

Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians
National Political Education Committee
Columban Border Awareness Encounters
April 16-22, 2023

Report

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The Columban Border Mission is located in El Paso, TX and provides Border Awareness Encounters for groups. On April 16-22, the Mission hosted the LAOH group. We were told that the Mission was going to end the Border Awareness Encounters for the year and allowed us to be the last visit because of the long connection with the LAOH and the Columban Fathers and Sisters.

The Mission is managed by Cynthia Gonzales, Advocacy Coordinator, and serves several functions, including housing for visiting religious and lay missionaries and other volunteers, and space for functions related to the Columban justice, peace, and ecology mission – such as this year's Earth Day Celebration. At the time we visited, two volunteers also stayed at the mission. The Border Awareness Encounters are organized by Beth Reigler, lay missionary, and Cynthia. The retreat house has dormitory bedrooms and the LAOH group shared two bedrooms. We were back in college! The cost of the lodgings included meals and we were treated to wonderful authentic Mexican dinners by Cynthia's aunt who was the chef.

We visited shelters and other missions every day. The first day we had a lecture at the local Sacred Heart Church, by a local historian who gave us background on the long history of the interrelationship between El Paso, TX and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. We came to understand that for many generations people have been going back and forth between Juarez and El Paso and lived and worked in the two cities.

Today individuals, Mexican and American, who regularly travel between Juarez and El Paso can get "commuter" papers that let them travel freely between the two cities. We also learned of the horrific treatment in the early and mid-1900's of Mexicans who traveled daily into El Paso for work. For example, Mexican people traveling to El Paso for work, their heads were sprayed with DDT – daily. The justification was – in case they had lice. These and other degradations happened to the grandmother of the historian and to the grandfather of our host, Cynthia. We also went on a tour of the streets around Sacred Heart and viewed several murals in the area. There was a beautiful mural on the Sacred Heart shelter (formerly the church's gym) of the daily activities and well-known people of that barrio.

That evening we helped to serve dinner at the Sacred Heart shelter. The shelter provides three meals a day, inside for 120 people. If they are able, they also will serve meals outside to people who were not able to get into the shelter. Everything in the shelter was well organized and a safe haven, especially for mothers and children. The shelter has showers, a clothes closet; sleeping mats and blankets, over the counter medicines, baby products and other necessities. The mats and blankets are provided by the Red Cross. Everything else is donated or purchased with donated funds. There are also volunteers who can help asylum seekers try to get appointments on the US government CBP app. The meals are provided, on a rotating basis, by different parishes in El Paso and there is a core volunteer kitchen staff headed by a lovely lady who said to call her Mama Coco.

The meals are provided to women and children first and then men are served. There are staff who count the line and cut it off at 120. It was all very orderly and most everyone who came through the serving line said gracias or were smiling to say thank you in English. We had the opportunity to speak with three women who had made the journey to El Paso. Two of the women were sisters who had made their way from Peru with five children. They journeyed through 10 countries including the Darien Gap! These are journeys that people do not take on a whim, most are escaping horrible gang violence, which was the case for these sisters. Their story was related to us by our host, Cynthia. She asked them if they had wanted to stay in any of the countries they passed through and they told her that they were basically pushed along from each country. The worst thing imaginable happened to them when they got to Mexico and the two youngest children, pre-school and elementary school age were kidnapped. They were able to get the children back and escape, but all their money and phones were taken. They were at the shelter trying to get to New York. I wish we could learn what happened to them.

Theirs was one of several stories we heard of people trying to get asylum in the U.S. None of them were nice stories. The one that resonated the most with me was the mother of five who in her country sold food and items she made from the back of her car to feed and support her family. The gangs said she had to pay a lot of money to be able to keep doing this, she said she could not pay and they said okay, give us your oldest daughter! These are the awful reasons people are migrating to the US to seek asylum. They are seeking safety and security for their families.

On another day we visited Juarez city. Our visit began with a stop to the small makeshift shrine that was put up to remember the migrants who perished in the fire at the Juarez detention center. We laid flowers and said a prayer. The shrine is along the street just outside the bridge that connects Juarez to El Paso. The street was lined with tents of migrants waiting to cross over. I was struck again at the order of the "camp" and the hopefulness of the migrants. Some wanted to talk to us and tell us their stories. This was when I personally wished I was able to speak Spanish, so I could get to learn more from the people there.

We next visited the Cathedral in Juarez City and the soup kitchen in the basement of the Cathedral. The Cathedral was open and is a beautiful and restful spot in the middle of the busy plaza. Again, the meals were served in a very orderly fashion by volunteers. They serve about 1000 people a day from 11 am until the food runs out. Cynthia, our host, volunteers there once

and week and said there were times when all the food ran out and there were still hungry people outside and they ordered pizzas and cut each slice in half so people could have at least that much.

