



Members of the International Leadership Team visit with the sisters of the El Paso and Juárez communities.

A Year in Review 2016

The sisters of Casa Alexia, A Border Ministry, commit ourselves to:

“Be a hopeful presence in solidarity with people on the border, especially immigrants and victims of violence, by promoting actions responding to their needs.”

Casa Alexia is a joint ministry of the Latin American and United States Provinces of the School Sisters of St. Francis that helps to realize their vision of a world transformed through peace, justice and love.

Six sisters and their partners in mission served on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border in 2016: Sisters Josefina López, Carol Jean Ory and Arlene Woelfel served in Juárez, Mexico; Sisters Kathy Braun, Elsa Canán and Fran Hicks served in the El Paso area. This report focuses on the accomplishments of Casa Alexia in 2016.



Pope Francis speaks to the assembly of 250,000 people in Juárez and El Paso during his papal visit in February of 2016.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Casa Alexia is to stand in solidarity with migrants, immigrants and victims of violence in the El Paso-Juárez border region:

Raising awareness regarding the social, economic, and political realities of the border

Offering accompaniment and counseling to victims of violence and their families

Advocating for the human rights of immigrants, detainees, victims of violence and injustice

Providing education and pastoral services for those in need

Our mission is to GIVE, heal and defend life.

Sister Elsa Canán: A Missionary to Many Communities

Sister Elsa Canán, one of our Guatemalan sisters living and working with us in Casa Alexia, is a great walker. Two days a week, she walks three to four miles through the streets of the *colonias*. This is an unincorporated area in the desert, outside the city of El Paso, where the residents are very economically poor.

During her visits to the people, she prays with the sick, comforts the lonely elderly, provides advocacy, and assists with Bible study programs.

Two other days of the week, she works with immigrants recently arrived from Mexico, Central America, and Brazil. These immigrants are fleeing horrible violence in the streets, gangs, extremely poor economic situations, and death threats.

Over one thousand immigrants crossed over the El Paso-Juárez border in one week. The flow of



Sister Elsa Paul of the International Leadership Team (right) accompanies Sister Elsa Canán in a home visit to a family with a child who has special needs.



Sister Elsa sorting supplies at Nazareth House while speaking with a resident.

people is continuous. These families are seeking political asylum.

Once they are apprehended and put into the custody of the Border Patrol or ask for asylum, they are processed, ankle bracelets are applied and they are released to travel to relatives. They will be assigned an immigration court date and their future will be decided. While they are waiting to travel, they have next to nothing. They have no change of clothes, no warm clothes, no money, and no place to stay, shower or eat. In response, the Loretto Sisters in El Paso have made a building they own available to provide housing, and the people of El Paso have provided for all the necessities they are lacking.

Hundreds of volunteers are serving these immigrants, including Sister Elsa who has two shifts a week. Sisters Kathy Braun and Fran Hicks also give rides to the airport and bus station. Not one cent of government money has gone into this program.

Truly the gospel message is practiced here in El Paso: The hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the thirsty have drink, and care is given to the sick.

Our mission is to GIVE, heal and defend life.



Proud to be super readers! Summer reading program participants earn points and receive school supplies.

Summer Reading Program

As temperatures rose over 100 degrees for 33 days, the children who live in the *colonias* outside the city of El Paso enjoyed being inside with a good book. Checking out library books was not always possible for these children because a *colonia* is an unincorporated area outside of the city, isolated from stores, parks, pools, libraries, and other activities. To make books more available to the children, small home libraries were created within walking distance of their homes. The mother in each small library acts as the “librarian” and checks on the children’s reading progress.

This past summer, more than 50 children read books. An added feature was that we had a college student in one of the *colonias* who read, in English, to the smaller children while slowly explaining the story in Spanish.

These children live in a mostly Spanish speaking environment so reading enables them to learn more English vocabulary and develop English language skills.

At the end of the summer program, the children have a party and receive prizes as well as school supplies. This year, each little one received two books to take home. One six-year-old boy was thrilled. He said, “Now I have my very own books!”



Can you tell how much Sister Fran Hicks loves books? This home library stocks books for children and teens.

