

Border Awareness Immersion: June 2015

The Borderlands ★★★★★

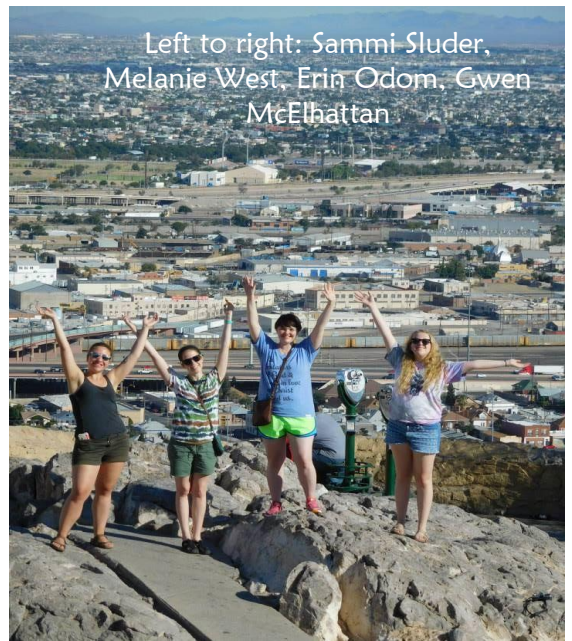
The natives call it “**The Borderlands**” - the area between Mexico and the United States that is separated by one tall, wide, militarized fence. As the four CCAO interns for the Summer 2015, we came to El Paso, Texas, across from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to **immerse ourselves in the people and social justice issues** of the Borderlands.

None of us had visited before. We felt eager and curious to see the fence that we had heard so much about, wanting to learn the **deeper workings** of the border security system which so many call for reform. We stepped out of our car, out of our secure bubble, and walked across the hot sand toward **the metal ten foot fence** that enforces the line between the two countries. As we looked at Mexico through the fence we saw a family outside of their house. Two little girls noticed us and we exchanged waves. The girls walked over to us and lifted their tiny hands to meet ours. We asked for their names: *¿Cómo te llamas?* We laughed and smiled as we learned their names and ages, but remembered **the reality that we are separated.**



This fence is not something to be proud of. We asked ourselves “**Why are we given this life? Why were we born in the United States instead of the two little girls? Do we fully understand our privilege? When our government continues to demand extreme measures to secure and militarize our border, do we understand who is affected?**”

We saw “The Borderlands” and the people who are crying for safety. We are called to stand in solidarity with them so they may have the dignity of life that is rightly theirs as children of God.



Left to right: Sammi Sluder, Melanie West, Erin Odom, Gwen McElhattan

Legal Status in the U.S.

While in El Paso, we met with staff of two organizations that provide legal aid to undocumented migrants.

Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center serves low-income migrants. Most of whom are seeking asylum in the U.S. A legal aide explained to us that Texas has one of the **lowest approval ratings** for granting asylum – one local judge boasts only 1%! The staff assists asylum-seekers to relocate to other states and live with family and friends and seek a trial under a different judge.

The **Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services, INC. (DMRS)** is the largest provider of free and low cost immigration legal services in West Texas and New Mexico. An immigration lawyer explained to us the complex ins-and-outs of residing legally in the U.S. Undocumented migrants endure long waits for their cases to be adjudicated – more than 20 years for some citizens of certain countries.

Is this a reasonable system for people to gain legal residence in the United States?



Atop Mt. Franklin, one can see Juárez, Mexico, stretched past the parameters of El Paso, Texas.

Community Leaders

We met local leaders positively impacting their communities including Gloria Morales. Gloria led our tour of her neighborhood located in a *colonia* on the outskirts of El Paso and invited us into her home to share with us about her life. Gloria's role as a leader in her community began at a garage sale organized by the Sisters of Charity. She quickly assumed the role of directing these garage sales as well as an annual Christmas toy drive for children in the *colonias*. Her team grew as the needs of the community grew. One Christmas, they distributed toys to over 1,500 children. We visited the now-closed clinic where Gloria served as a diabetes specialist. Gloria described the many services and hope that this clinic brought to the community.



Gloria is one example of the many leaders we met while on the border. We share in this **common call to respond as Christians** and with Gloria as an example, we feel inspired and empowered to bring her passion with us as we return to Washington, D.C.

Reaching Out

There are many organizations in El Paso providing essential services to undocumented migrants. We visited two faith-based social services organizations offering hospitality:

Nazareth Hall offers short-term shelter within a nursing home facility. After a quick tour, some of our group began laundry and others worked on organizing clothing donations. The residents often stay just **a day or two**, so it can be difficult for the employees to build deep connections with those they serve. Yet they continue to triage these migrants with **sympathetic care**.

Annunciation House – affectionately called “A-House” – provides long-term hospitality for undocumented migrants. We cooked a meal for about 50 of the residents and volunteers while soaking in their **warmth and kindness**.

We were blessed to be able to **bear witness to the good work** of many people, organizations, and faith communities dedicated to providing the poor and vulnerable in the Borderlands with the resources they need not only to survive, but to be empowered to live with dignity and love.



The interns making dinner for the Annunciation House residents

What you can do:

To join a Columban **Border Awareness Immersion Trip**, contact Fr. Robert Mosher at cmc@columban.org To help any of the organizations mentioned or to contact your member of Congress to asking for comprehensive immigration reform, go to:

Nazareth Hall:

<http://www.lorettocommunity.org/nazareth-halls-original-wing-a-resurrection/>

Annunciation House:

<http://annunciationhouse.org/financial-donations/>

Las Americas Immigration Advocacy Center:

<http://las-americas.org/>

To look up your Senators and Representatives:

<https://www.opencongress.org/people/zipcodelookup>



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For more info:

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