



Borderwor



May 2019

REPORT TO DONORS

JUNE 12, 2019



Center for
FaithJustice



CFJ's Inaugural Service Trip to McAllen, Texas

During the week of April 27th to May 3rd, 2019, four adult volunteers from the Center for FaithJustice, led by CFJ President Stephanie Peddicord, traveled to McAllen, Texas to serve at the Humanitarian Respite Center run by Sr. Norma Pimentel, MJ, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. The intention of this trip was two-fold: 1) to provide urgently-needed volunteer staff and supplies to address the humanitarian crisis along the southern border caused by thousands of Central American refugees seeking safety and asylum in the United States, and 2) to investigate the feasibility and logistics of future CFJ-sponsored adult immersion trips to the border.



A crowdsourced fundraising drive was conducted online by the four volunteers to raise money for supplies for the refugees. In the five weeks prior to and during the trip to McAllen, a total of \$15,963 was raised. All this money was spent in McAllen, TX at local businesses as well as large discount clothing retailers on basic necessities such as underwear, socks, clothing and toiletries that were urgently needed

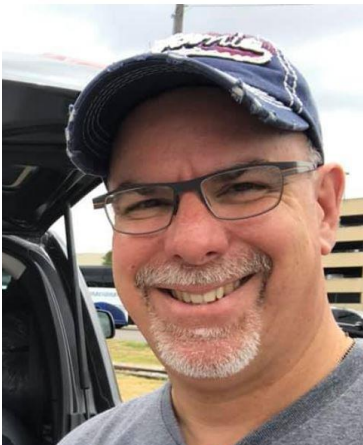
for the hundreds of refugee men, women and children who arrived at the Respite Center each day.

In appreciation for the generosity of our donors, we wish to share this account of how the money was spent, and even more importantly, of what we experienced, during our days in McAllen.



Participants*

Rocky Balsamo
Board Chair Emeritus, CFJ



Erin Dolan
Board Chair Emeritus, CFJ



Stephanie Peddicord
President, CFJ



Mary Vanderhoof
Former Board Member, CFJ



* All participants paid their own expenses, including transportation, meals, and lodging, so that 100% of your donations went to supplies for the refugee families

Humanitarian Respite Center

Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley

McAllen, Texas



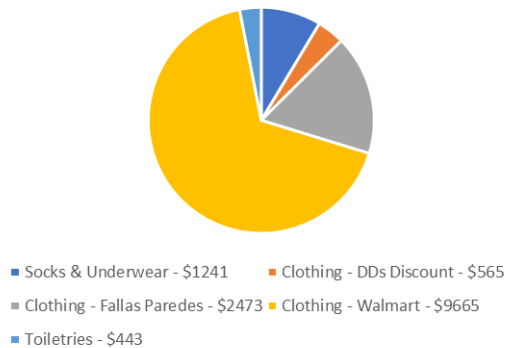
The Humanitarian Respite Center (HRC), run by Sr Norma Pimentel, MJ, the executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, was initiated in June of 2014 as a direct response to the refugee relief crisis in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The refugees endure a dangerous and grueling trek to reach the US, much of the way on foot,

traveling over 1,500 to 2,000 miles from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, enduring hunger, thirst, and often violence or predation, most with young children in tow. All the refugees we saw at the HRC had children with them or were pregnant; under the “Flores settlement” they must be released from detention centers within 20 days. Many other refugees that arrive individually are either immediately deported or can be held in detention centers for months to years awaiting an asylum hearing. A common misconception is that the refugees have entered the US “illegally”; however, it is legal under US law to seek asylum. After crossing the border, the refugees quickly surrender to Border Patrol and are brought to one of the ICE detention centers to be processed. If they have someone in the US who will agree to act as their sponsor, they can be released from detention and go to their sponsor to await an asylum hearing, but they must arrange their own transportation, a daunting task without money or English skills. So, the HRC provides showers and clean clothes, food and shelter for 24 to 48 hours, and help in contacting their sponsor and making transportation arrangements. We met refugees traveling to sponsors in California, Utah, Ohio, Michigan, Nevada, New York, New Jersey, and Florida; virtually all over the US.



Impact of Your Donation

Supplies Purchased in McAllen



We went to McAllen with the Catholic Social Teaching principle of subsidiarity in mind. Rather than decide in advance what we thought the money that was generously donated should be spent on, we waited until we got there to learn from the HRC staff what was most needed. Our “advance team” that arrived on April 27th consisted of Erin Dolan and Mary Vanderhoof.

They quickly saw that toiletry items, and particularly deodorant, was in short supply, so they headed to several local Dollar Tree stores to purchase toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs and deodorant. They spent a lot of time making up toiletry bags, which the refugee families receive on arrival at HRC.



