THE DESERT FOUNTAIN

HUMANE BORDERS
June 2022

Rainbow Fills the Sky on the Arivaca Water Run

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ARIZONA OpenGIS FOR DECEASED MIGRANTS
humaneborders.org/migrant-death-mapping/
Truck 12: 
Introducing the Newest Member of the Humane Borders Fleet

In twenty-two years of taking water runs into the desert, Humane Borders has thus far relied upon eleven different trucks to get the work done. Four are still on the road, continuing to withstand many miles of rough road in extreme weather conditions. Our vehicles are at the heart of what we do to get water to migrants and to educate hundreds of volunteers who join our dedicated drivers to service water stations in the desert.

We’d love to thank Humane Borders’ faithful friend in Knoxville, Tennessee for the newest member of our fleet, Truck 12! Twelve has a big enough bed for a 225-gallon water tank, the pump and hose reel, and replacement water barrels and flags. It is our safest truck yet because it allows the driver to see over the water tank in the rearview mirror, plus it has high clearance. With a big engine and big tires, it’s made for rough roads. In fact, it seems to relish them!
Letter from the Chair
Doug Ruopp

Thanks to everyone who has contributed to our mission! Listed below are the many groups on both sides of the Mexico/United States border that Humane Borders has teamed up with in large and small ways to provide resources like water, food, first aid, transportation of supplies, policy work, volunteer support, and clean-ups in the Southern Arizona desert in the last year:

- **Providing water:** Tucson Samaritans, Ajo Samaritans, Green Valley Samaritans, No More Deaths
- **Providing Water Station Locations:** Pima County, City of Tucson, Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge, Organ Pipe National Monument, Ironwood National Monument, Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Grupo Beta
- **Providing Help for Missing Persons:** Angeles del Desierto, Armadillos Busqueda y Rescate, Battalion Search and Rescue, Parallelo 31, Colibrí Center for Human Rights, Guatemalan Consulate, Mexican Consulate, Pima County Medical Examiner, International Committee of the Red Cross
- **Providing Shelter:** Casa de la Esperanza, Salavision, Casa San Pedro, Casa Migrante, Shelters for Hope, Centro Comunitario de Atencion al Migrante y Necesitado, Agua Prieta Migrant Resource Center, Frontera de Cristo, Casa Alitas
- **Providing Ongoing Support to Migrants:** YWCA House of Neighborly Service, Chicanos por la Causa, Southern Border Community Coalition, Kino Border Initiative, Derechos Humanos, East Valley Network and University Presbyterian Church

I’m reminded of a day in January in the desert on Pima County land that I found a blanket like the ones that are donated by a local church to a shelter in Mexico. A bottle of water from Samaritans was nearby, and we found an identification card from Oaxaca to take to the Mexican Consulate. I recognized that our varied organizations worked together to help this particular migrant have a better chance of surviving the crossing of a border that by all rights shouldn’t be dangerous in the first place. What feels overwhelming for me at times is that even with these efforts too many people suffer or die in desperate attempts to escape inhumane conditions in their home countries and in their attempts to migrate.

We’ll need everyone’s help with resources in the year to come. Humane Borders with the financial support of donors and volunteer time of people from around the country has already begun to increase our partnerships and efforts to make our border as safe for migrants as possible. Whether or not the numbers of border crossers grow, the constantly changing policies of our government have to be at least balanced by a growing number of people with organizations that simply want our reaction to so many migrants in harm’s way to be just and humane. As it has everywhere, the cost of gas and maintenance has gone up, but rather than “hunker down” to save expenses, we are compelled to do more. The board recently encouraged all of us to look into new areas where supplying water in the desert could save more lives, to increase our involvement in shelters that keep migrants healthy and safe, and to seek more understanding of the ways we can all work together to create a more compassionate response to migration in general.
Volunteering with Humane Borders
Kristin Norget, Montreal, Canada

The streets were still dark as I maneuvered my nimble rented Chevy Spark through desolate streets towards the Humane Borders office around 6:45am on December 23rd, 2021. Kirk Astroth and Jeff Jennings welcomed me warmly and we promptly set off to gas up and put some air into the truck’s tires before heading out for the Avra Valley run in the early morning sun. As we drove, Kirk and Jeff educated me about Title 42 and the so-called Migrant Protection Protocol, the Remain-in-Mexico policies that had caused a downturn in the number of Mexicans and Central Americans applying for asylum, perhaps making the journey for those who decided to cross even more perilous.

