

Humanity in Deming and Palomas

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It's 47 degrees and the sun is pushing through clouds after a night of heavy rain as I cross the border to Palomas, Mexico (pop. 4,600). The Mexican customs officials wave me right through as groups of soldiers watch. Fortunately, no one pays attention to the bags of beans and rice and boxes of Oreos in the back of my car.

I've been visiting the border at least once a month for over a decade, mostly Palomas and Juárez. I help different humanitarian groups as well as several families and document conditions here. My goal has been to bring attention to the heroic people who serve the needy. For reasons I still don't understand, this will be one of my most painful trips.

Earlier I had visited the armory in Deming where a couple of extraordinarily dedicated women – Ariana Saldares and Sandra Magallanes - were getting ready for their Wednesday food bank program. They expected about 100 cars but have had as many as 1,300 on Fridays. I visited several times in 2019 when the people of Deming were providing shelter for migrants and remember City Manager Aaron Sera telling me that the goal was “to be the model shelter on the southwest border.” This is a project of Colores United and the United Universalist Church in Silver City and includes assistance to the migrant shelter in Palomas which was my next stop. As I left for Palomas, Sandra handed me several boxes to deliver.

The Palomas shelter was founded by Padre Rosalio Sosa and the Iglesia Bautista Tierra de Oro headquartered in El Paso. I haven't met Sosa; we spoke on the phone earlier and he gave me permission to visit. Juan Rascón from Border Partners, another unique program led the way and I followed him through puddles that are more like small lakes. The shelter itself is surrounded by a fence and we wait by a locked gate until a young man named José appears and lets us in. I assume that he is an employee from Palomas but he is actually Honduran, has been waiting three months for his asylum hearing but has proven himself to be so reliable that he now helps manage the facility.

There were two groups in the shelter, women with children who are awaiting asylum hearings and hoping to enter the US and men who have been deported and will have to return to their home countries. The latter are given food, clothing, medical care and then receive financial assistance with transportation costs from an organization called Grupos Beta.

When I arrive, there are about twenty five men, women and children there but the numbers fluctuate wildly. The night before a group arrived without any advance notice, cold, soaking wet from the rain and exhausted. The staff fed them, provided dry clothing and gave them comfortable bunk beds.

I decided to focus on the men who had been deported and first met with Pedro from Guatemala who had had a "tortillería" near Guatemala City and was doing pretty well until gang members came to him and tried to extort him. He realized that he couldn't pay what they wanted and that they might kill him so he fled, leaving his family behind. He paid a "coyote" about \$4,670 (money he had to borrow) and after fifteen days of traveling reached the border wall at night. He went up a ladder but there was no ladder on the other side and he fell, breaking bones in his legs and feet. Then he was deported, ended up in the shelter and is hoping that he will heal and be able to walk again. Then he will have a heartbreaking trip back to Guatemala where he will have to face the people he borrowed from as well as those who tried to extort him earlier.

Next was Alberto from El Centro, California who said he was a DACA person but was deported for some minor mishap and ended up in Juárez where he was beaten and robbed. The robbers even ripped a patch of hair out of his head. Although he spoke perfect English, his story was confusing. Both Juan and I gave him money.

The older man in the next bed, Juan Ramón Rios was robbed and beaten in Agua Prieta. He had worked in San José, California and Chicago for 15 years and had a patron who valued him. He had spoken to the patron but it wasn't clear that the patron could do anything to help him. Both he and Alberto seemed dazed. Was it from their beating or the complete uncertainty of their future?

For years I have written about people who live on the border, often in dire circumstances. And I've written about migrant families at La Casa del Migrante in Juárez, the wonderful shelter run by Padre Javier Calvillo. The plight of these three men, however, seemed even more painful. No money, no family with them, no certainty where they were going to go in the cases of Alberto and Juan Ramón.

After José, Juan and I emptied my car of the beans, rice and Oreos I had brought as well as the boxes from Sandra, I headed north. The sky was black, then there was a scattering of rain, and then snow on the ground at Truth or Consequences and much more at Socorro. However, unlike Pedro, Alberto and Juan Ramón and the other migrants I met, I have a home to go to and a family waiting for me. I cannot imagine being in their shoes.

For Americans this is just another political issue. The press is asking "How much of today's problems are Trump's fault?" or "Is Biden to blame for this recent surge?" and the political parties battle it out in preparation for the 2022 elections. What I saw, however – what I have been seeing all these years - is not a political issue but a humanitarian one. I thank Ariana, Sandra, Juan, José and Padre Sosa and the many other volunteers for their commitment and compassion. It was an honor to spend a day seeing their work.

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