Our mission is to give, HEAL and defend life.

The Golden Age of Good Will

At the end of the Year of Mercy 2016, Sister Josefina shared an experience in her efforts to create a network of solidarity between the people of El Paso, Texas and the members of Jesús Obrero parish who live in one of the poorest colonias of Juárez, Mexico.

I would like to make special mention of the “Golden Age” community, women who are senior citizens in Santa Lucia Parish in El Paso, Texas. With their assistance, we began the “Compartir” (Sharing) program, which developed in response to the question, “How are the families who live in your parish?”

With a heavy heart and a lump in my throat, I responded, “With hunger, fear and pain.” This was the time of the greatest violence in Juárez.

Our friends, without a second thought, organized themselves and collected food for the holidays. As it was difficult to pass food and other items

**Thank you,
valient women of the
“Golden Age” group!
May the God of Mercy
continue to bless you.**

across the border, we spoke with the women and their coordinator, Beatriz Diaz. They decided that it would be better to cooperate with us by means of a monetary donation every month.

They have been extremely faithful in that effort for over seven years. Every month, they give us a monetary donation out of their very own purses. And at Christmastime, they purchase clothing and toys for the children of the poorest families. They do it with such enthusiasm and happiness that it is a feast for them as well as for the families and ourselves.



The women's group of Santa Lucia Parish in El Paso, Texas joins with Sister Josefina to share Christmas joy and holiday foods with needy families of Jesús Obrero Parish in Juárez, Mexico.

Our mission is to give, HEAL and defend life.

What is Peanut Butter?

We began our food program in 2010 in the poorest section of Jesús Obrero Parish in Juárez, Mexico. We tried to help out 30 families by supplementing their pantries with dried beans, rice, cooking oil and sugar once a month. In 2016, we served 95 families, with a total of 347 persons, and we have added six more foods to the list: oatmeal, canned milk, canned sardines in tomato sauce, canned mixed vegetables, noodles and, since September 2016, an 8 ounce jar of peanut butter. This was something completely new to kiddies and adults alike. It was a joy to watch many participants gingerly stick their fingers into the jar and then into their mouths and watch their expressions change into big smiles of delight!



Sister Carol Jean giving a family their first taste of peanut butter!

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For Christmas, each family received an additional jar of peanut butter. Two-person families received 8 ounces; families of five and more received a jumbo jar of 40 ounces.

We always feel badly about the limit of the aid these families receive. After all, what does one can of milk per month do for five children? But one mother told me that they eat no meat, no fish, no chicken, and no cheese (thank God for eggs!) The only milk her children enjoy comes once a month in their bag.

We thank God and all of you, our generous donors, for the help we are able to provide to such a big group. There are always more families on the waiting list, and how wonderful it would be to be able to offer two bags of groceries to these families each month.

Our mission is to give, heal and DEFEND life.

Ministry to the Elderly and Those in Prison



Sister Kathy ministers to the elderly at Bienvivir, in El Paso.

In September 2016, two vice presidents of our School Sisters of St. Francis International Leadership Team accompanied Sister Kathy Braun to her volunteer ministry in the El Paso Detention Center. No pictures were allowed, but they watched as Sister Kathy and another chaplain facilitated a very powerful two-hour session with a group of six detainees participating in a special Capacitar healing workshop. It was the last of four sessions to provide these inmates with self-help techniques for dealing with the stresses of incarceration, the effects of trauma, and their feelings of fear, sadness, anger, worry, and lack of self-esteem. The leadership team members were truly moved by the experience, and so happy that Sister Kathy is able and willing to provide this kind of pastoral accompaniment, which is in addition to her chaplaincy position with the frail elderly at Bienvivir. As Jesus instructed, "I was in prison and you visited me." (Mt 25:36)

Women's Sewing Cooperative

Sister Fran Hicks serves at the Centro Santa Catalina women's sewing cooperative in Juárez, Mexico as a mentor to the staff and a teacher of English as a second language. She also assists with the marketing and sale of beautifully sewn materials produced by the members of the cooperative. The center, founded by a U.S. Dominican sister, stands on land that was once the local garbage dump.