I’d found Humane Borders online when I was searching in mid-November for a place to travel to over the holiday period where I could work with migrants and learn more about the situation at the US-Mexico border. I signed up for two water runs with HB at the beginning and end of my stay in Tucson. The filler time was to be spent working at the migrant shelter Casa Alitas, about which I knew next to nothing except that numbers of migrants arriving each day had spiked, and so my presence as a fluent Spanish speaker could be of use.

My interest in the plight of migrants on the border was not new. As a socio-cultural anthropologist and university professor who’d done research in southern Mexico (Oaxaca state) for over three decades, I had taught plenty about the borderlands in my classes, including on the history of Mexico-US migration. During my own research, I’d met countless Oaxacans who’d tried their luck at making their way “al otro lado” to find work—picking tomatoes, in restaurants, as cleaners, construction workers, nannies, or landscapers—either on the short- or long-term. I’d also heard the heartrending stories of those who’d run into trouble with smugglers or coyotes who’d stolen from them or had abandoned them in the desert to find their own way, if they were so lucky, or even the relatives or compadres who had disappeared en route and never heard from again.

This late December foray into the Sonoran Desert brought home the realities of that journey in a visceral way. As Kirk explained to me, water stations are placed in strategic sites thought to be on routes favored by migrants. And clean water can make a huge difference to someone trying to traverse while underhydrated.

I’d read on the Humane Borders website that 3790 migrants had died in this desert between 1999 and 2021 – and that that number was only in relation to recovered human remains – the actual number was much higher. As I looked up at the Santa Catalina mountains rimming the distant skyline, I imagined what it would be like to scramble over this terrain, hungry, thirsty, exhausted, on worn shoes perhaps pierced by cactus thorns, wary of being discovered either by Border Patrol or some unsympathetic local. My thoughts turned to many of the Mexicans I knew who’d made the trip, whose integrity and character were so unalike the criminals they’d be treated as on this side of the border.

What would it be like as a migrant, to spy those blue flags, to encounter one of those signature blue barrels bearing a small sticker of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the quintessential emblem of
mexicanidad which transcends Catholicism, knowing it was all meant for me? The water station would surely be a small though reassuring oasis of humanity amidst an otherwise hostile and uncertain landscape.

As we moved from station to station, I perused the official Humane Borders reference binder, and was deeply impressed by the detailed attention that had clearly been poured in to all aspects of the organization’s operations. Kirk saw the trip as a training run for both Jeff and I, and so he explained the various tasks required for proper maintenance and servicing of the stations on our route, how you checked for the cleanliness of the water, the careful coding system identifying each barrel, and the dancing technique for filling each barrel from the tank on the truck so that the water remains clean while you remain dry. He told us that the locks on the spigots were needed due to the chronic vandalism the barrels were subject to as people would steal the spigots and empty the water into the desert or put bleach or other chemicals into the barrels, rendering the water toxic. Unfortunately, such crimes still persist as I learned of barrels regularly pocked with bullet holes or punctured with knives; flag poles are also periodically bent so that flags can’t be seen. It was difficult for me to fathom the reasoning behind such acts, though Kirk reported being yelled at by people who, on spying the Humane Borders/Fronteras Compasivas decal on the truck, would accuse him and other volunteers of being “irresponsible” and “unethical.”

I couldn’t help but feel that if any of these harsh critics of immigration could get to know any of these migrants themselves and hear their stories—they are people with hopes, fears, and dreams for their future and that of their children, just like them—their views would soften and comprehension could happen. The hundreds of migrants who were flowing into Casa Alitas almost every day the last week of December, no longer from Mexico or (only rarely) from Central America, but from Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Peru, Haiti, or even India, Russia, Georgia and Romania, were simply seeking a better, safer existence from the one they had fled to embark on often difficult journeys of several days, weeks or even a few months. I met families with one or several children, very pregnant women traveling alone or with young ones. With visibly anguished faces, some told me they’d been separated from adult daughters, mothers, fathers, or sons as they crossed the border into Yuma and placed in largely private, for-profit, unhygienic “processing [detention] centers”, sleeping on cement floors under metallic mylar blankets and fed frozen burritos during their stay. These are “legal” asylum-seekers, yet the adults still are obliged to wear electronic ankle monitors so that their movements in the US can be surveilled. Such practices reduce refugees to what philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls ‘bare life’: humans as animals that have no right to the same political freedom and human dignity enjoyed by others. Towards the end of our Humane Borders run, I discovered that both Kirk and Jeff were archaeology buffs. So at our third station (Whispering Coyote), which Kirk announced was a known Tohono O’odham site of occupation, after the usual checking and maintenance of the station we took a small break to look for potsherds. Our mood was light as we compared our findings: I pondered the awesomeness of holding this small, tangible fragment of the distant past, the thousands of generations that had moved across this territory since those pots were first made, communities that arose and then disappeared, replaced by others.

