Columns



Srs. Eileen McKenzie, Olga Cristobal, RGS, Cynthia Hernandez, coordinator of volunteers at KINO, and Sr. Kristine Vorenkamp. (Courtesy of Kristine Vorenkamp)



by Kristine Vorenkamp

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I have witnessed firsthand the struggles of migrants seeking safety and dignity. In the United States, immigration policies continue to shift, creating hardship for those on the move. The current administration has taken steps to drastically reduce immigration, with many families deported during workplace raids. In response, Catholic sisters stand in solidarity with our migrant neighbors, offering support and advocacy.

As a Sister of the Living Word in Des Plaines, Illinois, I had the opportunity to participate in the Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants program through the Kino Border Initiative. This month-long immersion allowed me to experience life at the U.S.-Mexico border, ministering at the Kino service center and living in an inter-congregational community in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. What I witnessed there continues to shape my ministry today.

After 10 years in leadership for my community, I was eager to be with the people in their day-to-day lives again. I was able to participate in the immersion experience in August 2023. We were five sisters from five different communities across the United States – living, praying, cooking and sharing about our gospel, living with each other and those we served. Each was grateful that our vowed life allowed us to be available for those in need.

My experience was incredibly educational. I learned how families are fleeing violence, some walking through the desert, and many having nowhere to go in Mexico. We were very busy each day cutting vegetables, serving meals, fitting clothes for families, attending educational presentations, and even making daily trips to feed those sleeping at the border port entrance (though this is no longer permitted). We learned that cartels in certain states in Mexico have taken control of all aspects of life, demanding a percentage of wages and loyalty – or threatening terrible consequences for individuals, their family members, and their children.

I learned that Kino is a shelter and a safe place for families but offers much more. One cannot help but be impressed by lawyers explaining migrants' rights, social workers connecting families with members in the United States, clinicians meeting immediate healthcare needs, the provision of religious services, and the hope people had through the care received. It is a powerful example of "the kingdom of God" that Jesus calls us to.

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It was also a visceral realization of a suffering humanity. In doing the *encuestas*, or initial interviews, when families arrived at the service center, my heart broke to hear of such letting go, physical and psychological injury, and desperation. It was powerful to be with these people who, after losing everything, witnessed their faith and hope in God's love and care. And, as difficult as it was to get an asylum interview in the U.S., they continued trying!

I committed my time to studies and training when I returned to Illinois. I am now an accredited representative through the U.S. Department of Justice for immigrants who are here and need legal assistance in their process toward legal residency. I work with the Alliance for Immigrant Neighbors in Des Plaines, Illinois. It is what I know I can do now, at my age, to continue to accompany our brothers and sisters in migration. I hope to be able to help our immigrant neighbors become residents and later citizens.

They face many challenges in this legal system. It is very complicated, and they need help. Many have been traumatized in their journey. Many have struggled through paths we wouldn't imagine possible, and they arrive with great faith and resiliency for the next step. I pray that our government will realize the gifts these people bring – their hope, faith and willingness to build up a community in the U.S. Not only do we need these strong, faithful people, but they need us.

In ways unexpected, my experience in Nogales at Kino continues to inform my ministry. Some of my most memorable experiences were doing the *encuestas* (interviews) of those arriving for help. Looking back, we were receiving many folks fleeing the state of Guerrero, where cartels control every aspect of life. Now, we understand that Guerrero is completely under the control of multiple cartels, and not only are we seeing the results of people fleeing, but we contributed to the report "Fleeing Terror in Southern Mexico: Why Numerous Guerrero Refugees Qualify for Asylum," recently published by the International Human Rights Clinic of Seattle University School of Law and Kino Border Initiative.

Considering the changes in our world, the call to embrace and welcome is the call to love, not hate. As the Trump administration forms and the "Border Czar" advances his Draconian plans for mass deportation, anyone with a conscience can see the devastating outcome of treating our neighbors this way. We will see what unfolds for

their future and ours. May we have the strength and courage to stand up for what is right and just.

I believe that we can all do something.

To learn more about the Catholic Sisters Walking with Migrants program, contact Sr. Eileen McKenzie, FSPA, at 520-867-5438 or emckenzie@kinoborderinitiative.org.