

THE DESERT FOUNTAIN HUMANE BORDERS

December 2022

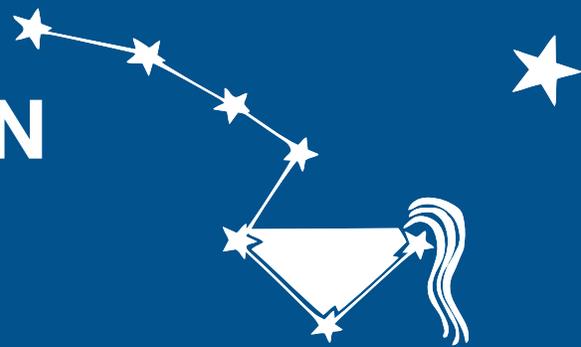


Photo Credit: Amanda Strickland/Allie Jordan

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ARIZONA OpenGIS FOR DECEASED MIGRANTS
humaneborders.org/migrant-death-mapping/

Farewell from Chair Doug Ruopp

A little earlier than I expected, I have passed on the duties of chair of Humane Borders. My family needs me – this is not the politicians' excuse – and our home is grandchildren central for awhile. I am completely grateful that Dora Rodriguez is our new chair. We have worked together for the last few years, especially around resources for migrants in Mexican border towns. I know she has the energy, sense of teamwork, and of course so many experiences that directly inspire her to help create "humane borders." Dora will have a bigger board with volunteers Laurie Cantillo, David Sarando, Brad Jones, and Scarlett Bradford (our new treasurer) joining.

Anyone who has spent time with Humane Borders staff, board, or volunteers knows that the variety of skills and knowledge we share is our strength. It's true that we just know that striving to be good citizens of the world is important, but the belief has to be backed up by effective action. We are constantly listening to the needs on the border, and finding ways to respond. I am deeply grateful and honored to have been involved as chair with Rebecca and Joel on our staff, and the board and volunteers. I know our new board members feel the same way.

With a little rewording for the 21st century these words keep going through my mind (inspired by John Donne):

No one is an island. No one stands alone. Each one's joy is joy to me. Each one's grief is my own. We need one another, so I will defend everyone as my family, everyone as my friend.



*Doug & Sara Ruopp's Grandbabies
Mateo and Guillermo*

Early on in my latest tenure on the board I went with Poncho Chavez to visit the shelters in Sonoita in Sonora, Mexico.

(Poncho's roles as treasurer and bridge to many likeminded groups was exceptional in my time on the board.) At the Casa del Migrante I was talking to a migrant about one of the warning posters we create to provide accurate information of the dangers involved in crossing the desert in Arizona. He acknowledged the dangers and simply said, "Cada uno de nosotros tiene que decidir por sí mismo lo que vamos a hacer." (Each one of us had to decide for ourselves what we are going to do.) Whatever he ultimately chose to do or any migrant chooses, in the end we all can decide what lengths we are willing to go to be a friend.

Empathy for others who have had to make life changing decisions, often in desperate circumstances, leads many of us to want to help. I recognize in migrant stories the will of people to do whatever they can to be able to feel safe and provide for their families. While we're all in the swirl of historical change environmentally, economically, and socially, the amazing volunteers in so many organizations like Humane Borders find time and resources to reach those in need. I am so grateful to those who believe in a more compassionate future, which board member John Hoelter reminds us is the meaning of faith.

Please Welcome New Chair Dora Luz Rodriguez



It is my honor to be part of an amazing organization like Humane Borders. I'm also humble to follow in the steps of Doug Ruopp who has devoted so much of his time and energy to desert humanitarian work in the effort to save lives. Thank you Doug! For everything you've done!

I remember just last spring when I called on Doug to ask for help. We needed to transport a set of swings to Casa San Pedro to a shelter in Sonoita, Sonora. Doug's response was "Of course we can help." He not only transported the huge boxes containing so many parts of that swing set, but together with other volunteers, he put all of those small pieces together to bring the little ones at the shelter some happiness. This is only one of the many times I asked Doug to help me around our borders.

So I take Doug's place with great responsibility, humbleness, and respect to represent each of our devoted volunteers, staff, donors, and most importantly, our brothers and sisters who are crossing the desert at this very moment, and who we hope will find our blue flags to guide them to water stations to fill up their black water bottles so they can continue their journey. We will continue to uphold our mission to save lives, advocate for human rights, denounce injustice, and we will always continue to hope for more humane policies that will welcome our neighbors!

