Savior in the Desert: Interview with Lois Martin

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Interview with Lois Martin, Volunteer Worker for immigrant support groups on the Arizona/Mexico border (October, 2010)

Interviewer: I know that you are a retired faculty member from a school of social work and before that you worked at many agencies in the human service field such as the Public Health Department, the Veterans Administration and child welfare and once worked as a teacher in Africa. Why did you decide to spend your retirement years volunteering in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona?

LM: Since the late 1970's I had been involved in doing Latin America solidarity work on a volunteer basis. So, when I came to Tucson in 2004 I anticipated continuing that focus through work along the border. But honestly, I was clueless about the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis on our border. When I learned about the numbers of people dying of dehydration and heat related problems in our desert, I began volunteering with Humane Borders. Humane Borders started establishing water stations in the desert in 2000 in response to the rapidly increasing numbers of migrant deaths. We now have 50 or more these water stations—55 gallon barrels with spigots—which we service with trucks equipped with large water tanks and pumps, but the Sonoran Desert is so vast that this is really only a "drop in the bucket."

All of the thousands of people who set out to walk across the desert are risking their lives. Most people walk for at least four days in temperatures that are sometimes over 100 degrees during summer months. It is humanly impossible for a person to carry enough water for such a trip. Many become ill or lost and many of these die as a result. This year (2010) alone, the remains of 252 migrants have been recovered in the desert and we know that many more have died—probably at least that many more—whose remains have not been found. Since 2000, the remains of more than 1700 people have been recovered from our desert!

Int: Since it is so dangerous to try to enter the USA illegally (and many American believe it is also wrong to do so) why do so many Mexicans (and occasionally other nationalities) try to do this?

LM: Well first of all, it's important to know that this is a relatively new phenomenon. For decades until the mid-1990's thousands of workers crossed back and forth across the border in or near urban centers to provide us with needed labor, especially seasonal work in agriculture. It was technically illegal, but little attention was paid to it because we needed their labor. Desert crossings were practically unheard of, but in 1994 our government initiated Operation Gatekeeper to keep workers from crossing into our country. This has involved building a border wall and militarizing the border with many more Border Patrol with military support. The walls were begun in and near urban border cities and have rapidly been spread farther and farther, forcing anyone crossing to do so in the most difficult and dangerous areas, like the desert. In this same period, globalization has grown rapidly, with trade policies like NAFTA [North America Free Trade Agreement]. They said globalization would benefit workers in poorer countries as well as in the US, but in fact, it has further impoverished millions of people. In Mexico, for example, millions of small farmers and farm workers

are no longer able to make a living because they can't compete with US agribusiness, which because of NAFTA, is able to dump our agricultural surpluses on the Mexican market. US government farm subsidies are also a big part of the problem.

So the short answer to your question is that the migrants are desperate—so desperate that they risk their lives to be able to support their families. So many migrants have said to me, "I had to do something—my children are always hungry!" Incidentally, not all migrants are Mexican. Some come from other Latin American countries that are also suffering from globalization. The paradox of all this is that there are plenty of farm owners in the United States who count on low cost labor to plant and harvest crops and are now suffering for lack of willing workers. There are also contractors who count on Mexican laborers for their building projects who are suffering. Once migrants slip across the border into this country most find jobs and family members to help them.

Int: Why don't they wait for legal visas like other prospective immigrants do?

LM: The waiting list for visas to enter this country legally is very long, Applying for a visa costs much more money than these people can afford and frankly, they don't stand much of a chance of being accepted, even if they get the money and are able to journey from their homes to Mexico City where they can apply at an American Embassy. US visas usually go to professionals who have the special skills we need or who are sponsored by employers in the US. They also have to show that they are wealthy enough that they will never need public assistance—impossible for most.

Int: Do you work with other groups beside Humane Borders?

