

## **An Invitation to Cross**

*By Sarah Degner*

Working with the Latino community in my medium-sized university town in the Midwest, near Chicago, I have heard many first-hand stories about the harrowing international trip from Central American and Mexico into the USA. A climate of fear reigns here regarding immigrant stories, especially among middle-aged adults and older, who are not eligible for legislation to create a temporary protected status. Many of my friends don't feel comfortable or safe, due to the controversy surrounding immigration, the misunderstandings about whether moving from country to country can be done legally at all by people of ordinary means, and due to the climate of fear for immigrants who wish to stay where they live but fear being found out and deported. For these reasons, they tell their stories in hushed tones. As I have worked as an advocate beside immigrant people in my town, shared trust has been earned over time. I would like to share their stories with others, in an anonymous way, creating a composite picture of what the journey between nations looks like for some migrant people. My community needs understanding and compassion---especially in a week like this one, when a racial slur was just flung from a passing car to attack a stranger on the street, and when a politician speaks on TV with ignorance and a lack of sensitivity. These are the days that I wish that I could re-trace the steps of my friends and family, to share the human trials that have been shared with me in the quest to make a new home of promised opportunities. If I could take a person through that voyage, I would invite them to take my hand and cross.

Cross. Cross the border. Not in a Jeep, not in a helicopter, not sitting in a pickup truck with a cattle rancher. Each migrant carries a backpack, a few photos, a Bible, and a bottle of water. First, at home, the men and women wishing to have an immigration immersion experience might kneel beside an elderly grandmother, and kiss a sleeping toddler goodbye, and then ride on a train, or curled up hiding in the trunk of a car for hours or days. These would-be migrants would need to do some walking, maybe to the point that shoes fall apart. No cell phones. No catered lunches. No cars. No receptionists. No internet. No contact with family. With an understanding of Spanish and also some indigenous languages, our pilgrims would hear the fear, risks, losses, and human rights violations that others before have faced. It might take a month to actually get their bodies across the border, once each had saved up for the cost of it. They would prepare mentally to lose every cent, no credit cards allowed. These travellers ought to experience the fear, exhaustion, hunger, thirst and isolation of the desert, to approach that border fence without the familiar comfort of a passport and visa in a pocket, in an undocumented way - like how our forefathers from elsewhere migrated into this land over the centuries and right up until now.

We all would benefit from this opportunity to walk in another's shoes. We would feel the injustice of being a migrant fleeing for economic survival, trusting strangers, trudging for days through the desert, feeling the helicopters with searchlights bearing down. Perhaps we'd take along a preschool-aged daughter, too young to understand, hand her over to strangers, say goodbye hoping for the best, that she makes it to the meeting point on the other side. Perhaps before kissing her forehead, we could weigh her options again; either starving at home, being carried by parents through the desert for weeks, or risking unspeakable horrors that befall trafficked girls. To understand the meaning of immigration, each person with a vote should have the opportunity to be detained, fingerprinted, and deported, to try again to cross when we'd each paid our debts and earned more cash. We should each hear the voices

and smell the breath of the border agents calling us "illegal" and then lie down to sleep in the desert and look death in the face.

All voluntarily, for the hope of a better life, for the dream of survival and the hope that a reunited family represents. If we see that side of the journey, then we will know the courage that immigrant families' lives are built upon. We will then be able to say that we really understand what the borders between nations represent, and we will be able to work for justice. If citizens who have forgotten their roots or who have no sense of other-ness want the full migration experience, they might do well to live as divided families for years on end, having said goodbye forever to family at home, feeling disillusioned by a minimum-wage job to send money to a sick relative each month. It takes courage and determination to settle down in a big city or a small town, to learn a new language under the pressure of survival, without any tutor except for the storekeepers of shops you frequent for groceries and gas. One might work months of six days a week, two eight-hour shifts back to back, laboring in the fields under the hot sun to harvest the food to feed and clothe others. Maybe we'd have other jobs, too, whatever we'd find without running into bureaucratic roadblocks that might prevent our employment. We'd learn the laws and language by making one little mistake at a time. Some arrests for not knowing the system might be part of the deal, or maybe just the frustration of not knowing the rules or how to learn them.

That field trip would give each insider another perspective on the role of migrant people living together in the world, and the kinds of economic and immigration policies that benefit everyone, even (to quote the plaque on the Statue of Liberty that was a gift from France to the United States) to bring a better life to "the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Only when we have lived as "other" can we really claim to have understood the idea of a borderland with our own eyes and to know why some believe these human-placed marks are deep political scars across the surface of the planet. When we put on the experience of another, get into her shoes and walk around for a while, we'll know the weight of being a refugee and the role that migrant people have in securing others' comfortable lives.

If we regard these voiceless poor with mercy and hospitality, we may entertain angels unawares. If we show kindness to immigrants, we will depend on shared labor and human loyalty for generations to come as we live as one family. Let's not cut off the source of human lifeblood that for centuries through migration has allowed nations and countries to grow, breathe, and be renewed.