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Migration



Sophomore Victoria Mendoza-Cardena, 16, from Sacred Heart Preparatory in Atherton, California, serves a Central American mother and her two young daughters breakfast on Feb. 19, 2025, at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico. (Anita Snow)



by Anita Snow

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Nogales, Mexico — March 19, 2025

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Documentary filmmaker Kip Doyle drove a recreational vehicle from Chicago to volunteer for two weeks serving meals to migrants just south of the Arizona-Mexico border.

A group of teenagers from a Catholic school in Northern California traveled here to volunteer during their recent winter break, and several times a week, retiree Bob Kee drives an hour from Tucson, Arizona, to administer first aid.

They all volunteered at the Catholic-run Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, just across the Arizona border. The center provides food, shelter, health care, legal help, social workers and job skills for migrants deported there or stranded in Mexico.

It has been a tumultuous few months for the 17-year-old humanitarian group since President Donald Trump took office and implemented a series of enforcement changes that have upended the lives of immigrants and caused anxiety, chaos and fear along the southern border.

The number of migrants arriving at the center has increased in recent weeks as the Trump administration has ramped up deportations. That followed an initial brief drop when arrests for illegal border crossings plummeted.

Pedro De Velasco, the center's director of education and advocacy, said in a video statement on March 17 that the number of immigrants arriving at Kino had increased in recent weeks. Eight of 10 of those immigrants told Kino that they had lived in the U.S. for an average of 11 years.

Through all the recent changes in U.S. immigration policy and fluctuations of immigrants through Kino, volunteers have continued to show up at the nonprofit's dining room and shelter, compelled to help by their faith, philosophy or conscience.

"Migration is such a complex issue," said Anesh Goyal, a 17-year-old junior who was among 10 students visiting from Sacred Heart Preparatory in Atherton, California. "You feel really sad when you leave because you don't really know what's next for them."



Visiting students from Sacred Heart Preparatory in Atherton, California, get an orientation on Feb. 19, 2025, before they serve breakfast to migrants at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico. (Anita Snow)

Goyal and his fellow students helped serve breakfast to several dozen migrants who sat at long tables in a large, gymnasium style room on a February morning. It was less than half the crowd usually seen at the twice-a-day meals and no one was staying at the once-crowded, 85-bed shelter.

The Kino Border Initiative was named for Italian Jesuit missionary Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino (1645-1711). It was inspired by the spirituality of the Jesuits and Missionaries of the Eucharist, a congregation of women who serve migrants and poor, elderly and Indigenous people. Kino has two locations — one in Nogales, Arizona, and the other in the town of the same name in Mexico.

In addition to food and shelter, the center's Mexico location — a short walk across the border from Arizona — offers job training and pro bono legal advice through partner groups like the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project.

Even before Trump took office, the group's executive director, Joanna Foote Williams, had predicted the new administration would have a dramatic effect on migrants at the border.

"I think it's going to be devastating. It's going to be exhausting," Williams told the National Catholic Reporter earlier this year, recalling how parents were separated from their children during the first Trump administration. "We remember all the moms and dads and sitting with them."

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"It's my belief that God calls me to do this work. I'm really motivated by that," she said.

Most of the migrants showing up at Kino Border Initiative right after Trump took office were Mexicans who were waiting in the country for an asylum appointment in the U.S. under a program the Trump presidency has since canceled. Deported non-Mexicans have been transported hours away from the border to the Sonora state capital of Hermosillo or the southernmost state of Chiapas.

During the new administration's first 10 days, the center received only 11 individuals who were deported to Nogales, Mexico, even though the U.S. Border Patrol has been deporting large numbers of people through that port of entry, Kino officials said in a report to U.S. lawmakers. The center saw 63 people in the first three weeks of January and 218 during December.

"More than a month into the current administration, we continue to observe the impacts of the dismantling of the asylum system and the lack of legal pathways for individuals seeking protection," the center said in its Feb. 27 report to U.S. Congressional offices.

Karen Hernández, the center's advocacy coordinator, said in an online March 2 update that about 1,000 people were deported back into Mexico through Nogales in February and approximately three-quarters were Mexicans. Many are struggling to cope with life along the border after fleeing violence in their hometowns deeper inside the country, she said.

Hernández said that although they have been helped by a Mexican initiative to welcome deported citizens back to the country, some show up seeking information to get needed services as they contemplate next steps while stranded on the border.

It's still far from the crowd seen at the center during the earlier part of the Biden administration, when hundreds of asylum seekers from around the world arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border daily.



Volunteer Bob Kee, right, a retired dental technician from Tucson, chats on Feb. 19, 2025, with maintenance worker Victor Lara at the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico. (Anita Snow)

Kee was already a regular Kino volunteer when Trump launched his first administration in 2017 with an immediate travel ban for people from seven majority-Muslim countries.

"He's doing exactly what he said he'd do," Kee said of Trump's promises this time to undertake mass deportations of millions from around the United States.

Kee, who spoke to NCR while helping at the center's medical clinic, is a retired dental technician who started volunteering at the Kino Border Initiative in 2011. He also received training as a wilderness first responder volunteering with the humanitarian group Tucson Samaritans to provide first aid to migrants found in remote areas.

"I guess it is just part of my belief system, the fact that I'm truly blessed and there is a real need," Kee said of his volunteer work, adding that he grew up in a Catholic family but didn't feel like he was especially religious.

The Rev. Steve Keplinger, rector of Tuscon's Grace St. Paul's Episcopal Church, said many people in Tucson volunteer to help migrants and some members of his church volunteer at Kino Border Initiative.

"We believe we are called to protect everyone who is oppressed," Keplinger said. "It is hard to find anyone who is being oppressed more than the migrants in southern Arizona."

Sr. Marilú Covani said she feels compelled to volunteer at Kino because of her Catholic faith.

"I do a lot of interviews because I'm bilingual," said Covani, a retired member of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods who is in her 80s.



Cars are parked on Feb. 19, 2025, outside the front entrance of the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Mexico, just south of the border with Arizona. (Anita Snow)

Originally from Argentina, Covani was a young wife of a medical doctor when she arrived in the U.S. in 1967. The couple had a son and Covani's husband died when he was young. When her son got married more than three decades ago, she joined the religious community.

"And now, I've just retired for the third time," she said. "I just wasn't ready for the motherhouse."

Documentary filmmaker Doyle, who shares her time between Chicago and Maine, said she volunteered to learn more about the people affected by U.S. immigration policies.

Doyle signed up last year for a two-month volunteer stint that started on Jan. 1 after she heard about the Kino Border Initiative on the news. At the time, she was working on projects about issues such as kidnappings in Venezuela and homeless veterans in

Chicago.

"Everything I do is mission-driven," Doyle said. "This has been an extremely interesting experience. I want to understand this, trace it back to its roots."

Among the migrants at Kino that same day in February was Andres, a 36-year-old who had been waiting in Mexico when Trump took office on Jan. 20 and then canceled asylum appointments, including Andres'. He had hoped to reunite with his father in Georgia.

"I didn't feel so much disillusioned as deceived," said Andres, identified only by his first name for his safety after fleeing violence in his native El Salvador. "We have lost so much. How much more can we lose?"

Andres said nevertheless he is grateful for Kino and the volunteers who work there.

"This is the kind of place where everyone does what they can to help all people, without national, gender, ethnic or other distinction," he said. "And along with that, they treat everyone warmly."

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