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Migration



A view of the skyline of Omaha, Nebraska: Asylum seekers from as far away as Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia and Sierra Leone are building new lives with the assistance of the nonprofit organization Omaha Welcomes the Stranger. (Dreamstime/Wirestock)



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Editor's note: *Global Sisters Report's series, "Welcoming the Stranger," takes a closer look at women religious working with immigrants and migrants. While we cover this topic often, this series presents sisters and organizations networking to better serve those crossing borders, within the framework of global migration trends.*



Asylum seekers from as far away as Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia and Sierra Leone are building new lives in Omaha, Nebraska, with the help of sisters representing three different religious communities and a network that stretches to Juárez, Mexico.

Founded in November 2022, Omaha Welcomes the Stranger Inc. is a nonprofit organization founded by Tom and Margaret Hoarty; Mercy Sr. Kathleen Erickson; Servants of Mary Sr. Val Lewandoski; and Notre Dame Sr. Mary Kay Meagher. The five form the Board of Directors for Omaha Welcomes the Stranger, along with Juan Carlos Garcia, director of Hispanic ministry for the Columban Fathers, and Mercy Sr. Maryanne Stevens.

The Hoartys were inspired to start Omaha Welcomes the Stranger after volunteering at Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, in 2019 and 2021, an opportunity Margaret

Hoarty learned about from a Notre Dame sister's account of her volunteer experience there. In 2022, Ruben Garcia, Annunciation House's founder and executive director, asked Erickson and the Hoartys to welcome a bus of migrants and asylum seekers to Omaha because shelters in El Paso and other border cities were overwhelmed.

They didn't hesitate and, with help and guidance from the Schlegel Center for Service and Justice at Creighton University and its director, Ken Reed-Bouley, they established Omaha Welcomes the Stranger and a shelter facility. That December, the organization welcomed a bus with 39 people from Central and South America. Within a week, all of the families were on their way to friends and family throughout the U.S.

"Sr. Kathleen Erickson's years of service at the border and her relationships with asylum seekers have been instrumental in furthering the mission of OWS," the Hoartys noted. Erickson spoke with Global Sisters Report in 2014, just three months after GSR began publishing, when she had already been working on immigration and social justice issues for more than two decades.



Mercy Sr. Kathleen Erickson, in foreground, is seen in 2017 at the Tabor House in Juárez, a Mexican city on the border with the United States. (CNS/Courtesy Sisters of Mercy of the Americas)

In a follow-up interview celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, Global Sisters Report asked Erickson what has changed since then. The vast majority of people at the southern border seeking asylum are still from Latin America, but the nations most are coming from has changed.

Those arrested who have citizenship in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Colombia make up 32% of the total, while in 2014, those citizens made up less than 1% of those arrested, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse on immigration at Syracuse University.

"What we see now are a great many more people who have nowhere to go and no contacts in the U.S., particularly those from Venezuela who are in the first wave of migrants from that country," Tom Hoarty said, adding that shift in migration dynamics essentially changed Omaha Welcomes the Stranger's mission.

In July 2023, a pair of migrant families, each with three children, spent the night in the rain outside the Omaha St. Juan Diego Center. Catholic Charities contacted Omaha Welcomes the Stranger the next morning and the organization agreed to accept them at its shelter.

Today, Omaha Welcomes the Stranger has nine families from Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia and Sierra Leone living in the shelter. Another five families have moved into apartments, and adults in two of the families have full-time jobs.

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"There are plenty of jobs available in Omaha for people who have a work permit, and we can get them placed pretty quickly once they have the permit," Tom Hoarty said. "A couple of our people have been asked to move up from entry-level jobs and become semi-supervisory once they started work, and we have been pleased with that. Employers are pleased with them and the work they do."

In addition to offering shelter, food and housing and employment assistance, Omaha Welcomes the Stranger and its volunteers provide transportation to health care, dental and legal appointments as well as help enroll children in school within days of their arrival.

