



Two OPs of Peace in Casa del Refugiado, El Paso, TX

May 29-June 11, 2021

Call from LCWR for Sisters to go to El Paso to work with migrant families seeking political asylum in the United States was published in our daily OP Peace news in February 2021.



Appoline Simard and Rose Marie Cummins (along with other Dominican Sisters and Associates of Peace) answered that call.



Ap and Rose Marie heard in May, 2021 that they would be welcomed by Annunciation House from May 29-June 11.

Sisters and Staff at St. Catharine generously supported the work of Annunciation House and Ap and Rose Marie financially with close to \$3,000.

We were feted with a party with guacamole, cheese and crackers and margaritas on Wednesday evening, May 26th and a royal sendoff on our day of departure. Sisters and staff all went with us in spirit.



Here is a little information on Annunciation House in El Paso:

- Was founded in 1978 by Rubén García (now 70 years of age) who has done this work of sheltering and assisting migrants for 43 yrs.**
- Is funded completely by individuals and organizations.**
- Includes several houses: one for short-term, one for long-term migrants; one in Juarez, Mexico for families awaiting clearance to come to the US; one a rented motel for people testing positive for covid or who are infirm.**

- **Casa del Refugiado (CDR), the largest of these houses was opened in 2019 for short-term migrant families/individuals.**

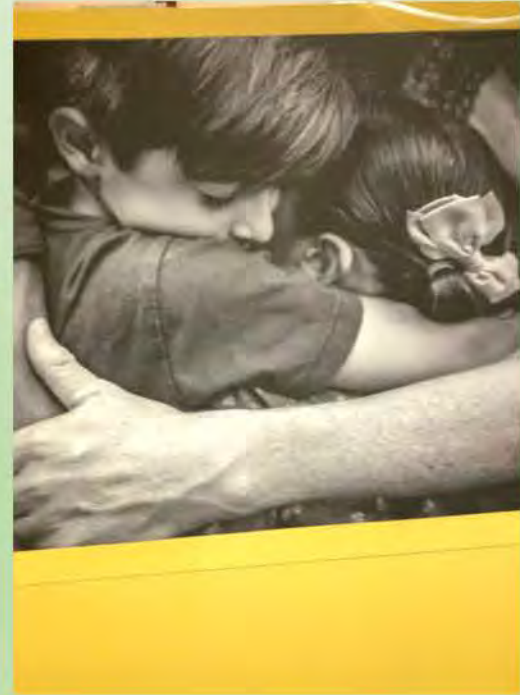
It is the largest of the houses and is a large block-long warehouse the size of a Costco (125,000 square feet) with a capacity for 500 people.

Migrants typically stay 1-3 days. The population depends on when Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) releases migrants.

The staff of Casa del Refugiado is made up of short and longer term volunteers. Some of the volunteers live, work, and eat at the same site as the migrants. Others find other accommodations elsewhere. Ap and Rose Marie stayed as CDF.

Casa del Refugiado is divided into sections by colors. One large part is a huge dormitory equipped with cots provided by the Salvation Army, sheets, blankets, towels, toiletries, and hygiene products. Outside is a Red Cross trailer equipped with showers for the migrants. Port-a-johns are outside toilets for the migrants.

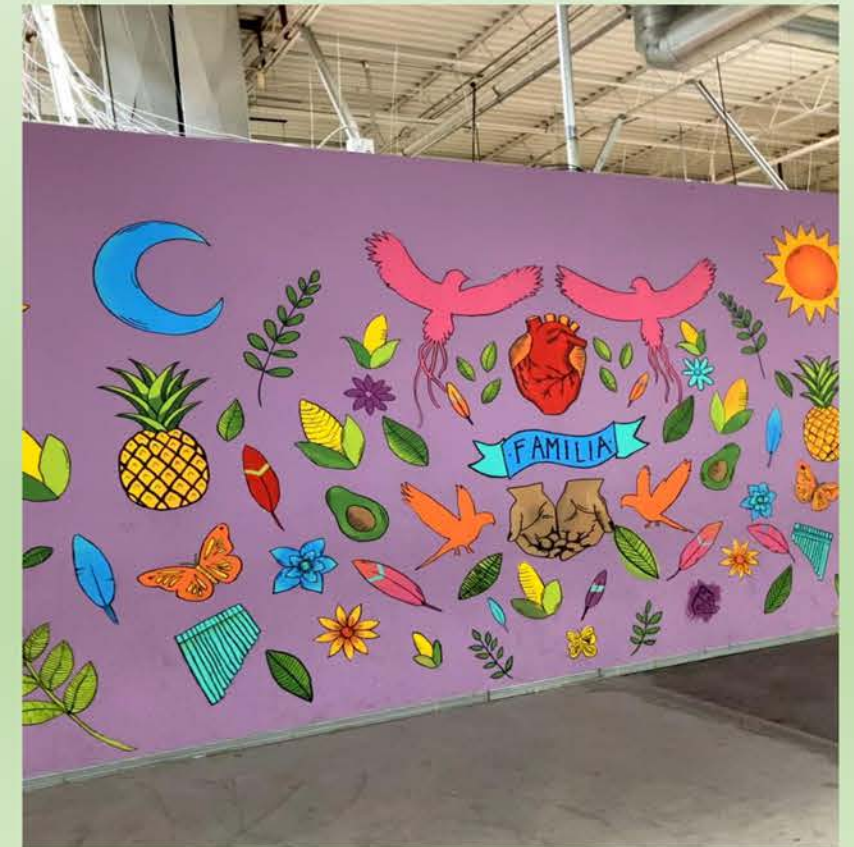
In another section, there is a fairly large dining area run by volunteers. Food is prepared by the Salvation Army and volunteers. It is served individually at tables by volunteers. Migrants help to clean up the dining room after each meal.



