



# Social Justice Today



Social Justice Today is an online, quarterly, not-for-profit journal which seeks to unite academics and other citizens passionate about social issues. We are interested in social, political, pedagogical, and cultural essays which examine issues of civic significance within a social justice framework

**Volume 1, No. 3**  
**Fall 2012**

**Immigration, Globalization and  
the Militarization of the Border**

## **Social Justice Today**

Co-Founders: Elvia R. Arriola and Sarah Miltz-Frielink

Issue Editors: Sarah Miltz-Frielink and Elvia R. Arriola

Contributing Authors:

Diane Kramer, George Gomez, Elaine J. Cohen, Dorothy Wall, Reverend Pamela Brouker,  
Charles I. Rand, Sarah Miltz-Frielink

Graphic Designer: Adam Frielink

Special thanks to May ATCF facilitators and delegates:

Bianca Hinz-Foley (facilitator), Elvia R. Arriola (facilitator), Sydney Dwoskin, Reverend Pamela Brouker, Natasha Dahanayake, Marcela Parra, Lisa Knauf, George Gomez, Jessica Alvarenga, Laura O'Neill, Dori Wall, and Miguel Rodriguez.

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### **Who We Are**

Social Justice Today is an online, quarterly, not-for-profit journal which seeks to unite academics and other citizens passionate about social issues. We are interested in social, political, pedagogical, and cultural essays which examine issues of civic significance within a social justice framework. We are seeking essays which explore issues of race, gender, disability, health, social class or sexual orientation and ask challenging questions about the institutional constraints under which we live and work. Equally important, we invite essays that articulate constructive democratic visions that dare to step outside conventional modes of interpretation. Another core aim of Social Justice Today is to revive the lost art of the American essay in the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, W.E.B. DuBois, and Susan Sontag, to mention a few exemplars of this genre. The hope is that our writers and readers will question their assumptions, prejudices, and personal/political ideologies in the process.

It is the editors' belief that we often overcome trials and experience transcendence as a result of this type of questioning and examination of thought forms. We urge individuals to reflect upon socio-cultural influences which have shaped personal perspectives and how new experiences have the potential to transform pain and prejudice. In today's post-modern American culture, heavily influenced as it is by degraded forms of commercial culture, social media, the blogosphere, and impersonal online interactions (often replacing face-to-face ones), the need for well-written thought-provoking essays is on the rise. Social Justice Today aims to provide a non-doctrinaire forum for publishing essays which ask fresh and difficult questions that provoke dialogue and stir up passion for public affairs.

## **Writer's Guidelines**

A well-written essay written in Chicago Style may range from 8-20 pages in length (double-spaced).

An ideal essay may begin with a personal narrative, which propels the writer to critique and ask questions about various oppressive practices. The writer could examine how these practices are shaped by thought paradigms and belief systems and as a result may present a counter narrative or point of view. In addition to American essays, we will consider well-written Q and A dialogue pieces, short stories, and poetry with a social justice theme. Please send completed manuscripts attached in word via email to [editor@socialjusticetoday.org](mailto:editor@socialjusticetoday.org) for consideration. Please put SJT submission in the subject line. We do not accept simultaneous submissions.

Notification via email regarding the status of your essay will occur approximately two weeks post submission. This is a quarterly publication. Our next writer's deadline is January 8, 2012. A short bio about the writer must accompany the submission.

Due to the fact that this publication is entirely run by volunteers, has no advertisers, and is unfunded, writers will not be paid upon publication. However, writers can use this opportunity to build their portfolios, curriculum vitae, or resumes. It would be paradoxical for this publication to accept any payments for publication due to our commitment to social justice and equity issues. This not-for-profit publication will remain run by volunteers as part of our commitment to social change. If you have editorial experience and would like to volunteer to help edit a future issue, please send an email with your experience and interest to [sarah@socialjusticetoday.org](mailto:sarah@socialjusticetoday.org).

