
VIVENCIAS: Reports from the field

Responding to the human costs of US immigration policy: No More Deaths and the New Sanctuary Movement

Marta Caminero-Santangelo

University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.

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In the summer and fall of 2008, I had the privilege of working with two humanitarian organizations with faith-based roots that provide aid to undocumented immigrants. Although the organizations No More Deaths (NMD) in Tucson, Arizona and Immigrant Justice Advocacy Movement (IJAM) in Kansas City are geographically distant from each other and address substantially different local immigration issues, they both draw their inspiration from the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which religious congregations offered sanctuary to Central American refugees who were fleeing political repression and facing possible torture and death or disappearance in their home countries, but who were largely unsuccessful in obtaining legal asylum status in the United States. Activities of both NMD and IJAM would potentially have been criminalized by provisions of the unsuccessful US House of Representatives bill of 2005 (H.R. 4437). In what follows, I report on what I learned from my experience with these groups.

No More Deaths

NMD/*No Más Muertes* is an entirely volunteer-operated humanitarian aid organization that runs a desert camp in Arivaca, Arizona, as well as partnering



in the operations of several aid stations for returning migrants on the Mexican side of the border. As the organization's name indicates, its primary aim is to prevent migrant deaths in the Arizona – Sonora desert, which have escalated in the decade and a half following implementation of Operation Gatekeeper and Operation Hold-the-Line. NMD training establishes the ethical core of its mission: the belief that current US border enforcement strategy violates human rights. The group sees itself as conducting *not* “civil disobedience” (which would imply a violation of the law), but “civil initiative,” the right and responsibility of civilians to protect the victims of human rights abuses.

Founded as an interfaith coalition in 2004, it now presents itself as largely secular in its daily practice, although it is a ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, and several area congregations support its operations. Indeed, one of its founding members is Rev. John Fife, also a founder of the Sanctuary Movement in the 1980s and a retired minister of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson. The NMD website directs readers to “Faith-Based Principles for Immigration Reform,” which begin, “We come together as communities of faith and people of conscience to express our indignation and sadness over the continued death of hundreds of migrants attempting to cross the US–Mexico border each year.” In another trace of the organization's interfaith roots, volunteers who are hiking trails call out (in Spanish) to migrants who might be in need but are scared to show themselves: “If you need food, water, or medical care, please call us. Don't be afraid. We aren't border patrol; we are friends from the church.” (*No tengan miedo – no somos la migra; somos amigos de la iglesia.*) It is a call that puts aside the question of whether the caller is “really” from the church (any church), in order to yell out something that will immediately diminish migrants' fear and create trust – at least enough trust so that they can emerge from hiding to get the help they need. NMD attracts volunteers from across the nation, both faith-based and secular, who pay a volunteer fee to support their food and camp expenses; its work is also supported through several full-time volunteers from the Tucson area.

In July 2008, the organization reported encountering an average of nearly 80 migrants per week during the blazing summer months, including families with small children. As volunteers for NMD quickly become aware, the desert is littered with the (mostly) unmarked graves of those who have not survived the journey. A shrine at the desert camp contains refuse found by volunteers along migrant trails – refuse that gives some indication of how the journey through the desert is, increasingly, a family affair. Among the items that decorate the shrine are an infant's shoe (Figure 1) and a young girl's pink backpack (Figures 2 and 3). In Warsaw Canyon, another spot sometimes visited by volunteers is marked only by a makeshift stretcher (Figure 4), woven of tree branches and men's belts (one boasts the initials “USA”), which was used by a group of migrants in July 2005 to carry a woman among their number who had fallen ill. (The more



Figure 1: Baby shoe, No More Deaths camp shrine; photo credit: Marta Caminero-Santangelo.

typical scenario is that the ill and ailing are simply left behind to die.) Volunteers who regularly hike the steep migrant trails begin to have some sense of what a herculean task it would be to carry a stretcher for many miles; yet, despite the group's heroic efforts, the woman died. The stretcher remains off the roadside in the desert, where the migrant group was apprehended by Border Patrol.

