



Report from the Tijuana Border August 2022

Sharon Franklin

La Casa de Paso is an emergency house at the Tijuana border started two years ago by Sharon and her partner Javier. La Casa de Paso provides short-term shelter; food; clothing and personal hygiene items; hot showers; and toys, books, and games for kids, along with a safe place of respite. La Casa serves primarily women and their children, because they are at the greatest risk while waiting at the border.

La Casa is not an RRC project, but we thought you'd like to read Sharon's report. Sharon is a member of the Oregon Community Asylum Network.



This month at the border was punctuated with new families arriving amid rumors regarding a new ID card to be issued to asylees to speed up processing in the U.S. and talk of a giant new border wall at Playas near Friendship Park.

Javier speaks with new families every day. They are easy to spot, standing in a group, uncertain what to do next once they realize they cannot cross. To exist for who knows how long in Tijuana, they must have a place to stay and a way to earn money. Javier helps many families do the impossible—find a place to stay (the shelters are all full) and obtain a permit to work. Often if they go by themselves to get a work permit, they are told they must return home to get the necessary documents! If you have just fled for your life amidst threats, abductions, and often the murder of family members, you cannot simply “take a trip back home to get your papers.” So Javier returns with them to the office, standing in line for hours in order to explain the situation to the person at the window and working out a solution.

This week he met a soft-spoken young man from Honduras. Javier said he couldn't have been more than 30 years old. He and his wife have six children. It's daunting to imagine the pressure on this young man. He needs to work and doesn't have the proper ID and papers to apply for a work permit. They need a place to stay, and many landlords do not want to rent to a family with six children. Every day Javier encounters variations on this theme.

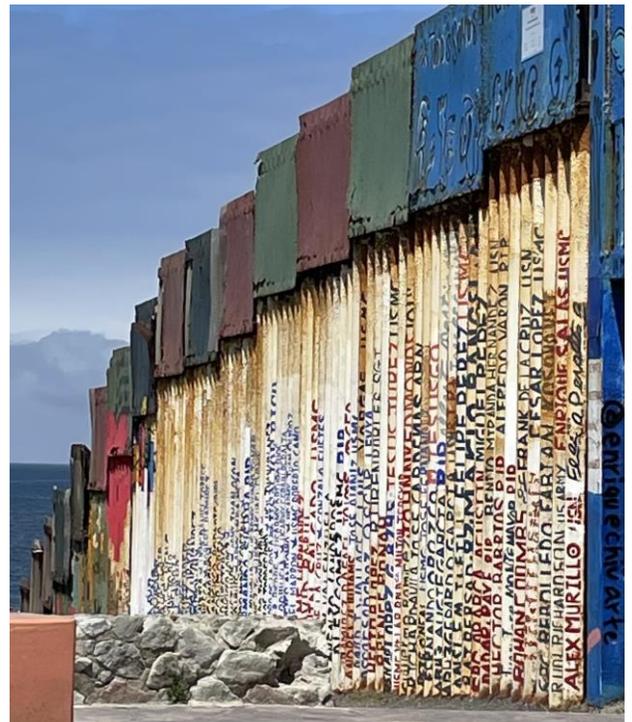
One asylum seeker from Honduras now living in Rosarito calls Javier every month to ask him what is happening. He has been waiting for more than two years now. When Javier tells him that the border is still essentially closed and that very little is happening, the man sometimes argues, because he hears of people crossing and thinks Javier is giving him wrong information. It is hard being the bearer of news no one wants to hear. Javier invited him to come to El Chaparral this weekend and talk to the Grupo Betas himself (the Mexican police, an agency of

the immigration service in Tijuana, who are at El Chaparral to help immigrants). “The Betas will tell you the same things I am telling you,” Javier says in his soft voice. He understands the frustration. He feels it as well.

We know that a few people are crossing every day. By a few, I mean about 30! The lack of a sane, respectful, and fair U.S. immigration policy becomes more apparent every day.

Deported U.S. Veterans

Playas is the beach in Tijuana, the place where the border wall sadistically burrows its way down into the ocean. It is at Playas where families on the U.S. side traditionally travel to catch a glimpse of a loved one on the Mexican side, including many deported U.S. veterans. The wall is painted with the names of many of these veterans. They served our country in two world wars, many in multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. All combat veterans face challenges adjusting to civilian life. Many came back suffering from PTSD and subsequent problems with drugs and alcohol. Veterans lacking citizenship often found that after completing a prison sentence related to drugs or alcohol, they were then deported to Mexico, a country many of them had never lived in and where they had no family ties. Many of them have died waiting to be allowed to return; the names of deported veterans on the border wall are updated to reflect those who passed away. In a final cruel twist, upon their death the U.S. allows them to cross back into the U.S. in a coffin to be buried in a military cemetery. Home at last.