Erin & Mary also saw the need for clothing. The bags of donated clothing at HRC had not been sorted due to the shortage of volunteer staff, and when they began to sort clothes, it quickly became apparent that most of the donations were not usable, either because they were out of season (it was 93 degrees in McAllen and there were bags of winter clothing) or because they were too large (Central American men and women tend to need Small and Medium sizes, whereas most donations were larger sizes). So, they asked local people where the best bargains on clothing were and went shopping at two local



discount clothing stores. For underwear, Casa Kevin in McAllen was our “go to” store, where we could get a dozen pairs of children’s underwear for around \$8. We also got good buys on socks there, which were in high demand to replace socks that had been worn out on the long, arduous trip from Guatemala and Honduras to Texas. The one item we were not able to purchase nearly enough of was shoelaces. Every man, women, and child who arrives at HRC needs shoelaces, since ICE confiscates them when

they place the refugees in detention (presumably because they could be used as a choking weapon). Almost every store we went to told us they were sold out of shoelaces, or they had very few.



On Day 3, Rocky and Stephanie arrived, which expanded our capabilities both for shopping and stocking clothing at HRC. Now the challenge became trying to find men's, women's and children's discount clothing in large enough quantities to meet the needs of up to 600 refugees arriving daily. We considered local thrift shops for used clothing, but we knew it would be very hit-or-miss to find the quantity of clothing we needed in the proper sizes and at the lowest prices possible. We somewhat reluctantly then turned to Walmart, setting aside our feelings about their labor practices, to maximize our shopping efficiency and our purchasing power and clothe as many people

as quickly as possible. The average price of adult shirts we purchased was around \$3, and we purchased pants for men and women ranging in price from \$5 to \$19 (mainly in the middle of that range). Children's clothing was just a little less expensive. We filled four large shopping carts on three consecutive days with hundreds of men's, women's, and children's pants and shirts. Over the course of 5 days in McAllen, through your generosity, we estimate that we were able to supply new clothing and toiletry items to over 2,000 men, women, and children.

While the dollar amounts and numbers of clothing items and people served may or may not seem impressive, they cannot capture the intangible,

BorderworX by the Numbers

- 4 volunteers
- 5 days
- 170 service hours
- 154 donors
- \$15,963 donated
- 2000+ men, women and children welcomed to America and given a chance for safety, security, and a new life

priceless value that your generous donations brought to the refugee families. It was so incredibly gratifying and moving to be able to offer the people we met new clothing and see the pride restored to a mother's eyes as we gave her a new outfit for her child, to see the dignity restored to a young man's face as we offered him a new pair of pants and a shirt, or to see the relief on a teenage girl's face when we offered her a new bra and panties. Over and over, the sincere thanks they offered, the warm embraces, and their blessings on us assured us that these simple purchases had done so much more than provided clean clothes – they had restored hope and dignity to these brave, grateful, and exhausted people.



Over the course of 5 days in McAllen, through your generosity, we estimate that we were able to supply new clothing and toiletry items to over 2,000 men, women, and children.

Participant Reflections

The week in McAllen was intense and emotional, and the participants posted their reactions and reflections on the experience on social media. Below are some of their unedited posts.



Mary McDonald Vanderhoof

April 28 · 🌐 ▼

Day 1 at the Respite Center complete. Several hundred men, women and children were dropped off today at 3 pm by Border Patrol. Luckily we had shopped in the morning for underwear, socks and children's clothing. The families arrive with the same clothes they left their home country wearing weeks or months ago. They have no shoelaces and we already ran out again today. The picture below is a mother and daughter choosing underwear for the girl. Notice her hair is tied back with a strip of mylar torn from the blankets they are given in detention.

These are not "bad hombres". These are mother's and father's who obviously love their children very much and are just trying to find a way to escape poverty and violence. Despite their fatigue they smiled and said Gracias for everything we gave them. My heart was broken so many times today. There are so many beautiful children here.

Please keep the families in your prayers. And if you'd like to help donate supplies, here's the link: borderworx.causevox.com/mary-vanderhoof



"They have suffered so much to get here, they have left behind absolutely everything, and the conditions are far from ideal, and yet they are so very grateful."



Day 2 Mission to McAllen: another exhausting but gratifying day at the Respite Center. Erin Dolan and I shopped this morning for clothing, toiletries and shoelaces. Then we arrived at the Respite Center and got the clothing ready to distribute. Many of the families who arrived yesterday were preparing today to leave and go to many different parts of the country: Houston, Ohio, Utah, California, Brooklyn were just some of the destinations I heard. We tried to make sure they had clean clothes for themselves and their children to take on the journey. But sadly, with so many hundreds of men, women and children arriving daily, we ran out of everything except socks and underwear (which we bought lots of yesterday). We watched groups depart with nothing but a couple of sandwiches and bottled waters for their long journeys.