I invite you to take a moment out of your busy schedules to reflect on the beautiful work you are doing supporting an organization that continues to save the lives of so many. Let's continue to walk this journey together, and to be part of the solution together! Have a wonderful holiday season with your family, friends, and everyone around you!

Remember all those who are, through no fault of their own, forced to flee their homes and take, along with family, only that which they can carry to seek a safer place to live. May we have hearts and hands willing to reach out and help these, our distant relatives within our worldwide family.



Children Play at San Pedro Shelter, Sonoita, Sonora

The Future of Borders

By Dinah Bear

This essay, lightly edited for *The Desert Fountain*, was part of a series of publications developed for the United Nations' Stockholm + 50 report on "Environmental Rights, Human Rights and Environmental Justice" held in Stockholm, Sweden, in June, 2022.

Borders between nations are much more than a legal line; they can bring joy, opportunity and freedom or fear, devastation and death. Today, we see a worldwide hardening of borders through infrastructure, technology and harsh policies. Borders are evolving from jurisdictional demarcation to a dark region of intimidation and peril. Walls lead this shift. In 1989, when the Berlin

wall fell, there were seven walls between nations. Today the count is seventy-seven countries and growing.

What happened? One word sums it up: fear – fear of masses of people who are perceived as being a threat to a way of life, to a culture, to safety, to political power and even to survival in times of scarcity. When the Berlin wall fell, worldwide migration was estimated to be approximately 150 million. In 2020, the global total was approximately 281 million migrants.

Human migration is a defining characteristic of this century, along with wildlife extinction and climate change. Conflicts, climate and epidemics have always been factors in migration. But as human population expands and climate change intensifies, the imperative

for people to move will continue to grow.

Walls divide families and communities, block wildlife and destroy sacred sites. Borders and blockades drive deaths up and shred human rights. As those familiar with Humane Borders' migrant death mapping know, hundreds of migrants die each year in the United States trying to cross borders and thousands die each year across the world. Countries that usually value the rule of law sweep it away to erect walls at enormous economic and ecological cost. In the quest to "secure borders" nations discard their own values.

Technology, suggested as an alternative to a physical wall, is more typically added to walls and comes with its own dark side, including robotic "dogs" that can be used to jump on the back of migrants. Wealthier nations that feel besieged shift millions of people to poorer countries.

Borders should not be a road to inhumanity, ecological destruction and death. Our collective obsession with security often blinds us to threats within our own countries. If humanity could muster the courage to overcome its fears, there are better visions for the future. In fact, currently there are more transboundary protected areas than border walls. These areas should be managed and nurtured, not divided. There are visionary proposals for joint community spaces at borders; for example, at the border in California, in an area called Friendship Park, considerable talent has been invested in designing a shared binational community space. Further, many people would stay in their original countries if they were able to do so safely. They need help.



In 2017, this incomplete 12-foot border wall dividing Arizona from Mexico abruptly ran out just east of the Tohono O' Oldham Nation. It has since been replaced by one 30-feet tall.

These ideas are not incompatible with a reasonable approach to security. If we are to reverse course to create borders more welcoming to life than death, we must rethink their character – not to destroy countries and cultures, but to save them. Indeed, by lifting up ecological values, humane treatment and economic opportunities, they would likely increase the overall security of nations and humanity. We need borders that support life.

Volunteer Spotlight: Tracey Ristow

In 2013, my husband and I took a winter vacation to Southern Arizona. One of our stops was Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument for a day of hiking. As we hiked, we came across gallon-sized black water bottles tied together with rope lying in the brush. Farther along, we saw a large blue flag rising up into the sky with a blue water barrel underneath. I remember talking about it as we hiked and theorizing what it was used for. When we returned home, I googled “blue water barrels in the Sonoran Desert,” and thus began my education as to what was happening on our U.S. border.

Growing up in the Midwest and living as an adult in many large cities across the U.S., I had heard little about our border problems from the news that I consumed. I regularly read newspapers and listened to my local NPR station, and I would have branded myself a well-informed U.S. citizen. I was not. The few news stories I had heard about the U.S. border were mostly focused on the “legality” of crossing or the criminal smuggling of drugs, but there were no news reports about the people crossing, the reasons they were crossing, or the perilous journey that they were undertaking.