On the way back into the city Kirk introduced us to the beautiful giant, many-armed saguaro cactus known as ‘The Overachiever,’ and I thought of the amazing things it must have witnessed in its probable couple of hundred years of existence, humanity’s evils as well as our virtues.
There was another rattle at the front door of the Welcome Center of Casa Alitas.

“We got someone here for you.” The border patrol agent leaped out of his seat and walked around to the van door. He reached in and gently guided a tiny woman wearing big black sunglasses down the steps. “She’s blind,” he explained as he handed me a large Rainbow Unicorn plastic bag as I scooped the woman’s elbow with my other hand.

Slowly, step by step, we inched our way into the office and helped Maria into a seat. I knelt down in front of her and offered water in a cup, which she drank gratefully. I noticed a bright red band around her wrist that read “Diabetic,” and I asked her if she had any medication.

“It’s in that bag,” she motioned. “My daughter gives it to me.”

The elderly woman began to sob, deep, deep yet gentle sobs. She wrapped her arms around me and buried her head into my chest.

“What have they done with my grandchildren?”

Maria had not eaten for four days, and she had not taken her meds for ten days. She did not have any way to measure her glucose, and she had been accustomed to her daughter taking care of her. Her daughter’s husband was murdered in their small village in Chiapas. More than ninety people had been murdered in 2021 alone. There was so much violence, so many dead, so much suffering. There were no jobs, no food, and even though hardly no one ever escaped the violence and poverty, the family decided to try anyway. And so Maria and her daughter sold their house and traveled north with Maria’s three grandchildren to the U.S.-Mexico border. As they were crossing the port of entry into the United States, in the dark push and shove of a multitude of desperate people waiting in line, the blind woman was struck with panic when she was suddenly separated from her daughter and her grandchildren. She called out for her daughter, “Where are you?”

Her daughter had not been allowed to cross the line into the United States. Her daughter with no home, no family, no money and a murdered husband had somehow been pushed aside in the dark without even a goodbye.

“Could I have a sweater, please? I am very cold.” I sent an intern to shuffle through the very neat and tidy racks of donated clothing. Each guest receives one complete outfit before they travel on to their sponsor’s home for their Immigration appointment in two weeks’ time. The intern came back with a fuzzy grey and black jacket.

“What have they done with my grandchildren?”
I explained that it was likely that they were being held in another center here in Tucson for children, and that I would give their parents, who resided in Nashville, Tennessee, the information they needed to contact them. We were here to walk through the entire process with her. We called her daughter-in-law Esperanza, her official sponsor. Later on, I was told that Immigration would not release the children to their grandmother; they were going to keep the two children, one of whom is five-years old, in a tent city by the airport for ten days even though they tested negative for COVID, rather than allow them to travel across the country with their blind grandmother to join with their parents.

I explained to Sandra who I was and where Maria was, explaining that she was alone, but seemed cognizant and alert. I promised to provide Sandra the information for making contact with her children as soon as she was finished talking to her mother. This is an example of what Title 42 and Migrant Protection Protocol look like in real people’s lives.

This is what we witness at Casa Alitas day after day, week after week: We receive guests one at a time, each person bringing with them a story of courage and resilience. Approximately 300 travelers arrive from ICE or Border Patrol at our hospitality centers in a day, although with the lifting of Title 42, we are expecting numbers to rise in the near future.

Volunteers greet the travelers, provide masks, water, and snacks while workers conduct COVID tests and create a roster. Recently Pima County has begun providing vaccines for our guests as well. We provide a safe place to rest, rehydrate, eat, and care for their children. We also provide a change of clothes, hygiene items, and a chance to wash up. We address urgent medical needs in order to permit our guests to travel to their sponsor. We help contact family members in the U.S. and also support the sponsor purchasing bus or plane tickets. Sometimes family members have been separated, and we have a team who works at finding missing members and putting the families in contact. Families receive travel bags before they leave. Bags may include food, water, toiletries, hygiene items, and diapers and baby food. Guests are provided transportation to the airport or bus station and volunteers also drive or meet guests to walk them through printing tickets and Transportation Security Administration and through any ticketing problems that may arise. Travelers who are unable to leave immediately spend one night or more at one of our shelters, staffed by volunteers and Catholic Community Services.

