Week 4: Collaborative Communities

What does it mean to be a part of a community? That question has been ringing through my mind as we’ve walked through the past four weeks living in the Borderlands. Is a community defined by a shared geographical location and common interest? I would probably have said yes to that question before this summer, but now I think that definition requires a little further explanation. Communities may start by simple commonalities, but the magic that comes with a group of people looking out and supporting each other for no other reason than they want to requires work. I don’t think true community can be accidental; it necessitates intentionality and vulnerability, people being willing to open their lives to those around them, and a whole lot of love. In this combination of time and energy, incredible networks of support can bloom, even amidst the drought of the desert.

In Ajo, the extreme temperatures were no deterrent for the incredible community of volunteers that make up the Ajo Samaritans. We were welcomed to the west desert by a backyard gathering that was full of laughter, conversations both serious and irreverent, and some pizza that was to die for. We learned about the ins and outs of Ajo, how this small town is turning itself into a destination—and not only for the incredible weather in the winter. Grants for small businesses were discussed among the ways that the town has changed, all woven into the myriad of stories of how folks found themselves living in the middle of the desert. Some were short infatuations with the geography of the area; others were winding journeys of finding a place to call home. All shared a love for the community that they saw blossoming in a town once left crippled by the loss of an economic lifeforce in the closure of the New Cornelia mine.
Helping others, whether that means being part of the work that the Ajo Samaritans does in water drops and desert searches or helping fund and run the Centro de Esperanza in Sonoyta, Sonora, is the lifeforce of a community that loses half of its population in the summer months due to many snowbirds escaping the heat. To have a friend requires being a friend, and that is clear in the way the residents of Ajo show up for each other: fiercely and fully. Informed consent, which in my mind is a show of the utmost respect, was paramount in our preparation for our Saturday water drop. We talked through every possibility, what the day could look like, and were assured that we had the ability to make our experience look like we wanted it to. There was no doubt in my mind: whether I was willing and able to participate in the full extent of the hike or if I needed to rest and contribute in other ways, I would be welcomed and accepted fully. That kind of unconditional acceptance is rare to find in a world that tells us we always must do more, be more, and earn more. Often is said “come as you are”; much rarer is finding a community that truly acts in a way to support that mantra.

Ajo wasn’t the first time I have felt this true sense of community in the Borderlands. My service-learning placement, Casa de la Misericordia in Nogales, Sonora, is an incredible example of an intentional community that creates a space for its residents to exist safely with purpose and hope. Casa is a place where migrant kids are allowed to just be kids in school and on the playground. Casa is a place where people find purpose in physically maintaining and participating in the care of the community that is built. Casa houses volunteers and paid staff, with dreams of their own that they put on the backburner so that they can serve those around them. Serving as a waystation for so many on their journey to safety, wherever they may find it, la Casa creates a space for hope in all who pass through its gates. What a privilege to see that work and
know that they are not the only ones pushing to preserve hope in situations where optimism can feel empty.

Most of all, I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of a small community of my own here in Nogales. The shared experiences we’ve had this summer have created a bond between us interns, but we’ve also chosen to make the most of this opportunity and get to know each other through Uno games, movie nights, and coming together around shared meals. We look out for each other, whether that means starting the coffee in the morning or checking in on how someone is doing after a particularly long day. It doesn’t matter that we all come from different places, with unique stories and experiences to share. That just makes our community all the stronger because we grow when we are exposed to new people, places, and ideas. I know I feel like I’ve learnt a lot about myself in just four short weeks, and although I’m happy to leave behind the heat of the Arizona sun, I’m not quite ready to say goodbye to these people yet. Luckily, I’m confident that the relationships I’ve forged and the lessons I’ve learned are going to last long after I leave the Borderlands. The strength of the community we’ve both found and created here is not something easily forgotten, and I know we all will go out into the world better for having had this experience.