Over the subsequent years, I began searching for more information

from online newspapers and magazines. I read books including Luis Alberta Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* and Sonia Nazario’s *Enrique’s Journey*, and I watched documentaries like *Who is Dayani Cristal?* In an attempt to make sense of what was happening in the borderlands along our boundary with Mexico. I started following organizations that included Humane Borders and Border Angels, an immigrant advocate organization out of San Diego, California.

After moving to Tucson in January 2018, I reached out to Humane Borders, and I was warmly invited to attend a monthly meeting. I was nervous walking in the front door of the Humane Borders office in South Tucson as I had limited knowledge about the border and felt I had nothing to offer. But a nice lady took me under her wing that very first night, providing context and deciphering for me the acronyms used at the meeting. I departed signed up for a water run servicing stations in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (BANWR). I never crossed paths with that nice lady again, but I have since learned that she was Lois Martin, a legendary social justice advocate and humanitarian volunteer who has since passed on.

The night prior to my first water run, I barely slept. I had packed and repacked my bag more times than I could count. I verified over and



Tracey Ristow Refills Bishop Carcaño Station

over that I had my passport in my purse since this water run would be crossing into Mexico.

The next morning, I arrived at the Humane Borders truck yard well before the sun was up and was greeted by long-time volunteer and driver, Steve Saltonstall. The other two passengers were also newbie volunteers, but from out-of-town. We spent the next six hours driving through the desert servicing various water barrels with Steve providing us with the Cliff’s Notes version of

Tracey Ristow Contribution, con.

Border Studies in Southern Arizona and how it relates to the Humane Borders mission. In addition to this education, Steve also taught us how to use the wrench to open the barrels, test the water, refill the water barrels properly, and repair a flagpole. Instead of coming home from that water run exhausted, I came home excited and motivated to share the information I had learned with others.

Over the next several years, I was a frequent volunteer on the BANWR water run with Steve as my primary driver. After several years of volunteering, I had the opportunity to begin driving the BANWR water route. Although I have prior off-road driving experience, I was nervous driving a vehicle that I did not own, that was of a larger size than what I was used to, and that had shifting weight due to the sloshing 300 gallons of water in the tank mounted on the truck bed. I found that driving the Humane Borders water truck was a totally different off-road experience, but I took it slow and grew to be comfortable with both the big truck and the water sloshing. Steve is a fabulous teacher and under his tutelage I developed my own style of

educating new volunteers and media about the desert and Humane Borders based on what he taught me. Each time I went out in the desert I learned something new, whether it was about the migrants, the terrain, or shifting weather patterns.

In the ensuing years, I have become even more involved in



On the Arivaca Water Run (Photo Credit Tracey Ristow)

Humane Borders. I drive different water run routes, and I participate in trash pick-ups along Humane Borders's adopted mile off of Hwy 286. I joined the mapping team who plot the locations of recovered human remains and publish the monthly death maps, and most recently I'm participating on ID runs, which involves hiking explorations into the desert to determine current migrant routes. As a result, my

knowledge and education of the border has expanded along with my personal experience. I have experienced walking desert trails in extreme temperatures from below freezing to above 110°F, and I have made my way across rocky, unstable terrain filled with prickly plants. I have met many lovely migrants while volunteering at Casa Alitas (a hospitality house for asylum seekers here in Tucson), and I have also encountered migrants in the desert who were scared and who had been lost for days. I have witnessed Border Patrol pursuing migrants using high-tech surveillance including helicopters and drones, and I have learned that there are many signs of the

migrants in the desert if I just know where to look. Telling signs include footprints in the washes, black water bottles like those I saw on my trip to Organ Pipe in 2013, backpacks, camouflage clothing, Vienna sausage cans, electrolyte bottles and shoes (so many shoes!). I still struggle understanding how migrants can walk for so many miles and so many days in these desert conditions and NOT die.

How Migrants Perish and How They're ID'd: A Visit with the Pima County Medical Examiner

By Laurie Cantillo

Two partial skeletons are found spooning under a distressed palo verde tree in the Arizona desert—a grim discovery by Border Patrol agents on routine patrol in February of 2012.

