

Week 7 [June 5-11]:



Thoughts and good wishes from Team El Centro to all of you who have been here and to those who are anticipating their time to volunteer at the California-Mexico border.

There have been eight IHM sisters and friends (four in each house) in El Centro since Sunday, June 6. We really have enjoyed being with one another ... lots of good stories, laughs and deep conversation. Last evening, we gathered for prayer and dessert and to say goodbye to those who will be leaving in the next few days. Mary Katherine (M), Dora (M), Christine (I) and Mary Catherine (I) return to Detroit and

Philadelphia today and Donna (S) and Terri (S) head back to Scranton on Sunday morning. Eileen (I) will stay on until Tuesday morning.

The team of two will quickly expand in the days to come. Eileen and Mary Elaine will pick up Patricia, Marian Gregory and Denise at the Yuma Airport on Monday evening. Six more (Marge, Vicki, Kim, Fran, Kathy and Teresa Catherine) will arrive on Saturday. With the appearance of Margie and Terri on June 21, we will be twelve IHMs in El Centro. Sometimes it's hard to keep track of who is here and in what house!

Each IHM Sister/ friend who arrives seems to have a great desire to see the WALL! The first glimpse of it usually is on the way from the Yuma Airport to El Centro. You can see the wall at a distance from the highway. The expanse of dry, flat desert between you and it makes you aware of how vulnerable people who cross the wall are. The heat in the desert is overwhelming, and the open land makes it easy for the Border Patrol to spot and pick up border crossers.

During our time here, on several occasions all of us have gone to Calexico, a town that sits on the U.S. side of the border, to see the wall close-up. The wall separates Calexico from Mexicali, the border town in Mexico. From the parking lot of the mall in Calexico, you can walk right up to the wall and look through the slats at life on the other side... a residential area with a small street and cars passing by. How did someone decide to build a wall in what appears to be a neighborhood of families? In one of the photos, you can see a backpack hanging from the upper part of the wall on the US side. It's a reminder of all that is left behind by those who cross the wall. People pack only the essentials in one bag to cross the border. How did this person feel when the wall stripped him/her of the only bag that he/she was carrying?

Some days in El Centro have been busier than others at the hotel/shelter. One day the Border Patrol releases 59, and the next day only 2. When there are a lot of people released, it means more intakes, meals to be served, more people to help find clothing and take to their rooms. The morning after usually is organized chaos. There are so many people who must find flights and then get to the airport! Vans with IHMs as drivers and co-pilots usually are on the road to Yuma or San Diego by 9 a.m.

What the day will bring is unknown until we step into the hotel each morning. Make sure you pack your patience and your flexibility! Let's pray for one another as we continue this adventure together.

With grateful hearts,

Team El Centro (Mary Katherine, Dora, Christine, Mary Catherine, Eileen, Donna, Terri and Mary Elaine)

Week 8 [June 12-18]:



We said goodbye to Mary Katherine (M), Dora (M), Donna (S), Terri (S), Mary Catherine (I), Christine (I) and Eileen (I). The new El Centro IHM team took on a new face and flavor with the arrival of Marian Gregory (I), Patricia (I) and Denise (S) on Monday evening, June 14. The quick transition of IHM teams is a little like "Moving Day". *(Remember when all the sisters who were changed to a new mission had a certain day or time frame to leave*

where they lived and ministered and to settle into their new local community and ministry?) The difference is that "Moving Day" happens every two weeks not every year! Because of the rapid changeover of IHM teams, it seems that each person comes with a desire and passion to make each day and encounter memorable for herself, for the team and for our asylum-seeking brothers and sisters.

For many of us who have had previous border or cross-cultural experiences, the work with asylum seekers in El Centro may not be what we expected. IHM volunteers at the border are gifted and skilled teachers, pastoral workers, counselors, artists, peace and justice activists, etc. and we come with a desire to put those gifts at the service of others. However, the turnover of asylum seekers is also very quick *(one day ... two days if the*

family's sponsor has difficulty finding an air flight for them). Encounters between a sister and an asylum seeker happen during the time of arrival and departure when families are waiting to be checked in or to leave. For van drivers and their co-pilots, accompaniment and encounter take place in the van or at the airport. In many ways, the individual gifts that we bring need to be re-imagined. (*My fortune cookie last evening read: "Be imaginative with the use of your skills. Another person's fortune was: "Be broad-minded in your social activity."*) So ... what are we learning individually and collectively as we minister at the border? Perhaps, we are learning that receiving is as valuable as giving and that empowering others is more about being vulnerable and present and not about showing our strength and how skilled we are.

Last week our IHM Team was informed that the work of Catholic Charities in the Imperial Valley (El Centro and Holtville) would be undergoing a few changes. Currently, we have been volunteering at two sites. One of those sites (the hotel in El Centro) will be closing on June 30, and all personnel and volunteers will be working with asylum seekers at the hotel in Holtville. We are part of the transitioning process, and we are going with the flow. Perhaps it's a small way of being in solidarity with our immigrant brothers and sisters who are in major transition and encountering new experiences every day.

Five IHM sisters and friends—Fran (I), Kathy (I), Teresa (I), Kim (M) and Vicki (M)—arrived on June 21 to begin their two weeks of service in El Centro. The new team encountered an unexpected snag in lodging. The decision was made to vacate House #3 before the team even had a chance to unpack. Fortunately, Nadine, the Director of Immigrant Services for Catholic Charities of San Diego, was able to find hotel rooms for the five at the last minute. The IHMs were flexible and took it all in good stride!

Gathering together in the evening and getting to know one another has been one of the many blessings of our border experience. We are so grateful for the opportunity to accompany our brothers and sisters at the border and to do it collaboratively. It feels like a real celebration of our 175th Anniversary!

With grateful hearts,
Team El Centro