



Photo by Michelle Yang

# LOS PAPELES NO TRABAJAN

## The Papers Don't Do the Work

DONALD HONES & PERSIDA CIFUENTES



Photo by Dalinda Melo Guzman



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*Ellos tienen papeles, yo no. Pero los papeles no trabajan. / They have papers, not me. But the papers don't do the work.*

—Mario Jimenez, deported to Agua Prieta, Sonora (August, 2010)

### In the Desert

It was just a few hours after sunrise in the Sonora Desert, but the day was already promising to be a hot one. Bernardo, Jessica, and I (Donald Hones) had been following the migrant trail along a dry watercourse for about an hour, climbing steadily up into the hills, searching for any signs of Fernando. My two companions had been here the previous afternoon, but we wanted to go further now, all the way to the top of the pass described to us by Jose, another migrant, the spot where Fernando had been left behind by his *coyote*.

Bernardo, a recently retired policeman, had taken down the explicit details of the terrain and description of Fernando: a 62-year-old man, balding with some white hair, black shirt, blue jeans, black backpack. We reached the top of the pass, and looked south across a long valley to the mountains on the Mexican border, perhaps seven miles away. Many border crossers

would have used up their water supply by the time they reached this pass, and they would still have two-to-four days of walking in the desert in front of them.

Lying on the ground, amidst the jumble of empty bottles and bits of cast-off clothing, was a black backpack in good condition. Inside were the usual folded black garbage bag and a toothbrush—nothing more. We called out:

*Fernando! Jose nos mando! Tenemos agua, y comida, y medicina. Si necesitas algo, nos avise! / Fernando! Jose sent us! We have water, food, and medicine. If you need anything, let us know!*

There was no answer, save the wind whistling through the rocks.

Fernando may have met up with another group, and made his way out of the desert. He may have been picked up by the border patrol and taken back to Mexico. Or he may have been claimed by the desert, leaving behind his bones like thousands of men, women, and children who have attempted this crossing in recent years.

As volunteers with the humanitarian group, No More Deaths, we would probably never know. We only knew that we needed to put out more water along the trails, in the hopes that those who were thirsty would find it.

of these children have crossed the border themselves. For teachers and other educators, the Supreme Court decision of *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) has set the precedent that all children in the United States are entitled to a public education, regardless of their immigration status.

Nevertheless, undocumented immigration remains a highly polarizing issue, and the struggles of immigrant children and their families often takes a back seat to political posturing. It is an act of both courage and solidarity for teachers to provide support for undocumented children and their families. But it is also a moral duty supported by international human rights agreements signed by the United States.

The following research study does not suggest specific ways to teach English to non-native speakers. What it does is raise questions about how we serve and support the children and families who arrive in our schools and communities with or without *papeles*, “papers,” documentation of their legal entry into the country; about how much we will tolerate the abuse, neglect, and death of men, women, and children who attempt to cross our border with Mexico; and about

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### Entitled to Public Education

Schools across the United States serve children from families that have crossed the U.S. border without documents. Some

*The photographs accompanying this article were taken by Dalina Melo Guzman and Michelle Yang along the Mexico-Arizona border. The photographs show the landscape of that region, participants at the No More Deaths camp near Arivaca, Arizona, and several artistic expressions on the Mexican side of the border wall.*



Photo by Dalinda Melo Guzman

## The Border, Human Rights, & Lessons for Teachers of Immigrant Students

how we will see ourselves as Americans, an oft-called “nation of immigrants,” in an era where immigrants are so readily demonized by politicians and media. These are questions that teachers, and all members of a community, need to address.

This study describes our involvement with a humanitarian organization on the Arizona border with Mexico, and what we learned from our conversations with ranchers, border patrol agents, Mexican officials, and the migrants themselves. We begin with a brief history of the border area, an area that has witnessed a tremendous flow of undocumented immigrants through the Sonora Desert in Arizona.

Next, we chronicle the work of organizations working to face this humanitarian crisis, groups such as No More Deaths, that have developed the concept of civil initiative—the responsibility to assist victims of human rights violations when the government itself is the violator. Civil initiative includes placing water along trails, providing medical assistance, and documenting abuses at border stations for returned migrants.

