

A Separation Enforced

By Miguel Conchas



Photo by Miguel Conchas

Students visited several spots along the border in the El Paso area and encountered an enforced separation from their brothers and sisters on the Mexico side of the fence.

First year Honors Students from The University of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio, Texas took the road less traveled on the fall break and return profoundly impacted by a personal observation of the harsh reality of the US-Mexico border.

In some parts of the US Mexico border the cost has become astronomical at \$11 million a mile for the fence. The price in human terms is one that is being told by increasing numbers found dead in Juarez and in the desert

oblivion where many lose their hopes of a better life. During the past year over 500 were found dead. These are the cold hard facts that students recently encountered on a Social Justice and Service Trip to El Paso.

From October 15 to 18, 2009, fourteen Honors Program students accompanied by Sister Martha Ann Kirk, professor in Religious Studies who has been taking students on social justice trips since 1978, and assistant Miguel Conchas, a former Peace Corps volunteer and Ph.D. student in International Education and Entrepreneurship, went on an El Paso visit designed to exhibit the challenges related to immigration faced by the communities there.

As a prelude to the substantial informative sessions on their schedule, they watched a screening of the powerful documentary "*Dying to Live*", a video co-sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. The video presents the touching stories of the hundreds of people who have died in the desert as they have been going north looking for work and economic prosperity.

“Standing on the edge to the desert in El Paso, the stories of those people began to become real for us and touch our hearts,” remarked Kirk.



The university students saw one of the hundreds of surveillance towers along the border fence north of where the Rio Grande River starts. The students saw border patrol in a helicopter above and others driving by. West Cosgrove, the director of El Puente suggested working on the roots of the challenges. He asked why couldn't the millions of dollars put into this fence, equipment, and patrolling be put into job opportunities for desperate people.

At the destination the student group stayed at Casa Puente, the headquarters of Project Puente, whose mission is to work toward a more just world, specifically along the border between the United States and Mexico, through educational and spiritual programs and relationship-building opportunities in the area. It was there that they met West Cosgrove, Director of Project Puente, who oriented them to a full weekend of activities and sessions related to migrant issues. Cosgrove describes The US-Mexico Border as the best classroom in the whole world to learn globalization, “This is the only place where the ‘first world’ and the ‘third world’ meet like this.”



Photo by Miguel Conchas

From a distance the border is hardly visible and only discerned by the big Mexican flag demarcating the territory of our southern neighbor.

Visits to centers of migrant assistance such as the Centro de Mujeres Esperanza, as well as various sites of the physical border complemented

the video's stark portrayal of the economic, social and political crucifixions experienced by immigrants in search of a better way of life. Matthew Gunst, a premed student, stated, "The view from the top of the mountain was not only breathtaking but thought provoking... Why is one community divided? Aren't we all one community of people on this planet? Why do borders even exist? It is unfair that many of us are subjected to pain and suffering while some are blessed with riches. We should all be equal and fair. We are all one."

Each day the group reflected on their visits and developed a greater awareness based on real face-to-face experiences along the border. One of the places visited that presented such an opportunity was Annunciation House, a shelter for the migrant, homeless, and economically vulnerable peoples of the border region.

Through hospitality, advocacy, and education, the staff of volunteers are able to serve those who suffer. Journalism student Lexi Salazar said, "visiting the Annunciation House was the strongest experience for me. Seeing this home, where a diverse group of people are living together trying to get back on their feet was a unique thing to witness."

In the chapel of Annunciation House which gives shelter to people is a cross of wire like the fence that separates Mexico and the U.S. Within it are shoes and devotional objects, grim reminders of things that have been found by the bodies of over 500 people who have died in the desert in this past year.



Photo by Miguel Conchas



Students also had time to lend a hand at another center that helps women by painting the rooms of the Centro de Mujeres Esperanza.

Throughout their time in El Paso, they discussed various perspectives on immigration with speakers from the legal and academic fields. Dr. Irasema Coronado, the Assistant to the Provost of UTEP, advised the

participants, “When you have a trip like this, you should not leave with feelings of guilt, but rather, one, compassion and gratitude, two, thank someone in your life and three, do advocacy.” The UIW students pledged that upon returning to campus, they would work on transmitting their experiences to their peers through websites, art exhibits, news articles, and videos.

