Week 2 Blog
Death at the Border/Death in the Desert

While our first week in Nogales laid the groundwork that allowed us to conceptualize the plight of an undocumented immigrant, this second week has served to put faces to the stories, further humanizing their struggles and hopes against the backdrop of the harsh Arizonian desert. Oftentimes organizations armed with good intentions and well-meaning gestures fall into the trap of generalizing, grouping those they aim to help into categories and statistics, unintentionally forgetting the very people that they set out to help behind these numbers and facts. Experiences that put us into direct contact with immigrants, like the ones we were lucky enough to have this week, allow us to ground ourselves, listening to the voices of migrants who share the trials they have gone through in search of what they cannot find back home—be it personal safety, economic security, stability, or simply a better future for themselves and their family.

Our service-learning placements on Monday and Tuesday gave us the opportunity to meet a wider array of people, most of whom are locals of Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona, and introduced us first-hand to their thoughts on what, for many of them, are issues they have dealt with their entire lives. Through our different service placements, we were able to hear unique perspectives, on issues ranging from LGBTQ+ representation and abortion rights in Mexico to what the visa processes is like and the militarization of the border wall. Working with BYTE, Sam and I spent quite a lot of time with Carolina and Teresita, who live in Sonora, and they were kind enough to give us insight into life at the border. We discussed cases where Border Patrol abused its power, like in the case of José Antonio, where a Border Patrol agent shot the 16-year-old ten times from across the border fence. After being taken to trial, the agent was found not guilty of murder by a US court, a decision that angered many. In light of the recent US Supreme Court ruling we also discussed abortion rights at length, where I learned that the Mexican Supreme Court decriminalized it, but it is only available in Mexico City and 8 other States. Though at first glance many of these social issues might not be seen as related to migration directly, I have come to view them through the lenses of intersectionality, that upon closer inspection we see how they are inherently tied to many of the reasons migrants make the journey to the United States, how various aspects of their political and social identity can make them more vulnerable, and they are forced to leave.
The following four days were equally eye-opening, as we spoke to people that had attempted the dangerous crossing and had failed to make it across. Talking to the migrants at the Migrant Resource Center and CAME was saddening yet one couldn’t help but admire the high spirits and friendliness they offered us; despite the hardships they had experienced. They cracked jokes and spoke of their families back home, the hopes for a better life that they had for them. It was maddening to think that they virtually had no path to the United States through the legal process, leaving them with little to no option on what to do. Though they had been expelled under Title 42 they had no notions of giving up, determined to try again. It was the first time I had heard about “coyotes” from a first-hand account, from someone who had paid for their services and was going to do so again. These little things really highlighted the differences between learning about migrant issues through readings and lectures and discussing it with someone who is living through them. This, along with our experience at Café Justo, has really reinforced my belief that investing into the communities across the borders and generating economic security and opportunities for furthering education will always be more effective for border security and migration than funding CBP and a border wall will ever be. We have heard it many times from many people this week: they don’t want to leave their home countries, they have to. Nearly every person we have interacted with has told us that they wish they could stay back, to be surrounded by familiar people and a familiar language. Circumstances have made it impossible, so they turn to migration, though they love what they leave behind.

I’ve found that participating in activities in which you put yourself out there and directly help others often feels more proactive. “Flood The Desert” was a perfect example, putting down waters in places from which migrants would hopefully be able to find them. Seeing the piles of clothes, water bottles, and other equipment strewn about was heartbreaking, knowing that many most likely did not make it, going so far just to meet with disappointment. This was one of the most impactful days, as we encountered migrants that had made it to mile marker 37, hiding and waiting for their pickup. The moment was a shocking one, really emphasizing the reality of where we are and what’s occurring at the border. I wish we could have helped more but we did as much as we were able to, giving some food and water.

Experiences like these are very important in the understanding of undocumented migrations, focusing on the individuals that make up this group, rather than generalizing and
losing the human touch. It is extremely necessary to be armed with facts and have the knowledge to understand what is occurring in the border, but it is equally necessary to put it into practical use and listen to those living it, that we might understand and act.