Dear Reader,

We dedicate this publication to the education of the American public regarding human rights issues involving immigration, globalization, and the militarization of the border. In May, 2012 Professor Arriola—who founded Women on the Border (WOB)—teamed up with the ally organization Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (ATCF) for a delegation on the Texas border. Fortunately, I had the honor of being one of the 13 delegates who traveled down to the border with WOB and ATCF. There we witnessed the economic and social injustice undocumented workers face on a daily basis as they endure wage theft, hazardous labor conditions, and the loss of human rights in the US Customs Enforcement detention system. We heard testimonies from the Workers Defense Project on wage theft at Casa Marianella—an emergency shelter for adult immigrants in Austin, Texas. We met struggling single mothers living in the “colonias”—slum housing along the border—who will never see their husbands again due to deportation or detention issues. We toured Port Isabel Detention Facility, operated by the Department of Homeland Security, in Los Fresnos, Texas where husbands, fathers, and sons peered across metal bars in quiet desperation to return to their families. We had the honor of meeting Diego Dominguez<sup>1</sup>, a labor organizer from the workers’ activist group Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO), who educated us on the harsh realities for maquiladora (sweatshop) workers who live at the border and work for the US companies that profit from their labor under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The following reflections and articles highlight important lessons we learned during the May delegation. In addition, we have included essays that delegates wrote about their past trips to the Mexico side of the border. As activists, we continue our work for a more just society through educating others about our experiences. We hope this issue of SJT will build a greater awareness of

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<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

the indignities families on both sides of Mexican border endure under hegemonic pieces of legislation like NAFTA, or anti-immigrant policies which support the construction of the border wall and militarized policing of the boundaries between the US and Mexico. Questions will inevitably arise such as: “Who has a right to feel safe? Who has the right to be paid a living wage? Who has a right to work in safe conditions? Who has a right to be with their families?” We hope the nuances and complexities explored in this issue create a greater urgency for immigration policy reform, which takes into account the immeasurable value of every human being. William H. Watkins speaks to this socio-political struggle with cautionary reference to the historical, “Our lawmakers have not learned the lessons of history at Berlin and Gaza that the consequences of walling people in or out of a place and space are dire. Even the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.”<sup>2</sup> Our aim is to inform lawmakers about the human loss and cost we pay for the militarization of the border because “we are all Americans of the new world, and our most dangerous enemies are not each other, but the great wall of ignorance between us.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, I would like to suggest to readers that one outstanding resource available for promoting greater sensitivity about the range of immigration issues facing us today is the recently released documentary, *Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America* (Onyx Films, 2012).

Sincerely,

Sarah Miltz-Frielink  
Co-founder and issue co-editor  
Social Justice Today

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Watkins, “New Social Order: An Educator looks at Economics, Politics, and Race.” in *The Assault on Public Education: Confronting the Politics of Corporate School Reform*, ed. William H. Watkins (New York: Teacher’s College Press), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America*, directed by Peter Getzels and Eduardo Lopez (2012; Atlanta, GA: Onyx Films, 2012), DVD.

## Different Eyes

By: Diane Kramer

Mae sat with elbows propped on the table, hands under her chin, eyes on me. Chunky turquoise jewelry highlighted her caramel skin. Colleagues for twenty years, she knew I needed a listener and she was the one to hear what I had to say. We often spoke up together at meetings, the only ones with a divergent opinion, or the only ones willing to take the risk. When I'd go off half-cocked, Mae would rein me in, saying "pick your battles, keep a united front, bide your time," all lessons from her African-American experience. Despite our growing up in different colored worlds, we'd forged a bond of trust in the workplace, one of the borders where her people and my people mixed.

"Tell me the story," she sighed, sitting back in her chair, as if readying herself for an unruly teenager's adventure.