As our intake numbers rise, we are looking for more volunteers to help us welcome guests. Each one of us has a role to play and gifts to share, whether it be Spanish fluency to help guests book tickets or contact a separated family member, a calm heart that can handle shepherding thirty people through a crowded airport, a willingness to run two or three loads of donated clothing through your washer and dryer so each guest can receive a change of outfit, or simply offering a warm smile along with the provision of prepackaged meals and a ziplocked cookie.

If you are interested in volunteering at Casa Alitas, please contact Christy Stewart at volunteers@casaalitas.org, and we will give you more information as to how you can join our wonderful community.
A few years ago, in 2018, I was helping out for a few months at the Benedictine Monastery, the site that housed Catholic Social Service’s Casa Alitas in the first year of its operations. Tucson’s Casa Alitas serves as a hospitality center to receive asylum seekers, provide them a safe space to land, food, clothes, and supports until they can get to the sponsors who are receiving them in various cities across the country. This hospitality process costs the government and US taxpayer $0, and is funded by the love, sweat, tears and good hearts of the Tucson community and beyond.

One night, I was leaving later in the evening, having spent hours after the intake process to update room assignments, travel information, and reset the room for the next day. I was tired. I was headed home about two hours later than I had promised my family, and I was feeling stressed and guilty about the fact that it was yet another night that I had to lean on my partner to do dinner, homework, and the nighttime routine of getting our kiddos down for the night and ready for the next day.

As I stepped down the long hall toward the exit, I heard loud raised voices and quickly assessed that a makeshift soccer game was in progress between three boys. They were about 8 or 9 years old, laughing and lost in their game. For a second, I nearly pulled on my mom voice to scold them about kicking a ball in the hallway, then realized that a) there was nothing they could harm in said hallway and b) they were probably having the first bit of fun they had had since leaving detention. I continued down the hall through their game and said nothing, smiling at them instead.

As I got further down the hall, I heard them kick the ball, not a real soccer ball, but a smaller rubber ball, and knew it was headed my way. I saw movement as the person up ahead of me moved to intercept it, and realized that it was their mother. She was laughing and smiling, as lost in the game as they were, and it occurred to me that she was experiencing freedom along with them. How many of us mothers hear the constant “Mommy, play with me!”? She was playing with them, and happy to be doing so. I could hear the ball getting closer to me, and she sped up, sticking her leg out to shift the ball’s course. We both glanced down together at her leg - her to direct it where she wanted the ball to go, me to make sure that I wasn’t going to trip over it (though it wasn’t going very fast).

That’s when I saw it. The ankle monitor, hanging off of her delicate, capriclad leg. It looked so foreign, so out of place, that I couldn’t wrap my head around its presence. We both stared at it, and it looked like she was also having trouble understanding why it was there, as if she had forgotten about it, if only for the length of a hallway soccer game. Then she seemed to remember, and she jerked her leg back. The ball went past me, out of her reach, and she stumbled over to it. I could tell she was embarrassed. But I was also embarrassed. I wish I could explain to this Young soccer mom why or how she was so dangerous as to require 24-hour ankle monitoring.

From left, clockwise, Lexi, Chris, Kathryn, and Lici
That shame followed me to my car, on the drive home, and all the way to my home, where my own children greeted me with, “Mommy! Come play with us!” as they sought to evade bedtime. It sits with me still, and I really can’t figure out a way to expel it. So I hope that my efforts, and all the efforts of those who are working to confront this shameful reality, these murderous and deadly border policies, will move us to a world where soccer moms don’t wear ankle monitors, and we stop pretending that refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants are the ones who should be ashamed.

The Crossing of Alberto P and Mario M
- As Told to Kristin Norget

We left Nicaragua on October 30, 2021 because we were being persecuted for our political beliefs; we were against the government. We decided to come to the United States for a better future and for our families. For me, it was for my mother; but I also have two sons and a wife. A group of 18 of us Nicaraguans traveled by bus, and everything was fine until we got through Guatemala and into Mexico. The entry into Mexico was difficult. We had no passports, only ID. We had to depend a lot on communication with the coyote, who was in charge of all arrangements.

Everything seemed pretty good until we got to Mazatlán. Then ten of us decided to separate off from the others. Rumors were running that the guide who was accompanying us planned to kidnap us. We told the coyote that we were going to separate, and once we did, we found ourselves being watched; people took photos of us and threatened us while we waited in the bus station. Finally, we took the bus to Culiacán and stayed in a hotel. There we met another coyote. He said that everything had been set up and was ready to go, and we wouldn’t have to worry about encountering egg, liquid frijoles, and yodo [iodine] to curb our sex drive. All the meals were like this. They even put yodo in soft drinks they’d give us. We were there for 6 days, and then we were sent by air to Chiapas. The distance we’d traveled then over 15 days was suddenly lost in 3 hours.

