HUMANITARIAN AID EFFORTS FROM AJO, ARIZONA
Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument Volunteer Stories

Almost since its beginnings, Humane Borders has been blessed with stalwart volunteers who work very hard to carry out our mission from Phoenix. For many years, volunteers have found it in their hearts to spend their entire Saturdays – usually from 6 am to 6 pm – to drive the beautiful but grueling route through Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, south of Ajo in southern Arizona. Here are stories from Brad Jones, Dan Abbott, and Osha Gray Davidson about what drives them to take water out to the Desert:

Organ Pipe, North
by Brad Jones

The opening lines to the song “Como Perdonar,” the first track from Making Movies’ 2019 album ameri’kana speak of borders and of human suffering:

La tierra no sabe dónde un país comienza ni dónde termina
Por eso esta canción va dedicada a todos ustedes y a los que hoy sufren y han sufrido en las fronteras que hemos creado en el mundo

These words, translated in English, tell us

The earth doesn’t know where one country ends and another begins, so this song is dedicated to all of you, and those who have suffered and are suffering at the borders we have created in this world.

As both a volunteer driver for Humane Borders and a professor of Political Science at UC Davis who studies the issue of immigration, it has become clear to me that my volunteer work and my academic research cannot be separated. The lessons I have learned in the desert from my work with Humane Borders compel me to talk to audiences outside academic circles, to show people, however far away they are, what the far western desert “looks like,” to show them the killing fields and talk about the positive action Humane Borders does to prevent needless death.

In this capacity, I recently made a sort of homecoming. Born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, a city where my grandfather, Nicolas Jaime, migrated to from Guanajuato, Mexico in the early 20th century, I spoke to an audience about the migrant death crisis, Humane Borders, and the desert generally. Invited by Enrique Chi, co-founder of the Latin Grammy nominated band Making Movies and Chico Sierra, an artist and activist in the Kansas City area, I spoke to a group of about 50 people at Studio Joy, an art studio in Kansas City, Mo.

While I have given many public talks about the migrant death issue, this was the first talk I gave about this issue so geographically far from the Arizona/Sonora border. And yet despite the distance, the receptivity to the message, the embracing of the work Humane Borders does (as well the work done by other humanitarian groups), was palpable. In this talk, as with any talk I give, when anyone sees the death map (see humaneborders.org/migrant-death-mapping/) lit up by so many red dots, each a human life, there is a collective gasp and then silence. The gasp because of the realization of the massive death toll; the silence because of the sadness and disbelief that this can happen here. This particular talk to this particular group was particularly special to me. So many migrants who attempt the crossing but who die are trying to make it to the interior of the country. Whether to reunite with family members or find employment in the agriculture sector or meat packing industry of the Midwest, the family connections—those ties that bind the living to the dead—were here, in the room where I talked about the remote desert in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument.

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Talking about Humane Borders’ work in the desert compels people to learn, to want to do something, anything, to help. And talking about the route that I and so many other volunteers drive, in the remote desert of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, makes all the effort of the drive worth it. Seeing the desert compels speaking of the desert. In turn, those who may feel so remotely far from the desert, feel the desert, see the death, and want to help. This particular talk, this sort of homecoming, was special because I saw such positive action taking place by artists, activists, and musicians on the issue of immigration.

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (OPCNM), near Humane Borders Dripping Springs Water Station. (Photo Credit: Brad Jones)

Dan Abbott at Dripping Springs Water Station, OPCNM. (Photo Credit: Rebecca Fowler)

In my fifteen-plus years of driving water runs for Humane Borders, I have made more than 100 trips servicing water stations in some of the most remote reaches of the Arizona Sonoran Desert. During all of that time, I have had a good number of occasions to meet migrants along the way. Some I encountered walking the road leading to our Organ Pipe East station; others would mysteriously show up upon my arrival at the station. If you make enough trips into the desert dropping water, sooner or later you become familiar with a peculiar sensation and knowing that eyes are watching you, and I’m not talking about the eyes of Border Patrol. I’m talking about the eyes of folks not yet sure of whether they can trust you enough to come out from their hiding place. My most memorable meeting took place about ten years ago along the Bates Ranch Road in the beautiful but deadly Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. We were in Truck

"La Mano de Dios"
by Dan Abbott

Bringing Humane Borders’ work in Organ Pipe so far north, deep into the interior of the country, intersected with the work being done by so many in Kansas City. Information propels change and reaching out to others about the work we do in the desert helps create connectivity with others who simply want to alleviate the suffering at the borders we have created in this world.

Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (OPCNM), near Humane Borders Dripping Springs Water Station. (Photo Credit: Reed Wood)

Brad Jones, filling tank on Truck 8 in OPCNM. (Photo Credit: Reed Wood)
7, an amazing assembly of nuts and bolts and noisy flapping pieces. At about thirteen miles off the paved road, we had to slow down to cross an arroyo. As is my custom, I looked first one way and then another in the dip, and that's when I saw him. A man was running towards us from the north end of the arroyo, waving his shirt in his effort to get our attention. When we stopped and got out of the truck, he rushed up to me and thrust his hands out at me as if to ask that I shackle him. We assured him that we were not la migra, but he still had us know that he wanted us to call Border Patrol. It was the month of October, but in Southern Arizona, October can be blistering and the temperature was in the hundreds. And yet this man, whose name we soon learned was Gregorio, was standing before us dry as a bone with no sign of sweat on his body. The fact that he was not sweating alerted us to the fact that he was well into the first stages of hyperthermia, and so we worked fast to get him out of the elements. We pulled the truck out of the arroyo and parked it in the shade to get Gregorio out of the sun, and then we started giving him water. I happened to have an extra t-shirt along that I soaked in the coolest water we had, and we draped it over his shoulders. Between our little bit of Spanish and Gregorio’s little bit of English, we determined that he had been walking for five days; he was traveling alone; he had run out of water more than a day before; he had only beef jerky to eat; and he had discarded his backpack along the way. Gregorio was en route to the central valley of California where his children lived and where he worked as a painter and cement worker. He was returning from his home state of Colima in Jalisco along the Pacific seaboard of Central Mexico where he had been to the funeral of a relative. When my grandfather was just a little child from Poland, he was stranded with his family in a Chicago train station. The year was 1882, and my great-grandfather were never united with their families because their identities remain desconocido – unknown? I’ll never know. All I know is that on that particular day, we were in the right place, at the right time, with the right life-giving water. I am aware of so many significant differences, but I have often told this story in relation to my own family’s immigration story. When my grandfather was just a little child from Poland, he was stranded with his family in a Chicago train station. The year was 1882, and my great-grandfather and his great-grand family were on their way to northern Michigan but had run out of money. Some kind soul whose name has long since been forgotten took notice of them, and this person “passed the hat” to people hurrying by in the station. After a while enough money was collected to see to it that the Koteskeys got back on the train and were bound for their Grand Rapids destination. I believe that we are all called to be La Mano de Dios – “the hand of God” – to strangers and foreigners and “the Other” that we meet along the way. We have no want or need for names or papers. We just share a basic human obligation to care for our brothers and sisters in need.

He died in September of 2018. His name was Enrique Favela Garibay and he was 58 years old, and he died of exposure and dehydration while crossing the vast Arizona Sonora Desert west of Ajo. Favela had been deported to Mexico and was desperately trying to get back home to his family in Phoenix where he had lived for more than a quarter century, working construction and raising a family. Favela disappeared after the phone call he made to his family letting them know that he was on his way back to them, and nearly a year would pass before his remains were identified by DNA testing. For his family, the waiting was a struggle and the grieving began. His daughter later told me that she wasn’t sure which was worse: Waiting with uncertainty and a glimmer of hope, or living with the certainty of his death. I joined Humane Borders as a water-truck driver to ease the journey of the many migrants who travel through the parched regions of our state and, perhaps, to save some lives. We’ll never know the names of the people who made it out of the desert alive because they found one of our barrels (blue like the color of water) in time. We can only know the names of the dead – of those who, like Favela, weren’t helped.

