



Juarez and El Paso, Sister Cities and Cities with Sisters' Influences (At least where I was!)

The point was a pastoral visit to Christa – to see her in her home and places of work, to meet the people important to her and those who give her life, to see how her faith and IBVM connection are supported.

Characters: Christa lives with Romina, a Sister of Charity.

At the shelter: Yvonne (El Salvador) sprayed us to sanitize upon entry and welcomed us in. No hugs, but a Namaste bow.

Rosa and Yohaira (Jo-hi!-da) are migrant women, strangers in Guatemala but friends once they met in El Paso where they were deported to Juarez. Yohaira has 3 children: Keila (16), Greilie(11), and Leo (4). They have all been 'on the road' for 2 years. Rosa's children went ahead of her and are in the US now. She stayed in Guatemala until her mom died, then came alone on the journey north, and hopefully to Iowa.

Sr. Arlene, CSJ or SSJ who was living in El Paso when Christa first moved there, visits the shelters in a therapy capacity, listening to women tell their stories. Sr. Jo, Dominican of some sort, who has been there forever having lived in a camp in Guatemala for a stretch of time teaches English one-on-one in the shelters. Christina, a social activist in Juarez area, addresses both the immediate needs and the political structures (corruption). She takes the donations and gets the bread, food, clothing, whatever is needed in the shelters, gets people to court, finds resources, challenges the system. Sr. Bea, a Holy Spirit sister from Ireland whose home base is in Wisconsin, who, having retired from teaching, admin, leadership and a sabbatical in Guatemala to learn Spanish, returned to El Paso and has been running one of the shelters for 6 years. She is 86 with no desire to retire. Other Charity sisters were there in different clinics and shelters. One, Carol, is a massage therapist who is amazing in what she has done for healing. Sr. Peggy is a jack-of-all-trades but focuses on the nurse aspect of her life at the home for children (special needs) where Romina and Carol also work.

Some Sisters of
the Sister Cities!!



Then there were the groups of young volunteers – 10-week summer groups, 6-month, and 1-year groups. They just come, not as projects of a university, but as young people who want to make change and will take a summer or a year out of their lives for exploration. Most of these volunteers live at the shelters, but some also take break days at Christa's or other homes of Sisters.

Volunteer, Lilian, with Judy at Ascension House (also known as CDR or A-House). Lilian, in the 6th month of her year commitment as a volunteer, is the manager of the house that can welcome as many as 500 overnight.

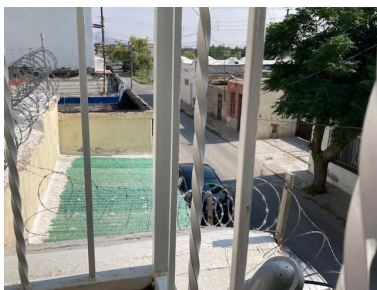




Bridges over the wall There are 4 bridges over this wall. The center 2 bridges charge, and, if you want to travel somewhat quickly, you need a 'century pass' for the express lane. Otherwise you may take 2-5 hours to cross depending on the time of day and how thorough the inspector is. Because Judy and I do not have century passes we could cross into Juarez with Christa, but we could not come into the US with her in the express lane. So Christa would park on the EP side and we would walk over the bridge to begin and end the day.

The two edge-of-town bridges were less crowded so on the last day we drove to the shelter and then on to another shelter on that side before crossing over one in such a poor area. Crossing over one day we saw a line of men crossing to Juarez accompanied by armed guards who led them to a detention center in Juarez. No shoelaces for their shoes. No socks. No possessions with them.

Shelters: The one we went to daily was a small one, housing Rosa, Yohaira and the kids. This houses 3-4 families. It has a bedroom per family, 2 bathrooms, a washer and clothes line (in that heat, everything dries in 10 minutes!), a kitchen as big as our one in Sacramento ('2-butt'), and 3 rooms – play, eat, and lounge. Inside was kept very clean, but the area is old and not pretty according to most standards. Inside that shelter there were hugs galore. Once they knew Christa loved us, we were family.



Left: View from one shelter window. Right: View from same room by turning 90 degrees. Bottom left: Judy and Christa sort diapers for families at another shelter. Center: The sheltered women have taken a class in embroidery which is eventually sewn onto a bag. The parrot is the bird of Guatemala. Right: rooms are simple and vary in size. This has 2 bunks for 4 people.



The big shelter in El Paso, A-House (Ascension House) aka CDR, can hold up to 500 people in 2 large dormitories full of cots. They have 4 areas for gathering, color coded, and 2 or 3 dining areas. The shower building is outside as is the Salvation Army Semi (portable kitchen) which comes 3 times a day. Salvation Army volunteers fix the food and bring it into the shelter where shelter volunteers serve and clean up. One of the two managers of that shelter is a 1-year volunteer in her 6th month there. She had to go check the hot water access for the showers while we there. Then she had to check on the scheduled fire check and give us the tour. The day we were there was the last day for the summer volunteers. Christa had many sad good-byes there, including at least one who is thinking about joining a community some day.

The A-House walls are FULL of beautiful murals and some large photos depicting the people who have passed through these doors.



ESPERANZA !



This is one of the rooms that holds up to 250 guests in this detention center. The other one that was in use was full of cots. No photos were allowed there to protect the privacy of those living and waiting there.