After that three of the group decided to go back to Nicaragua. Two of us contacted another coyote who’d been recommended to us, and he found a new guide. Meanwhile two of our group had decided to go with another guide. So we went to our new coyote’s house to stay, in San Cristobal de las Casas, for eight days; they were a “familia Cristiana.” We made the decision to try to cross the border again. The new guide looked for someone else to help, telling us that the trip had been completely financed with the $3000US we’d given him. But while we were on the way to the border in the bus, a journey of some two weeks, this guide-coyote began to bribe us. At Altar, Sonora, we were taken off the bus and kidnapped by the “mafia” [i.e., narco cartels]. Our kidnappers demanded $5000 more if we wanted to get into the US.
I communicated with my family and arranged to put up our house as collateral, but it only yielded $2000. So we paid this amount, and then still owed them $3000. One afternoon though the four kidnappers started to drink, playing loud music. They got drunker and drunker, eventually falling asleep. We decided to escape. We went into the bathroom and broke the window with a cellphone. We squeezed through the window and fled, running to the bus station which was only some 10 minutes away. By this time it was about 3 in the afternoon. We had no money, and so we began to beg for hand-outs, explaining to people what had happened to us. Finally, we managed to get together enough for the 150 peso bus tickets to go from Altar to Sonoyta, Sonora. We took refuge in a house of the first coyote. He gave us help and some food.

Meanwhile the second coyote and his friends had taken off with our $5000. We got in touch with my brother to pay the first [“good”] coyote $200US so he would take us across the border to where the US Border Patrol would pick us up. We arrived at the wall with Arizona and crossed, but Border Patrol was nowhere to be found. So we decided to walk. We ended up walking over seven hours, from 6pm until almost 3am. It was so cold that we both got hypothermia. In desperation we decided to call Mexican emergency services. They called the Border Patrol, who picked us up at around 7am near Ajo [AZ], and returned us into Mexico. It was Dec. 17th. We again went back to begging so we’d be able to go back and try again. By Dec 24th we had enough money to pay the coyote another $200. We entered, and this time it took the Border Patrol just 10 minutes to find us. They took us to the Patrol station at Ajo, at about 9pm, where the agents had given us burritos and cookies and juice and spent the night.

The next day, at 7am, the Border Patrol agents returned us once more to Mexico. At the bus station in Altar we talked to people and investigated a bit and heard that at Mexicali Nicaraguans were supposedly being accepted across the border. We begged for money again and even got some from Mexicans who were in the house of the coyote. We scraped together enough for the bus fare, but the coyote ended up gifting us the tickets. At Mexicali we decided to go to the border entrance at La Garita and try to cross there, but they refused to receive us. Disheartened, we went back to the bus station where we made friends with a Honduran guy who was headed to Monterrey. He mentioned that a friend of his had gotten through at [Los] Algodones. In the end the Honduran decided to cancel his plane ticket to Monterrey and join us instead. So the three of us traveled to Algodones, where the Honduran guy went his own way and we crossed into Yuma, about 15 Km away.

There was no border patrol. We decided to walk, and after about five miles we decided to hitchhike. A good samaritan gave us a ride and bought us hamburgers, leaving us just outside of Yuma. We decided to walk some more. We walked day and night, we walked so much! My friend started to become feverish. We decided to rest at the edge of the highway. The cold was unbearable— so bad that we decided to start walking again.

At midnight someone else gave us a ride to the next town, Wellton. We told the driver, a gringo, that we needed water. He dropped us off at a gas station, where we tried to pay for water with Mexican pesos but they wouldn’t accept them. We decided to keep walking anyways and sleep at the side of the highway.
At 4am we stopped to rest; we’d made it all the way to Ave 33 E of Wellton, and then we made it to Ave 36. By this time I’d texted my brother [who’d crossed eight months earlier], who was going to come from Phoenix to get us. But then all of a sudden my brother texted me to say that he’d crashed his car and so couldn’t make it. At 8am a police patrol spotted us and took us to Yuma [i.e., the detention center], where we found ourselves among about 600 people, of all different nationalities. The next day, at dawn, we were taken to a detention center in Nogales, where we spent five days locked up [encerrados]. We were interviewed there, and then taken to Tucson. In Tucson I got separated from my friend when I was brought here, to Casa Alitas and my friend was taken somewhere else.