LM: Yes, there are actually 2 more Tucson groups that work directly in the desert—No More Deaths and Samaritans. Now, most of my work is with No More Deaths. Many of our projects were begun by younger people—college age or just post-college. We have a camp in a remote area from which we do patrols on foot—patrols of migrant trails looking for people injured, lost or in need of water and food. The camp includes a tent where we treat people needing first aid. Hundreds of volunteers have come from all over the US and even abroad, to enable us to keep the camp operating 24/7 during summer months and during March (Spring break time in colleges and universities). The rest of the year we are, at least, able to staff it on weekends. Local volunteers also do weekly water runs into the desert to leave gallon bottles of water on migrant trails. Volunteers from the other organization—the Samaritans—also do patrols in the desert and put out water on migrant trails. They focus particularly on locating lost or sick migrants and administering emergency medical treatment. I occasionally have time to volunteer with Samaritans as well.

Int: What happens to the folks who get caught without documents crossing the border or living in the states without the proper papers?

LM: Well, that is another very upsetting part of the story and it varies a lot according to where they are apprehended. If the Border Patrol finds them in the American part of the Sonoran Desert, after processing them through one of their holding facilities, they may simply deport them. Or they may also charge them criminally and put them through court procedures so that they will have a criminal record. The deportation is a whole other problem. They may be bussed to Nogales, which is the nearest Mexican town, or they may be "laterally repatriated," meaning that they are deported through some distant port of entry, possibly even California or Texas. This can include repatriating family members in different places. Once back in Mexico, they rarely have means to reconnect with their loved ones, to buy food or other necessities or pay bus fare back to their home village. Many are virtually stranded. Several years ago, No More Deaths set up a center in Nogales to try to assist people returned by the Border Patrol. We also document abuses by the Border Patrol—everything from denial of water, food and medical care to verbal and physical abuse. In Nogales, we work

together with a branch of the Mexican government to try to help these folks make contact with family and find a way to get back home if that is what they want to do.

However, during the past year, our work in Nogales has become much more challenging. Instead of migrants, people who have been living in all parts of the US have become the majority of the people we are seeing. If Mexicans (or other nationalities) are found to be in this country illegally, they are frequently imprisoned, sometimes for long periods of time, even years, before they are deported. Many of these people have lived most of their lives in the US and are suffering terribly because their families are in the US, often including US citizen children, and they have no legal way to reunite with them. For some who were brought to the US as children, Mexico is essentially a foreign country where they know no one and have no means of support. The stories we hear from these people are truly heart rending.

Nogales and other border cities are full of impoverished people, both migrants and deportees trying to survive. These people are very vulnerable! Of course, this contributes to drug dealing, gang formation and generally to the violence in Mexico that is reported in our newspapers.

Int: What are your future plans with the support programs?

LM: Lately, I've been working on the creation of a network around the country of former volunteers who can help respond to the needs of deported individuals. This may be help for their families, legal representation, obtaining back salary owed to them by their former employers or any of a number of other problems.

We are really in a unique position to see the impact of our broken immigration system. Because of this, we feel bound to spread the word and to lobby for immigration reform. We are always working on this, but it is hard to do enough when it means taking time from responding to the dire needs of the people we meet. **Int:** How does the Border Patrol react to the support and advocacy work the volunteers do? **LM:** Well obviously, many of them don't approve of what we do—they may see us as interfering with the performance of their jobs. Some of us have been cited for littering for putting out water on migrant trails. This has led to a waste of tax money on trials and a waste of our volunteer lawyers' time defending us against the citations. **Int:** This all sounds like very draining work. What keeps you going? **LM:** I would have to answer that it is people who give me the determination to continue this work. I have met some of the most amazing, strong, decent people among those seeking entry into the country—people who risk everything to help their families, friends and even strangers. I think of a group of five men we met in Nogales who came across a woman in the desert who was dying. Even though it meant they would be taken into custody and sent back to Mexico, they carried her for a couple of days till they could get to a highway and flag down the Border Patrol to take her to a hospital. It's also the volunteers—wonderful people whom I love—especially the young volunteers who endure enormous hardships and work tirelessly to help the people we encounter.

Footnotes