Judith and I had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. We'd met through Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, an organization that sponsors educational delegations to the Mexican border. Now we were making a journey to Rio Bravo, in the state of Tamaulipas, just the two of us. We would connect with Mark, a union organizer, who was consulting with maquiladora workers from Duro Bag, a company that manufactures gift bags headquartered in Kentucky. Maquiladoras are foreign-owned corporations, usually US, who operate just inside the Mexican side of the border. They profit from low wages, lax enforcement of labor laws, and abusive oversight of employees by Mexican managers. The Mexican constitution contains some of the most progressive labor laws of any country, but few workers know this.



On a previous delegation to Ciudad Acuña, our group distributed booklets informing workers of their rights; such as bathroom breaks, no forced over-time or lock-downs, free speech, the right to assembly. Workers told us about their experiences. Some were denied requests to use the restroom and resorted to wearing diapers. In plants that offered breaks, workers were so closely monitored that women who needed more frequent trips to take care of their menstrual hygiene were forced to show used sanitary napkins to male supervisors to prove they weren't just wasting time. Not surprisingly, sexual harassment was commonplace. Overtime wages were often withheld, workers were forced to accept payment through company store vouchers; and company housing, seemingly a nice benefit, left workers who were fired or quit nowhere to live and no equity to show for their money.

For this trip to Rio Bravo, Judith and I were delivering funds she had raised to support the striking workers at Duro Bag. The majority of their workers were young women. Not willing to take my car into Mexico we parked at Mark's apartment in McAllen and accompanied him across the border. As Mark drove, we planned our respective steps and a strategy if things started to go awry.

The demonstration would occur during the graveyard shift. We'd already heard there was a lock down in the plant, no one allowed to go in or out, management's way of intimidating workers. We knew the home of the leader of the pro-union workers had mysteriously burned the week before and one female worker showed us her injuries from an assault by her supervisor. Judith and I shook our heads and reflected on the similarities to the US labor movement in the early twentieth century. We wondered if anyone back home would believe this, anymore than we did seeing it with our own eyes.

Everyone was excited and nervous, undeterred by the dust of this rural area that swirled about us, choking our throats and stinging our eyes. We were three US Americans among a hundred

or so Mexicans, all of them poor. At the plant we chanted with workers, hung the red and black banner on the cyclone fence, a symbol of solidarity in Mexico, even took a few photos in front of the massive gates. Judith and I made a pact with Mark that we'd leave at the first sign of trouble, that is, when the police showed up. Forewarned this might happen in response to some protestors' threats to close the plant, we'd parked the car heading away from the dead end road where Duro was located. As if agitated by our singing and chanting, the security guards at the station paced and traded places, in out, in out, their eyes darting back and forth. One guard yelled at us to get away from the fence. That's when we saw the first police cars barreling down the dirt road toward the crowd.

“Uh, oh.” Judith and I said in unison.

We knew Mexico had several types of law enforcement like the US, but we couldn't tell who was who. Different uniforms, different vehicles. The last to arrive: unmistakably, the Federales. A stream of cars pulled up in a line and officers in black uniforms, flak jackets, and weapons, including assault rifles, ran down the street toward the demonstrators. Judith and I slowly stepped back, one foot after the other into the shadows, but Mark was exposed at the front of the crowd and several officers made a beeline for him. Judith and I couldn't see what was happening through the yelling and commotion until an officer threw Mark into a car and sped off. Hearts racing, we stood unable to decipher what had just occurred and what to do next.

Mark's car sped around in front of us, gravel spraying, with Ricardo a local union organizer behind the wheel.

“Get in the back. Get down, get your head down!”

Judith and I scrambled in and crouched in the back seat. I yelled at Ricardo, “Where are we going?”

“Getting you out of here.”

Unseen by us, Mark had tossed his keys to Ricardo as the police had thrown him into the squad car. Now Ricardo raced down the dirt road, dust flying, swerving around pot holes; Judith and I pitched back and forth like sacks of groceries. Scared, but intent on knowing what was going on, I popped my head over the back seat where my eyes locked on like lasers to brake lights in front of us. My God, we were right on the bumper of a police car.