Using methods of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, Davies, Huber, Rose, & Whelan, 2001; Hones, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995), we present immigrant stories from the border area, with all names changed to protect confidentiality. We recognize our own perspectives influence this research: One author is a teacher educator, born in the United States, who has worked extensively with refugee and immigrant groups;

the other author is an immigrant from Guatemala, now a citizen of the United States, who works as a teaching assistant and is on the board of directors of a Latino Community organization in the Minnesota Twin Cities.

We gathered, edited, and now present these stories about the humanitarian crisis on the Arizona border. Following the stories, we suggest ways in which educators and others can utilize border studies to engage their students and colleagues, to better inform themselves, and to begin to ask fundamental questions about who we want to be as a nation and how we propose to get there.

### A Brief Border History

People have lived in the U.S.-Mexican border region for thousands of years. Many native peoples, such as the Tohono O’odham, still inhabit both sides of the border in the Sonora Desert region. The presence of today’s security fences, high-tech watchtowers, and fleets of border patrol vehicles is the latest physical manifestation of a political boundary established in 1848. In that year, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States expanded greatly its western territory at the conclusion of a war against Mexico. Together with the Gadsden Treaty of 1853, this established the current boundary between the United States and Mexico.

Through these treaties, over 100,000 Mexican citizens found themselves within the boundaries of the United States. Over

time, many other Mexicans journeyed north to the United States to find work in the growing economy of places such as California, Arizona, and elsewhere. After 1929, the onset of an economic depression, coupled with anti-Mexican hysteria, resulted in hundreds of thousands of Mexicans being forcibly deported, some of whom were actually American citizens.

Then the Bracero Program brought thousands of guest workers to the United States during and after World War Two. In 1986 the Immigration Reform and Control Act allowed for three million undocumented immigrants to regularize their status and pursue citizenship, while also expanding the Border Patrol, an organization that had its origins in the Texas Rangers.

In 1994, shortly after the passage of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Mexico, and Canada, the United States began Operation Gatekeeper, which, along with Operation Hold-the-Line, effectively shut down popular border crossing points in California and Texas. As the 1990s came to a close, and as undocumented immigration increased due to a worsening economic situation in much of Mexico, the border has been increasingly sealed off by fences and patrolled by armed agents of the Border Patrol (Nevins, 2002).

The main gap in this border control remains in southern Arizona, where the Sonora Desert provides what many thought would be a natural barrier to undocumented immigration. Yet, despite





Photo by Dalinda Melo Guzman

the desert and the mountains and the high cost of the journey (up to \$3,000 per person for the crossing), hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, Central Americans, and others continue to enter the United States each year through this dangerous land. Migrant death data compiled by the Pima County Forensic Science Center in Arizona suggests that, although numbers of border crossings have decreased substantially in the past two years, the number of deaths remain high (No More Deaths, 2011).

### Humanitarian Aid in the Desert

Millions of Mexicans, Central Americans, and others have attempted to cross into the United States through increasingly hostile terrain in the last decade (Scharf, 2006; Urrea, 2004). As deaths in the desert have grown, various humanitarian organizations have stepped in to provide water, food, and medical assistance to migrants who are in distress. These organizations include Humane Borders, the Samaritans, and No More Deaths.

Each organization puts out water at certain spots along the migrant trails. No More Deaths also maintains a desert camp during the summer months, and sends out foot patrols to walk the trails and maintain remote water drops. The organization also helps maintain aid stations at border crossing points in Nogales and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico. The work of No More Deaths has been discussed in books and the organization's documentation of the violation of human rights has been presented before Congress (Castillo, 2011; Regan, 2010).

The following descriptions of the organization's activities are drawn from the personal experiences of the authors.

### Civil Initiative

On arrival in Tucson, volunteers with No More Deaths attend an orientation where they learn about border history, legal issues, medical issues they are likely to encounter in the desert, and the organizing principle of No More Deaths, *civil initiative*. Civil Initiative is a concept that has grown out of the humanitarian response, first to the influx of refugees from Latin America in the 1980s, and now to the crisis posed by hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children crossing through dangerous desert terrain in order to get into the United States.