During our day in Juarez, we visited Mercy Sister Betty Campbell. Sister Betty lives very simply in a small adobe house in a residential neighborhood. Many visiting missionaries have stayed with her over the years. For decades, she has worked with migrants and the women in her neighborhood. At 89 years old, she uses a cane but still travels by bus to the Cathedral. She says she does her praying while visiting with the migrants. Sister Betty has a covered patio with a wall in her garden where she keeps a wall of remembrance by writing the names of persons who have been killed by violence in Juarez. The wall has sections for journalists, religious, men, women, lawyers, and law enforcement. Our group was honored and saddened that there were names for each of us to add to the wall, to say a prayer and give witness.

We also visited Columban Fr. Bill Morton at his parish in Anapara, Juarez. Fr. Bill wears many hats, he is the Director of the Columban Mission in El Paso, parish priest, and also is involved in the work of the Cathedral to support migrants. He and Sr. Betty are very well known in Juarez for their mission work. We were treated to lunch during our visit to Fr. Bill. Lunch was cooked by two parishioners, again delicious home cooked Mexican food with a traditional drink called agua fresca.

On another day, we visited the El Paso farmers collective. The collective's main focus is to provide a place for seasonal farm workers from Mexico to relax after long days in the field and to receive services. One main support provided to the farm workers are group meetings where the men have a safe space to talk about their lives. This emotional support has been found to help the men and has a positive influence on domestic situations. We learned about the hard work, in the hot sun, the men do in harvesting mostly chili peppers and onions around El Paso. Currently, the collective opened their building as a shelter to migrants. They are able provide meals and sleeping space for women and children.

In addition to visiting shelters and soup kitchens, we attended lectures from an immigration lawyer; a representative from an NGO that works with the Federal government to assist unaccompanied minors, and we visited and met with members of Border Patrol. We learned about the laws and processes for seeking asylum in the U.S. We learned about the process for assisting unaccompanied minors. We had an informative visit with two officers from U.S. Border Patrol. We learned that human traffickers use migrants to try to hide their illegal activities from Border Patrol. We learned that that the traffickers will draw the focus of Border Patrol to one area by pushing migrants over the wall or through a hole in the fence so that they can smuggle drugs over in another section of the border. Border Patrol officers we talked to have helped a pregnant woman left on the top of the wall by traffickers and rescued a three-year-old left in the desert. When migrants turn themselves in to Border Patrol it is their job to quickly interview and collect names for a database and to check if the person has a criminal record. The person is then sent to Customs and Border Protection. Border Patrol was never intended to jail or detain asylum seekers. The migrant surges that occur at the border in El Paso have at times overwhelmed the Border Patrol there. We asked about the emotional toll that it takes on Border Patrol and the answer was yes it does take a tremendous toll on officers.

Our hosts also took us on a tour of El Paso and we were able to view El Paso and Juarez from a scenic overlook in the hills. We enjoyed a walk through the University of Texas, El Paso, Cynthia's alma mater which also had amazing views of Juarez and its mountains. We were also treated to some retail therapy, and were able to purchase beautiful, handmade items, mostly textiles, from three women's collectives. One in Juarez, where indigenous women made gorgeous scarves, purses, table linens, etc. Another collective in Juarez was women in Fr. Bill Morton's parish who made hand embroidered tote bags and the third was a group of women in El Paso who collaborated with women in Mexico and made jewelry and clothing to support the women's group in that El Paso barrio who were working for decent schools, housing, and jobs for the community. This community was devastated financially when factories which provided a living for most of the barrio were closed and moved to Mexico after NAFTA was enacted.

I was totally humbled by the generosity of our LAOH sisters who contributed \$1700 to be donated to the missions we visited. We made the following donations:

\$600 Columban Fr. Bill Morton's mission
\$200 Mercy Sr. Betty Campbell's mission
\$500 Sacred Heart Church shelter
\$400 Farm Workers Collective shelter

I believe I can speak for the group when I say the trip was a profound and spiritual experience. So many people doing God's work – feeding and sheltering those in need. Recognizing we are all God's children, deserving to be treated with respect and dignity. To quote from Mary Asaki, LAOH MD, in her report to her County:

“Our nation of immigrants, including our Irish ancestors, must continue to welcome the present immigrants, must figure out how to do this. I can assure you that the people we met are not coming for the money. They are fleeing life-threatening situations-kidnapping and ransom demands, rape, sex trafficking, extreme poverty, drug cartels, political persecution. The border situation is no longer about desires for the better life of milk and honey; it is about survival.”

Respectfully submitted,

Gail Dapolito, Chair
LAOH National Political Education Committee