“Why are we following them?!”

“To make sure they don’t disappear Mark!”

Shit.

After a mile or two in the dark of rural roads Ricardo twisted the car to the left and came to a halt in front of the police station.

“Stay down!”

Within seconds, he threw the car into reverse and headed out to another unknown destination. At this point, I wondered how much Judith and I could trust Ricardo.

“Mark will be okay in jail. Now I’m taking you to a hotel where you’ll be safe until I know what to do.”

We parked around the corner from a local inn with two floors of rooms, not your Cancun resort hotel—Rio Bravo isn’t much of a tourist destination. We made our way through the grungy

foyer to the manager's station. When we asked for a room, he looked at us disagreeably. It was midnight. He looked back and forth at Judith and me, argued with Ricardo, arms gesturing. I didn't need to know Spanish to understand he didn't want us gringas in his establishment, but US dollars were hard to pass up.

Judith and I sat in the musty air after Ricardo dashed back out, feeling dropped in our room like the baggage we were. I sat on the edge of the bed, my body unable to feel the mattress, as thighs, knees, ankles, even toes shook uncontrollably. The urge to pee overtook me and somehow I coordinated my body to get from bed to bathroom several times.

"Nervous?" Judith asked, seemingly not anxious herself.

"My God, yes. I'm shaking like a leaf. Aren't you?"

"Not really."

My head snapped around to look Judith squarely in the eyes, searching for clues to what she was really feeling.

Are you kidding me? We've just run from the police; how could you not be scared?"

"We haven't done anything against the law."

"Judith, these are the *Mexican* police. We don't need to have done anything wrong. They're corrupt!"

With an unsettling nonchalance, Judith answered, "I'm a Jew from New York. I don't know these things."

I hadn't realized the reputation of the Mexican police I was so familiar with hadn't penetrated Judith's New York, not been in Texas long, mindset. I didn't want to find myself inside a cramped, smelly Mexican jail cell or pondering whether to offer the not uncustomary bribe to the officers or judge. I insisted we leave as soon as possible.

The door swung open and Ricardo entered followed by a tall, heavy set man with chin and chest that said ego. I recognized him as Antonio, a labor attorney from Mexico City we'd met earlier at the demonstration that afternoon. We'd had a brief conversation about how to identify ourselves if detained by the police and our "international observer" answer had made his eyes roll that same dismay, "gringas," that we'd gotten from the hotel clerk. Antonio had advised us we needed special papers for that and to just show them our ID.

Our activities didn't side with the usual tourist visa and we knew we were on shaky ground. We'd been aware authorities wouldn't want outsiders at this event, but we also knew outsiders were just what the workers welcomed. We had eyes to see, ears to hear, and voices to speak. Our presence pierced the anonymity that often hides misdeeds. Judith and I realized this was the reason we had violated our plan to leave at the first sign of trouble. We didn't want to desert a group of women, even younger and more idealistic than we. We had gone to be advocates; we stayed to be witnesses.

Head-to-head, Ricardo and Antonio spoke in Spanish, then Antonio turned on his heels and left.

"We're working on Mark's release. The police arrested at least nine others. They're all thrown together in one cell. Mark will be safe. But, you're not."

"Oh, great," I sighed.

Ricardo stroked his chin as he paced around the room. “The International Bridge is the quickest, but it closes at 1am. Assuming we even make it on time, if the agents have been told about tonight’s events, they’ll be on the lookout for you.”

“So what do we do?” Judith asked.

“I’ll take you the back way to the Reynosa Bridge; it’s not used as often. If we hurry, we might make it before they close.”

The rural night was darker than the city nights I’m used to. No street lamps, road reflectors, or neon signs lit up the sky. Ricardo moved the car in a hurry along the dirt roads, but didn’t race as before. He made chit chat in simple English as if charming a new date. Still slumped in the back seat, Judith and I kept our answers short.

