



Notes from the Rocking Chair

Nola Grannies

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Because the Grannies (and Granddads) really rock!

The Matamoras Asylum Seekers Encampment -Images-

As we entered and walked through the camp the first day, we were greeted by smiling children, friendly and helpful residents and began to see the day-to-day lives of the asylum seekers living in the encampment.



All that separates Brownsville from Matamoras...the Rio Grande River. The tent on the left side is an "Asylum Court" tent where videoconference judges determine if an asylum seeker's request is granted.





There are rows and rows of people living in these donated tents.



One family's abode



There are many of these makeshift stoves around the camp. Camp residents are free to go into Matamoros to buy supplies for cooking, but most don't have any money. Several groups such as the "Angry Tias and Abuelas" supply the raw ingredients (rice, masa, beans, etc.) for people to cook for their own families. There are 4 free stores within the camp (called Tiendas) that are stocked by the non-profit agencies but run by the residents where asylum seekers can pick up free food and other necessities.



One of the camp stores



The day's laundry hung out to dry.



Port-a-Potties supplied by Team Brownsville, one of the grass roots non-profit organizations working in the camp.





Signs in the camp...

(Above Left) "Take care of me" and then a drawing of the beautiful blue earth.

(Above Right) For their cooking fires, people had been cutting down tree branches. The sign translates into (roughly) "Respect that which you did not plant." To accommodate asylum seekers cooking meals for themselves, cooking wood is now being brought into the camp.

(Bottom) Caring for nature is caring for us.



Free charging station for the cell phones the asylum seekers bring with them or have donated to them. This is their lifeline to those left at home and the family sponsors in the US they hope to be allowed to join.



The wonderful thing is that there is hope. The sad thing is that these farmers here in the encampment will probably still be here to harvest those tomatoes later this summer.



SERVING IN THE DINING ROOM AND LEARNING ABOUT LOSS by Grannie Beth

The camps were everything you might imagine. Hundreds of domed tents packed tightly together. Wood fires with cook pots, phone charging station and a large tent with the sign “COMEDOR” (dining room). For me, serving dinner was a high point of the trip because we could talk to so many people. We had been told by the World Central Kitchen to be prepared for an onslaught of diners but to be sure to interact with the people. There were two long lines at the entrance. The first day was fried chicken day, a favorite among the people. There were two stations at two long tables. I was the fried chicken and rice server. Each person was limited to one plate, with 1 piece of chicken and a scoop of rice and salad; at the next station they got bread and an orange. We were shown a sample plate, but it was impossible to comply. We cheated a bit. The people were hungry; there were nursing mothers, growing teenagers, big men.

As a Spanish speaker, I was able to chat with the “customers” as they came through the line. We were mostly joking around about the food and the size of the portions. Each person seemed to be in good spirits and always said gracias or thank you. Each station had helpers - volunteers from the camp who gave advice and brought over the next stainless steel food pan just as food was getting low. The food was warm and looked delicious. My main helper, José, was from El Salvador. He told me he had to leave because of the danger from the gangs. I heard the same story from another man in the camps from El Salvador. There were two rival gangs (maras) who have taken over the country. MS-13 and 18th Street. They told me that nowhere was safe because the gang boundaries kept changing from day to day, and if you crossed the street, you could be shot. They felt they had no place to go where they and their families were safe, so they paid a lot of money to get smuggled into Mexico. He pointed out his wife and kids when they came through the line. It’s just heartbreaking.

When I told José I had lived in Guatemala when I was a teenager, he pointed out two guys helping on the other serving line. I approached them at the end of service and introduced myself. One guy, Enrique, was from Guatemala City, where I had lived. He asked what zone (neighborhood) I had lived in. When I told him, he was overwhelmed with emotion. “It makes me so happy to know that you walked on the same land as me,” he said. He told me he missed his country so much. He had tears in his eyes, and then I did, too. Until this happened, I had been focusing mostly on the fact that all the folks in the camps left their countries to come to the US. I knew conditions in Central America were bad. Talking to Enrique reminded me that the pain that they were experiencing wasn’t just the horrible conditions in which they were living, or the violence they were fleeing, but the loss of their beloved native land. I recognized there can be an almost physical longing for your native country or city, and the pain in knowing you will never see it again. This is coupled with the knowledge that if you do go back, you or family members will be kidnapped or killed. It’s unimaginable but real. I worry so much about these brave people.

We left early because we were afraid of possibly infecting people with the virus. Now things have worsened at the camps. Some people are giving up and going back. I look forward to the end of the pandemic so I can return to help, but I worry that there will be no one left.

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