At 5 pm a bus with around 130 new migrants was dropped off by Border Patrol. I thanked God that I had time to make up enough bags before they arrived. As you can see in the picture, they are lined up on both sides of the hallway and we greet each family and give them a red shopping bag with a tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush, a deodorant and a comb in it. I asked them "Quantos ninos?" And add a toothbrush for each child.

Each family is asked where they are going and the Catholic Charities staff meets with each one to help them arrange transport to their destinations. Then they are fed, and line up to take a shower in the trailers out back. They will spend the night sleeping on gym mats on the floor. They use port-a-potties in the yard as well. They have suffered so much to get here, they have left behind absolutely everything, and the conditions are far from ideal, and yet they are so very grateful. Many are sick, and there are so many pregnant women! I saw a single mother who had come across the border with 4 children in tow. One mother walked off the bus with a baby at her breast. They wait in endless lines so patiently. They care lovingly for their children. They are our sisters. They are our brothers. They are Christ in our midst.



Erin Dolan is with Mary McDonald Vanderhoof.

April 30 at 1:11 AM · 🌐

So this was my favorite task today by a long shot. I was asked by a young father from El Salvador to hold his sleeping child while he tried to find a set of clean clothes for his journey alone with his baby to Virginia tomorrow. I was thrilled to take her and cuddle her as she slept. I asked the young volunteer who was my very welcomed interpreter to tell him that my kids would be happy I was getting my baby fix! He and the others in the room laughed. A while later when he tenderly reclaimed her he thanked me and told me he hoped I had lots of grandchildren. He made my day and I sent them on their way with me blessings for a safe trip and a happy life.

Earlier in the day, after we had helped an abuela and her daughter and granddaughter to find clothing, the little grandmother thanked me profusely for the few items she grasped in her arms for the three of them. SHE was blessing ME for what I had done for her. When she saw that I was tearing up, she reached out to touch my arm and told ME not to worry. Everything would be alright. God would take care of us.



“The hallways are filled with lines and lines of people, waiting. I don’t think they even know what they’re waiting for. They have become accustomed to being at the mercy of others....”



Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord

May 1 at 8:53 AM · 🌐

I’ve been in McAllen about 18 hours. After a pretty restless night, the word reverberating in my brain is HOW.

We arrived yesterday and Mary and Erin had been shopping for clothes. As an organization, we collected monetary donations to have the ability to make these purchases while here. Thank God for donors because the shelves at the Respite Center are empty. And the refugees arrive, in many cases, with literally nothing on their backs. No shirts, no socks, no shoes.

I was in the children’s clothing room, where the families are allowed in one at a time. At first, I enjoyed visiting with the families - asking where they were from, how long they had travelled, where they were headed next. I smiled as warmly as I could and said - Bienvenidos - welcome. You have arrived. You’re here now. They smile with relief and fear. Their journey is far from over. They are headed to California, Washington state, Ohio, Oklahoma, north and South Carolina, Canada, New York, Boston. A few to New Jersey and excitedly I ask “donde? Yo tambien soy de Nueva Jersey!” They pull out their form with a street address and show me. They have no real idea where they’re going or what’s happening. Utter powerlessness.

I imagine their response is “anywhere but here or that detention facility”. Many have been in detention for 5 days, 20 days. That facility, one mother indicates, had limited food, no windows, no fresh air. All with young children in tow and nothing to occupy them. The Respite Center is better but it, too, is crowded and uncomfortably hot. Staff are in short supply, as are volunteers. Resources are extremely limited.

The hallways are filled with lines and lines of people, waiting. I don’t think they even know what they are waiting for. They have become accustomed to being at the mercy of others - coyotes (smugglers on whom they spend their life savings to get out of their home countries), Border Patrol, volunteers like us that mean well but have little to offer. Each family is polite and orderly, exhausted and desperate. They gladly accept what we can give and tell us not to worry when we can’t meet a basic need.

We swiftly ran out of boys pants in all sizes. Of course, it then felt like every family that entered had a young boy with them. Filthy, head to toe, and all I could offer was a clean shirt, some socks, and fresh underwear. I asked one mother “a donde van?” (Where are you headed?) and with tears she explained they’ve been traveling for more than a month - headed to Boston - and her son hadn’t changed or washed his pants for the entire journey. Their bus was at 9 pm. Couldn’t I find something clean for her son to wear after he was able to bathe? (Their first shower after many days in US detention facilities). I quickly turned toward the girls’ bin and select some gray leggings and convince her that these will at least make due until they arrive in Boston where her mother awaits. Four days on a Greyhound bus alone in a foreign country with three young children. I honestly can’t imagine anything worse. My children can’t even get in the car and buckle their seatbelts without bickering.