Perhaps he’d read our minds or was simply experienced in organizing in Mexico, “You can trust me. I’ve worked with Mark a lot. I’m really taking you to the bridge.”

Judith and I breathed a bit more deeply after that or maybe we relaxed the more miles we got from town and the closer to our side of the Rio Grande. Our bodies crouched less and sat more and the three of us conversed, first about union organizing, then about ourselves. In his early thirties and slightly built, Ricardo’s brown eyes conveyed he was an amiable fellow and I could see why Mark had entrusted us to him.

“We’re getting closer to the bridge. Let me do all the talking.”

Judith and I kept silent. The lights in the distance signaled it was show time. Ricardo slowed the car to a stop and the agent appeared at the driver’s window. He peered around the front seat, then the back. My stomach churned as the agent asked for our IDs. I recalled Ricardo’s instructions

to stay casual and hand them over. Next the agent asked what we'd been doing on the Mexican side and why we were headed to the US.

I heard Ricardo tell the story we'd agreed to, "We were at a party with friends. I'm just driving them back home, sir."

The agent handed back our identification and motioned us on. I held my breath as we cruised across the bridge and onto US soil.

Our relief was short lived as we aimed our efforts at getting Mark out of jail. Ricardo returned to Rio Bravo and we assisted from McAllen. Judith caught a few moments of sleep, I none, as we made adrenaline-fueled calls to our friends in Austin 'Tan Cerca. The next morning, we visited the US Consulate, who, much to our dismay, did nothing. We called the Red Cross, which eventually sent an observer to the jail, who reported back that the accommodations were basic, but everyone was okay.

Striking Duro workers continued to hold rallies for many weeks at the zócalo, or town square. Back in Austin, Judith and I raised funds for the bail that eventually released Mark from Mexican custody, and the union was successfully registered by the end of the summer. We learned that after we left the plant, some of the demonstrators had been beaten by the police; most fled into the scrub brush of the rural countryside. A local Mexican newspaper wrote about what happened, "man arrested, two women flee," and Amnesty International reported on the incident and Duro's abuse of workers.

I participated in another delegation or two but mainly continued my labor organizing with my employer's union, one I'd helped establish a couple of years before the events in Rio Bravo. Now ten years later, Judith continues with Austin 'Tan Cerca de la Frontera leading delegations to

border towns and educating US Americans about cross-cultural solidarity. She received a PhD in Rhetoric, basing her dissertation on the voices of the maquiladora workers.

During the orientation for my first delegation to Ciudad Acuna, we were told Austin Tan Cerca had only one expectation of those participating: to be the eyes and ears and voices for the maquiladora workers when we returned to the US side of the border.

One leader had cautioned, “What you see and hear on this trip may change you forever.”

I kept my commitment, telling the stories of what I saw and what I heard many times to many people. And, yes, it’s true, my experience changed me. I came home with different eyes. Not just for Mexico or maquiladora workers. Not just for labor organizing or employer abuses. But for what I felt when I crossed over to “safety” onto the US side: I realized my sense of safety was because I was white. I had only seen US police through that experience, not through the eyes of someone of color whose treatment by law enforcement was not so safe as mine.

Though our eyes are taught how to see, we’re born with our skin. I began to learn of the unearned benefits afforded me because of mine. Though I may not feel prejudice or intentionally commit an act of discrimination, recognize or even want any advantage, I am given privileges based on the white skin that others see.

As I finished telling my story to my colleague Mae, she shook her head and chuckled. I explained how I realized the fear and distrust I had for police in Mexico is what Blacks like her routinely feel in the US. She nodded in affirmation. I don’t recall her words, just the feelings unsaid between us; she’d been waiting for a long time. I knew she understood I’d begun to see with different eyes.