Just off one of the trails hiked by NMD aid workers is a shrine erected in memory of Josseline Janiletha Hernández Quinteros, a 14-year-old girl from El Salvador who was left behind by her group and died in February 2008 (Figure 5). In a manifestation of the increasing tensions surrounding the humanitarian aid work of the group, one of the volunteers who found Josseline's body in February was fined 2 days later for "littering" by leaving gallon jugs of water for would-be migrants along trails in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. (The volunteer was, ironically, also picking up "litter," as he was collecting empty water jugs left behind by migrants.) When he refused to pay the US\$175 fine, he was tried, and was found guilty by a federal magistrate judge in September 2008.

In late August 2008, the Arivaca desert camp was raided by border patrol agents. Three migrants who were receiving humanitarian aid at the camp were detained by Border Patrol, which also took the names of the camp coordinator and the single volunteer found at the camp. The raid, the first of its kind in the



Figure 2: Girl's backpack, No More Deaths camp shrine; photo credit: Marta Caminero-Santangelo.

history of NMD, was quite startling for several of the volunteers, who felt they could no longer offer migrants the option of resting and recuperating at the desert camp – at least not without first warning them that the camp may well not be a safe space for them. A case in point was that of “Ernesto,” a migrant found shortly thereafter by volunteers, who had been left behind by his group



Figure 3: No More Deaths camp shrine; photo credit: Marta Caminero-Santangelo.

because he had hurt his knee. As the volunteers no longer felt able to provide humanitarian aid at the camp, they instead provided Ernesto with food, water and medical aid for his knee at the spot where they found him; they then had to leave him there to return to the camp. On their return from caring for him, they came upon a lost border patrol agent, to whom they offered a lift. (The irony was not lost on volunteers.) Eventually Ernesto went on with his journey, leaving behind a thank you note for the aid workers.



Figure 4: Migrant stretcher; photo credit: Laura Kummerer.

At the end of the following week, volunteers driving to a remote hiking trail came upon a migrant by the side of the main road. “Fernando” had been lost in the desert, left behind by his group, and without water, for 2 to 3 days. He had drunk contaminated water from a nearby “cattle tank”; this water is full of bacteria and cow feces and often makes the migrants sicker. (Volunteers are told at training that drinking your own urine is actually safer than drinking from the cattle tanks.) When the group found him, he was, in fact, vomiting and unable to hold down any fluids. As the volunteers descended upon him, administering water and tending to his severe blisters, Fernando asked if he was dreaming and if the aid workers were “angelitos.”

Unable to secure a helicopter airlift to a hospital, NMD workers finally transported Fernando to an ambulance, which met them on a main road. Although it is impossible to follow up on care of migrants who are transported to hospitals (because the hospitals will not release information on their status), it is very likely that, because he was found in time by NMD workers, Fernando lived. In 2005, NMD aid workers were arrested for a similar transport of migrants in need of medical aid. The arrest launched a public relations campaign, “Humanitarian Aid is Never a Crime.” The case was dismissed in 2006, but was not precedent-setting. It remains to be seen whether humanitarian aid of people in dire need of medical care and hospital attention will continue to be met with opposition from Border Patrol.



Figure 5: Josseline's shrine; photo credit: Marta Caminero-Santangelo.

As Rev. Gene Lefebvre, a founding member of NMD and retired minister from Shadow Rock United Church of Christ in Phoenix, noted during an NMD training session in Summer 2008, NMD understands itself as a first-aid



operation – both literally and metaphorically. It addresses the symptoms of a much larger immigration and border policy problem. Indeed, Walt Staton, a long-term volunteer for NMD, insists that when the organization was formed, it never imagined that it would still be necessary 4 years later. NMD relies on national volunteers returning to their home communities to spread their stories of witnessing, as a way to address hearts and minds in the immigration reform debate.