I don’t know what my future plans are. When I see the papers that the Border Patrol gave other people [i.e., the Venezuelans he’s been hanging out with since Yuma], they have until 2023 before they must report to a judge. But I have only until May, 2022. I worry that I’ll get deported back to Nicaragua. Meanwhile I now owe some $14,000 from money I borrowed to pay coyotes for the initial trip, and the money that got extorted from me. I’d like to stay, but I don’t know what will happen.

Volunteer Contribution:
Laurie Cantillo - Tucson, Arizona

I ease the water truck to a gentle stop on the dusty shoulder of Arizona Highway 286—a lonely desert highway north of the Arizona-Mexico border. To our left is Baboquivari Peak, a granite monolith shaped like a snaggletooth, framed by rugged mountains and canyons. To our right are forever views of the picturesque Sonoran Desert—rolling hills of palo verde, acacia, and creosote. Just ahead—on both sides of this asphalt two-lane highway are crosses. The beauty of the area belies a terrible secret—that along this scenic corridor dozens of migrants have perished over the years, most from exposure to the elements.

With me on this crisp February day are Humane Borders volunteers Kirk Astroth and Barbara Johnson. I’ve just completed my first day of training as a driver on a “water run” through Pima County lands and parts of the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. We’ve spent a few hours driving a prescribed route on bumpy dirt roads to service several water stops, which consist of sturdy 55-gallon blue barrels resting in a wood cradle and marked by tall flags that can be seen from a distance. This run is somewhat uneventful by Humane Borders standards; we check the water quality and top off the tanks, but what happened next makes a lasting impression on me. The three of us fall silent as we approach wood crosses that mark locations where migrants died in the harsh Sonoran desert. Those who die in the desert are mostly men, but women and children also perish in the extreme heat and cold. Many remain unidentified. Brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers go missing and are never found. The crosses are erected by grieving family members, humanitarian groups, and some by Tucson artist and Colombian immigrant Alvaro Enciso, who says that, sadly, his work is never done. The sobering reality of our work hits me.
Kirk spots something a short distance away, and makes his way through heavy brush. I follow him, carefully navigating through thorny scrub and a seasonal wash. We find signs of a recent encampment—there are camouflage backpacks and clothing, thin navy blankets, black water bottles, and a discarded trash bag that served as a makeshift poncho. Impressions in the sand reveal that someone recently slept – or tried to – where I'm standing. I collect a toothbrush, barely-used toothpaste, and a razor. A plastic fork. These items of modern living seem so out of place in such an inhospitable place. What led their owners to make such a dangerous journey? What were their hopes and dreams? More importantly: what happened to them?

(A few months earlier)

It's December 2021, and I relax in my Tucson home, enjoying a familiar weekend routine—reading the Arizona Daily Star, morning tea in hand. A series on Death in the Desert catches my eye. I'm riveted. My tea gets cold. I read about Oscar, who calls 911 after being lost in the Arizona desert. Oscar's cell battery is low, he's out of food, and he tells the dispatcher, "I'm lost and alone." After more dropped calls, he sobs, "please don't leave me here...this is killing me." There is no further contact with Oscar. His fate is unknown.

In the last couple decades almost 4,000 migrants have died on the hazardous journey from Mexico through Arizona alone. This is happening right in my backyard, I think. I'm puzzled that more people aren't talking about the human crisis at our border, or doing something about it. Once you know, you can't un-know. I google "Humane Borders" and submit my volunteer application the next day.

Jan. 2, 2022

The new year has arrived, full of promise. While most of Tucson is asleep, I roll out of bed at 4:30 AM, scrape frost off the windshield with a credit card, and drive to the Humane Borders offices in south Tucson. Here I meet Steve Saltonstall and Guillermo Jones to ride along on the Arivaca water run. After taking Covid tests, we pile into truck 9 for a 6-hour journey. It's dark, and the streets of Tucson are mostly empty on a quiet Sunday morning. Temperatures hover around freezing mark; yes, it can be cold in the desert too. Steve and Guillermo have a friendly, easy banter and I relax rom my perch in the back seat. They've been driving this route for years, and they make me feel right at home. Our first stop on a day filled with surprises is at a pecan grove off of I-19. We wave at a security guard and continue on a bumpy road through the grove, our headlights startling a herd of deer that appear ghostlike in the predawn light. We discover that the first barrel on our stop, while full, is mostly frozen, so we continue on into the desert, passing a Border Patrol truck idling nearby. As we approach our second stop, the view of the rolling hills is breathtaking, frosted trees and bushes glistening in the sunlight. I see my breath.