On initial examination, the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office determines that one skeleton belongs to a child of undetermined sex who's 10-13 years old, and the other to a middle-aged Hispanic woman. It's unusual to find remains so close together. How and when did they die?

The coroner later determines that the "Doe" skeletons are those of 13-year-old Omar and a woman known as Dona Teresa, both from Guatemala. Dona Teresa agreed to shepherd young Omar across the border to be reunited with his mother. On their first day of crossing in triple-digit July heat, Dona Teresa falls behind and Omar stays with her. The rest of the

group, led by a coyote, moves on.

After an exhaustive investigation, the medical examiner identifies the pair and determines they likely died from heat exposure. The two, along with their hopes

Greg Hess, Pima County Medical Examiner, meets with Humane Borders and other humanitarian groups on a regular basis to discuss the magnitude of the crisis, Pima County's response, and to answer the uncomfortable question of

what volunteers should do when finding human remains in the desert.

How Many Deaths?

The underreporting of migrant deaths is a tremendous challenge, as it's difficult to fully appreciate the magnitude of the loss of human life without accurate data. "The only centralized place to

find deaths is Border Patrol, which is v a s t l y undercounted," says Hess, whose office has recovered 3,966 migrant remains since 2000. The Border Patrol is the only federal group that reports official numbers, but in 2014 the agency opted to only report remains found by its officers, which is a small part of the



Medical Examiner's Office Presentation (Photo Credit Laurie Cantillo)

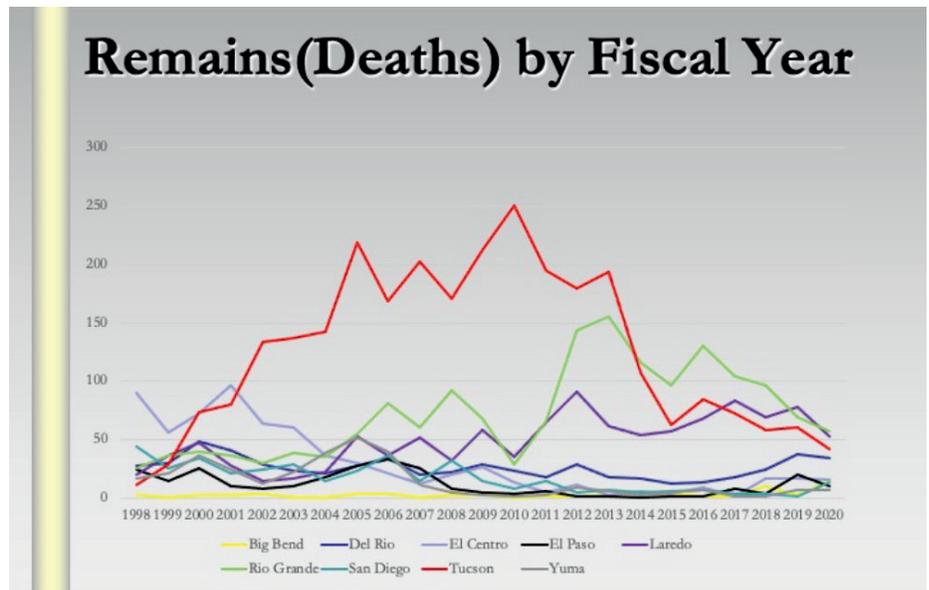
and dreams, become another statistic—two of the several thousand migrants who have perished in the Arizona desert, arguably the deadliest land crossing in the world. Their story is a grim reminder of why Humane Borders does the work that we do.

How Migrants Perish, con.

story. For example, Hess says, the Border Patrol may report 42 deaths in a year, while the actual number of migrant remains found by agents, hikers, ranchers, humanitarian groups, and others might be well over 200.

Adding to the challenge of reporting deaths is the patchwork of approaches to reporting across jurisdictions along the border. “Deaths are investigated differently depending on where people die,” Hess says. Reporting is handled on a state-by-state basis, but Hess says even that is fragmented. For example, Texas counties may have a justice of the peace who is also sheriff, judge, and coroner, each handling reporting in their own way. Even the two border counties in California handle reporting differently. Hess is emphatic that “reporting of migrant deaths really should be at the federal level. We should have federal mapping similar to what Humane Borders does.”