Civil Initiative differs from Civil Disobedience in that, rather than consciously breaking a law that is morally wrong, those engaged in Civil Initiative seek to protect the human rights of immigrants, when the government has been the violator of those rights (No More Deaths, 2009). No More Deaths and affiliated organizations seek to provide humanitarian aid in settings where the government is failing to do so, as well as raise public awareness regarding the tragic and often abusive realities facing immigrants in the border region (Bhemji, 2009; Michalowski, 2007; Scharf, 2006).

No More Deaths relies on volunteers to provide on-site humanitarian aid at border stations where immigrants are returned to Mexico; to maintain a desert camp, with food, water and medical supplies; and to undertake daily patrols along migrant trails, setting out gallon jugs of water, and looking for any migrants who may be in distress. Each of these sites is ideal for human service providers, especially those with some medical training or some fluency in the Spanish language.

### Bird Camp

Located about one-half hour from the town of Arivaca, Bird Camp sits close to some established migrant trails which follow routes from Sasabe, on the border, to Highway 19 and Tucson. Volunteers typically go on a morning and afternoon patrol each day. Trucks are loaded with water, and members of each patrol bring a GPS, a cell phone, maps of the area, and a medical kit. Each patrol member carries extra water and food packets for any migrants who may be encountered.

Participants must be physically fit and capable of walking eight-to-10 miles daily in temperatures that can reach 110 degrees Fahrenheit. The camp is equipped with a medical tent and supplies, in order to provide first aid to migrants. Medical conditions seen at the camp typically range from large blisters on feet, to insect and animal bites, to diarrhea, dehydration, and heat exhaustion.

### On the Border: Perspectives and Testimonies

#### Alternative Spring Break, Sonora Desert, March, 2010

In March, 2010, I (first author) returned to the desert with a group of university students for alternative spring break. After a 36-hour odyssey through airports in the Midwest, mountain states, and Pacific coast, we arrived in Tucson and were sent southward to our camp. This camp, on national forest land, was reached by a one-hour ride up a rocky, semi-developed road that threatened to seriously damage our rented vans.

When we reached the camp we were so excited to be on solid land again that we didn't notice the forest service vehicle approaching in the distance. The forest service agent got out, walked over to us, and asked us what we were doing there. I said, "We are volunteers. We plan to do humanitarian work this week."

"Well," replied the agent, "If you plan on putting out any water along these trails I am telling you now that I will slash the bottles and return the water to the desert. If you place plastic gallons on these trails you are littering and subject to fine and arrest. I need to see some identification from everyone here."

"What if we don't show you our ID?" asked one of the long-term volunteers.

"That is fine. If any of you don't want to show your ID, just go stand over there. You will be under arrest."

My students looked at me. I knew this agent had no basis to arrest us, as we hadn't done anything. Nevertheless, I

thought of the promises I had made to my students' parents, that they would be safe and out of trouble. We had literally just arrived. I handed over my ID. Everyone else followed suit. The forest service agent took down the information from everyone in our group, then handed the IDs back, told us to take down the camp, as it had been there over 14 days, and left.

We headed back down that awful stretch of road for two or three more hours of driving to reach the long-established Bird Camp, which sits on private land. The mood in my car was angry, but I was very proud of our students. They kept their cool, and dedicated themselves to making a difference during their stay in the desert.

Our group from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, defied stereotypes: all of the students were either immigrants themselves or children of immigrants. We were a group of four Mexican Americans, one Guatemalan American, two Hmong Americans, one Lebanese American, and one Israeli American. By our third day in camp Ma Lee, whose parents had navigated the dangerous jungle paths out of Laos, was leading patrols. On one of these patrols we had returned to the dirt trail and were waiting to be picked up, when two border patrol agents approached, their rifles drawn. We greeted them. One said, "We thought you were illegals until we heard you laughing."

Wilson, a young man whose parents had immigrated from Guatemala, smiled and asked the agents: "Do either of you know any White guy jokes? Because we have been telling jokes about Latinos, and Asians, but we don't know any White guy jokes."

The agents looked at him, and one, who was Latino himself, cracked a small smile. "Nope," he said. "We got to get going. We are in the zone."

As the agents walked off, Wilson said to us: "I learned that from my dad. He said that whenever you are stopped by the police or the military, try to get them to laugh. That way they aren't as likely to hurt you."

