

## **REFLECTIONS ON MY VOLUNTEER TIME IN EL PASO**

**March 12-26, 2019**

### **Vicki Simon – Returned Maryknoll Lay Missioner**

#### **• What touched your heart?**

- *Their stories...usually while driving to bus stations or airport or in hospital:*
  - One woman from El Salvador talked about her 8 days in the Detention Ctr.- their first 3 days they had no food at all, no blankets, slept on a concrete floor, so cold, took some of their clothes, like shoestrings, because they said they might try to commit suicide!  
She described these as the worst days of her life – children were screaming because of cold and no milk; if a mother was nursing her baby she was told to feed other babies too.  
After those first 3 days, they received 2 meals each day, at 4 and 8 p.m.; there were no phones; no contact with outside; never knew what was happening nor when leaving.
  
- **B. C. A. and her daughter, M. (5) from Guatemala;** a sweet and strong woman; her child listless and with fever. Accompanied them to Children's Hospital and while waiting she shared her story...
  - Her mama died of cancer last year – has a brother and sister who both live in L.A. – brother married with 3 children and sister is single- hopes to live with her sister.
  - She thinks that her daughter may have neurological problems but no such Dr. in Guatemala or no money for such things. Her feet turn in and she doesn't see/reach in same place as noted – her kindergarten teacher noticed this. This is why she came...traveled 4-5 days.
  - Before we went to the hospital I had asked for her room to be cleaned up since Miley had vomited in bed; when we returned back from hospital two other migrants had been assigned to their room so had to move again and find another room for them!
  - So sad that they had to leave already the next day at 1:30 pm for the airport...for a flight at 8:55 pm – M. was better but not at all well yet and B. quite worried.
  
- **C.P.T. and his son, W.B. from Guatemala.**
  - C. arrived with his son who had a high fever; we gave him medicine and told him what to do; fever rose so we called the Dr. and were advised to take him the ER at Childrens' Hospital. We got in right away but then waited for 4-6 hours with interns coming in and out with same tests and same questions. It was in between that I learned his story. W. watched Coco on TV and really enjoyed it!
  - C. was 30 years old and very shy. I learned he was Mayan and spoke little Spanish, mostly K'iche. He was very poor, had a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education and left a wife and 2-year-old son still at home. He said that he came to find

work...there is no food or work in his pueblo. He said he came to find some way to support his wife and kids. C. had a wonderful smile but neither he nor W. smiled much...very serious.

- They are heading to Washington D.C. where his brother A. lives - in Harrisburg, MD and he will pick him up in D.C. A few days after arriving C. and his son will have to travel to Baltimore for his appearance before the Judge there – this is a requirement for all migrants about 10 days after they arrive at their U.S. destinations. He asked how far that was and we discovered it was about 46 miles.
  - He was finally discharged and we went back to the Hotel...got W. back in bed and happy that his fever had subsided. While in the hospital they gave him fluids and antibiotics.
  - When I returned to work the next morning, I discovered that W.'s fever had returned even higher (105) so they had taken him back to the hospital and he was admitted for observation and treatment. They said it was “gripa” or flu or some kind of virus.
  - After two more days he was discharged and the next day was off to the airport for his flight to D.C....
  - I think about them so often and always with a prayer.
- **R. G. ?.** – the saga of mistaken identity! Will the real R.G. who got on the Greyhound Bus to San Francisco please stand up! There were two men with the first names R. G. at our shelter but they had different last names – which one was Hernandez and which one Domingo?
- When we received a phone call from one of their papas we discovered we had two R. G.s but then couldn't find either one at our shelter; we knew at least one left on a shuttle to the bus station. Jean and I drove like crazy to the Greyhound bus station to determine who got on that bus to L.A.? One R. was going there but the other one was supposed to go to Boston! So which one had gotten on that bus was the mystery, but no one seemed to know!
  - The Greyhound Manager ended up finding them both on that bus when it arrived in Lordsburg, TX, its first stop ...neither one knowing the other had their same name! So the bus driver put R.G. H. back on the bus to El Paso.
  - He arrived back to shelter that night at 10:30 p.m...tired but glad to be going the right direction!
  - What a night...and then the next day we put him on the right bus to Boston.
  - Mystery resolved: Greyhound had mistakenly given them the same confirmation number but were also very helpful in finding and returning the wrong one!
  - I learned the importance of getting all their names when they arrive, even if we have to write down six or seven names for one person!
  - All was well that ended well...but what a scare it was for us all!
- ***What surprised you?***
    - The sheer numbers of migrants and incredible number of volunteers who are there helping them! Really gave me hope amidst such political rhetoric and negative border news reports!

