

7/15/04

Dear friends and family,

So I have been wanting to write for days now, but there is never enough time. As many of you know, but not all, I'm here on the Mexican side of the Texas/Mexico border, in Piedras Negras, sister city to Eagle Pass. I'm here for just a month, not very long really, and already two weeks have passed. But the two weeks have been filled with so many new experiences, faces and stories, that if you saw me now, I'd be in a hand stand position, the blood rushing to my face, trying to sort out the curiosities, peculiarities and small wonders of this place while turned upside down, inside out.

I sleep in a maquiladora, which, by definition, is a processing plant. Here on the border, it is more appropriately defined as a sweat shop. I, however, am not really living in a sweat shop. But I am living in a miracle. I'll tell you more about that in a minute. First, a little background as to why im here. I came to Piedras Negras to complete an internship with a group called Comite Fronterizo de Obreras or "Border Committee of Women Workers", for short CFO. CFO has a long history starting in the early 80's of grassroots organizing within the maquiladoras along the border. Their main emphasis is teaching workers their rights as defined by the Mexican Federal Labor Law, one of the best in the world actually. Life on the border and particularly employment within the maquiladoras is anything but secure. Maquiladoras such as Alcoa, Delphi, Racini, Malco-Mex, etc. are constantly letting people go, hiring new people at lower wages, telling their employees money is tight and they are going to have to downsize so they won't complain because they don't want to lose their job, or actually closing and reopening somewhere else in Mexico, Guatemala, etc. where labor is cheaper and the workers less informed of their rights. Some maquiladoras have even been known to close up shop and reopen in a new location in the very same town. New workers are hired of course, under a

new set of conditions, less pay, benefits, shorter work contract, etc.

I spoke with a man today who used to work for a maquiladora five years ago that paid him about \$100 a week. For him, five years ago that was a lot. Today, however, he told me this same maquiladora is paying its workers around \$60 dollars a week. They make less money and the cost of living is only going up. \$60 is actually the high end of what workers make, and wages can go as low as \$35-40 a week here.

So I am here, living with a woman name Tere Polo, as I said, in a maquiladora, but it's her and four other workers maquiladora, to which they've given the name "Maquiladora de Dignidad y Justicia"/ Maquiladora of Dignity and Justice, or MDJ. It's actually a small house that they are turning into a sewing business. They would prefer to call it a cooperative, but because they are going to be importing and exporting textile goods, they had to register as a maquiladora. And, as a maquiladora, they also get a break in import/ export costs under NAFTA. Quite clever of them really. Right now they have about 7-10 sewing machines that fill up the bottom floor of the house. Tere and I share a room upstairs. All in all, I'd say the house is about 800-1000 sq. ft.

I just happened to arrive here in Piedras right when Tere was attempting to register the maquiladora with customs so they could legally work and import/export goods. Today, after running in circles for days, the maquiladora was registered and is now official. I wish i could tell you all the hoops she was made to jump through, but to give an example, Tere went one day to Customs thinking she finally had all the paperwork she needed. I waited outside for her because they don't allow visitors past a certain point. I've been doing a photo story on MDJ, so I follow Tere everywhere, documenting all the ends and outs related to MDJ. About an hour later, Tere comes out and tells me they won't register MDJ because the name on her birth certificate differs from an

official document that they, Customs, wrote up. Turns out her birth certificate has her first name as Theresita and Customs had written it as Theresa. Tere had shown them her birth certificate, but rather than change the mistake they made on their document, they wanted Tere to have her original birth certificate changed to say Theresa. This would have meant that Tere would have to go to Vera Cruz, where she was born, hours away, to get another copy of her birth certificate with the changes to it.

Anyways, we were sent all over the place and finally the issue was resolved, but it cost her a couple of days time and money trying to resolve something for which she was not at fault. I share this because i see many delays and obstacles presented to people here by the bureaucracy and the powers that be with the hope that it will frustrate someone to the point that they throw up their hands and just say forget it. But then, they don't know Tere, a woman of determination and humor, who is not easily brushed off.

At any rate, there are many peculiar things about Piedras, and as I'm not good with brevity, I won't get to them all. Other than following Tere around, I also go with CFO workers when they visit people in the community, most of whom have been laid off or have been injured on the job and are fighting for the appropriate severance pay and health care coverage. And some of my internship duties involve teaching some CFO workers how to drive a stick shift, giving computer classes (hah! imagine me doing that), and looking for potential funding sources. I brought my car with me, and so its become a much used resource these past couple of weeks. i've made a couple of trips to san antonio, and many trips to eagle pass to go shopping at walmart. the irony of crossing the border to shop in walmart continues to impress me. but as i've been told, many items in walmart are cheaper than in piedras. go figure, it was all made in a sweat shop! crossing over continues to be an adventure as well. one time i was pulled over and the car searched, but that was because i was driving a friends car across to get gas in eagle pass because it's cheaper

there. only she wasn't with me, another friend was, the owner unable to go because she didn't have permission. nothing happened, but it sure made me sweat ten times more if that's even possible in this 100+ degree weather.

i have been enjoying myself though. did i say that? i've danced plenty and drank plenty. i'm learning to dance cumbia and how to dance along the pot-hole ridden roads swerving from one side to the other. fortunately most roads are one way. anyways, i could go on, but it is late, and the folks will be worried. i love you all. i'll be in touch. christina.