#### **Agua Prieta Border Aid Stations, August, 2010**

It is evening on the border. The crowds of school children who daily make the trek across the line to Douglas, Arizona, are now home with their families. Most of the ambling vendors have also disappeared from the border zone. From the rubble of the adjacent lot we have watched the sun set gloriously behind the Huachuca Mountains in the west.

Now, inside the *Centro de Migracion*, just over the line in Agua Prieta, Mexico, we sit and chat with Mario Jimenez. He has dark hair, dark brown skin, brown eyes, and a serious expression on his face that only occasionally breaks into a smile. He wears a red Chivas cap, broken down shoes, and clothes soiled by days of travel in the desert. He has lived in the United States for years, but returned to Michoacan for his mother's pancreas operation. He has been trying for two months to cross back over. Border politics has separated him from his mother and now his daughter.

Yesterday Mario arrived at the *Centro* in need of food, water, and medical attention for blisters. Tonight he is more relaxed and ready to talk about his home in California, where he lives in a nice house with his wife and daughter on the huge farm in the San Joaquin Valley where he works. He is a master of mechanized cultivation and can operate and maintain any of the machines necessary to produce a wide variety of vegetables and fruits. He tells

us that several of his brothers are also employed on the farm, but that many of his wife's relatives refuse to do such work. He explains,

*Ellos tienen papeles, yo no. Pero los papeles no trabajan. / They have papers, not me. But the papers don't do the work.*

When migrants are picked up by the Border Patrol, they are held for perhaps 24 hours, and then turned over to Wackenhut, a private bus service which transports the migrants to border crossings at places such as Nogales, Agua Prieta, and Naco. During peak season crossings four or five years ago Nogales saw 3,000 returning migrants in a day. Migrants must walk back across the border, often without having been given much food and water since their arrests, and typically with untreated medical needs. No More Deaths, the Mexican Red Cross, and other Mexican support groups have established aid stations at these border crossings in order to provide needed first aid, as well as food and water, to migrants. There are also some shelters provided for men, women, and children migrants.

At the Men's shelter in Agua Prieta we meet Guadalupe from Guatemala. He is about 60, with graying hair and serious eyes, the elder statesman of the men at the shelter, and he is quite reserved when we first meet him. He warms up considerably when he learns Persida is also from Guatemala, and they began a happy conversation about the country that they both love, the nation they had to leave.

We learn that Guadalupe is a former newspaperman who was detained after crossing the border in an attempt to join his children living in the United States. We also learn he is an artist. After our first visit we go shopping at the Walmart in Douglas, and return with paper and colored pencils for Guadalupe. With the grace and dignity of those who have few possessions, he thanks us. On our next visit he gives us two of his drawings, one containing a message, in English, of peace and cooperation between the peoples of the United States and Latin America.

#### **Mariposa Crossing, Nogales, Sonora, July, 2008**

It has been a quiet night at the Mariposa truck crossing, at least for those of us hanging around the Mexican *Cruz Roja / No Mas Muertes* tent where water, a little food, and some first aid is available. We wait for the next Wackenhut bus full of returned immigrants to show up.

Besides Gregg, Alfred and myself, the usual crowd is there: Mexican volunteers and *coyotes* occupy their ill-defined space



*Photo by Dalinda Melo Guzman*



rate spaces, but they are close enough to exchange pleasantries and confuse those of us new to the border as we try to learn who is who. There are a variety of children who come and go, mostly poorly dressed and some showing signs of drug addiction.

We occupy a rise, which turns into a cliff across the street, where most of the *coyotes* do their business. Below them, in the canyon, a new series of walls and fences is under construction, and powerful lights shine throughout the night. On the far side the hills rise again. Away in the distance we spot a lone border patrol car. They, too, are waiting for business.

Into this rather grim scene walks Esmeralda, a bright-eyed child in a beautiful pink dress, carrying her *Princesas de Disney* coloring book and some colors. She tries to interest Julio, an aging drunk, to color with her. Then Oswaldo, head of the Mexican volunteers, sends her to color with me. We chat about the different princesses (Jasmine is my favorite) and which colors to use. In this way we pass half an hour. When she skips off, Alfred comes over to tell me that while we were coloring, Esmeralda's mother, locally known as La Colocha, has escorted two groups of people across the border.