Nonetheless, NMD has been in a particular position to address the escalating militarization of the border. Volunteers in aid stations on the Mexican side of the border have for some years been documenting instances of human rights abuses of migrants by border patrol agents while in custody. These abuses were compiled into a report, which was presented by NMD to congressional offices in Washington DC in September 2008. Among the findings of the report were a routine failure to provide sufficient food, water or medical treatment to migrants in short-term custody, as well as the separation of family members during repatriation to different ports of entry or at different times, without informing family members of each other's whereabouts. According to Staton, who was one of the presenters, representatives of several organizations including Amnesty International, MALDEF (Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund) and Detention Watch were also present at a briefing hosted by Amnesty International; although these groups have already been mobilizing around issues of abuses while in ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) custody, they had little prior information about abuses while in short-term (less than 72 hours) custody by Border Patrol. NMD is hopeful that these larger organizations can make use of the report in the ongoing struggle for human rights at the border.

IJAM: The New Sanctuary Movement in Kansas City

Although NMD continues to provide humanitarian assistance in Arizona, a Kansas City organization is providing a different kind of “first aid” deep in the heartland; and though NMD primarily addresses issues related to migrant entry, IJAM turns to the issues of detention and deportation that are potentially faced by an increasing number of families in the Midwest. IJAM traces its beginnings to the formation in late 2006 and early 2007 of a coalition of pastors and lay leaders from Kansas City area churches in both Kansas and Missouri who felt they needed to respond to an impending Kansas City conference of the Minutemen. In early summer 2007, the group, now working with Interfaith Worker Justice, became part of the National New Sanctuary Movement, which had launched in May 2007. The Kansas City coalition included Presbyterian, Methodist, Quaker, Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, Disciples of Christ and



Church of Christ members. (Mennonite, Lutheran, Jewish and non-denominational members are now also represented in the group.)

The Kansas City coalition marked its launch with the display of a billboard on I-70, which runs through both Kansas and Missouri, that read, “Love the Immigrant as Yourself.” At its inception, the group, originally given the cumbersome name of “People of Faith for Hospitality and Justice and New Sanctuary Movement of Greater Kansas City,” understood as its primary calling the need to serve as “public witness” for the deep suffering caused by family separations that result from our inhumane immigration policy. In defining its mission in this way, it was fully in line with the national New Sanctuary Movement, which has dedicated itself to raising public awareness about the immorality of current policy, if necessary by providing physical sanctuary to families at risk of being separated by deportation orders. (Many New Sanctuary congregations nationwide do not actually host undocumented families, however, but provide other forms of spiritual and material support, including legal aid.)

In May 2008, however, the group’s focus became centered on what the New Sanctuary Movement refers to as “radical hospitality,” when a “mixed status” family living in Kansas City, with undocumented parents, two older undocumented children and three younger US citizen children, began to face neighborhood and police harassment. Fearing the possibility of deportation, the family sought sanctuary from the organization, which rallied together household goods, bedding and money for food from supportive congregations; it housed the family for a time in an area Quaker meeting house, and then relocated it to another neighborhood. In the fall, when the family’s teenaged son, who came to the United States with his parents 14 years ago when he was two, was arrested for being involved in a (weaponless) fight with another boy, he was placed in juvenile detention. Members of the Kansas City coalition accompanied his mother to the boy’s court hearing and subsequently to the county detention center, offering support and assistance to the scared mother. Although the boy had been ordered released into parental custody at his hearing, his mother learned at the detention center that ICE had issued a detainer that prevented his release. The family now faces permanent separation from their son. The boy could be taken into the custody of US citizen foster parents, which would allow him to remain in the United States; but this would mean the prohibition of any contact with his family until he comes of legal age.

