Photograph by Sarah Mcdonald

On the Border
OF LIFE AND DEATH

By Sarah Mcdonald

The desert is quiet, but we are not alone. Vivian, Claire and I are surrounded by tall grass and brambles. I never knew the desert could be so green. It's the heart of monsoon season, the one time of year the land springs to life. Two U.S. Border Patrol trucks drive past, slowly. As we hike over a sloping hill, I hear a woman's voice. Vivian says she heard someone cough. We stop, and call out:

"¡Amigas y amigos! ¡Somos voluntarios de un grupo humanitaria! ¡Tenemos agua, comida, y atención médica! ¡Gritas si necesita ayuda!" (Friends! We are volunteers with a humanitarian aid group! We have water, food, and medical attention! Yell if you need help!)

Silence. We leave jugs of water next to a bush, along with cans of food and clean socks, and move on.

More than 2,000 people have died in the Sonoran desert since 1998 trying to cross the border from Mexico to the United States. In August, I spent a week there with the humanitarian aid group No More Deaths, trying to help alleviate these unnecessary casualties.

I went to the border with a group of activist friends from SF Pride at Work, a queer social and economic justice volunteer organization. Normally, we do migrant rights work defending the city's Sanctuary City status for undocumented residents. In a city like San Francisco, many of us are migrants, particularly in the queer community. The difference is some people are criminalized because of borders they crossed to come here.

Our plan is to leave water and food along trails frequented by migrants. We hike for miles, looking for people in trouble – sick, injured, possibly dying. Each group has a Spanish speaker and a medic – EMTs, med students, or other volunteers with medical training. We carry "migrant packs," collections of food, water, and socks to give to anyone we find.

Our group arrives in Tucson for training on Saturday. We talk about the history of the border, and humanitarian aid in Arizona. Empty as they might look during the day, the trails we will be hiking are practically international freeways, foot paths traveled by many of the half million people estimated to enter the U.S. illegally every year. Until the mid-90s, most crossed in urban areas, near border towns like San Diego and El Paso. The "Southwest Border Strategy" changed that. In 1994, the U.S. shut down traditional crossing points by concentrating huge numbers of Border Patrol agents in these areas. They assumed migration would shift to remote areas, where "natural barriers" – the Rio Grande River, the Cuyamaca and Laguna mountains near San Diego, and the deadly Sonoran Desert – would deter illegal entry.

The policy had deadly results. Bodies dotted the landscape, killed by exposure – heat stroke, thirst, hyperthermia. Recorded border crossing deaths doubled between 1995 and 2005. And that's only the people they found. Between scavengers and the blistering sun, corpses don't last long here.

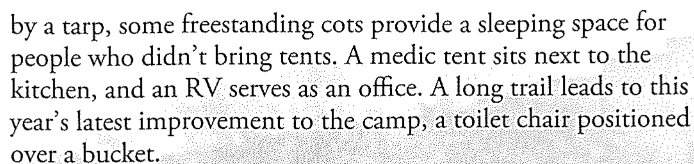
Gene LaFebure, a co-founder of No More Deaths, spoke at our training and accompanied us to camp. A retired Presbyterian minister from Tucson, he became aware of what was happening on the border when "people started dying in our backyards."

LaFebure helped found No More Deaths in 2003. Their camp lies in the heart of the desert, about 10 miles North of Mexico. Smugglers drop migrants off just south of the border, a 4-day walk from their destination past Border Patrol checkpoints. It's impossible to carry enough water for the trip. Some people find water bottles, others drink from cattle troughs that make them sick. We assume anybody we find is dehydrated, and probably suffering heat stroke and exhaustion. People also get injured. Days of walking in cheap shoes and wet socks leave them with severe blisters. Their "coyotes," or guides, leave them if they can't keep up. And that's where trouble starts. Crossing the desert, when you're healthy and know your way, is dangerous. Crossing alone is impossible. Unless you find help, or help finds you, you'll die.