The wind picks up just as two Wackenhut buses arrive and we are inundated with about 80 returned immigrants, all hungry and thirsty, many with blisters. We work with a Guatemalan woman named Rosa. Her feet are blistered, but she also suffers from a bruised, painful blow to the face. In the high wind the electricity goes out, and we work by the light of our headlamps.

Overcoming her fear and pain, Rosa recounts to us her ordeal: her group had made it across the desert and into a waiting vehicle. The border patrol gave chase, ran

them off the road, and when they left the car she was thrown to the ground and smacked in the face. I listen to her, fixing her blisters, while Gregg takes down her testimony. This is the only answer we have for the degrading treatment she has received.

A steady stream of trucks carrying goods rolls through the border all night long, south to north, south to north.

#### **Persida Cifuentes' Testimony from Nogales Centro, Sonora, March, 2010**

After spending five days with No More Deaths in Nogales, I have learned just how much the human spirit of these people has been harmed. I interviewed various people who were deported from the U.S. to Nogales, Sonora for different reasons. I understood from what I had seen and from the testimonies given that this is a war zone: the military presence, the humiliations, the verbal, physical, and psychological abuses, and the overall abuse of power by the authorities and others give a clear image of a violent war of values waged against immigrants in the border area.

As a witness to these violations I must ask myself, where is the human spirit of those who represent the United States? On what basis do they have the authority to abuse and maltreat others for breaking an immigration law? What does a system of justice mean when the violation of the human right to defend oneself, to receive medical assistance, and to be treated humanely or simply receive a cup of water is ignored and such violations tolerated?

Marta, Lorena, Victor, and Salvador become *wetbacks*, *criminals*, *deportees*. These new names help erase their rights as human beings. If they are found crossing the desert they are in violation of immigration laws, some receive criminal charges,

some will spend time in prison, and families traveling together will routinely be divided and sent back to border crossings hundreds of miles apart.

Our brothers and sisters in Latin America first have to sadly accept that there is no work and they cannot survive economically in their countries. They borrow money for the trip, often putting up their houses as collateral. These are the telephone conversations overheard when such immigrants speak to those from whom they have borrowed money:

Don Jose, the *migra* caught me and I was deported. Can you give me a little more time to pay you everything back? Thank you Don Jose, God bless you.

People crossing the desert must survive the harsh, inclement climate, hot, dry and dusty during the day and cold at night. The vegetation is spiky, and the terrain is rocky and dangerous. They are threatened by animals such as coyotes, scorpions, and rattlesnakes, and are in constant danger from bandits, kidnappers, and drug dealers.

The results of this journey are blisters as large as their feet, spines in their bodies from cactus, and bones bruised, sprained, and broken, often at the start of the journey when they must jump the wall. They end their journey with spirits as damaged as their bodies from the mistreatment received from bandits, authorities, and sometimes their own guides.

During her journey in the desert Marta came across a woman lying in a state of agony. She looked helplessly into her eyes and watched her die. Marta told me that "those eyes you cannot erase from your mind." When she turned the body over Marta discovered that the woman had died with her child of six months in her arms. Did they die of thirst? Did they die of exposure or from the bites of animals? Did this mother leave more children behind in Mexico or the U.S.?

A few yards further along the trail was the body of a man. Was he the father of the child? Or perhaps another immigrant who wanted to help them? Did someone kill all three of them? These questions will probably never be answered. Three more sets of bones are added to the long list that the desert has taken.

Immigrants crossing the desert face border patrols, *zetas* (drug cartel), *mules* (drug carriers), *coyotes*, "guards" (who protect them from the *zetas* at a price), common criminals who will kidnap them for money, police dogs, and extremist groups such as the Minute Men.