She smiles despite her exhaustion (she carries a 2-yr old asleep in her arms) and tears. “Ok. Gracias.” Her children will be meeting their grandmother for the first time, she says. She hasn’t seen her mother in 15 years. The children ask me if Boston is cold. I make a joke and ask if they know how to ski. They beam from ear to ear.

HOW.

Reverberating in my mind and heart.





Mary McDonald Vanderhoof is 🥰 feeling exhausted with Erin Dolan and 2 others in McAllen, Texas.

May 1 at 12:44 AM · 🌐 ▼

Day 3 in McAllen: I'm emotionally and physically exhausted tonight. We started the day making 100 toiletry bags consisting of toothpaste, a toothbrush, a comb and deodorant. Then we went and purchased literally hundreds of pants and shirts for men, women and children and spent the afternoon handing them out at the Respite Center.

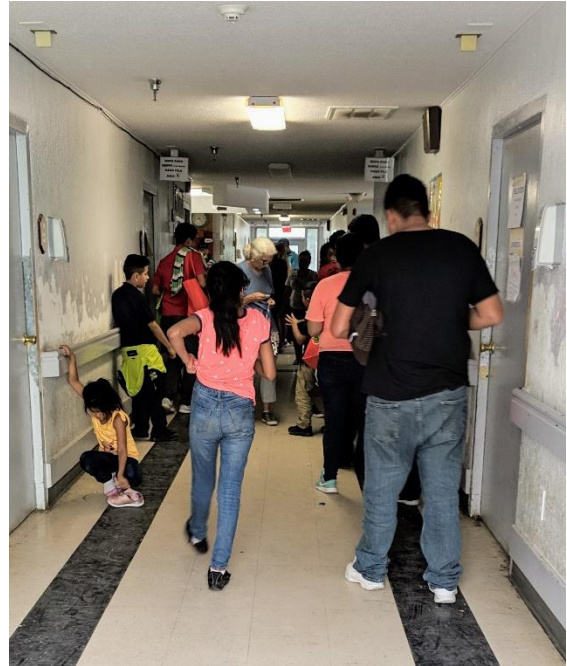
My friend Stephanie arrived and worked with me in the children's room. She is a fluent Spanish speaker, so I was able to hear much more of the people's stories today. They were heartbreaking. One young mother told us she had been held in detention for 20 days with her child. They could do nothing but sit and stare at the walls. She broke down crying as she described it to us. She is overwhelmed and frightened. A father came in with his young daughter who had bronchitis or pneumonia and he was so worried because there is no real medical care other than OTC medications. We ran out of boys pants in less than an hour after Border Patrol delivered yet another busload of people. A little boy of about 7 or 8 years came in wearing only pajamas. No pants, no shirt, no shoes. We could only give him a new shirt, underwear and socks and promise that we'll go buy more pants manana.

But there were happy moments too. Two little boys came in and gave us big hugs after receiving their new clothes. A little girl squealed with delight to get new pink socks and hair ties. I said "Dios te bendiga" (God bless you) to a mother as she left with her children's new clothes, and she hugged and kissed me so warmly. Sacramental moments.

But at other times, it's so hard to believe that I'm in America. This feels like a refugee camp in every way and it makes me so angry and sad at the same time. We have to do better.

God help us.

God forgive us.



"There are so many children, and they are the most heart-wrenching. So many kids came today in bare feet – not a single pair of shoes."



Mary McDonald Vanderhoof is 🥰 feeling blessed with Erin Dolan and 2 others in McAllen, Texas.

May 2 at 1:24 AM · 🌐 ▼

Day 4 McAllen: Where do I begin? We shopped again all morning for pants, shirts, underwear and socks. Each man, woman, and child gets one of each, but with hundreds passing through the Respite Center each day, the need is endless. There are used clothes to distribute, but the used donations are usually stained, or much too large. It feels so much better to offer someone something new, even if it's a \$3 T-shirt or a \$6 pair of leggings. It helps us to restore their dignity.

So many people we saw today were sick with colds, or other types of infections. There is a clinic here where a nurse gives out OTC medications, but no other access to medical care.

The A/C doesn't work well at the Respite Center and it's so hot. Stephanie, Rocky, Erin and I worked for hours handing out clothes to men, women and children. They stand in line for hours waiting for their turn to choose a change of clothes without complaint and they thank us effusively when they finally get their turn.

