in towns like Palomas where there is little government support for the poor.

I arrived late for Esperanza's program. Originally her intent had been to feed seniors but she learned that there are many kids in need and now she feeds roughly 60-80 per day. She has closed her seating areas, the kids now come in and receive a container with their meal in it. Esperanza and her staff are careful to obey health and safety procedures.

What does the future hold here? Palomas seems to have handled the pandemic well – or maybe has just been lucky – but what about the underlying problem of poverty and a lack of jobs?

At La Casa de Amor para Niños, a residential program for young women who have been abandoned by their families, the goal is not just education but education beyond high school so that these young women as well as others in Palomas who have been given scholarships can qualify for higher level, more skilled and better paying jobs.

The combination of programs like these – La Luz with the basic task of providing food and La Casa offering higher level education – can change this impoverished community but it is a slow process requiring tremendous commitment and persistence.

Morgan Smith writes frequently about border issues and can be reached at Morgan-smith@comcast.net.