Mario describes his arrest by the border patrol:

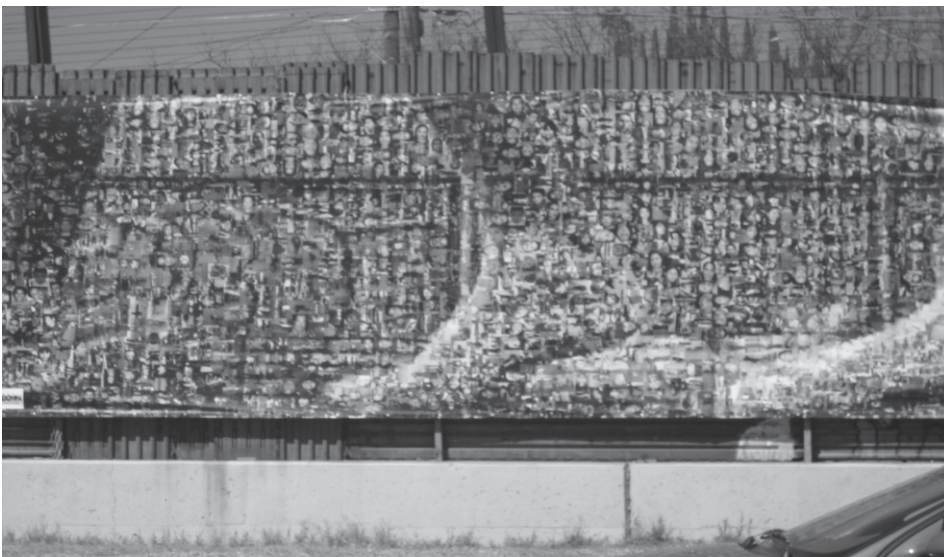


Photo by Michelle Yang

They broke my clavicle when they detained me. I was hit with the butt of a rifle and fell to the ground. I got up and said that it hurt, and they told me to shut up, put on my backpack, and start walking.

Immigrants will be detained, humiliated verbally and physically, with the sole purpose of “teaching them the lesson”: Do not try to cross this border again.

When they are put into the back of the border patrol vehicles, the so-called *perreras* or dogcatchers, immigrants suffer from the heat without air conditioning, from thirst because they are not given water, from lack of medical assistance, and from high speeds over very bumpy terrain. Ricardo recounts:

They drove like crazy. Once they stopped to chat with other border agents in another car while we waited in the stifling perrera. One young man was so sick that he vomited on everyone packed tightly near him. Thus we arrived at the prison.

Marta states that

... in the prison it was air-conditioned and we were very cold. They took our jackets from us and gave us dirty, lice-filled blankets. They gave us each a cold hamburger and we slept on our feet for lack of space.

Juana, age 13, described the detention center:

They put plastic handcuffs on us. They hurt my wrists a lot because they were so tight.

Rosalba described the coercion of signing papers:

They told me to sign a paper but would not let me read it first. They said only that if I didn't sign I would spend up to a year in prison. They said I could call my consulate but what is the point if they are not going to do anything for us?

### Streamlining: The Dialogue

*Persida:* From the detention centers 70 immigrants are chosen each day to go through “streamlining,” a rapid trial in immigration court that will go on their records. If caught crossing the border illegally again, they will be charged as felons. The immigrants enter the courtroom with hands and feet chained. This scene brought to my mind the days of slavery. In the silence of the courtroom the only sound were the chains when the prisoners moved. As they were charged, their lawyers stood behind them, translating, whispering the correct answers to the judge's questions.

As a citizen of the United States I feel guilty for my part in this system whose



Photo by Michelle Yang

aim is to break the spirit of the individuals charged with illegal entry. Our laws condemn those who enter this nation undocumented and at the same time violate human rights as defined internationally. I was witness to these violations of human rights.

Any one of us could be an immigrant some day. I am one myself. All of us are human beings. What present do we want to forge for this generation? What future do we want to create for the next?

*Donald:* I remember when my son Orion and I visited the immigration court in the summer of 2009: the laughter of the guards, the lawyers dressed in black fluttering about like so many crows, whispering into the ears of their clients, the judge's seat set high above us all, cold and distant. The immigrants themselves were so polite, thanking the judge after he was through with them, as they were about to be led out in their chains.

Then two women among the prisoners passed us. One looked directly at me with the eyes of a mother who was worried about the fate of her children. I remember turning to Orion and saying, that could be your mother. Where have we landed as a nation when mothers who try to feed their children are led off in chains?

### Crossing Borders: Suggestions for Educators and Human Rights Advocates

Undocumented immigration into the United States is a hugely controversial issue. Those who seek to take a humanitarian stand and participate in efforts to provide medical assistance, food, and water to migrants may find their efforts met with skepticism or outright opposition.

