

## **Tiny Gestures at Vision in Action**

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It seemed like a tiny gesture, my wife, Sherry's insistence on taking these Walmart 4 X 6 photos of women patients at the mental asylum, Vision in Action in Juárez and putting them in paper frames and then pasting gold stars on the frames.

Then we drove to Juárez, a trip that I have been making at least monthly for more than a decade and that Sherry has made a number of times with me since our marriage in 2018. Our first stop was the new dormitory for some 24 women that we had raised the money for several years ago. Probably for the first time in their lives, these 24 women have a decent level of comfort and, more important, physical security. Their lives could get boring, however, so visitors like us are always welcome.

When I visit, I always take photos and I always bring prints on the next visit. If done right, I think this is therapeutic. For example, many of these patients feel that they are ugly and abandoned. However, when they see the print, they realize that, in fact, they are quite attractive. After all, there is no reason why someone who has mental problems can't be physically attractive.

These patients often feel that they are alone and without friends. Yet when they get a print of them with other patients, all laughing and with their arms around each other, they realize that they have friends, that they are not alone.

There are rules obviously. No photos unless the patient agrees. No photos of missing teeth or breadcrumbs on the face. In other words, the photo is designed to enhance the attractiveness of the subject.

When we got to the women's dormitory, Sherry laid the photos out on a table. Then a number of the patients asked for more photos; these would be of them holding the prints we had brought. I'll make prints of these for the next visit.

This was a moment of near hysterical laughter. Yes, it was just a tiny gesture but one that was unforgettable.

Colorado, the state where the two of us spent our careers has a population of about 6 million and is now spending almost one billion dollars a year on its mental health system. New Mexico is still recovering from the damage caused by former Governor Susana Martinez's attack on the mental health system. Texas which is said to have the worst mental health system of any state is now spending 25 billion a year. Mexico with much higher levels of violence which presumably would lead to more mental health issues spends almost nothing. Vision in Action which has been in existence for almost thirty years survives largely via donations.

So, like it or not, tiny gestures matter.

On June 2, Mexico will undergo a massive change. For the first time in its history, a woman will be elected President. Claudia Sheinbaum who served as Mayor of Mexico City from 2018 to 2023 is way ahead of her opponent, Xóchitl Gálvan in the polls and is a member of the Morena party and said to be closely aligned with the current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, better known as AMLO. Although I believe AMLO has been a disaster as President, his popularity is at 61 %, far above our president. Will Sheinbaum be captive to his continuing influence or can she break out on her own and do more for programs like Vision in Action that are committed to helping the mentally ill?

Interestingly, Sheinbaum is a scientist and from a family of scientists. Her father is a chemical engineer and her mother a biologist. She completed her PhD thesis working at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California and has authored over 100 articles plus two books on issues like the environment, energy and sustainable development. So this is a woman of extraordinary intellect and I feel very positive about her potential as the future president.

In the meantime, however, we will continue with tiny gestures.

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