Most of the volunteers I ride with are members of one “faith community” or another. I love them dearly. I feel at home with them and enjoy their “God talk.” But as for myself, I belong to the community of doubt. I don’t see any inherent meaning in my life. I believe the only meaning is that which I create. So, for me, working with Humane Borders is an opportunity to create meaning and purpose through filling those blue barrels in the brown borderlands. It isn’t enough to mourn those who, like Enrique Favela, don’t make it – though I had the honor of meeting his family at a memorial service and mourning his death with them. The possibility of sparing another family this immense grief helps give my life meaning and fills me with gratitude.
This old saying is true of the desert humanitarian aid work that’s being performed in the vast Arizona borderlands on behalf of the migrant community. That’s especially true in the remote west desert area of Arizona. For this December Christmas 2019 issue of The Desert Fountain, we are highlighting the incredible work and dedication of the humanitarian efforts of desert and migrant aid workers taken out of Ajo, Arizona. The town of Ajo (“garlic” in English), population 3,304, is located on State Route 85, 120 miles west of Tucson, and just 43 miles north of the Mexican border and the line drawn separating Lukeville, Arizona from Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico. Ajo is also the closest community in its proximity to Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, where many hundreds of migrants make the crossing into the United States in attempts to flee violence and extortion in their home countries, or to unite with family and loved ones already living in the U.S. Don’t let Ajo’s sleepy appearance fool you! Among the town’s population includes amazing people who work with both Humane Borders and the Ajo Samaritans, a local all-volunteer organization. Especially in light of recent policies requiring asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while their situation is assessed in the U.S., all humanitarian aid organizations are focusing more on assistance in shelters in Mexico. These Ajo volunteers expend an infinite amount of energy carrying out relentless work taking humanitarian aid across the Arizona border to migrant shelters in Sonora, Mexico. Humane Borders is proud to partners with the Ajo Samaritans in doing this important work.

OUR WORK AT CASA DEL MIGRANTES & SAN PEDRO SONOYTA SHELTERS

by Jan St. Peters

What strikes us again and again is the strength of their character, their determination to have a better life, and their resolve to overcome the trauma they have experienced in their own countries.

Since the spring of 2017, Ajo Samaritans of Ajo, Arizona have provided humanitarian aid to migrant shelters in Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico. We have found that migrants come from diverse places and locales all over Mexico as well as from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The first shelter that was established, now known as Casa del Migrantes, houses up to 125 people. It is primarily a men’s shelter, but occasionally we find women staying there. In the beginning, Casa was pretty primitive: just tents and cots. There was no running water, no toilets, no showers, no electricity. Humane Borders quickly became involved by supplying water barrels so that migrants could have safe drinking water. After many months and a lot of work, most of it done by the migrant residents themselves, Casa del Migrantes boasted power, running water, showers, toilets, and even a partially finished dormitory.

From the beginning, volunteers reached out to Humane Borders for help in providing 55-gallon water drums for drinking water and a truck for delivering it. And now, once a week, Ajo Samaritans double as Humane Borders volunteers. We drive Humane Borders Truck #8, a massive vehicle equipped with a flatbed holding 300 plus gallons of water, and we replenish the water where and when it is needed.

Ajo SAMs volunteers also deliver needed clothing, bedding, pet food, and materials that are needed for construction projects. For example, the most recent building project at Casa del Migrantes involved making windows for the dormitories and required wooden frames, and visqueen for protection from wind and rain. We also provide basic medical care when possible.

The other Sonoyta shelter that receives our support is San Pedro. Last year the number of resident migrants hovered between 30 and 40. But those numbers ballooned in late summer upwards over 100 people, and suddenly we were encountering many families with children. From its inception, San Pedro had a completed building, but there were many projects that needed finishing that included lighting, plumbing, roof work, and light construction. In addition, there were bunk beds to be built, cots to be brought in, and many improvements to be made. In 2018, in alliance with Humane Borders, Ajo SAMs installed 55-gallon water barrels, and since then, the shelter gets water delivered on a weekly basis. Since last spring, Humane Borders has also contributed to the overall cost of food provisions. Then, starting last August, when the numbers of migrants in the shelters increased drastically with the “Keep them in Mexico!” mandate, Humane Borders stepped up and significantly increased its monthly monetary contribution for food. Now everyone gets a balanced meal twice a day.