A blue barrel rests in a wooden cradle, with a Humane Borders flag flying overhead. This barrel has seen some use and needs replenishment. As Steve and Guillermo prepare to crank the generator, they encounter a broken line that requires a plumbing repair. Luckily, all Humane Borders trucks are well-equipped with plumbing parts and tools (there's no hardware store in the middle of nowhere) and Guillermo brings a solid plumbing game to the task, so he and Steve jerry-rig a solution. The water is flowing and, relieved, we top off the tank, on to our next stop.
I gape as we find the next barrel is missing. Steve and Guillermo tell me that barrels are sometimes stolen or vandalized, which is incomprehensible. I imagine the utter dismay of being thirsty and out of water, seeing a blue “agua” flag, and arriving only to find there’s no water. Some water stops are vandalized more than others. Humane Borders puts locks on barrels to prevent someone from pouring gasoline or kerosene into them. We replace the barrel and continue on our way.

The most challenging part of the drive is known as Cemetery Ridge—the road here is rocky, deeply rutted, and is a steep climb to a long, narrow ridge with breathtaking 360-degree views. We take a break, drinking in the natural beauty of the area. Steve walks around the site, searching for artifacts and other signs that migrants have come through. In addition to finding camouflage backpacks, clothing, and black water bottles, Steve once found a baby shoe that he keeps as a reminder of what’s at stake.

March 24, 2022

This marked my first drive across the border—to see the wall up close and provide my first opportunity to interact with migrants. A team of Humane Borders volunteers, led by Doug Ruopp, drives truck #12 to Sasabe, a port of entry on the Arizona/Mexico border with a commanding view of Baboquivari—bisected by the wall. My reaction to seeing the wall is one of horror. Most people assume the border is flat, but east and west of Sasabe a black scar divides entire mountains in half, leaving behind dusty slashes of roads and debris in one of the most pristine, biodiverse parts of the world.

The border is quiet and our crossing into Mexico is uneventful. Our first stop—just across the border, is a small outpost for Grupo Beta, a Mexican version of the Peace Corps that provides protection for migrants. A couple guys (and a few street dogs) greet us. Sasabe, Mexico does not have a reliable source of drinking water, so Humane Borders regularly delivers 200+ gallons of clean drinking water to an underground cistern for distribution to various camps in the area. Water drop accomplished, we drive another block to Casa de la Esperanza, a modest facility that offers meals, water, clothing, and showers for migrants who’ve been returned by the Border Patrol to Mexico. After a short lull, the rush begins. Almost two dozen returning migrants arrive within the next hour, most sweaty and weary. Alma, one of two cooks on site, springs into action. Under her supervision, we all pitch in to heat soup, beans, pasta, and toast...lots of toast. Our guests are hungry and appreciative.

Most are younger men—one boy appears to be about 14. Seven of the returnees are women—four in their teens. They look like typical students having lunch at a high school in Tucson, all in jeans and t-shirts, chatting and looking at their phones. To a person, our guests are well-mannered, thanking us profusely in both English and Spanish.

After eating heartily, the girls browse through a rack of donated clothing, while some of the younger boys play with a street puppy. A short time later their ride arrives to take them to Altar, about 60 miles south, for the night. With a friendly wave and a “Vaya con Dios” (go with God), they pile an impossible number of passengers into a station wagon and are on their way.

As they depart, my eye returns to the wall. The water is flowing and, relieved, we top off the tank, on to our next stop. While a wall may physically divide us, it can never change the fact that we are all human and deserving of safety and dignity.

My wish is that everyone could experience what I have with Humane Borders, witnessing the border crisis first-hand, rather than through the lens of
able news or political grandstanding. Perhaps it would help us find compassion for those who risk everything for what we take for granted.

**Humane Borders Board Member Profile:**

**Bob Feinman Interviews Jose Vazquez**

Bob: Jose, what attracted you to Humane Borders? What made you decide that this is a place you want to be to work with the community?

Jose: What attracted me to the organization was the mission and the people behind it. I looked at Humane Borders and I saw a group of experienced, motivated, altruistic individuals who came together with the common goal of saving people’s lives. It is a purely humanitarian organization that puts people above politics, above money, above self-interests. I saw an organization that was helping immigrants, a population of people that I assist in my practice. And I felt I could use my experience to contribute to a worthy and necessary cause.

Bob: Your practice in law is devoted to immigration-related practice. But were you not in some other sort of law prior to devoting yourself to immigration?

Jose: Yes, I’ve done immigration law for over ten years, since about 2011. But for about five years prior, I was a prosecutor for the county of Santa Cruz and also here in Pima County, and in Tucson and Nogales as well. I prosecuted a wide array of crimes, everything from juvenile offenses to adult felony offenses and everything in between.