Indeed, since 2008, 15 volunteers with No More Deaths have been cited for “litter-

ing” in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. These volunteers were caught leaving sealed gallons of clean water along migrant trails notorious for immigrant deaths. In their court appearances, volunteers have argued that humanitarian assistance is not a crime. These court cases have brought the group into the regional and national spotlight (Gandossy, 2009).

The need for humanitarian assistance remains very high, and volunteers will find that they will use all of their skills and develop new ones in this important work. For human service providers as well as institutions training them, there are some key issues to remember. Furthermore, there are lessons in the border experiences for all educators.

**1. Humanitarian assistance is not against the law, but work with organizations such as No More Deaths may be seen as controversial.** This is the case at our university. Therefore, institutions interested in providing service learning experiences on the border may wish to go through organizations that are more overtly educational, such as Borderlinks ([www.borderlinks.org](http://www.borderlinks.org)). Borderlinks will provide an excellent introduction to the border issues, as well as introduce students to the work of groups such as No More Deaths.

Many of our summer volunteers had their first border experience through Borderlinks. If you would like to bring a group to the border, consider spring break (March) or the summer months, as these are the deadly months in the Sonora Desert, and volunteers will have a huge impact. If you have some fluency in Spanish or some medical training, your skills will be well-utilized in the border area. University Spanish language programs and nursing programs could find that some time spent on the border would be



beneficial to students and relatively inexpensive.

**2. The border experience is a place for individual growth and reflection.** We have found that it has had a tremendous impact on our own perspectives regarding immigration and on our teaching. For example, in Minnesota and Wisconsin we prepare teachers and human service providers who will work with the large Hmong, Somalian, and Latino communities in our area. The border experience helps us to get a better glimpse of the trials and perseverance of those Mexican and Latin American immigrants who have crossed through the desert. It also gives us some additional insight into the dangerous crossing in Laos of the Mekong River, a journey made by many of the members of our Hmong community, as well as the flight of Somalians through the drought-stricken landscape of East Africa.

**3. The impact of the border reaches into communities far to the north.** As such, border issues would be ideal for social studies units and literature study groups of secondary students or educational professionals. For example, in an upcoming university course, we will compare Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latecomer* (2008), about the Hmong refugee experience, and Regan's (2010) *The Death of Josseline*, which begins with the death of a 14-year-old in the Arizona desert.

There is something universal about the border crossing experience, something that needs to be addressed and explored by those of us who have not been compelled to leave our native land. It can increase our understanding of ourselves, and provide us a sense of the everyday heroism present in our immigrant and refugee communities, a heroism that should be acknowledged and honored.

**4. Curriculum that incorporates themes of justice, human rights, and what it means to be an "American" is appropriate for children at all ages in school.** *The Line Between Us: Teaching about the Border and Mexican Immigration* (Bigelow, 2006) provides a variety of curriculum ideas, many especially appropriate for middle and high school. *Crossing Arizona: Where do You Draw the Line?* (Mathew & DeVivo, 2006), is a documentary film that combines the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders on the Arizona immigration debate with emotion-laden scenes of migrants preparing to cross, losing their way in the desert, and being taken into detention. It would be appropriate for audiences from middle school on up.

At Friends School of Minnesota, teachers in various grades have addressed top-



Photo by Michelle Yang

ics of the border after learning first-hand from their colleague Persida Cifuentes. Students investigated immigration issues and laws, and presented their findings through hand-made picture books, papers, oral presentations and dramatizations.

### We Are All Border Crossers

Some have called the struggle to defend the human rights of undocumented workers the new civil rights movement. Alabama has approved a law that criminalizes undocumented workers and their families to such an extent that thousands have fled the state, leaving furnished homes behind and classrooms empty of children (Fitz & Kelley, 2011). Florida is pursuing legislation that would deny in-state tuition to American citizens whose parents are undocumented (Vazquez, 2011).

Clearly, teachers are placed in the front lines of the issue of undocumented immigration. Teachers, which way will you turn? Do you still believe in the idea of a nation of immigrants? Are you willing to look past *los papeles* to see the human being that stands before you? To what lengths will you defend the human rights of your students and their families? What borders are you willing to cross?

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