Monsoon rains assault the windshield as we drive south on I-19, pulling into a little Arizona border town called Arivaca. We park our cars at the Red Rooster Inn, a red building that looks like a barn. A battered pickup truck and Suburban arrive to take us the rest of the way. The heat isn't bad yet, thanks to the rain. Red and black ants carpet the ground, and a bright green and yellow grasshopper sits on the windshield. They're everywhere out here.

A dozen volunteers from California, Massachusetts, Illinois, and New Jersey are bumping up and down in their seats. What they call a road here is a wide trail of hard-packed sand and rock. Forty-five minutes later we reach camp, a mass of tents and tarps next to a huge stack of water jugs. Chairs and crates form a circle next to the kitchen tent. Protected from the sun

JOSSELINE QUINTEROS, A 14-YEAR-OLD GIRL from El Salvador, died while crossing the border. Someone dumped a can of beans over her shrine in the Sonoran Desert.



by a tarp, some freestanding cots provide a sleeping space for people who didn't bring tents. A medic tent sits next to the kitchen, and an RV serves as an office. A long trail leads to this year's latest improvement to the camp, a toilet chair positioned over a bucket.

There are 20 volunteers, most of whom are church activists or queers like us. That night, alone in my tent, I think about the people who are moving now, all around us, and wonder what tomorrow might bring.

We wake around 5 a.m. to the bellowing of cattle and howling coyotes. Our trainer gives us a mini-course in GPS navigation, so we don't get lost on the trail.

That afternoon we pile into the Suburban and drive to four water drops programmed into the GPS. Finding them is tricky, since they're hidden off-road. At one drop, migrants had consumed three dozen 1-gallon jugs that had been left for them. We spend half an hour walking back and forth from the car, replenishing them. Later, we break into smaller groups. Two women and I hike through a canyon lined with long-stemmed Desert Spoon bushes. The terrain is so desolate that any sign of life stands out – a sock, bottle caps, a backpack. Every few feet Sofia announces loudly in Spanish who we are and why we're here. Then we stop and listen.

There are shoe prints on the trail. Tuesday morning, at an abandoned resting area, we find clothes, empty water bottles and food containers everywhere. A pair of jeans hangs in a tree to dry, as though their inhabitant is coming back to claim them. We call out, but nobody calls back.

In training, they told us to say "somos de la iglesia," or "we are from the church." Many migrants trust the church. My friend Wendy finds another way to say it:

"¡Somos homosexuales de la iglesia!"

I wonder if any of them will make it to the United States. Or if they'd remember the homos from the church who left them water on the trail.

We don't see anyone. Experienced volunteers say some weeks they see people every day; some weeks they don't. They think it's because of the moon. Most migrants walk at night to hide from the Border Patrol. During a full moon, the desert shines so bright you can see your shadow. The moon is just a sliver, but it's waxing. I wonder if we'll see more people toward the end of the week. Meanwhile, it's ghostly quiet.

On Wednesday, I visit Josseline Hernandez Quinteros' shrine. Her story is haunting. Josseline was a 14-year-old girl from El Salvador who died crossing the border in February, trying to join her parents in the U.S. She and her little brother got sick from a can of bad tuna while crossing with a group. Both were too sick to keep up, but her brother was small enough

A VOLUNTEER LOOKS AT THE BORDER WALL IN THE Sonoran Desert, where more than 2,000 people have died since 1998 while trying to reach the United States.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF No More Deaths

> Crossing the desert alone is impossible. Unless you find help, or help finds you, you'll die.

to be carried. Her family notified humanitarian groups that she was missing after her brother reached the United States. Volunteers from No More Deaths found her, but not in time. She had wandered the desert alone for a week before she died.

After several water drops and a hike, we stop by her shrine. Her picture hangs from a tree, behind a small cross bearing her name. Writing adorns a plaque that is too dirty to read, even if I knew Spanish. Yesterday's patrol had left 12 water jugs.

As I approach, something doesn't seem right. The shrine has been desecrated. The cross is covered with black beans, an empty can lies next to it. The water jugs have been slashed. They're empty. The words "¡Suerte!" or "Good luck!" that we had written are crossed out.