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Diane Kramer retired from Austin Community College in Austin, TX, after thirty years as a counselor and psychology professor. Her childhood of class and white privilege contributed little to her understanding of students coming from a wide range of race, class, language, and cultural backgrounds. Instead, her students became her teachers and showed her the real world beyond her upbringing. She continues to learn about white privilege.

## Reflection on the May 2012 Delegation “Journey of an Immigrant”

By: George Gomez

If there is a word that can best describe my emotion towards this delegation, it is hope. This delegation signifies for me that there is still hope to fight for what is right. There are people still fighting for a better tomorrow. It demonstrates that not all hope for those who are voiceless is dead. I want to begin by extending a special recognition and thanks in this reflection to Professor and Executive Director of Women on the Border, Elvia Arriola, for her intellectuality. I would also like to express my gratitude to the members of ATCF and everyone who participated in this year’s delegation. You are all held closely to my heart.

The main concept of the delegation revolved around the concept of “Manos Vacias” (or empty hands). It is an enigmatic term for many and it might be hard for some to practice, that is to go into an experience without an agenda and with a willingness just to observe and to listen. I came to this delegation with an empty glass only to come back with my glass overflowing in the rich drink of knowledge and experience. I find the concept ground breaking. As if it had to be a concept of unprecedented caliber. Yet, it is not. It is something a typical person who crossed the border could have told you about his or her own experience coming to America. Yet ATCF and WOB’s organizers have aggrandized such a phrase to a new level of sophistication. I kept wondering why I never thought of it in the first place. Nonetheless, it opened another door of knowledge to enable me to think in a different perspective. A second term that I found captivating and probably one that I will take with me forever is solidarity. Solidarity was a word I have never quite clearly understood until I came on this delegation. Solidarity to me now is becoming one with the community. It is more than just attempting to fix a dilemma but understanding the dilemma and its complexities. However, the most crucial part of solidarity is the way one faces the dilemma. I read a quote in our

delegation packet that explains solidarity: “do not sympathize me, but support me.” One should be cautious before attempting to solve another’s problem: one should instead support them in their struggle. It is all about being an individual but becoming part of a community simultaneously.

This delegation experience especially affected me because it reminded me how far I have come. It reminds me how much my family has overcome. It brought me back to the very beginning. By far, the most cherished memory I will take from this delegation was our visit to the families in the indigent neighborhoods of Alamo, Texas facilitated for us by the organizing women’s group called ARISE. The women of ARISE meet and support the immigrant families of the Rio Grande Valley who live in constant fear of losing a home, a relative or spouse or of being picked up, jailed and deported. In the matter of a few hours, the members of ARISE and the family we visited unlocked my heart. I cried profusely during our visit to one family. I did not shed my tears out of sympathy but because I fundamentally understood the family’s experiences. I was taken back to my roots as the young child of immigrant parents. I knew their lack of food and bedding, the absence of capital because I had lived that way myself. I knew the mother’s pain and it was all too familiar. I had promised myself that my family would never go back to that life again. We were to move forward and never look back. However, I regret now never looking back.

Looking back to our own beginnings reminds one of why things turned out the way they did. As a first generation Mexican-American, it helps you understand life experiences that were incomprehensible at the time seen through a child’s eyes. Additionally, these kinds of experiences, of a group of people in a delegation meeting other people in their communities who share their stories, like the ATCF delegation, educates the public on what is really going on at this very moment at the Mexican border. One has the opportunity to see a problem from a completely different perspective when we connect it to a real person’s life story and situation. The experience helps us to

demystify subjects that are exaggerated regularly by the media with what we might call “the CNN effect.” Topics such as the NAFTA or immigration are only brought up by the media when they think it is important. But after this delegation I ask this -- how can this subject not be a priority issue to cover on a daily basis whether it is in Mexico or in the United States? Does the impact of our militarized border not deprive enough people of justice on a daily basis for it to become a newsworthy issue? We are at the whims of the media and yet we, as the public, permit them to tell us what is important for the day. Here is the truth -- there is a war occurring at the border right now that is being silenced or underreported. There is an on-going clash between the government versus its co-inhabitants. The worst thing is that most people, even those who might care, are oblivious to it. However, because of this delegation I am absolutely convinced that there are still people fighting. I guess I could not see it because I felt alone in this struggle. I felt that no one cared about what was occurring to my people. I do not feel that way anymore.