The Kansas City New Sanctuary Movement coalition, renamed IJAM in Summer 2008, has put its “faith-based” values at the forefront of its public outreach efforts. Drawing on what Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008) has termed the authority and legitimacy of traditional religious affiliations, IJAM has insisted that fundamental beliefs common to many religions demand a more humanitarian and even welcoming approach to the vulnerable “stranger” in our midst. Taking its cue from the National New Sanctuary Movement, which



declares, “When we see families in need or danger, we are called by our faith to respond,” the initial brochure of the Kansas City coalition quoted from scripture and stated, “We believe that *God’s laws are above all laws* We seek justice for all God’s people.”

The addition of a Unitarian board member to the group’s board of directors, along with the potential addition of an area Unitarian congregation as an allied congregation, precipitated some “soul searching” regarding the coalition’s public presentation of its mission and principles. As Unitarian Universalists do not have any one prescribed theology, and many do not subscribe to a belief in a higher power, IJAM was forced to grapple explicitly with the question of what it meant to be a faith-based coalition. (Could a group be “faith-based” if some of its members did not believe in God?) Strikingly, these discussions concluded by enacting the principle of welcoming the stranger in their midst; the group ended by affirming mutual support for each member’s sources of inspiration. Members agreed on the need for a “big umbrella” that could be inclusive of a wide and truly diverse variety of religious perspectives and traditions; the consensus was that, while all members came to IJAM with personal commitments stemming from their own deeply held religious convictions, and must be able to speak from those convictions, the public presentation of the group should be as inclusive as possible. The new IJAM brochure was revised to read, “As people representing a spectrum of faiths, we are united in our affirmation of the innate value of all human beings and their right to be treated fairly and mercifully, regardless of their immigration status.” IJAM materials now quote from the Torah and Qur’an, along with the New Testament.

Like NMD in Arizona, the IJAM New Sanctuary coalition has increasingly felt the need to address not only “first aid” through sanctuary and accompaniment, but also the larger systemic issues that are presented by our current, broken immigration system. Indeed, the group’s name change to IJAM in the summer of 2008 signaled its shift in emphasis from “hospitality” to “justice” for immigrants. The first step in this effort evolved strongly out of the group’s faith-based orientation. Area pastors had found that local ICE detention centers all had different approval processes for pastoral visits to detainees. Pastors could not be assured that following a certain set of steps would result in approval of their visits. A single pastor might make 4 to 5 deportation visits per week, and ICE leases detention space from 10 area jails. The group began meeting with the ICE director of detentions in the Kansas and Missouri region in an effort to negotiate for a standardized process and criteria for pastoral care visits to all area detention centers.

A second dedicated “campaign” resulted from the group’s experience with its family in sanctuary. This family felt that it had been the subject of harassment and intimidation by area residents and the police because of its undocumented status. Although Kansas City, Kansas police have no agreement with ICE to cooperate on immigration issues, the degree of cooperation is left up to



individual officers, resulting in inconsistent practices. Police Chief Samuel Breshears agreed to a meeting between the police department and IJAM representatives, including local pastors, who saw themselves as representing the voice of the voiceless – those who felt too scared or disempowered to speak for themselves. IJAM hopes to work with police so that local Hispanic communities will feel represented and safe in reporting crimes or complaints. One goal is the establishment of “listening groups” in three area churches with representatives from the police, faith groups and the larger community. IJAM hopes that such groups will help to build relationships and provide a forum for airing concerns. Yet another issue currently being addressed by IJAM involves raid preparedness for communities in Western Kansas. IJAM is joining other area organizations in a new Kansas Raid Response Coalition to provide “know your rights” training, legal and financial assistance, and spiritual support to communities impacted by raids.

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008) has suggested that faith-based organizations are a powerful voice in the current struggle for immigrant rights and comprehensive, humane immigration reform. NMD and IJAM offer two salient examples of how local communities with origins in faith traditions are coming together, not only to provide “band-aids” for the specific local wounds of immigration policy, but also to offer a long-term vision and profoundly moral commitment: to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the long run, perhaps it is just such organizations that hold the key to changing American hearts and minds.

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About the Author

Marta Caminero-Santangelo is an associate professor of English and the founder of Latino Studies at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (University Press of Florida, 2007) and *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

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