There is a small chapel and an open space where Mass is held every two weeks. Volunteers provide the music and gather the migrants together for the Mass. A priest comes from outside to offer Mass.



There is also an intake area where migrants first come when they are dropped off by bus by ICE. When that happens, the migrants are given food if they haven't eaten and a general orientation of what CDR does and how volunteers can be of assistance.



Volunteers working in Intake help migrants by taking down vital information (how many people are in family, how will they travel to their destinations, who is going to sponsor them and who will pay for their bus or plane tickets, how they will travel). The volunteers then call the sponsors, let them know their family/friend has arrived, where they are, and ask about their ability to get tickets for the migrants to travel. Sponsors call back with specific travel details and other volunteers get the migrants to the bus station or airport.



Now, a little information about volunteers:

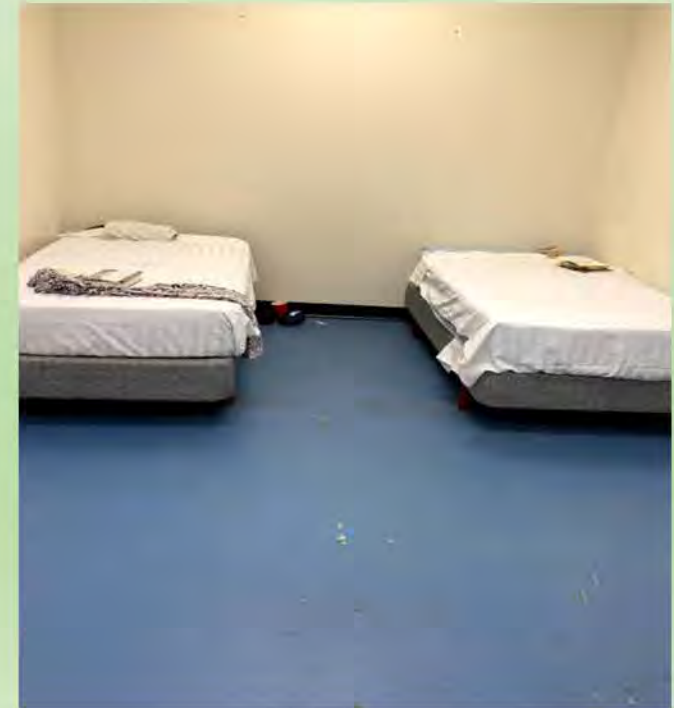
- **The day after our arrival began with an entire day of orientation. In our group (those who arrived for their 2-wk. time period), there were 9 volunteers. Rubén Garcia, Director of Annunciation House, gave an overview of the history of Annunciation House, past and present immigration ways of working with the shelter, and some dos and don'ts about our volunteer work (e.g. no photos of migrants or things that would identify the site). He also answered volunteers' questions.**

Ap and Rose Marie were assigned to work in La Ropería (clothing shop) where migrants and their families came each day from 1-4 p.m. to get clothing for each member of their family. Our shift was 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Much of the clothing (underwear, socks) was new and donated, while other items were used. Each individual was able to get socks, shoes, underwear, tops and slacks, shirts and pants, dresses for girls, blouses, jackets, and sometimes, shorts.




However, many times, ICE sometimes dropped off migrants in the afternoon or evening and the migrants were leaving for their destinations the next day. That necessitated their getting clothing at other times of the day or night.

CDR also included a large part of the warehouse for housing for volunteers and a laundry. In their bedroom, Ap and Rose Marie had a large box for a nightstand and nails on the wall served as “hangars” for towels and clothing. Some volunteers were assigned to work in the laundry washing sheets, blankets, towels and left-behind clothing.