The tour inside the Port Isabel detention center was an eye opener for me and yet was self-evident. The overall conclusion is that we, the people, are the law. The people are the ones that elect those who create the law and the procedures that affect migrants today in their human rights and civil liberties. It is probably the most important yet the most overlooked concept. It should be a priority message for informing the masses, especially anyone who believes there is injustice in our immigration policies today. If we could only make people understand that voting representatives with more favorable attitudes toward the “immigration problem” can change the law of immigration to be less harmful. However, it seems easier said than done. Either people do not care about the realm of politics or they believe the idea that every white man is out in this world to get us (Latinos, foreigners, or immigrants). I personally thought that was true. Secondly, I never knew there were so many diverse nationalities represented in the groups that frequently use the Mexican border as their entry point for coming into the United States. For the first time, I heard a monk and a person from

the Asian Pacific give testimony when we gathered at the refugee center Casa Marianella, in Austin, of her attempts to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. The wide diversity of those using Mexico as their entry point to the US was more evident at the detention center. The Assistant Field Director Watkins for Port Isabel informed us that out of the usual 1100+ detainees held in that facility, that Mexicans make up less than 10 percent of the facility's population. It demonstrates how the media skews the statistics of those who are detained to make it appear that all are Mexican.

In all, this delegation has impacted my life dramatically. It answered questions some people around me could never answer. It has filled me with new information that has extremely diversified the topic of immigration and its effect on my own life, my communities and the world. I might not be able to help directly with the problems of injustice at the Mexican border but I can support the effort to bring awareness and more compassion to the discussions about it. I will support by informing other fellow students and youth about realities at the border today. I can help to demystify the general public's stereotypical opinions about the border and those who cross or attempt to cross them. I will do this in support of the goals of solidarity, freedom, and opportunity.



George is a law student at Northern Illinois University, where he graduated with a degree in political science with an emphasis in public law and comparative politics. He is a first-generation Mexican-American who is the first in his family to attend college. Throughout his life, he has seen and experienced the struggles of his family and friends in the face of immigration enforcement. He spent years and summers of his youth in Mexico attending elementary school and visiting family.

## A Spiritual Journey in the Colonias: Meeting the Heart of an Undocumented Single Mother

By: Sarah Miltz-Frielink

I have stood in solidarity with undocumented mothers and their children on the US/Mexico border—knowing that I am here to learn, be an activist for change, and educate others when I return. Visiting the colonias (slum housing along the border in Las Milpas, Texas) was a spiritual experience that gave more to me than I will ever be able to give back—despite this work I try to do. When I speak of solidarity, I draw upon Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez’s work. He defines a creative kind that “underscores a way of being with each other that contingently presents itself against a sense of normalcy and coherence...a solidarity that operates under the assumption that we are incomplete, in the process of becoming.”<sup>4</sup>

It was in this incomplete state of becoming where I met one of the bravest, most beautiful souls—Consuela<sup>5</sup>—a single mother who struggles to feed her four children and grapples with the fact that she will never see her husband again due to issues involving detention of laborers denied legal residency status and deportation. Our meeting was a sacred communion of despair and grief tethered to a fragile strand of hope. This essay attempts to convey the transcendent human connections made when our small group of ACTF delegates—Natasha, George, Lisa, Elvia, Bianca, and me—visited Consuela and her children in May, 2012. A member of ARISE, a grassroots organization which empowers women in their communities, introduced us to Consuela’s family in the colonias.<sup>7</sup> In the colonias, most of the tiny houses do not have running water or electricity. Consuela speaks about the daily challenge to feed her four children. Poverty isn’t the only issue she