- Never met the “supervisor” we expected would meet and orient us when we arrived at the shelter – until day 3. We discovered later that the two young women were supervisors for all 15 shelter sites, not just ours. So when they say be prepared for the “fluid reality” where you volunteer, take it literally.
- How important it is to have a car, if possible. We had many needs for runs to airport, bus stations and hospital. Everyone with a car was asked to make runs.
- In my second week there, being put in charge as shift supervisor on two days was totally not expected and I felt the awesome responsibility for so many, especially when the bus arrived and all is “A GO”!
- Had to laugh on my last day I was breathing a sigh of relief while awaiting my flight home when I ran into two refugee men and their children sitting across from me in the El Paso airport; they were from Las Cruces and a woman who accompanied them to the airport asked me to help them make their connection in Dallas; none of them had ever flown before so we became acquainted and helped them in Dallas as they began the final leg of their journeys to their sponsors’ homes - a brother in Memphis and a sister in Philadelphia.

- ***What challenged you?***

- Woah, the first day I volunteered...this is what I wrote in my journal:
  - Organized chaos, frenetic environment, lots of new faces and names, so many good Sisters who answered the call!
  - Baptism by fire—volunteer Jacob introduced the whole shelter process to Jean and me in about 5 minutes...then on our own!
  - The sheer numbers of folks arriving...never knowing the time nor the number being brought to us from the Detention Centers; so many coming in so tired, dirty, needing warm clothing, some sick with coughs, colds and fevers. They have so many questions in their eyes and spoken...not enough time ever to do all that was needed.
  - Calling their sponsors by phone – really required good listening and Spanish speaking skills. Also, the critical importance of getting down the correct Confirmation Numbers/Letters for airline and bus reservations when given to my sponsors by phone.
  - My prayer at the end of each day was for balancing better the personal attention and listening to each person I was attending along with their immediate needs in process! To listen with affection and care first...and then attend to their needs! That balance challenged me.
- many new volunteers on shifts and constant changes with often no one in charge... makes communications especially between shifts very difficult; some speak Spanish but some don’t, and they can’t understand what the migrants are asking or doing.
- How terribly important good health is for these poor people! Terrible conditions: cold, rainy and damp weather, no heavy clothing, coughs, colds, sore throats, fever, rashes, diarrhea, etc. Parents so worried about their children...no time to resolve many of the problems before they travel again. For me, it was often “letting go” of the things we couldn’t control in such short timeframes.

- Airport runs when the bus driver didn't go in with them and was just dropping them off at the airport. Fernanda and I insisted that someone be there to help them with this process. While some had taken a bus in the past, no one had ever flown before and it can be quite a scary process if you don't know the language. Security check alone is quite scary!
- A personal realization: I, in a 54-year-old body, am no longer ready for full-time mission, like I wish I was! My heart was willing but my body exhausted by day's end. Two weeks was doable but don't think I could do this for a straight month. Maybe 2-3 days a week...for an extended time period. I do think I was needed and helpful and felt great peace at day's end.

- ***What do you want to hold on to?***

- The migrants I met were so kind, forgiving, patient, faithful and grateful for every little thing given (a bar of soap, shampoo, medicine, a sandwich, an "ear", etc.) and whatever help they were provided. I never met one who seemed "entitled" or upset from having to wait...and there was lots of waiting! I learned so much from them.
- The goodness and generosity and witness of God's love through so many volunteers, refugees (one to another) and the local people of El Paso. This was a real ecumenical effort of a whole City....so impressed by how hard everyone worked together daily to welcome, care for and assist the hundreds on their journey for a new life. Parishes, youth groups, synagogues, community organizations, company groups...they all provided clothing, food, water, meals and medicines.
- The importance of paying close attention to the person and face in front of you...more than a speedy process and next one in line! People need to feel safe and know compassion and care as much as securing food and shelter and clothing.
- How grateful the migrants I served were – hugs and prayers given in abundance as they said goodbye and boarded shuttles and buses and planes for the next part of their long and unknown journeys. They trusted all of us, even though strangers.
- I am very grateful I did not get sick, as many of the volunteers did. Just lucky I think, but also drank lots of water each day, slept 8 hours each night and took lots of vitamin C...all the rest was in the hands of God.
- I mostly want to hold on to the faces I saw and the stories I heard; I want to remember and never take our privileges for granted or as earned...all are gifts to be well-used and shared.

Vicki Simon

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