Humane Borders works to track migrant deaths in the Border Patrol’s Tucson sector, partnering with the Pima County Medical Examiner’s Office to manage a migrant death map, known as the Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants. Medical examiners in Pima and Maricopa County determine which remains are undocumented border crossers, and Humane Borders volunteers curate and update maps with a red dot denoting the precise location where each set of migrant remains were found. A searchable database provides the name and gender of the deceased (if known and family has been notified), date of



(Courtesy of Greg Hess)

discovery, and probable cause of death.

Sadly, Hess says, “We don’t know the number of people who haven’t been found.”

How did we get to this point? Hess says that historically apprehensions along the border were in El Paso and San Diego. In the early 90s, President Clinton’s Operation Gatekeeper made it more difficult for migrants to cross in urban areas along the border. The resulting “funnel effect” pushed more migrants into remote, dangerous parts of Arizona, and the Tucson sector became the deadliest for migrants from 2002-2014. Operation Gatekeeper, Hess says, was a failed attempt that led to more suffering and deaths. Today, in 2022, there are somewhat more deaths in Texas, though the Tucson sector is a close second.

Causes of Death and Identification

“We give policies such as Title 42 too much credit for death trends,” Hess says. The truth is that it’s

mostly about weather. “Deaths in 2020 and 2021 were worse than previous years because it was hotter than usual.”

Not surprisingly, most deaths are in summer. Hyperthermia is a big factor, but Hess says the desert can also be cold and people are dehydrated. “We lump all these causes into an ‘exposure’ category,” he notes, but adds, “the number one cause of migrant deaths for 22 years is ‘undetermined.’ We simply don’t recover enough remains to diagnose those.” Blunt force trauma (often the result of motor vehicle accidents) and natural causes also play a role.

Contrary to popular belief, firearms only make up 2% percent of deaths, which is often related to smuggling people or drugs. The firearms statistic includes migrants who were shot and killed by Border Patrol agents.

“Often, migrants simply ‘run out of steam’ and die,” says Hess. “We find them lying against a berm of a tree.” Most known fatalities are in

their 20s and 30s; 84% of the deceased are male, and 16% female. Many of the bodies are found to have blisters, scrapes, and scratches from brush and cactus. Some recovered remains have only been there a day. Unfortunately, many of these were left behind while others went to get help. But help arrived too late.

Of the two-thirds of remains that are positively identified, Hess says 79% are Mexican nationals, 13% from Guatemala, and the rest are from other Central and South American countries. The bigger problem is that, for so many, “we don’t know who they are.” Even a small number of unknowns can backlog an entire building at the medical examiner’s office, which has storage capacity for about 300 remains. In 2005, Hess says the cold storage capacity in Pima County was exceeded. “Sixty-nine bodies were received in July alone; we had to buy a refrigerated truck.” The truck has been used as a stopgap during COVID as well.

Once decomposition occurs, it’s very hard to identify individuals. “You can’t show images on a website for obvious reasons,” Hess notes. “We often find a portion of remains but not everything.” While ID based on dental records is common in the U.S., it’s rare to make a dental identification of migrant remains when the individual is from Mexico or Central America. Years ago, investigators would find phone numbers on the deceased. But now

many migrants carry cell phones that are often separated from the victims.

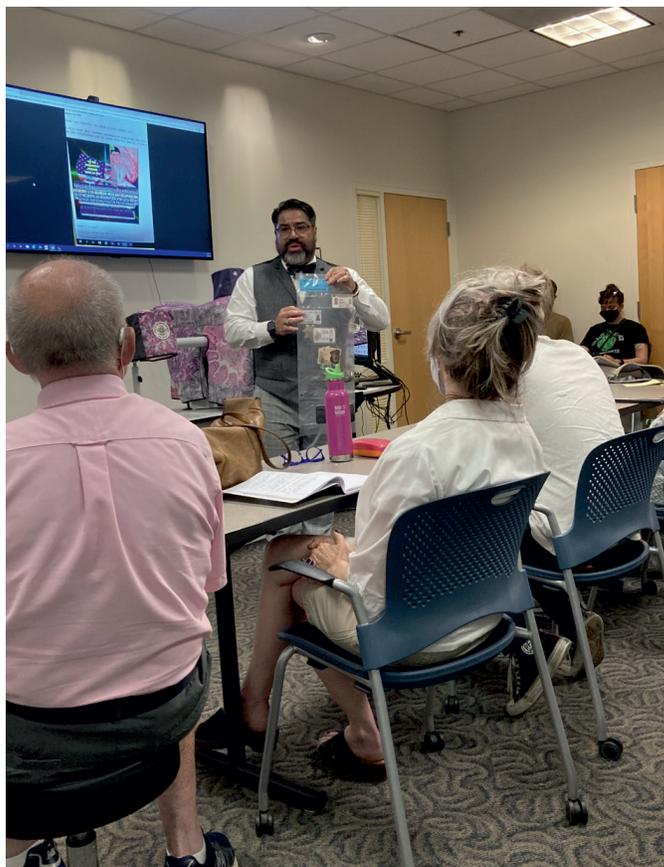
Infrared light can be helpful to view tattoos, clothing can provide clues for family members looking for a lost loved one, and ID cards and cash are often found sewn into clothing. But the ID isn’t always a