Bob: The change seems like night and day. I mean, you stayed in the legal profession, but instead of being a prosecutor of crimes, you were now a defender of immigrants. What motivated you to make the switch?

Jose: Well, I always looked at my role as a prosecutor as more of a minister of justice. It wasn’t just about convicting people or getting people more time. Certainly there was an element of that when you’re dealing with an individual who is dangerous, who should be off the street. But I tried to do justice as a prosecutor. When I went to immigration law, the move was more to help people, regardless of what the need might be, whether it be a work visa, reuniting with a family member, or representation and protection from being deported. So making the shift from prosecution to immigration law wasn’t as dramatic as it may sound in that my motivation for serving justice remained the same.

Bob: Your practice changes based on changes in the laws. If the law said X, Y, Z, a month ago, you were dealing with an X, Y or Z type of a case. But then one day we can wake up and read in the newspaper that the X, Y, Z law has changed, that it’s now ABC law. And our organization must keep pace with those changes to be able to accomplish our mission. Humane Borders went on retreat not long ago, and we talked about the changing of the times and where we think we should be five years from now. What is your take on that? As an immigration lawyer, where would you like to see us go that we may not be at this point in our history?

Jose: You know, in a perfect world, we wouldn’t need to exist in five years because there would be no more deaths in the desert. But that’s not the world we live in. I think we should do more of what we’re already doing, which is providing lifesaving water in the desert to those in need, ideally on a larger scale so we can help more people. This would include staying on top of technological advancements on death mapping. We’ve developed maps that show the routes migrants take and the deaths that occurred along the way as represented by red dots. We must stay on top of that, because inevitably these routes will change. So we should continue using up to date resources to maximize our efficiency, and to continue...
using common sense solutions to save human life. It could be as simple as more visible flags that mark locations of water stations, or utilizing gadgets in the desert that would allow migrants to get a signal on a cell phone to call the authorities for help if needed. As an immigration attorney, I think that the biggest change I’d like to see within the next five years is for our organization to have would love for us to be a voice of fact and reason when the subject is being discussed.

**Bob:** Is there anything you’d like to add based on your feelings or other experiences?

**Jose:** Sure. At the retreat, we talked about what Humane Borders means, right? What are “humane borders” in terms of policy? Humane borders comprehensive plan, based on expertise and experience, can bring permanent results and truly address the crux of the matter.

**Bob:** Yeah. We’re all immigrants. That’s what makes the United States a great country. Your family, you’re what generation, from what part of where?

**Jose:** I’m first-born generation. My parents are both from Mexico. My father is from the Zacatecas area, and my mother’s family is from around Jalisco. But both of my parents immigrated when they were kids; my mother was probably 5, and my father was about 14 years old. They both immigrated to work in the fields and agriculture. My father immigrated because his family were farm workers, and through the amnesty that Ronald Reagan signed into law in 1986, they immigrated. On my mother’s side, both my grandparents, though raised in Mexico, were actually born here in the U.S. because they used to travel according to the seasons of working agricultural fields, both in Mexico and the United States. So my mother had an easy way to get here. So I’m first born generation. Working in this area of law, there is no profession, race, culture, or nationality that I haven’t dealt with: I’ve represented people from all walks of life and of all professions. And I think a lot of a lot of people would be surprised if they knew, given the current political climate, how closely related we all of us are to immigration. We tend to look at “them” as “other” people, but really “they” are us.

Since 1999, nearly 4,000 Known Migrant Deaths Have Been Recorded. The Actual Number is Much Higher.

a larger voice in relationship to the discourse on immigration on the border that we so often hear about. I mean, we are experts on migrant migration through the southwest desert. That is what we do. We go to shelters in Mexico, we speak to the people involved, we see their conditions and study their patterns. And unfortunately, we are also made witness to the remnants of their final moments. So we are experts in this narrow, unusual field. I’d like to see us have influence as a source of facts and a voice of reason regarding migrants at the border. You know, politics, unfortunately, paints migrants and immigration in a negative light. And the big picture is missed when that happens. So I and border policy should lend themselves to human dignity. And everything starts with doing all we can to prevent a horrendous death in the desert. That’s the bottom line. But it would also include comprehensive mechanisms and policies on a macro scale that allow us to remedy the problem prior to getting to that point. As the old adage goes, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” And that’s where the focus needs to be, on preventing migrant deaths. I think we need to address the border situation as adults with intellect and common sense as opposed to fear and politics. Criminalizing a group of people only exacerbates the problem. A wall on the border only delays a problem, but a
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