

Volunteering with the First Bus

I am recalling the story of my experience with St. Michael and All Angels Church's hosting busloads of asylum seekers traveling from the border near El Paso to their sponsors scattered across the United States. I hope that readers can share some portion of the profound blessings we volunteers received from being part of this ministry.

I feel free to brag about the efficiency and warm hospitality that we offered these weary people because I only followed my instructions from the capable and hard-working organizers of a very complex operation. On very short notice, our lay and clergy immigration ministers pulled together a comprehensive plan to care to the needs of the "Strangers" God had sent to us.

The masterminds first secured our Bishop's collaboration to use our Diocesan Bosque Retreat Center to house our guests. He provided staff to prepare the rooms with linens, soap, shampoo, etc. as well as to provide meals as needed.

We didn't have an accurate count of who would arrive on the bus or buses. Somehow, we were ready to accommodate 54 people ranging in age from babes in arms to a few seniors. They were mostly from Central America. I estimate that we had three or more volunteers for each asylum seeker so we served in shifts to carry out the wide variety of tasks required. We could have done it with fewer, but so many were ready and wanted so much to help out.

My neighbors responded to my call for the numerous air mattresses needed to allow families to stay together in the same room. My recently widowed neighbor who is a physics professor at UNM set to work collecting, distributing and inflating the mattresses. A native of Brazil, his Portuguese was invaluable as he also transported Brazilians to their planes or buses at all hours of the days and nights. Several of those neighbors were delighted to join the workforces of volunteers across the city. A side benefit to our endeavor was that we broadened awareness of the plight and needs of immigrants beyond the confines of our own parish.

Our great New Mexico weather and beautiful Sandia Mountains created a welcoming set for their arrival. A large delegation of parishioners and volunteers gathered to greet our people as they disembarked from the buses. Their fearful, worried faces soon melted into relaxed smiles as Spanish and Portuguese speakers (some immigrants themselves) welcomed each person. They were led to registration tables where they were assigned appropriate size rooms. Guides checked for immediate needs and then led them to their rooms where their names were placed on the doors. Doctors and nurses were available for any expressed medical needs.

An assigned volunteer immediately began making contacts with their sponsors. Our folks made arrangements with plane and bus schedules making sure that sponsors would meet them upon arrival. We had our volunteer taxis on standby to transport them and make sure they got on board.

After the guests got situated in their rooms, they were escorted to the clothing supply room. Everything from hats down to shoes were laid out in easily accessible sizes. Assorted backpacks were available to carry changes of clothes, diapers, and whatever supplies they needed to carry with them. Most of them arrived with only the clothes they were wearing. Flip flops were not going to work for those going to cold

climates. A "runner" was on standby to go to the central warehouse for needed items where collaborating churches had collected and sorted clothing.

After their showers, people came to the spacious gathering room where chairs were grouped around tables laden with bowls of fruit and water bottles. Bananas seemed to be most popular.

A playroom well equipped with toys, puzzles, books in Spanish and English, and art supplies opened off the large room. Children and parents could still see each other. Volunteers helped the kids find what they wanted and played along with them. I watched an artist pull together six young teen aged boys to make art. Having taught American kids that age, I was astonished at their joy and enthusiasm as they expressed their feelings in colorful images. There were lots of hearts and birds in their paintings.

I was assigned to keep tabs on a very active two-year-old named Madelyn. I crawled on the floor with her, played hide and seek up and down the halls, and finally was able to cuddle her in a rocking chair when she got tired. The joy I received from that beautiful child was well worth the arthritis that hampered my getting out of bed the next morning.

Two family therapists set up sand trays under a shady ramada on the vast grounds outside the gathering room. All the symbolic figures kids could want were available for the kids to use sand play to work through stressful if not traumatic experiences that caused their families to seek asylum. Wide expanses of cottonwood shaded space allowed safety and freedom to run and play after the confinement of the long bus ride.

In two and a half days the last persons were en route to join their sponsors. Tired but blest workers put everything back in order for the next of three busloads of grateful people we hosted before the government shut us down.

I treasure the privilege I had to be a small part of such a manifestation of God's incomparable love.

Experience of April 1-3, 2019
Told by Oleta Saunders, October 2020