When we make weekly visits to the shelters, we have a chance to get to know people over time. What strikes us again and again are the strength of the migrants’ character, their determination to have a better life, and their resolve to overcome the trauma they have experienced in their own countries. Their stories can be heartbreaking. Despite doing the best that we as humanitarian aid workers can do, we feel very inadequate when we bear witness to someone sobbing because they miss their families and their children. Or because a man has just heard his baby say their first word via a cell phone call. Or because a man’s wife had his child in the United States while he was deported to a country he hadn’t lived in most of his life, all alone, with no resources.

That’s when one really understands the privilege that comes with living in the United States, the privilege of going home at the end of a long day to reunite with our families, to a comfortable bed and a good meal, and most of all, to security and safety.
11/12
Today, Carol and I drove down to Sonoyta. They apparently don’t care if you bring in 2 tons of frozen donuts across the border. We first went and picked up several bags of clothes that a friend helped us take across, and then we took the clothes to Casa del Migrantes along with the donuts, toothpaste, and toothbrushes. Right now, there are now 140 people staying there. I also brought with me a Central American map that I bought especially for the occasion, and a lot the men enjoyed looking at the map, pointing at their home countries and towns, and talking about where they were from. We didn’t have time to share it with everyone, but one thing that became apparent very quickly was that most came from Honduras and El Salvador. Fabian, who helps manage the shelter, asked for a couple of heaters for the coming cold months, and so Carol and I went shopping and we each bought one and brought them back to the shelter. We also planned a Christmas menu. Ham was the heavy favorite again this year with everyone voting on the main dish, although one person joked that we should go with jalapeños and cerveza instead! We then left to go to the San Pedro shelter and went shopping with Maura, Carlos, and Felix. Maura and Joaquin are the primary caretakers of that shelter. We found that there were about 102 men, women, and children there, a little down from the numbers that were there last week. We brought them little delicious cakes from Maribel and they were a big hit with them. We also bought diapers and feminine hygiene products with money friends gave me, and we delivered wipes that Susannah Brown had gotten them. We also brought them a soccer ball from the Ajo aid office, and they were happy to get that! All and all, Carol and I had a great trip. Jan. 11/26
Carol and I took a trip across the border to visit the shelters today. We took to Casa del Migrants some clothes from the Ajo aid office, peanut butter, hats that Chris, a benefactor, provided us for them, the last of my toothbrushes and toothpaste… and donuts from Millie’s. Today there are about sixty people at Casa del Migrantes, mostly men. Everyone seemed rather subdued, even Ricardo. They still need blankets, jackets, shoes, and jeans. We talked about what we would make for Christmas dinner again, and Ricardo showed us a new litter of puppies that were delivered just last night. Afterward, we went to the San Pedro shelter and found that there were 102 men, women, and children there. We delivered some jackets that would collected for the women, and also gave them some dental products. After that, we went grocery shopping with Felix, Carlos, and Maura, using the Humane Borders card to buy for $400 of groceries, which amounts to about two weeks’ worth of food. What is needed now are primarily men’s jackets, and Joaquin asked for blankets. Sister Judy Bourg had just taken some down, but more are needed because it sure is cold! Hopefully Susannah’s blankets will arrive soon. Carol and I bought diapers, feminine products, and a pair of electric clippers for the barber – this was after observing him use a dull razor blade last Saturday! Meanwhile, there were some guys enjoying themselves playing soccer. Another good trip today. Jan. 12/3
Carol and I went to both Sonoyta shelters today. We packed my entire truck full with clothes after sorting through a vanload of donated goods. And everything that we were bringing down was all needed because it was winter supplies like jackets, blankets, long-sleeved shirts, sleeping bags, pillows, hats, scarves, and gloves. And so we dropped off LOTS of good winter stuff, but sadly, there weren’t any shoes or jeans. And some were in dire need of shoes. However, we only had a few pairs to give out! Some of the men were walking around in shoes that were two sizes too small for them, or in flip flops and socks. We also brought cookies, and Carol dropped off dozens of donuts that she had gotten donated from Millie’s bakery. While we were there, we watched the men put two Christmas trees together that we brought them, and that we had donated to us, and afterwards they strung them with lights and made ornaments to put on them. Carol and I had bought construction paper, glitter, yarn, glue, and scissors, and we showed them some ideas for making ornaments. Most of them got in on the fun. From there, we went to the San Pedro shelter and found about 110 people there. We also found out that the heavily pregnant woman from last week was taken by ambulance this past Saturday to Puerto Penasco. She had a little girl, is doing well, and is due back today. Meanwhile, Maura and some of the mothers have planned a birthday party for a 9-year old girl. They bought a cake at the store when we did the usual grocery shopping. Oh, and Carol got diapers and wipes for the newborn.

