

The Walk for Life

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Hiking in a canyon near the Mexican border a few years ago when my late husband and I still lived in Tucson, we stumbled across a human carcass. We knew it was the remains of a migrant who had attempted to cross the treacherous Sonoran desert because of a simple backpack nearby, a Bible written in Spanish, and assorted food wrappers. We could not determine whether it was a man or a woman. That shocking experience is seared into my memory.

For years after that shocking experience, I felt called to join the 75-mile, six-day trek, Arizona Migrant Walk (azmigranttrail.com), an annual event for the past twelve years. Volunteer organizers vowed to sponsor this annual trek until migrant women, men and children from Mexico and places further south no longer perish in the harsh desert. This year, my life permitted me to make the walk in honor of that human being whom I never met. I have always believed it could have been me if I felt his or her level of desperation to feed my family.

Our walk began in El Sasabe, Mexico a tiny border town populated by struggling Mexican families trying to eke out a living. Organizers told us that El Sasabe is a major staging area for migrants crossing the border in search of work as well as a departure point for drug smugglers or their human burros who smuggle illegal drugs into the United States. We were instructed to be cautious while walking through this dusty Mexican town populated by abandoned houses and run-down adobe buildings. Violence is common there in the last few years as drug cartels carry on their illicit operations.

The metal border fence constructed by the United States between Mexico and the U.S. stretches as far as the eye can see to the east and to the west wandering through the desert on a path much like a river. As a result of this barrier, more people attempt to cross and now traverse 50 miles further in either direction into the inhospitable terrain as they attempt to reach the first road (located on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation near Baboquivari Mountain. Baboquivari is a Tohono O'odham sacred mountain.

We walked through a gate in the wall and showed our passports to border agents stationed at what is described as the loneliest United States border customs checkpoint along the 2,000 mile US-Mexican border. Statistics note that some days, 165 cars pass through this station. On the U.S. side, the dirt road turns into a two-lane, asphalt U.S. Highway 286.

The first afternoon we walked in 100-degree heat and encountered a heckler who on the opposite side of the highway shouting obscenities at us. None of the walkers responded to the man, but I felt my heart rate quicken when I saw that he had a pistol holstered to his side.

We walked single file, everyone carrying a simple, wooden white cross each displaying the name of a migrant who had died trying to cross. The remaining six days we started walking at 6 a.m. and daytime temperatures soared to 105 degrees with little to no natural shade when we stopped walking for the day at lunchtime.

Coming from a 9,000 elevation, Colorado town, the heat was overbearing. I wet my bandana, wore a hat to shade my face but nothing mitigated the boiling temperature either when I was walking or when we stopped for the day to rest.

This year, walkers ranged in age from 17 to 73 years. This multicultural group from diverse spiritual backgrounds walked together (mostly in silence) to honor the more than 2,300 known migrants who have lost their lives in the desert since 2001. Faith communities and humanitarian groups in the Americas support The Walk by bringing water trucks and meals to the campsites at lunch and dinner times.

I knew that my participation in The Walk would in no way simulate migrants' experiences. The 70 of us had support vehicles we could climb aboard when we could no longer bear the scorching heat. We had water stops every mile and a half and were encouraged to drink at least a pint of water between each stop. We had ample food and medical attention for our blistered feet and encounters with cholla and other unfriendly cacti. We did sleep on the desert floor every night, but we had sleeping bags to brace against the nighttime temperature drops. And, in the morning, our personal supplies were carted to the next camping spot.

Migrants who are trying to cross generally are equipped with a simple backpack, flip flops or cheap tennis shoes, little food and perhaps a gallon of water in an plastic milk container (not nearly sufficient for the long journey). When they run out of water, many cut cactus trying to find life-sustaining moisture. Migrants usually travel by night trying not to be spotted by border patrol agents.

Empty water bottles, backpacks, jackets, baby pacifiers and other items left behind by desperate migrants litter the desert. Migrants try to lighten their load in hopes of making their way to safety and an honest livelihood. My heart broke each time I saw one of these items.

We spotted occasional deer during our walk but none of the poisonous spiders (black widows or scorpions) or rattle snakes I had feared encountering. The night was quiet and I could smell the sage as I lay in my

sleeping bag looking up at the brilliant display of night stars. The only interruption to the silent nighttime was an occasional helicopter beating the sky searching for migrants.

Border patrol pickups appeared on our path about every hour. They often waved and smiled at us as we trudged hot and sweaty through the desert. They are not responsible for the inhumane policies that force migrants to the point of desperation and often death. I believe the agents appreciated our conviction.

People have asked me why I left the comfort of my cool mountain surroundings to make this walk. "What good does it do?" people asked me. It has done me good to honor that soul I encountered who perished probably only hoping to work in our fields, clean our houses or do our gardening.

Migrants I have met tell me they want to work and send money back to their financially struggling and often starving families. They also say they do not want to stay in the United States or immigrate here. Instead, they say there is no hope in Mexico for them and they are dying there. "Hope" happens for them when they reach the border. Their hope is that their families back home might just survive when the migrant finds work and is able to send money back home.

I will never know the identity of that human being we found in the desert. But, I know I will never forget. I walked for that human being, and for myself.

But, even with all the support I had and my now healed blistered feet, it was no cakewalk.