Friendship Park

Friendship Park (where the border wall hits the ocean in Tijuana) is worth learning more about. Established in 1971, many visitors visit Friendship Park, a demarcation point of the physical location of the international boundary line and a gathering place for visitors to the border. Javier and I go to Playas every Sunday for Border Church at Friendship Park. This nondenominational service happens simultaneously on both sides of the border and is translated back and forth from Spanish to English by pastors on both sides of the wall. For me the most moving part is when we are asked to go up to the wall and raise our hands up as high as we can reach on the wall. “It is the wall that separates us,” Pastor Guillermo says, “but now look up and see the sky. The wall separates us, but it is the sky, *el cielo*, that unites us.”

Recently the U.S. Border Patrol announced plans to replace the fences there now. This week a meeting was held on the Mexican side to discuss the new border walls proposed by the U.S. Here are some excerpts from one news account (Salvador Rivera: *Border Report*, July 28, 2022):

“A meeting with Border Patrol representatives didn’t go as expected for a group of advocates trying to save a public gathering spot along the San Diego-Tijuana border known as Friendship Park. Advocates sought a 120-day delay for the proposed construction of **two 30-foot walls** to replace existing barriers on a bluff above the Pacific Ocean, but no compromise was reached.

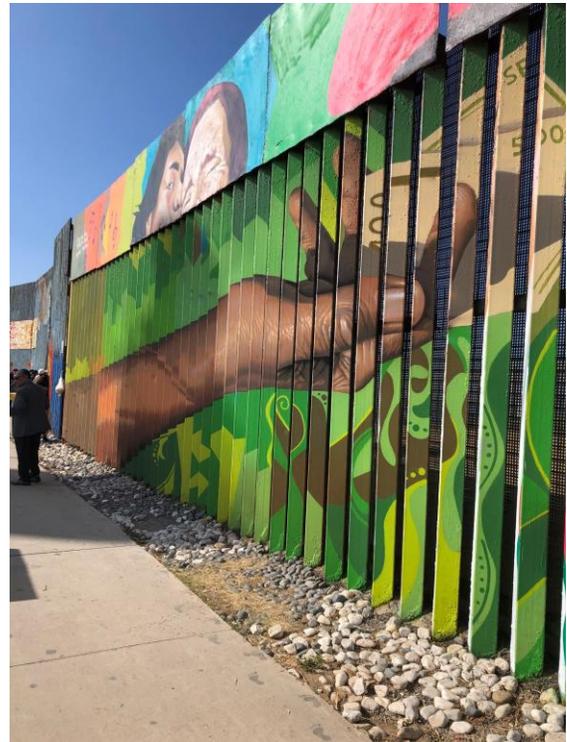
“The fencing there now, according to Border Patrol, is not safe for the public, migrants or the agents who patrol the area and that’s why the new structures are necessary. It’s within these walls, in the so-called ‘enforcement zone,’ that the public had been allowed to enter and meet family and friends who gather on the south side of the border wall.

“Advocates fear Feds have no intention of ever reopening the popular California border park. Traditionally, Border Patrol agents open a gate for a couple of hours on weekends, so people can go in [and visit with a family member on the Mexican side]. The practice was stopped as the pandemic began, and it has not resumed since.”

Javier and I have seen very old and terminally ill people make long journeys, hoping to see their child once more before they die. We’ve witnessed grown children who traveled thousands of miles to show their deported father his new grandchild. Once about 20 people on the Mexican side showed up to celebrate the birthday of a family member on the U.S. side, complete with a Mariachi band, cake, dancing, and the singing of songs they always sang as a family. Can something be celebratory and heartbreaking at the same time? I found it so.

If you would like to learn more about Friendship Park and/or send a letter of support for opening the border and NOT building two 30-foot high fortresses to replace the walls there now, please see the Friendship Park website (www.friendshippark.org).

Meanwhile, Javier is still doing what he has always done for asylum seekers who still arrive seeking safe passage to the U.S. He endured five days of isolation this month when he tested positive for COVID, but thankfully he had a mild case. When I’m here, he describes the families and situations to me in detail when we talk every day, and we often brainstorm the best thing we can do for specific families. He continues to bring families to La Casa to rest, to take showers, to cook, and to give the kids a chance to play in a calm, safe, caring environment.



Javier's prayer every day is to do the best he can do for the people he meets that day. He can do it because of the financial support that keeps La Casa de Paso open. Thank you for your continuing support. Together we can make a huge difference in the lives of these families—and in Javier's mind, especially the children. We can show them we care.

For more information, see www.lacasadepaso.com.

COMPASSION IS A VERB.

