

## Essay by Mary Chen

I first met Father Bill Morton in December of 2014 when I arrived at the Columban Mission Center in El Paso, Texas. The cozy home of Fr. Morton lacked central heating but smelled of an authentic Mexican meal. Fr. Morton was a Columban priest, working with various missions on the border. Having served at my Chinese Catholic church in Dallas, he warmly welcomed our group and served as our retreat leader during the next week.

Our first visit was to the Annunciation Home, a home for immigrants and refugees which began operating in 1978. The immigrants at the Annunciation Home were mostly families and pregnant women from Central American countries. One of the families, consisting of a mother and son, explained to us that they fled El Salvador for the son's safety due to the gang violence that was beginning to be an everyday occurrence in streets and schools.

Another day in El Paso was spent cleaning and organizing food supplies at Nazareth, a converted shelter for undocumented immigrants. The women in charge of the facility explained that Nazareth was only an extension of the Annunciation Home when it reached its full capacity. Inside the shelters the immigrants were given temporary asylum from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and had access to clean, hot water, warm beds, and a balanced meal.

On the last day of the mission trip, our group walked across the international border into the Ciudad Juarez in Mexico. Crossing the border, we saw a stark contrast between the paved roads and infrastructure in El Paso and the crumbling roads and buildings in Juarez. We visited an after-school care facility called Biblioteca, which served 300 children from the city Anapra. From inside the building, the children ran out to greet us with smiles and warm embraces. Christina, the center director, explained to us the daily realities that these children face: how many of the students drop out of school later to work in the maquilas, and how many of the kids we met did not look their age because they only receive one full meal a day. As I interacted with the children earlier, so cheerful and happy, I had not grasped the gravity of their situations.

After Biblioteca, we ate dinner in the home of several Sisters of Charity, who ran a clinic called Proyecto Santo Nino which served handicapped people by providing medical services that their families could not afford. The sisters told us of stories where they risked their lives commuting across the border to bring the necessary supplies for the people they served; while the trips were dangerous, they would do it all again to help even just one person. That evening as I crossed back over the border to my country where I lived without fear of persecution or where I would find my next meal, I reflected about what I had seen the past few days like the undocumented immigrants and the children who lived just a twenty minute car ride away from where I was staying in El Paso yet endured so much hardship. I was moved by my experience and looked for a way to take action regarding this situation.

In the following year, I helped my Church restart the yearly Easter Carnival where the proceeds were donated to the Annunciation Home in El Paso and to the Biblioteca in Juarez. I was part of

a team of organizers who created the games and collected supplies for each booth. I actively participated in planning and advertising for the Carnival, from selling tickets on Sunday to packing candies into plastic eggs. After several months of planning and preparation, the day of Easter arrived. Once Mass ended, all the kids came running out to our booths. From the floating duck station that I oversaw, I witnessed much joy and excitement from children similar in ages to the ones I interacted with in El Paso and Juarez. The proceeds from the Carnival were able to fund school supplies for the kids at Biblioteca and feed immigrant families at the Annunciation Home. Since then, our Church has had three successful Easter Carnivals, and I will continue to volunteer every year. What I experienced on both sides of the US-Mexico border has changed my life forever.