The mission of the center is to empower poor and uneducated women with a means of earning a livelihood through their work as skilled seamstresses. The center also provides tutorial programs for the children of these women, along with computer training, faith and values education and other services. The women who participate love Sister Fran. She is a mentor who is always there for them no matter what need arises.



Sisters Fran, Elsa Paul, and Maureen holding colorful sewn articles made by the women of the Sewing Cooperative.

Forced Disappearances in Mexico

Much of Sister Arlene Woelfel's work in 2016 at the Human Rights Center Paso del Norte (CDHPN) in Juárez, Mexico involved accompanying families in their search for missing loved ones. These are people who were detained by authorities and then disappeared. For the first time, the staff of CDHPN assisted families as they identified the remains of their sons and laid them to rest.

The following story illustrates the challenges faced by one family and the center staff as they strived to bring closure to years of painful searching for a beloved son. In April 2016, Arlene and two other staff members accompanied an elderly couple to a meeting called by federal officials regarding the disappearance of the couple's son, Victor. Government officials believed they had custody of the skeletal remains of the young man. Victor and two other youths had been detained by the Army in February 2009. The other two youths were released, but Victor never reappeared. It is believed he was tortured before he was shot. His body was placed in a gunny sack and thrown into a ravine on a ranch located on the southern outskirts of Juárez. Even though the remains were discovered in October 2009, the family was not informed until last April. CDHPN staff accompanied the family for several months of meetings with



Every four hours a person disappears in Mexico. For how long?

federal and local officials; two additional DNA tests of bone fragments from the skeletal remains; the eventual confirmation of the identity of the skeletal remains; and the burial of the young man in November 2016.

Since this case involves a homicide committed by the Mexican Army, the legal staff of CDHPN continues its efforts to seek justice for the family. The psychosocial staff accompanies the family in their grieving process. Most importantly, the center's staff and we Franciscan sisters have come to understand the words of Pope Francis at his first Wednesday General Audience of 2017:

“To speak of hope to the desperate, it is necessary to share in their desperation; to dry the tears on the faces of those who suffer, it is necessary to unite our tears with theirs. Only in this way can our words and actions really be able to offer some hope in the midst of such pain.”



Every four hours a person disappears in Mexico. For how long?

How Can **YOU** Partner with the Sisters at Casa Alexia?

BECOME INFORMED

Come for an immersion experience at the border, which will help you:

- Learn about the border reality
- Learn about the effects of globalization on border life in the areas of economic justice, human rights, and the environment
- Share with others about Casa Alexia and its important ministries

PRAY

- Pray for healing and an end to violence in Juárez and all of Mexico
- Pray for a better life for immigrants and just immigration laws
- Join the sisters and associates for prayer and reflection
- Join the sisters and others for prayer vigils

VOLUNTEER

Volunteer in El Paso or Juárez with:

- Food distribution in Juárez
- Office administration support
- Assistance with various ministries

Become a Tau Volunteer

Contact Irene Perez

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TO BECOME INVOLVED, CONTACT

Sister Fran Hicks

Casa Alexia, A Border Ministry

Un Ministerio en la Frontera

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To learn more about the School Sisters of St. Francis, visit www.sssf.org or like us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/schoolsistersofstfrancis.



Thank you!

“Meal on Wheels” (Whoops, “on Legs”)

Sister Carol Jean was driving the car down one of the busy streets of Juárez when she happened upon this adorable donkey and his owner. She asked the owner if he could use some extra groceries. “Delighted!” If you look closely, you’ll see the donkey is carrying a bag of your donations on his back.

CONTRIBUTE

- Monetary donations to support the ministries of Casa Alexia
- A funding priority for 2017 is the “Across the Border Sharing Project” which provides 95 families in Juárez with 10 basic necessities. The cost to feed the families for one month is \$760. Even the smallest donation makes a difference.

Please visit www.casaalexia.com

TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION

Use the enclosed self-addressed envelope or visit www.sssf.org and click the “Donate” button at the top of the page. Select “Casa Alexia” in the drop-down menu to make your gift.