Free at last to move to Colorado!

A little shelter also in El Paso, was near the bus station. I'm not sure how many people it held. It was so full of life and energy because these people were on their way to family somewhere in the US. The departure information was posted on the walls for volunteers to get the right tickets and time to the people who then got to the right station. We were privileged to take one woman and her son to the bus station. Christa stayed with them until they understood which bus, what time and how long it would take. Every transaction with each person in every location was patient, peaceful and respectful. The trust of the traveler in the volunteers is absolute.

The last shelter we visited was just outside Juarez in Mexico. Christina lives here and can take up to 4 families – all in one room, each given one bunk of 2 bunk bed sets. At the time there was just one woman there, Iliana, with her son Emanuel (5). Of the migrants we met, she had the most English and was anxiously awaiting her court case. The file was 1.5 inches thick with all the documents needed! Last time she presented it, the judge never read it – he just denied it. Emanuel is the one who was terrified when he didn't know where his mom had gone (just outside). I've seen separation anxiety, but not like this.



In that shelter, Christa, Judy and I prepared what I call departure bags. Baggies of food – 1 baggie per traveler, and a health/ hygiene bag. The string backpacks were color-coded based on gender and number travelling together. The goal was 400 bags but we probably had enough for only 150 complete bags. Most needed items were toothpaste, tooth brushes, shampoo, lotion, masks, and wet wipes of some kind. Postage would cost a lot, but gift cards to Walmart are always useful. Volunteers in the area can go shopping. (We did shop late one night to get \$400 worth of supplies – which also included flip-flops, towels and miscellaneous items for the shelter Christa goes to every day.)



On the first day, after we met the families, Christa asked me to see if I thought a little boy was autistic. Because he didn't talk much, a visitor had suggested this. Coincidentally, the book my "family book club" is reading now, is the history of autism. Is Leo autistic? No way! One common trait across the spectrum is awkward social interaction. Leo wanted me to play with him all day, and he hugged me often.

One concern was that he didn't know numbers or colors at age 4, so Christa asked me to work with him. But a child who has had no playmates for 2 formative years is not interested in formal learning. Forget colors and numbers – just build and jump and pretend we were broad jumpers at the Olympics. He made a line of blocks and we had to jump over them from greater distances. Each time he would cheer and raise his arms in delight. He is not autistic!

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English lessons – The second day we each had some informal time helping with English – in the kitchen, in the lounge area, at lunch. Then the actual English class started with the ABC's to spell their names and then practice normal greetings. Paired up we practiced a lot, laughing at both confusion and success. There was a closeness in that afternoon. Christa has empowered these women to trust, to grow in courage and esteem, and to hope. Esperanza is a big word and experience.

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Thursday morning we all sat in a circle. Christa invited each woman to tell her story – as much or as little of it as she wished – in Spanish. Christa then translated it to Judy and me. To get it going she asked the two of us to tell a little about ourselves, so they could learn about us. Then gradually the others told stories. Some aspects of the journey came out – the reason for leaving Guatemala, not too much about the journey, the difficulties in some of the shelters along the way, and the challenges at the border. This network of shelters in Juarez/El Paso is a charitable and safe network. But not all. Assault, abuse, drugs, theft - they each – mother and child - had experienced some or all of it along the way. Yet, they also spoke of the beautiful landscapes along the way, too. It was, as Judy said, both heart-warming and heart-wrenching to listen. Tears flowed at different times, hugs abounded after we came to know each other in a new way. Sisters all are we.

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Scenic Guatemala



Every shelter had some sort of chapel. This one was small. The cage cross contained relics of those who had died on the journey north.



Questions for me are what does this mean now? How has this changed me? Focused me? Does it mean going to join the sisters who work there? Does it mean being a fundraiser, awareness raiser, contact person? What is expected of a sponsor? Who in this area have been sponsored, and do those families need support in this endeavor? Other questions: What will happen to Yvonne who got her call from the UN to move to the next step of getting a hearing? Will she become a doctor or scientist? What will happen to Yohaira and her family of bright children who need companions and school and security? What will happen to Rosa? Will Emanuel ever overcome his anxiety? Will Iliana's case be heard this time? Will the shelters remain safe havens until they are no longer needed?

The story is not over yet.

Christa is fine. She is loved by everyone. She is a 40-year-old who overworks and is happy doing so. She is humble, grateful, brave, talented and learning every day. Our goal of the pastoral meeting was achieved. The challenge of my first missionary experience has just begun.





Our first and favorite shelter in Juarez is home to the precious moms and children.

Our first evening we met two donors from the El Paso side who collect and often deliver donated goods for the shelters. They also work at A-House. This night, they brought 13 boxes of food, toiletries, and other items.



As we approached a bridge for our first foot crossing from Juarez to El Paso this cross stood before us. The nails each hold multiple names of women who have been victims of femicide in the border area. Some strips of paper say “unknown”. In front of that cross was a newsstand with stories of shootings and pictures of porn. The sign cries out, **“Ni una Mas” Not one more!**



Thank you first to the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters, whose grant made this mission possible. Our thanks also to Christa and Romina, who welcomed us warmly. Thank you as well to all of the Sisters, volunteers and migrants who shared so much of their experiences and hopes for the Sister Cities.