While Ap and Rose Marie were in El Paso, there were 32 volunteers staying in the shelter of Casa del Refugiado. Many other volunteers who lived in El Paso came on a regular basis to work at the shelter. They were young and old, laity and religious women and men. Many spoke Spanish while others didn't. However, there was enough work for everyone.



CDR also had a large section called La Dispensa where migrants received needed medications, where sandwiches were prepared for each traveler for how many days they would be on their journeys.

Volunteers covid-tested all migrants who had not been tested by ICE. All those who had been tested by ICE had proof of their covid results. Anyone who tested positive was sent with their families to a motel rented out by Annunciation House. In our experience, only one person tested positive. Volunteers were also giving the Johnson and Johnson vaccine to as many migrants who were willing to receive it.



While we were there at CDR, we saw migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Turkey and other countries. Everyone we saw was petitioning for asylum in the U.S.

A few stories we heard:

- **A young Haitian child was put in the hospital after arriving at Casa del Refugiado. He had been hospitalized when he was found not responding. He was starving from lack of enough nourishment.**



- **A beautiful young (early 30s) Guatemalan woman came to the shelter covered in bites (bed bugs?). Rose Marie spoke with her when she came to the clothing shop. She told RM that she had been brought (trafficked?) to a motel in Juarez where she was photographed nude and threatened with the pictures being sent to immigration. This had actually come to pass, the woman said, and it was slowing down her application for asylum.**

- I met a family of three from El Salvador. It was difficult to determine relationships, i.e., whether it was the mother and father, parents of a one year old child, or mother, son, and his child. Their skin was weathered by the sun and leathery. All three were extremely thin.



- One family with eight children traveled from Cuba to El Paso. There they turned themselves in to Immigration to seek asylum. We wondered why they went all the way to El Paso instead of to some place in Florida.

Some of the volunteers at CDR:



As was mentioned before, we were not allowed to take photos of migrants or of identifiable parts of the shelter. Ap and I took a walk most mornings before our shift and saw a lot of beauty in nature—growing in areas where there was a lot of trash and not very much care for Nature. The beauty we saw on our walks reminded us of the beauty of the migrants, who though they had paid a big price for getting to the US, were also beautiful and who taught us a lot. That beauty also reminded us of the many volunteers we met who showed us that the universe is in the hands of some very caring people.







There was also some very beautiful artwork in the volunteer housing section that fed our souls.



Rubén García, the Director of Annunciation House, told us at our orientation that our jobs were not to learn the individual stories of the migrants, not to exchange names and addresses, but to help migrants move to the next part of their lives. This was difficult at first. In some ways, we felt insignificant and significant at the same time. The migrants, in their haste to move from their stay at Immigration and at the shelter, would probably not remember our names. As volunteers we recognized we were a little cog or spoke in a wheel. The whole operation of Casa del Refugiado depended not on the work of a single individual, but on each person doing her/his little part to help the migrants there to move to the next step in their lives.

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- **Rubén also made some statements that made us ask questions and think about our role there. He said it was important not to do that work to look good and noble, but just to be an instrument in the migrants' ability to move on in their lives.**
- **We may think that migrants' entry and processing into the US is a way of putting them ahead of others seeking permanent residence or citizenship in the US. On the contrary, it could be that our government is looking noble by allowing these migrants the chance to seek asylum, but, at the same time, pushing through their petitions to deny them asylum and deport them back to their own countries.**
- **Some countries (e.g., Honduras) have put ads on TV showing their citizens the long line of people waiting for asylum in the US. They are trying to discourage their citizens from leaving the country.**
- **In El Paso, a Jewish legal group is offering pro bono legal services to migrants entering the country at that port.**
- **Oftentimes, people deported from the US through Mexico do not go home, but wait there to see what will happen to those seeking asylum.**

Ap and Rose Marie left El Paso with only a tiny understanding of the stories of individual migrants and of entire families. We only knew that we were just a tiny little dot that was part of helping them to move on with their lives. There was a little sadness in thinking many of them, after making such a trip through the desert, might eventually be deported back to their countries. In the meantime, we saw bravery, courage, humility, tenacity, and hope.





- A little poetry came, some of it relief from the heat, some from the way we saw migrants pouring in day after day, some from the beauty of the desert in the midst of a bad drought:

NINGUN SER HUMANO
es ilegal—no human being is illegal.
Many human beings are greedy,
intolerant, incredibly cruel,
but the artist of this painting spoke
a simple indisputable truth:
No human being is illegal.

Rose Marie Cummins 6-8-2021



BEAUTY FINDS A WAY

I see cousins here of former friends I once met in Arizona: palo verde trees, orange mallow, ocotillos, small palm trees.

Texas these days suffers from drought,
But, beauty,. . . well, just like the migrants,
finds a way to lift her head and be noticed.

“See,” she says, “life doesn’t beat me down.
She helps me raise my head and show
my beauty to those who would see.” Rose Marie, 6-8-2021