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<sup>4</sup> Rubin A Gaztambide-Fernandez, “Toward Creative Solidarity in the “Next” Moment of Curriculum Work” in *Curriculum Studies Handbook The Next Moment* ed. Erik Malewski (New York: Routledge, 2010), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

<sup>7</sup> ARISE, a grassroots organization started in 1987, along the south Texas border, works to empower women living in the colonias. ARISE is “about spirituality, cultural values and personal growth. It’s about connecting women with each other and strengthening the fabric of their communities. It’s about inspiring hope and a sense of possibility.” See [www.ariseotex.org](http://www.ariseotex.org) for more information.

faces; she is mourning the loss of her husband who is being detained for three more years (after two years in a detention facility) and then deported to their home town in Mexico which is too violent for Pelita and the children to return. Consuela's husband has been transferred to different detention facilities over the past few years. He is slated to transfer to another facility in Arizona, which will make it nearly impossible for Consuela and the children to visit.

Consuela has little hope for her husband's release because this is the second time he was captured undocumented in this country. The last time Consuela's husband fled Mexico, he was beaten, tortured, and left for dead by a drug cartel. Yet he found the strength to risk coming back here so he could provide for his family again. As tears started to well up in Consuela's eyes, we felt our eyes mist up with tears as well. We listened as Consuela described feeding her children from the dumpsters in grocery store parking lots. We felt our hearts swell with compassion as she recounted cutting rot out of apples she found there. At one point Consuela stops speaking and is overcome with silence. Perhaps her story is too painful to share with strangers. Perhaps she wonders if we will ever fully comprehend her experiences. We pause in this space of silence, this distance, which is filled with a mixture of trepidation and understanding.

Then George, one of the delegates, breaks the silence. George who is a law student at NIU also happens to be a Mexican American immigrant too. He begins to connect with Consuela as he speaks about his childhood. He recounts growing up in this country as an immigrant in Spanish. I am not fluent in Spanish, but for some reason I can understand what George and Consuela say before Bianca and Elvia translate. George is describing his life growing up in Round Lake, Illinois. Being here in the colonias takes George back to his home life living in abject poverty just like Consuela's children. His mother and father worked three jobs below minimum wage. They did not have enough money to pay rent at one point. They lost their home soon after that. George speaks to

Consuela's children in profound ways. At this point Consuela, her children, and the delegates, are crying. I cannot look at George because the emotion in the room is too high as I teeter on the verge between sobbing and breaking down into complete hysterics. There is so much power in what George says as he speaks the language of shared human suffering. Witnessing the exchange between Consuela, George, and the children is precious. My spirit is filled with a mixed sense of gratitude and moral outrage about the social injustice undocumented immigrants face—as I listen to George relive the suffering Consuela's family faces every day. I believe that what George says to the children will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Here is someone who understands their pain—an older version of themselves who made it out of the colonias and into law school. George speaks through the tears: "Your mother is breaking her back so you can have a better life. I know this because my parents did too. I remember my parents telling me to stay in school because being poor makes you tired. We were so tired of being poor. You will probably lose your house but don't give up hope; stay in school because you may have a chance to get out someday. Your mom is working hard so you don't have to be tired for the rest of your life. Respect what she says. I got out. I pray you can too."

I know George will make one of the finest immigration attorneys because he has a depth of experience, resilience, and knowledge that transcends what any professor in the legal academy can teach him. George's connection to Consuela's family creates a safer space for Consuela to break the silence. Consuela shares the plight of her daily life, the exhausting details that she negotiates daily as a single mother working jobs that pay below minimum wage. We listen as Consuela relives her husband's capture, torture, and current imprisonment. She shares the struggles they face in the colonias with hunger, lack of access to schools, electricity, and adequate housing. She shares the plight of an undocumented working single mother who doesn't get as much time as she would like with her children because she is working too hard to feed them. Despite this, Consuela speaks with



































































