12/9
Today we were only able to go to San Pedro – we just didn’t have enough time to go to Casa del Migrantes. Some good news: Rick, my husband, and Tom, Carol’s husband, bought construction materials in Sonoyta, to repair the entire roof on San Pedro, and Shelters for Hope is funding the materials. The guys scraped and cleaned the roof and repaired all of the holes. Then today Rick got them started with the Elastomeric. It is a product that forms a thick but flexible white coating for the exterior of a structure. It is often used on the roofs of RV’s once they start leaking! We left before they were done. Carol and I talked to Joaquin and Maura and asked if we could use a list of names to distribute the shoes, and they said it would be okay. So Carol and I measured the feet of most of the men, women, and children –there were about 100 people there. I must say, it was a popular event, and I was hoping they wouldn’t thinking that the shoes would magically appear afterwards! Hopefully we’ll be able to fulfill the orders to take down with us on our next visit. Next, we went grocery shopping and bought the usual food as well as diapers and sanitary supplies for the women. Excellent news: the new mother and baby are doing well. All in all, another wonderful day, and it’s good to see that the construction on the ramada is coming along. Lots of good works and well doing today! This Thursday is the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and there will be a big celebration, and so we plan on coming back.

12/12
Carol and I went to both shelters yesterday. We intended to measure feet for shoes at Casa del Migrantes but ended up having meetings with Fabian instead. Fabian said they do not need a washing machine, even though the one they have is broken. He said that everyone is used to washing clothes by hand. Everyone also reported that the dorms are warmer now with the visqueen windows and wooden doors. Fabian asked that we have a meeting with the migrants to ask about conditions at the shelter. So through the use of an interpreter, (continued on page 9)
Carol and I asked about the food. Were they getting enough? Yes. Were people being treated fairly when it came to food distribution? Yes. Was anyone being asked to pay for food? No. All in all, there were probably about 75 people there, and everyone said they were happy with the conditions and treatment. Afterward, we talked about what we would have for Christmas dinner, and there was lots of excitement about that. One young man said his birthday was Dec 24. Would he get a present? Since we didn’t have enough time today, we told everyone that we would measure for shoes next week, and Fabian asked that we distribute them ourselves. Next we went to San Pedro and found that everyone was busy celebrating the fiesta of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And it was so good to see how everyone was enjoying the ramada, which now appears complete. Food was served, and the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth was served for dessert. There was also a piñata for the children. It was hard to tell Joaquin from the children when, at one point, he was buried underneath a pile of about 40 of them! I got photos of the completed roof repair, paid for by Shelters for Hope. It looks fabulous, and everyone is so proud of the work that was done. Carol and I brought out about 10 pairs of shoes. Several pairs were too large and no one could use them, and we also found that people whose feet we had measured from last week were not there anymore. But we measured the feet of many more children, and of the women too. It was a wonderful exhausting day, and there were many Ajo Samaritans were present. Jan.

