

Week 6 Blog Post

## “What Next?”

By Melissa Mena, BCA Border Ambassador Intern, 2023

When I arrived in Houston, I realized there was no painless way to talk about what my group and I witnessed, learned, and experienced throughout our time in Nogales. There is no formula that can make someone always look at the world with color, pure blissfulness, or 100% hopefulness. Arizona impacted my everyday life more than I thought it would. I figured that my passion and knowledge passed down from all the individuals or our service place learning centers would fill me with glee and excitement, which I could share with everyone in my community.

However, if I'm being realistic, I am not happy. There is nothing exciting about telling everyone that I spent an afternoon planting three crosses with Alvaro Enciso where migrants have died recently (one of them being Jose Hernandez Vasquez, a 20 year old man) or leaving gallons of water in the desert with our dear friends in Ajo to assist our friends crossing the desert in search for a better life. There is nothing exciting about exposing the way in which organizations must intervene because the United States government is unable to create an immigration reform or provide more work visas, thus, affecting the lives of people whose dreams get dried up in the desert.

Before Amy checked in on me after arriving in Houston, I could not sit down and write this blog post. I would wake up and think about how lucky I was to be sleeping in my own bed, and within seconds the thought of migrants sleeping in the desert would crawl to my head, and my eyes would fill with tears. I would spend hours trying to fall asleep and being afraid of seeing pure darkness because I couldn't imagine the fear a 20 year old or a ten year old like Javier Zamora has felt. I knew there are people in a rocky terrain in the darkness with nothing but plants that prod you and animals waiting to devour you, with nothing but the moon and stars to guide you. I would lay in bed all day not wanting to leave because I was so mad at the world for continuing their everyday lives and not doing something about the dehumanization and humanitarian crisis we are dealing with...it seemed like no one cares.

I was at a loss from everything I had seen. I had come to the city that I dearly loved to see my neighbors follow the exact routine everyday without the urge to change the world like I felt in Arizona. It was as if Arizona was in a parallel universe because I went from thinking about the borderlands every second of my day and answering questions like, “Señorita, ya puedo trabajar en los Estados Unidos con este permiso?” to my mother asking, “quieres ir a la playa y por una raspa?”...my whole world shifted from one day to another.

After Amy conversed with me, Amy was able to reshape my perspective on how I viewed my life here in Houston. I no longer found myself regarding my mental state as one in "despair" but rather as hopeful with the desperation for change.

When I think about my mind being clouded by my discouragement to change the system and people's beliefs, I think about you. I think about the people setting time aside to read the blog post

of a recent graduate student who is an aspiring immigration lawyer from two migrant parents from Mexico. This includes you, BCA, Ajo and Green Valley Samaritans, Casa de la Misericordia, Centro de la Esperanza, Casa de Esperanza, No More Deaths, People Helping People, and the many more organizations that have made it their mission to not only help others but to spread the word about the reality of the borderlands and the need for instant change. I think about how every person involved in spreading humanitarian aid first heard of the battle against our friends across the fence and decided, “enough is enough,” “I need to get involved.”

If there is one thing this year that the six interns have learned is the myriad and numerous ways one can make a difference by either being 80 miles away from the border or living in Maine, including welcoming people into the community by showing them the best local public schools, guiding them to seeking legal aid or connecting them with other organizations that can help them acquire necessities. Throughout our time in Nogales, multiple people expressed how discussing the truth about the borderlands and the type of conditions migrants are exposed to in order to do their constitutional right and seek asylum is our duty. However, I believe that we need to do more than tell the people around us what we have learned. We must look for those who challenge our beliefs and values not to argue with them, but to create a common ground and educate them on the reality of the borderlands. Once we reach a common ground, it is our responsibility to take direct action within our local communities, cities, and states by either volunteering in a pro bono office translating legal documents or calling the state representative to push for an immigration reform or granting citizenship to DACA recipients. Direct action can come a long way when there is a visibility for the need of improvement.

More importantly, I think about our neighbors across the natural barriers like the desert or the ocean. They are able to have the most hope out of all this. Through it all, they manage to continue moving forward with their hopes and their dreams in front of them, to not lose track of what they are really doing it for. Our neighbors expect finite disappointments but never lose infinite hope, they seek for the terrain to be open, for the birds to fly without a pistol awaiting them, a land where they are able to work and not be exploited, where they get to be treated no more and no less as a human.

My time in Nogales has heavily impacted me more than I anticipated. I discovered aspects of myself that I had not done since my youth, like painting. Being able to channel all those emotions and artistically expressing myself is one of the elements I will continue to explore. Although, right now, I may not be mentally ready to discuss my time in Nogales, I want to be able to express it through art in my community. Therefore, I devised a plan. Rather than talking, I will paint political art on the brown wooden tablets of my gate to raise awareness of what is happening in Nogales. With the help of my parents, I will incorporate phrases that I have learned and create a sign to explain my project. I never envisioned myself channeling my passion of immigration policy into an artistic form, but being a part of the 2023 Border Community Alliance has broadened my scope on the many ways a person can call attention to an important issue, whether through art or verbal. “Like art, political action gives shape and expression, to the things we fear as well as to those we desire. It is a creative process, drawing on the power to imagine as well as to act.” - Madeleine M. Kunin.

Paintings I did throughout my time in Nogales:



(Jose Hernandez Vasquez cross)