After 6 hours of sweating and working in the clothing rooms we were ready to leave for the day when I spotted a bus outside. Not just 1, but 2 buses of migrants were delivered to the Center by Border Patrol at 7 pm. Almost 300 people were on those buses. The Center staff had to tell them that with over 300 people already there, they could not guarantee a mat on the floor for the night to everyone and priority would be given to pregnant women and mothers with small children. The Center is in an old nursing home building. Picture 600+ people sleeping on the floors of your average sized nursing home! The people eat at picnic tables outside in the backyard. They sleep on gym mats on the floor. They wait in line for an hour or more to take a brief shower in an outside trailer. And they are so grateful.



Erin Dolan

May 1 at 9:19 AM · 🌐

Observations from the Border.

Day 4 at the Respite Center started a bit later as we'd been shopping for a good part of the morning and early afternoon after making up the 100 hygiene bags we were bringing with us that day. There is simply no time to do any organizing once there so we decided to make them at our hotel and bring them. Likewise we sorted, divided and bagged the \$4000 worth of clothing we'd gotten so that we could hit the ground running. As Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord said, thank God we had it because the shelves were barren but it didn't last long once another busload showed up.

It feels somewhat futile. But under the circumstances it's all we can do. My daughter Faelen Paladino asked what the plan was for once we got home. Not sure. But sharing our experiences and advocating for immediate congressional action will likely be at the top of the to do list.

Heading into my last working day I'm feeling miserable. I picked up something. But I'm hoping I will make it through the day. I know I will be back.

Pray for everyone we meet and serve this day that they will know that we love them and that they will be safe.

There are so many children, and they are the most heart-wrenching. So many kids came today in bare feet - not a single pair of shoes. We have almost no shoes here and it kills me not to have shoes to give them. We bought some children's Crocs for \$2 this morning downtown and I was grateful to have them to offer some of them. I watched mothers and fathers holding their children and I see my own daughters and their husbands. They are the same ages as they are and they love their children just like my daughters do. I look at the children playing with simple items they find in the yard and I see my own grandsons. They like the same things my grandkids like. They are beautiful and full of promise. And they have so little. They break my heart.



Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord

May 3 at 1:26 AM · 🌐

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11:30 pm and departing for the airport at 5:30 am. Headed back to (our) reality, back to normalcy. Back to my own husband and children whom I left behind to care for others. It feels as though I've just come through the Twilight Zone.

Yesterday was total chaos from the moment we set foot in the Respite Center. We came armed with thousands of dollars in donated new clothes, ready to distribute. We arrive and quickly thereafter the first ICE bus unloads. We quickly sort and get our clothing room together. We begin to welcome in one family at a time to select the clothes for their respective children. We are happy, laughing, chatting with the families.

Then, the second bus arrives and a feeling of urgency pulses through the building. The staff have little to no advance warning of when a bus will arrive. The supplies are what they are; the staffing is what it is. Sometimes both are sufficient, most often - not. This week's hot commodity is deodorant, which is gone. A woman begs me - she hasn't been allowed to shower for 6 days in detention. She will finally be able to shower here, but without deodorant in the 95 degree heat, she will soon need a second. "Lo siento", I say, "no tengo. No hay." I am sorry. I hate being outside in this weather, let alone without deodorant.

The modus operandi is to keep moving.

The staff person on duty quickly tells me to quit with the niceties and distribute more efficiently. The lines of people are absolutely never-ending. Each bus seems to hold hundreds of people and they seem to multiply ten-fold in the increasingly tight accommodations. The heat, humidity, and stench ("human soup", as [Rocky](#) calls it) don't help the situation.

Just ask their ages, she says. Give them whatever is fastest. They need to get moving and so do you.

It makes my soul hurt.

I am trained in the mantra of my long-time employer, Covenant House, whose mission is absolute respect and unconditional love. It was my colleague and friend Cordella Hill, who always reminded me what it was for a homeless street kid's dignity to get a hot shower, followed by fresh new clothes. Not something from a dank old hamper, but something new.

Uniquely theirs.

More than clothing: renewed self-esteem.

Restored dignity.

I don't do warehouse charity.

But, I quickly glance at the volume of people in the hallways. Everywhere I look is crowded and full of people. Waiting. The magnitude of what needs to be done, quickly, hits me like a freight train. I begin to meet people at the door of the clothing room and do my best to move quickly while also honoring dignity. It's a delicate balancing act. I often fail, especially as the days grow long and my Spanish begins to suffer. I am one of few Spanish speaking volunteers so I am frequently interrupted and called upon to translate. I am often having multiple conversations at once.