Some time in 2012, confronted by media images of the devastation of the Syrian civil war, I began to ruminate on the similar plight of desert migrants on our southern border with Mexico—of people who are forced to walk away from all things familiar, leaving community connections and personal possessions behind. More recently, U.S. policies of family separation, asylum denial, and the criminalization of migration compelled me to research the motivations and circumstances of migrants and asylum seekers crossing our border with Mexico. I learned that attempting to cross was often a deathly endeavor: Between October 1999 and December 2018, 3,339 migrant deaths occurred in the Tucson Sector of Arizona alone.

In September of this year, I decided it was time to take action myself. On the web I found several migrant-oriented organizations that offered opportunities to volunteer. One of them, Humane Borders, has been in existence for nearly 20 years. They’re “motivated by faith and the universal need for kindness” and “maintain a system of water stations in the [Arizona Sonoran Desert] just means used by migrants making the perilous journey on foot” (humaneborders.org/). Rebecca Fowler of Humane Borders became my guide. She quickly found several days within my timeframe when I could accompany members of the Humane Borders on desert runs servicing water stations in remote locations of the Arizona Sonoran Desert.

Without further ado, I booked a flight from my home city of Juneau, Alaska, to Tucson and the awe-inspiring borderlands. Several weeks later, I attended the regularly scheduled Wednesday meeting at Humane Borders headquarters in Tucson, and at 7 a.m. the subsequent Monday, I met with long-time volunteers Rev. John Hoelter and wife Diane for my first water run. With Diane behind the wheel, we drove a crew cab flatbed truck carrying a massive 325-gallon water tank. Our destination was Sasabe, Sonora, a small town located in an amazingly beautiful stretch of Sonoran Desert covering the Altar Valley. Our mission was to drop the water immediately on the other side of the U.S. boundary behind the Mexican port of entry with Grupo Beta, the humanitarian arm of the Mexican government who then distributes the water to migrants at different staging sites in Mexico. On another outing with Humane Borders taking place at different locales on the U.S. side of the border, we serviced eight water stations, each with its own 55-gallon water barrel and blue flag raising 30 feet into the sky, signaling the location of life-saving water supplies. On that day, we observed that several stations had seen migrant usage, and we refilled about 10 gallons of water in total.

Rebecca also arranged for me to take a trip out with the Tucson Samaritans, a sister desert humanitarian aid organization based out of Southside Presbyterian Church, the original site of the 1980s Sanctuary Movement (www.tucsonsamaritans.org/). Sams hike desert trails that see recent migrant traffic, taking water, food, and medical supplies. My guide on the Samaritan trip was Gail Kocourek, an energetic, knowledgeable, and long-standing volunteer with the SAMS. Gail shared that over the previous two months she had encountered approximately 40 asylum seekers. Some were sick and in need of help. Other migrants who are not in the position to claim asylum or don’t trust the process travel almost exclusively by night, and on the least hospitable routes, to avoid the heavy Border Patrol presence. When they’re visible during the day, they are almost always in great distress. Hundreds die in the Arizona desert from dehydration, which you can’t see. And so the tremendous need for desert humanitarian aid. On my trip out with Gail, we left four gallons of water in two strategic locations.

We are subject to a lot of misinformation and dehumanizing accounts of migrants in the news. Perhaps we should learn to question these accounts and find out what’s really happening for ourselves. One way of turning these narratives on their heads is to volunteer with Arizona desert humanitarian aid organizations to gain a wider perspective on migration issues. Because to pull apart or deny asylum to a desperate immigrant family, or to make a criminal out of a migrant whose only intent is to work hard and send home a few American dollars, is to abandon the values that make civilization honorable and worthy. Allowing fear of the few to establish policies for the whole of a given society is a mistake. This fear-based behavior supports an insidious, enormous, and profitable global caste system enforced by a far-reaching and powerful border security apparatus, where the poor end up trapped in their impoverished, often violent and climate-ravaged surroundings. We can do much better than this.

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