Family members generally don’t file missing persons reports, as people don’t want to involve the police. Hess says missing persons reports are often funneled through the Colibri Center for Human Rights, an Tucson-based advocacy group that works to reunite families with the remains of missing loved ones.

Finding Human Remains

What should you do if you happen to find what appears to be human remains in the desert? Gene Hernandez, chief investigator with the Pima County Medical Examiner, says it’s important to treat the area as a crime scene. That means leaving the remains where you found them, even if they may have been scattered by animals or erosion. The same goes for any personal items that may be in the area. “If you find any items, leave them where they be,” Hernandez says. “Don’t reach out to families to say you found remains. Take lots of photos. Keep any ID cards with remains. He advises, “If you find a bone and aren’t sure if it’s human, take a photo from a couple different angles and mark it with an object for scale. Send it to us. Then we will tell you if you need to contact law enforcement.”

Hess acknowledges some frustration with getting the world to pay attention to what’s happening on the southern border. “We’ve met with politicians, the media, and others, but nothing seems to change. I’m resistant to getting politically involved because nothing changes.”



Dr. Gene Hernandez Holds Up I.D.s found with human remains (Photo Credit Laurie Cantillo)

sure thing, Hess says—it doesn’t guarantee the card will match the person. While older ID cards may have fingerprints, it’s very difficult to fingerprint mummified remains. Post-mortem fingerprints are sent to the FBI, where Hess says most IDs are confirmed by prints. DNA testing is also very powerful tool for identification purposes; only a small amount is needed to make a successful ID.

While their work is exhausting and often goes unnoticed, the Office of the Medical Examiner in Pima County is considered to be a model for the nation, says Dinah Bear, board member for Humane Borders. “In the midst of dark days at the border, the Pima County Medical Examiner’s Office has been successfully led by people with a high degree of competence and compassion. The office is the gold standard on the U.S./

Mexico border in terms of examinations and analysis of deceased migrants by any governmental entity, whether local or federal.”

Hess, Hernandez, and others quietly model compassion and dignity for the deceased and their loved ones. It’s a commitment that brings us closer to a more humane border.

Volunteer Spotlight: Scarlett Bradford

When the COVID-19 pandemic began its campaign of isolation and social distancing, I was still a new desert transplant, having only recently relocated to the Phoenix area from Alabama to be closer to my brother, who had resided in the Valley for two decades. Since I had yet to develop a large network of friends there, I shared in the loneliness experienced by many during the lockdown of the early days of the pandemic, and working from home provided for a bit of the type of stir crazy one reads about prompted by long winter months in other parts of the country.

It was during these days that my innate curiosity and love of travel drove me to the desert wonderland that is Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. I loaded up my two small dogs Rhett and Gizmo and headed out on weekend day trips there often to get away from the same-four-walls-house-arrest of my Monday through Friday routine. Winding my way through various highways of Southern Arizona, I stopped to get a closer look at the murals in Ajo, to spend time amongst the mighty Saguaros with all of their personality, or to inspect roadside shrines to lost loved ones that appeared

frequently on the route between Tucson and Ajo. I would wonder why there were so many when the roads didn’t appear exceptionally dangerous.