By day's end, I ask one boy his age at least five times. "Diez." Ten, he says. "Lo siento. Seis?" "No. Diez." Ten. He holds up his hands. I apologize that I can't keep it straight. He laughs at how loca I am. I just hope that his new clothes fit.

7:15 pm. Two new overflowing buses arrive from border patrol as the Respite Center is supposed to "close" for the night. Our fatigued hearts sink. The shelves are empty and we are done for the day. The new arrivals will have to get by with what is contained in their meager welcome bag: toothbrush, comb, and deodorant - if they are lucky.

Our travel companion Erin Dolan saw a news report that 1100 new refugees were processed in McAllen yesterday. No wonder, we say. We weren't exaggerating: the onslaught of humanity on that already taxed facility was just as extreme as it felt.

Tomorrow, we head back to a home that feels 1 million miles from this place or this humanitarian crisis. Tonight over margaritas, [Mary](#) shared with our waitress that we had spent the week volunteering at the Respite Center with refugees. The waitress, a McAllen resident, had never heard of it before. She seemed surprised that we would come all this way to volunteer for this.

The restaurant was maybe 2 miles from the epicenter of one of the largest crises our country has seen in a generation ... and life went on for all of those patrons, seemingly uninterrupted. As it will for us, too, in some ways; but this experience will remain - to borrow a phrase from Fr. Greg Boyle - "tattooed on the heart."

I was very happy today to meet siblings the same ages as my kids, Natalie and John. And, without thinking, I offer to share a photo of them from Easter. Natalie looks amazing, so grown up in new jumpsuit from Nordstrom; John in his velour blazer and button down shirt. The children look at my photo politely, but also with expressions that suggest my children might as well be aliens to them. Their mother tells me how beautiful Nat and John are, as I've said many times about her daughter and son.

As mothers, it seems we all want to brag and be reassured that we are just doing the best we can.

My own beautiful baby boy turns 6 on Saturday. I met many kids his age this week and delighted in sharing that "mijo tambien tiene 5 anos! El se llama joncito." The refugee children are excited by anyone who offers them kindness and smile broadly and enthusiastically despite their exhaustion. They are malnourished, dehydrated, sick with runny noses and coughs. Despite their shared age, they are a fraction of my John's size and their lives bear little resemblance.

This realization makes me at once filled with gratitude and shame. It's very hard to separate my own privilege from the complete poverty I've witnessed here. Poverty of finances, poverty of home, poverty of possessions, poverty of choice. But, most of all, poverty of dignity.

We've done our best to restore some of that this week, through the generosity of many. And, our work is not over.

We'll see you soon, McAllen.

***"More than clothing: renewed self-esteem.
Restored dignity."***





Mary McDonald Vanderhoof is 😞 feeling sad with Rocky Balsamo and Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord in McAllen, Texas.
May 3 at 9:59 PM · 🌐 ▼

Day 5 McAllen: I didn't stay up last night to post an update since I had to be up at 5 to head to the airport, so here is my belated post Rocky Balsamo, Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord and I did one more power shopping with the remaining money so generously donated by so many wonderful friends. We filled 4 shopping carts at Walmart with socks, adult underwear, men's, women and children's tops and pants. It took 45 minutes just to check out! Then we headed to Casa Kevin for children's underwear and socks. Between our many trips to the Dollar Store for toiletries and clothes shopping at 3 different discount stores, we spent all \$14,000 that was donated. We cannot thank our donors enough!

We arrived after lunch at the Respite Center just after a bus had dropped off another 100-130 men women and children newly released from detention. We quickly brought in all our purchases and got to work stocking shelves and began to distribute clothing to the new arrivals.

The mothers are so tired. I see it in their faces. They carry 3- and 4-year-old toddlers in their arms, with nothing on but a diaper, and ask me to please find clothes for them. I'm so happy to be able to give them new clothing for their child. I'm sure they'd be grateful for used clothing, but being able to

provide their child with a new shirt and pants helps to restore their dignity. Some of the mothers told us that they will travel to Ohio, or Las Vegas, or Florida, and will be reunited with a spouse or a parent they haven't seen in 5 or 7 or 8 years. One mother was going to be showing her child to her mother in the US for the first time. How wonderful to be able to give that child new clothes to wear, and give that parent her pride and dignity. I can't imagine having to be separated from my mother or my husband for years. But often one family member goes first, then works and saves enough to bring the rest of their family. They are all escaping terrible violence and poverty. No wonder they endure so much to come here.

