



Report from the Tijuana Border as of August 28, 2020

Sharon Franklin

La Casa de Paso is an emergency house that Sharon Franklin and her partner Javier started a year ago in Tijuana for asylum-seekers, primarily women and children. Sharon is a member of the Refugee Resettlement Coalition and the Oregon Community Asylum Network. She splits her time between Eugene and Tijuana.

Since July 2019, well over 150 people have stayed at La Casa, usually for 1-3 nights until their number is called and they cross the border at El Chaparral San Ysidro, the border crossing from Tijuana into the U.S. (When an asylum seeker presents at the border crossing, they are given a number and placed on a waiting list for their asylum claim to be processed.) Some families spend the day at La Casa. Children play with toys, books, and games, while the moms cook a meal, do laundry, take a shower, or just rest.

Things have changed dramatically in Tijuana with the COVID-19 pandemic, as they have everywhere. Javier is in Tijuana, but Sharon has been unable to return.



It has been another busy month and a stressful one for Javier. He encountered a woman at El Chaparral a few weeks ago who didn't feel well, so he carried her belongings and walked her to the clinic. She tested positive for COVID. When he got home and told me, I told him he needed to go get tested, so he did. The doctors all know him and he said three of them literally dropped everything to all concentrate on him, poking, prodding, testing, asking him questions. Thankfully he tested negative and it's been more than two weeks now. But I know it made him even more cautious when he's out and about down there. He still sees COVID deaths almost every time he's on his bike, either a dead body on the street or a street blocked off by police because there are bodies to pick up. Sobering to say the least.

Still, a lot of new people continue to arrive at the border every day in hope of seeking asylum in the U.S. They come from southern Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, etc., even in the midst of COVID and the fact that the border has been closed for six months now. That alone tells you that if the cartels threaten (or inflict) enough violence on you or your family members, you have no choice but to leave. The danger to many asylum seekers cannot be exaggerated. Just two days ago a 32-year-old man was kidnapped in Guerrero. He is the cousin of a mom in a family I know well from Tijuana (a mom and her two daughters, 19 and 10). I continue to keep track of them since their arrival in the Midwest. The young man refused to pay the cartel. His body was found a day later, murdered by the cartel, leaving behind a wife and two-year-old

daughter. The family here is grief-stricken, and the mom is even more worried now about the safety of her husband who was deported from detention back to Tijuana instead of being allowed to join his family here a few months ago (they had crossed together). These stories are horrifying and tragic, and they happen every day.

Meanwhile, in Tijuana, the families Javier meets know someone cares. He is at El Chaparral (the Mexican side of the border crossing at San Ysidro) at 7 am, seven days a week. He listens, answers questions, pays for food for six different shelters and sometimes pays for medications or dentists if needed. He takes people to the clinic, gives them clothes when needed, helps them get papers they need, and finds them a safe place to stay. If they aren't Mexican citizens and have no way to receive money from family, he sometimes helps them by allowing their family members to wire money to his account for them. (I always marvel at the trust this implies.) This is all we can do right now, but it is a lot.

When you've had to flee and feel so much fear, it's a lot to know that someone cares and takes the time to listen to you and try to help you and your family stay safe.

Javier also gives out masks, along with a little talk about the importance of wearing one and keeping it clean and other things they can do to keep their family safe from COVID. A lot of the masks are donated by people in the U.S. and shipped to my friend Jill in San Diego, who delivers the boxes to an essential worker who can cross the border and drop them off at La Casa. Javier also sews masks himself.

Along with regularly buying a bunch of food for shelters, the other day he bought a bunch of men's pants, t-shirts, socks, and underwear -- the shelters all seem to have a shortage of men's clothing items these days. He also bought feminine supplies, and shoelaces, all of which we can do thanks to your donations to La Casa.

Regarding the lack of shoelaces: Every time an asylum seeker tries to cross the border illegally or is otherwise returned to Tijuana, they arrive back at El Chaparral with a small orange plastic sack with their belongings...and no shoelaces. It's humiliating, shuffling along in shoes with no laces. You can easily tell at a glance of course who's been deported. One day when I was there, I got so fed up that Javier and I went in search of someone selling shoelaces on the street and bought a slew of them to give to everyone we'd meet at the border. Now we have a big stash of them, so Javier gives them out every day to people who are returned, along with masks. A lot of people are being returned now, in large part because people have been waiting for so long that they give up and try to cross illegally in hopes they can make it to a family member's house.

And last, a border-crossing story to share with you. Last Monday Javier met an older woman. She was white, a US citizen, and was trying to walk across the border with several large, heavy bags. She'd broken her leg at some point and was walking with a cane. It was super-hot. He talked to her and ended up offering to carry all her bags. The border crossing at El Chaparral was closed for some reason, so they had to walk to the other border crossing that's farther away.

On the way, she told him how she was going back to the U.S. because her boyfriend "kicked her out." She explained they were having a lot of arguments about politics because she planned to vote for Trump. Well, as you can imagine, these are not Javier's politics. So, as they walked, he took the opportunity to explain some of the reasons she might reconsider voting for Trump, including what he's done to the asylum process.

When they reached the border crossing, they found at least 400 people in line. When she saw the line, she started to cry. Her leg was hurting, it was extremely hot, and she said she couldn't stand in that long line. Javier told her, 'Don't worry. I'm going to get you to the front of the line.' She was astounded at his generosity. He walked her to the front of the long line, talked to the border guards, and they let her in.

Javier's last glimpse of the woman was after she walked through the border. She turned around, dropped her bags, and, widely waving her arms, yelled, "THANK YOU, JAVIER! THANK YOU SO MUCH!"

A little kindness for a long journey.

For more information on or to donate to La Casa de Paso, please visit www.lacasadepaso.com.

**Some people can travel; others can raise money.
Some people can generate resources; others can spread the word.
No one can do everything, but everyone can do something,
and together we can do a LOT.**