We're not the only Americans here. Others come, not to save lives but to keep people from crossing illegally. Minutemen, self-proclaimed vigilantes, sometimes sit armed in their lawn chairs by the freeway, looking for targets. Less comical are the real vigilantes – the gunmen on the trails.

We wash off Josseline's shrine with water, and pick little bits of beans out of the engraved letters. Then we take the empty slashed water jugs back and return with full ones. What else can we do?

By Thursday, I'm exhausted. My body feels heavy, my joints weak. My thigh muscles burn and I'm limping. My back and arms hurt from carrying water jugs. That's after only four days in the desert. I've gone on two hikes a day, maybe a few hours total. I can't imagine hiking this long through the night.

I set out to do a few water drops close to the road. Arriving near our first spot, we park the car and start over a hill, water jugs in hand. On the other side we see about a dozen men in ragged clothing. They hurry off when they see us, then stop at the base of the hill. We shout that we have food and water if they need it, and can offer medical attention. Then we head back to the truck for more water.

When we get back to the other side of the hill, two Border Patrol trucks are parked nearby. Did they hear us calling out? Are they following us? We don't want to draw attention to the men we saw, so we start the truck and drive to the next spot on the GPS. The trucks just sit there. Nobody gets out. We leave water at the next drop and go for a short hike. The desert feels more alive today – voices seem to rise from the bushes. The Border Patrol passes us again. We return to the water drop. The jugs are gone or empty, small rocks left in the empty bottles so they don't blow away. There's no sign of the men we saw earlier.

Back at camp, a patient is staying in the medic tent. He hurt his knee and his group left him. The medics are treating him for severe dehydration and a knee injury. I say "hola" to him as he hobbles through camp that evening, heading toward our sun shower. He looks about 40. According to the medics and translators, he lived in the U.S. for 20 years before he got deported. His whole family lives in the United States. He said he's trying to return home.

Friday morning, our group does a quick morning patrol before heading to Tucson for the Streamline hearings. Operation Streamline began in 2005 in Tucson to file criminal charges against people caught crossing the border. They try 70 people every day, randomly selected from the hundreds they catch.

The courtroom is full of men and women in shackles, chains around their feet, their waists, their hands. The vast majority look young. And terrified.

First the judge sentences a group of indigenous people who don't speak Spanish or English. They are deported with no record because they can't enter a plea. Next, dozens of migrants who were caught crossing previously waive their right to due process and a trial by jury. They receive sentences of 2 weeks to 6 months in jail. Three others have prior offenses – things like minor in possession of alcohol or reckless driving. They also waive their rights to a trial, and get sent to jail.

Throughout the process, the judge mispronounces names and mixes people up. Finally he tells the last group, all first offenders, to stand up if they do not wish to waive their right to a trial. One man stands up, confused, and his court-appointed lawyer motions for him to sit back down. The hearing continues. The judge sentences the entire group to "voluntary" deportation, threatening jail time if they get caught coming back. He tells them to make a home for themselves in Mexico, or find another country that wants them.

"The world is a big place," he says.

Another man, who looks like he's in his early 20s, stands up and says in perfect English that he's lived in the U.S. since he was 8 years old. The judge tells him that his "free ride" in this country is over. Two women watching the hearing start sobbing. When the hearing is over, the prisoners walk in shackles past us, out a side door. When the man who spoke up passes, a young woman that could have been his sister or girlfriend cries out, "I love you!"

For the first time all week, I start to cry. I go to the restroom to dry my tears. I try to imagine how scary it is to get pulled away from your family, your community. Or how painful it is to be left behind.

The next day, we drive back to San Francisco, seven queers packed into two small cars. Our only barrier to returning home is California gas prices. We drive north, barbed wire fences and Border Patrol trucks fading in the distance. We pull into the city around 4 a.m. The fog engulfs us. As I tumble into my bed, I think about the people on the trail, crossing the desert. I wonder how long it will be before they finally get home.