Around 7 we were told that 3 more buses with about 200 more people were coming from Border Patrol. We were exhausted but knew we had to stay and help. The first people off the first bus were 3 young women, each holding newborn babies wrapped in pink and blue striped hospital receiving blankets. They were only weeks old, perhaps born in detention, but certainly had spent a good portion of their very new lives in a jail cell, where their mother had to sleep on a concrete floor. It was the first time all week I had to turn away and compose myself before I could greet them. I saw the Christ child, also born in poverty to a tired, frightened teenage mother. My heart was broken yet again.

We worked until after 8 since it was our last day at the Respite Center. I teared up every time I thought about leaving. I have come to love these people, all so grateful and hopeful. We said goodbye to Alma, one of the living saints who has worked at the Respite Center for 5 years and loves the people too. We promised her we will be back. And we will.

“Around 7 we were told that 3 more buses with about 200 more people were coming...The first people off the first bus were 3 young women, each holding newborn babies wrapped in pink-and-blue-striped hospital receiving blankets...I saw the Christ child, also born in poverty to a tired, frightened, teenage mother. My heart was broken yet again.”





Rocky Balsamo
May 5 at 12:19 AM · 🌐

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FINAL UPDATE: McAllen Refugee Respite Center

So... my three friends, [Erin](#), [Mary](#), and [Stephanie](#), over the past few days, have so eloquently and willingly, throughout the week, shared their thoughts and feelings on social media regarding our experiences serving the refugees at Catholic Charities Respite Center in McAllen Texas, while I remained mostly silent.

The truth is - I just couldn't.

My heart ached... aches... so deeply. Two days have passed since we've returned home, and I still find myself clumsily groping for words that can adequately explain the desperation I feel for the refugee families along the US border, but perhaps this will help.

I woke up this morning in my own home. I showered, as I do every morning – not every thirty days. When I brushed my teeth, shaved, and put on my deodorant, I recognized that I do that every morning too, without giving it a second thought. Our linen closet is full of deodorant, shampoo, soap, and toothpaste. I don't have to fish it out of bag that's been given to me, a bag that may or may not have the things that I need to clean my body.

As I dressed, I choose clothes, clean clothes, from a dresser filled with more clean clothes than a person could wear in a months' time. And it was 'my choice', not the choice of some well-intending volunteer from New Jersey passing out ill-fitting generic jeans and t-shirts that he bought at Walmart.

I choose from several pairs of shoes in my closet. I tied my shoes because they had actual shoelaces. No one had taken them from me.

I kissed and hugged my wife 'good morning.' She was in our kitchen, not at an unknown detention center several hundred miles from me.

My granddaughter slept in a pack-n-play with clean sheets in our spare bedroom-- not in my aching arms or my filthy lap or in the hallway of the respite center, or on the floor of a cage, where the lights are on 24/7. She had a typical breakfast-- organic milk, Cheerios, and fresh fruit. Not powdered formula, or warm water, or day-old bread, or a rotting peach.

I woke up this morning in America. An American. The only reason my life is different from the people we met and served in McAllen, is because of where I was born. I didn't earn this luxury, this gift. It was an accident of my birth.

As I get ready to go to bed, I am so grateful for the freshly laundered bedding and my cloth blanket, not a concrete floor and a government-provided mylar sheet. Before I give in to sleep, I once again this night, vividly remember every face of every person I encountered. Remembering them is my prayer.

I ask God to bless them and keep them safe. May He, and they, forgive us for our foolishness and our selfishness. [#LoSientoMyFriends](#)



"The only reason my life is different from the people we met in McAllen is because of where I was born. I didn't earn this luxury, this gift. It was an accident of my birth."



Mary McDonald Vanderhoof is with Rocky Balsamo and Stephanie Jussaume Peddicord.
May 5 at 5:23 PM · 🌐

...

I wanted to post one more reflection on my trip to McAllen yesterday, but I ended up spending the afternoon and evening sick in bed with a stomach bug. I felt well enough to get to Mass this morning and hear the Gospel reading where Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus answers, "Feed my lambs" I smiled quietly as I remembered the many ways I had the opportunity to do just that last week. On Friday morning we arrived at the gate for our 7:15 am flight home and found 5 families from the Respite Center waiting for the same flight, still clutching the red shopping bags we handed them when they arrived and dressed in the clothes we had distributed. They were nervous, as none had ever flown before. We were grateful to be there to reassure and guide them. Rocky and I changed seats with a Mom and son so they could sit together. We noticed some still had no shoelaces, so we took the laces out of our own sneakers and gave them to them, since we had other shoes we could wear.