"They still need a little bit of guidance and support from us, but there are churches and other people within the community that have welcomed them," Tom Hoarty said, adding that local Catholic parishes and other religious organizations have provided meals, clothing and other support.

Stevens, who joined the Omaha Welcomes the Stranger board last January after retiring the previous June, began her volunteer work for the organization as it began receiving the most families it ever had from Annunciation House. She is currently helping three families from Venezuela resettle and has seen firsthand how life-changing the experience can be.

"For all of us, it's been so rewarding to see their determination and desire to live in a place that is safe and raise their children in a place that is safe," she said.



A migrant family is dropped off Dec. 13, 2022, at a migrant shelter run by Annunciation House in downtown El Paso, Texas. (OSV News/Reuters/Ivan Pierre Aguirre)

Stevens doesn't see much of the adult men in the families because they received their work permits within two weeks of Omaha Welcomes the Stranger's application for them, and they each work from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. six days a week. However, she has seen the women become more confident as they became acclimated to grocery shopping and storing a pantry with food, shopping at thrift stores for other supplies, and learning to use the bus system.

The children acclimated quickly as well and, once they had received physicals and the necessary vaccinations, began attending school and learning to speak English. They enjoy playing soccer in their free time, and are bonding with the families from other countries who also are resettling. One girl from Sierra Leone is learning to speak Spanish as she befriends the families from Venezuela.

"This work is very in line with what we as religious communities believe in in terms of welcoming the strangers," Stevens said. "The best way we can do that is to tell the stories of what we are doing to our families, our friends and our neighbors."

That word of mouth is one of the reasons Omaha Welcomes the Stranger has been so successful in recruiting volunteers to help the organization and the families it serves, said Lewandoski, who has watched the roster of helpers grow since the organization was founded.

"Part of the draw is that the volunteers who do the case management really get to know the families and develop relationships with them. We're not just doing what the borders are doing with a quick turnaround in the shelters. We're actually helping them resettle so we're able to develop a relationship over several months," she said.



The board for Omaha Welcomes the Stranger includes (from left): Mercy Sr. Maryanne Stevens, Servants of Mary Sr. Val Lewandoski, Notre Dame Sr. Mary Kay Meagher and Mercy Sr. Kathleen Erickson. (Courtesy of OWS)

Lewandoski said she was eager to get involved in Omaha Welcomes the Stranger after traveling with Erickson, her friend and colleague, to the southern border. "It really was an eye-opener for me to visit the shelters there, meet some of the immigrants, and go into Juárez and see the conditions there," she said.

"OWS is so grounded and such a from-the-ground-up organization where everybody is connected. I think a key support I want to provide, too, is building community among the volunteers and among the families themselves," Lewandoski added.

Margaret Hoarty noted that Omaha Welcomes the Stranger does not receive government funding and it carries out its work with the support of donations and grants.

"People in the community have been very generous when they find out what our mission is and when they meet the families face to face. I think that really makes a difference," she said. "Our volunteers have been wonderful. They are around retirement age and have a real heart for this type of ministry. They have been very generous with their time and expertise."

She described the partnership with the sisters on Omaha Welcomes the Stranger's board and a number of other women religious who are volunteers as an "amazing experience."

The Hoartys also expressed their appreciation for the associate groups that have supported Omaha Welcomes the Stranger, including the Mercy Associates, the Franciscan Associates, the Servite Associates and the Notre Dame Associates.

"Our hope is that other cities throughout the country might also, as the Gospel asks, 'welcome the stranger,' " Margaret Hoarty said.

She added that, in collaboration with Ruben Garcia and Annunciation House in El Paso, Fr. Bill Morton with Columban Fathers and Cristina Coronado in Juárez, Omaha Welcomes the Stranger hopes to welcome more migrants in need to the area. It expects to move the families currently living in its shelter into apartments by the end of July and refill its shelter space with waiting families soon after.

This story appears in the **Welcoming the Stranger** feature series. View the full series.