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The Boy Who Had No Shoes

By Gail Balden

What I remember most are the faces. There were 150 of them that day, April 9, 2013. Desperate faces filled with anxiety, fear, compliance and gratitude. Most of them were men, but a third were women, and that day, there was one child, a ten-year old boy, Hector, who with his parents, had been deported to Nogales, Sonora, Mexico on the U.S.-Mexico border. Hector was clomping around in a pair of men's black leather oxfords, two sizes too big, but they were the only shoes that fit his swollen feet.

I was in Mexico with a group called the Samaritans whose declared mission is to save lives in the southern Arizona desert. That day, our mission was to help serve hot meals to migrants at an aid station called the *El Comedor*, something the Green Valley Samaritans did every Tuesday. Seeing the desperate faces of these people who had not eaten in awhile, I couldn't bring the heaping plates of beans, rice, vegetables and hot bread to them fast enough. Yet I noticed how polite they were, patiently waiting their turn, passing the food down their table saying over and over, *Gracias, thank you*.

After their meal, the migrants walked outside to allow room for the next group. When all had been fed, the tables were cleared and set up with clean donated clothing we'd brought. The deported migrants, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, lined up to get a pair of shoes, socks, jeans and a clean shirt. We also offered what we called *dignity kits*, which contained what you and I would consider simple basics: a toothbrush, toothpaste, a bar of soap and a comb.

For the ten-year old boy limping on his sprained ankles, we took up a collection among us for a pair of shoes that his father could buy at a local store with money left over for bus tickets south. Happy with paper and a few crayons, Hector drew us a picture of a brilliant sun next to a big black cloud. An eagle flew next to the sun over a saguaro that rose up from a desert filled with prickly pear cactus. Beneath the scene was a drawing of the Mexican flag, the colors of which I later learned represented a tribute to those who died during the war for independence; the purity of their catholic faith and their hope for a better nation.

One of our group asked Hector to tell us what happened to him. With his father translating, she recorded Hector's story on the back of his picture. He called it:

"The Days and Nights in the Desert"

*I live near Mexico City.*

*We spent four days and nights in the desert.*

*The days were very hot and the nights very cold.*

*Day 2—hurt both feet.*

*Many people say the American people aren't good, but what I see now is different.*

*They are good. Thank you!*

Professor Steven Bender of Seattle University School of Law says, “As a culture, we’ve dehumanized migrants. They are viewed solely as criminals and not people desperate for economic survival.”

I don’t know how the complex border issues will be resolved. There is much information and misinformation to sift through. There are the statistics: an estimated 1,100 immigrants deported to the border every day; 200 to 500 dying in the inhospitable terrain of the desert each year, a total now of 5000 over the last fifteen years; 700 of the bodies remaining unidentified. People continue to mark the graves of unidentified migrants with crosses that say *No Olvidado*, (not forgotten).

I do know human faces and the stories written on them. Perhaps it’s my job as a writer to tell their stories. Am I up for the “wreckage of the human heart” as writer Anne Lamott calls it? I don’t know, but I decide to stand for what’s right in what can only be called a humanitarian crisis in our fragile borderlands.

Co-founder of the Green Valley Samaritans, the Reverend Doctor Randy Mayer, pastor of the Good Shepherd United Church of Christ in Sahuarita, said in a recent message to the Samaritans: “We enter the legislative battle of our time—gird up.”

And I would add we should arm ourselves—with information.