Being new to the Borderlands, so much of what I experienced on my weekend visits felt exotic to me. Coming upon signs indicating that

Mexico was near or that warned of smugglers in the area, stopping for Border Patrol checkpoints, all of this was quite different from my day trip sojourns on county roads in the rural South. And in the midst of these curiosities, I happened upon another unusual site – a green truck hauling water into the remotest of dirt roads within the Monument. As I got closer to the truck, I could see a hose stretched from the water tank on the flatbed of the vehicle to a blue tank positioned among the Organ Pipe and other cacti, which I hadn’t noticed on my previous scenic drives. I took a picture of the Humane Borders logo on the side of the truck and planned to Google the organization when I got back to civilization where my cell phone would work.

I was excited to learn more about the work of Humane Borders because I had wanted to find a way to volunteer time to the migrant crisis in my new community, which I had made a point to keep up with via the national media long before making Phoenix my new home. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, Humane Borders wasn’t accepting new volunteers at that time, but once the lockdown began to loosen and vaccines became available, I reached out by email and was soon contacted by long-time volunteer and board member



Scarlett Bradford & Cherra Mathis on OP Water Run (Photo Credit: Amanda Strickland/Allie Jordan)



Scarlett Bradford finds child's clothing (Photo Credit: Amanda Strickland/Allie Jordan)

Dan Abbott, and was scheduled for an upcoming run. After the first run, I immediately signed up for return trips and completed the steps to becoming a driver. Over time, my initial excitement and interest in Humane Borders and its work has only strengthened. I've come to believe that the efforts of maintaining the water tanks in Organ Pipe is just a part of the overall mission that we carry out advocating for migrants along the border. I am honored to play a small role.

While each journey with Humane Borders has been special in its own way, there were two trips which are etched more firmly in my memory which I will share.

While riding with another volunteer on a road adjacent to the border, I noticed movement some distance away on the path just beside "the Wall," which took my brain a moment to accept because the image seemed so out of place. Two adult women with two very young children were walking along

the wall. The children had on backpacks and looked like the back-to-school images that pop up all over social media on the first days of school in autumn with cute kiddos heading off to kindergarten. They looked like that except they were in an unforgiving and harsh desert environment. The contrast was a gut punch. Possibly a mile later, we observed a man with another child walking along the wall in the same direction as the others. All appeared to be headed to the Lukeville, AZ point of entry, likely to surrender as refugees. Miles north, parents are privileged to dread a trip with their kids to a noisy and hectic Chuck E. Cheese, while these parents were faced with the dread of a treacherous journey to seek a better life for their children. Again, the contrast was heartbreaking, and served as a reminder of my own amazing fortune of the happenstance of being born on the more privileged side of an imaginary line.

Another memorable trip occurred when we were accompanied by a

documentary crew that was following the steps of migrants from a village in southern Mexico to their ultimate destination in San Francisco. In prior trips, we had occasionally found artifacts along the Wall and other areas on our route which assured us migrants were in the area, tangible proof of a mostly invisible presence with so many individual stories we would never know. On most trips, we would see an isolated black water

bottle, perhaps a pair of carpet shoes, an occasional empty tin of tuna or other meat. But on this trip, with sounds and images being recorded and documented, it seemed the desert was poised to provide more of its secrets than usual, as if to say, "If you will give pause to listen, I will provide you a glimpse of my truth." We found partially burned documents of a Brazilian man who had attempted unsuccessfully to cross legally, several pairs of toddler-sized pants and other children's clothing, a backpack with personal effects, a pocket knife, and several other items. These items felt precious because they humanize the mystical migrant, transforming them from an idea in our imaginations into actual individuals who embarked on this dangerous path fueled primarily by a hunger and hope for a better life. I believe putting a face on any type of social problem is the strongest weapon we can employ to solve a problem, so I was honored to be a conduit for the documentary crew to share those stories with the world.

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IN THIS ISSUE

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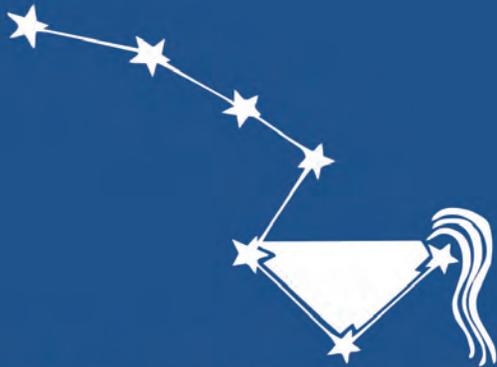
Welcoming Chair Dora Luz Rodriguez

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