

On the Border

Encuentro Project Newsletter

January 2024

ENCUENTRO TEAM ADDS NEW MEMBERS



The Encuentro team is growing and changing. We say goodbye to Marist Brothers Brice Byczynski and Lalo Navarro and Maryknoll Lay Missioner Debbie Northern. Br. Brice is now in Brownsville, TX and Br. Lalo is in Mexico. Debbie has returned to the East Coast.

Joining the team this year are Marist Br. Hector Dessavre Davila and Marist volunteer Jacob Grimm, who is a former Encuentro Project participant. Another Marist volunteer, Michael Costello, is continuing with Encuentro Project. Br. Todd Patenaude and Coralys Salvador are also remaining.

CURRENT SITUATION ON THE BORDER

Even though there are many migrants who are in Mexico filling out the CBP One app for appointments to come into the United States, others tire of waiting months for the appointments and cross on their own or with smugglers. The migrants are eager to get to relative safety in the U.S. after months or years of uncertainty and fear.

In El Paso, the numbers of migrants in the shelters changes daily. The surges we saw earlier in the year seem to have evened out. Sacred Heart still tends to be full and have some migrants who sleep outdoors despite the cooler temperatures.

Even those migrants who complete the CBP One and who are allowed into the U.S. still are being placed for months in detention centers. They are confused and angry because they have done what they were told to do and are still being treated as criminals. Unfortunately, many of these facilities are privately owned and have contracts with the government with quotas of how many detainees are to be held. Migrants are a commodity that private industry and smugglers are taking advantage of. There are billions of dollars made in the security industry along the border and the cartels now make more money off human smuggling than drugs.

The political rhetoric as we approach next year's elections will only continue to vilify migrants. A bipartisan immigration bill that recognizes the many reasons that people are fleeing their countries of origin and that has humane solutions is greatly needed.

Follow this link to Maryknoll Magazine to read about the Border ministries: [MKMG-Winter-2024-lores.pdf \(maryknollmagazine.org\)](https://www.maryknollmagazine.org/winter-2024-lores.pdf)

This is a link to an article about migrants journeying to Chicago:
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/immigration/ct-venezuelan-migrants-texas-denver-chicago-20230806-3qc5bnexxav5ba2mbzz42uoxm-htmlstory.html>



REFLECTION FROM PARTICIPANT

In my time volunteering with the Encuentro Project, I was able to learn about and better grasp the topic of immigration. Before my time in El Paso, I viewed immigration as merely a political situation, and I didn't pay much attention to it. After all, problems concerning immigration only seem to come up on the news about once every other month in the place I live. However, after my time with the Encuentro Project, my attitude regarding immigration drastically changed. Hearing informative

speeches, seeing the city of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez with my own eyes, and talking extensively with immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, Colombia, etc and hearing stories about their lives and journeys to the US, helped me view the problem of immigration as very un-political and a constant issue.

One opportunity afforded by the Encuentro Project was the opportunity to make friends in El Paso. One friend I made was Alivert, who came from Columbia and a fellow lover of baseball. He shared his story with me about how he traveled all over Colombia searching for work, so he could feed his family and pay the bills; however, with rampant inflation there, he discovered that the only way to survive was to either join the cartel or leave. Alivert chose to leave. He spent four years traveling with his family all throughout South America and Mexico looking for work; and finally, he ended up in El Paso, where I was lucky enough to meet him. We also talked about baseball, his love for Miguel Cabrera, and played catch with one another. My friends and I gave him one of our baseball gloves. My friendship with Alivert shaped my view of immigration; It isn't just about numbers—it's about people, real people. Immigration should not be primarily a political issue—it should be a humanitarian issue. And finally, the crises people face when immigrating to the United States isn't just a problem that occurs every now and then—it's constant.

My experience with the Encuentro Projects not only helped mold my view on immigration, but also helped me understand how lucky I am to have a home, a country, and a community that I can identify with—a perspective that humbles me constantly and motivates me to do good in the world.

With this in mind, I can say with confidence that my experience with the Encuentro Project was life changing, and I'll never forget the lessons that it taught me.

-Raymond Huke
(A student at Georgetown Prep)

ANOTHER REFLECTION FROM PARTICIPANT

To say the least, my Encuentro experience is a memorable one.

Arriving well after dark to an enthusiastic set of smiling faces, our Creighton group stretched our legs for one final time after a 16-hour drive beginning in Omaha, Nebraska. Some miscalculations in our ETA left us pulling into the parking lot around 9pm and eating a much-needed meal with fantastic company. Our group consisted of Creighton students from all around the US and even around the world. Every single one of us chose to be here in El Paso to not only learn about the injustices surrounding immigration, but to experience it for ourselves as we began our immersive experience with Encuentro.

Most of us had some general information about immigration policy and what the process looks like but as the first couple days began, we were overwhelmed with the spider-web that is immigration along the southern border. We heard from a couple speakers who helped describe what the current situation is along the border and what policies were in place at the current moment. While we were not overwhelmed quite yet at this point, we started to piece

together just how convoluted the system is for a migrant.

After getting a foundational knowledge of the systems in place, we began experiencing it for ourselves (hence the name 'Encuentro' right?). We walked the streets of El Paso and saw the landscape for the first time under the sun. The dry, hard ground, the bright murals on building sides, and the people that greeted us warmly as we walked by. To say the least, it was very different from the midwestern farmland I had grown up in. But what was most memorable were the people, migrants to be exact. Despite the language barrier, we were able to hear stories of migrants who made the long and grueling journey to the States, many of whom crossed the Darian Gap in search of a better life for themselves, but also their families. It was in the Holy Family Shelter that we really found ourselves connected with these families and their experiences. We made meals for them, and all ate together while sharing stories and even some laughs afterwards which was made easy largely due to the children whom we quickly befriended a couple hours earlier. At this moment, we all had increased our empathy for one another, and our group was proud to be there in that exact moment to alleviate some of the pain from their journey.

Our last day in El Paso saw us making the hike up Mt Cristo Rey which allowed us to take in El Paso from yet another perspective. We shared our own stories as we made our own personal journey up the mountain, reflecting upon the week that we had just experienced. Near the top, we saw the scar in the land that was the border wall separating El Paso from Juarez. We stopped and stared for a moment thinking about the

drastic differences in life between people who lived only a few hundred feet from each other. Shortly after, we reached the top and gave one last look at the town that changed our lives in one week. We thought back to the people that blessed our lives with their stories, the children that brought laughter to a world that can be dark and unforgiving, and the people in Encuentro who made this experience such a memorable one. Br. Todd, Hector, Debbie, Coralís and all the speakers who gave their passion for a hopeful future in El Paso and the entire southern border. Their dedication to a more just world is what brings hope in people who otherwise would have none. Their dedication is the reason why I am so grateful for the experience that I am now taking with me for the rest of my life.

- Arthur Deseck, Senior at Creighton University

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2023 ENCUESTRO GROUPS

In 2023, we hosted 14 groups. Here are some of the latest groups:

GEORGETOWN PREP



MARYKNOLL FATHERS AND BROTHERS



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS



CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