We had time to hear their stories. One Mom and son from Guatemala were headed to Houston to reunite with the boys Dad, who hadn't seen his wife and son for 8 years. Another young pregnant girl from Honduras was headed to Las Vegas to family. A father, mother and infant were headed to Boston. A mother and 2 kids from Honduras were headed to Tampa. All had left everything they ever knew behind, walked for miles, gone hungry, sat for days or weeks in detention uncertain of their fate, and now we're only hours away from the end of their long, arduous journey and being reunited with a parent, spouse or child they hadn't seen for too many years. Poverty and violence had driven their loved one to leave years ago in hopes of making a better life in America, and now, out of desperation they had risked everything to make the same dangerous journey to reunite their family.

Our flight to Houston was extremely turbulent, making me nervous, but I could only imagine if this had been my first ever flight how frightened I would have been. Four of the five groups had to make connections in Houston in other terminals. Houston is a large, daunting airport even for seasoned travelers and it was completely overwhelming for these first time flyers who do not read or speak English. Luckily we had over an hour layover and were able to take them to their gates. The family of 3 from Honduras had over 2 hours to wait for their flight. We took them to Dunkin Donuts and got them drinks and sandwiches. They looked at the menu in complete confusion but they seemed to really enjoy the donuts. We left them at their gate, and they gave us huge hugs and thanked us. "Dios te bendiga" I whispered in the Mom's ear. She hugged me tighter.

So now I'm back physically but my head and my heart seem to still be in McAllen. I keep thinking about the buses I know are still pulling up to the Respite Center and wondering if they have enough deodorant to make up the toiletry bags. I'm worried that the children arriving won't have clean clothes given to them since I remember how empty the clothing bins were when we arrived. I keep wondering what comes next. What can I do now? I know I can't just go back to life here in NJ and not be changed by this experience. Whether it's advocacy with legislators, or sending cases of supplies to the Respite Center, or recruiting more volunteers to come with me in the Fall, I must do something. I hope these posts have made you feel the same, and in the days and weeks ahead I'll have some ways you and I can continue to help our Central American sisters and brothers.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

Thank you to all our generous donors!

We could not have done this without you!

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What Now?

We greatly appreciate what you have done, but if you want to do more, here are some suggestions:

Donations

*HRC needs the following items (**Bold** items are most needed):*

Deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, washcloths, etc.)

Shoes (sandals, tennis shoes, loafers, etc.) for men, women, children and infants of all sizes

Shoelaces

Clothes (pants, t-shirts, blouses, underclothing, socks, etc.) for children and adults of all sizes
(Adults need mainly Small and Medium sizes)

Baby supplies for toddlers (Pampers, baby wipes, baby bottles, etc.)

Sealed snack food (single serving granola bars, chips, peanut butter & cheese crackers, etc.)

Gift cards to purchase food items

Phone cards

Plastic bags for families to pack sandwiches, snacks, and water for their trip.

Cash or in-kind donations can be sent to:

Catholic Charities RGV Humanitarian Respite Center

111 S. 15th St.

McAllen, TX 78501

956-702-4088

The Respite Center also has an Amazon Wishlist (although you may find better prices elsewhere):

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/JJVAJFS3VIIQ/>

Advocacy

Many wonderful Catholic organizations are advocating for immigration reform and humane treatment of asylum seekers. See the links below to learn how you can add your voice to theirs:

<https://networklobby.org/issues/immigration/>

<https://www.sistersofmercy.org/get-involved/advocate-for-social-justice/seeking-just-and-humane-immigration-reform/>

<https://www.kinoborderinitiative.org/advocacy/>

<https://www.hopeborder.org/>

Join Us

Do you think you'd like to volunteer at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen? We are planning trips for Fall 2019 and Spring 2020. If you're interested in learning more, please email Mary Vanderhoof at mary.vanderhoof@gmail.com to receive information as we make the plans.

Sr. Norma Pimentel, MJ Coming to Speak at CFJ!

The Magdalene Circle started as a CFJ passion project in 2017 and continues to grow, thanks in no small way to the amazing women of faith who have shared their wisdom with and inspired us at our annual gathering, starting with Kerry Robinson and Christine Schenk and, this year, Sr. Norma Pimentel. On November 15, 2019, we invite women of faith with a passion for social justice and young people to join us for a luncheon and keynote address by Sr. Norma. Come be inspired and learn more about how women of faith are using their talent and treasure to shape the next generation of Catholic leaders.



SAVE THE DATE!
Magdalene Circle

ANNUAL LUNCHEON EVENT

featuring distinguished guest speaker

**SISTER
NORMA
PIMENTEL, MJ,**

Executive Director, Catholic Charities of the
Rio Grande Valley

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2019
12 P.M.



Center for
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Faith without worX is dead • James 2:26

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