A Year in Review 2017

The School Sisters of St. Francis is an international, intercultural congregation. 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 2017: 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 2017.
To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her,

In this report, we choose to share our experiences in the El Paso, Texas/Juárez, Mexico border region through the lens of presence and accompaniment. We believe these approaches express the Franciscan tradition of being a nonviolent, caring presence among people in need, and describe what our lived experience has been here in the border area.

The root of *acompañamiento* is the Spanish word compañero or friend. It draws from the Latin *ad cum panis*, to break bread with one another.

Mary Watkins writes, “To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end. There’s an element of mystery, of openness, of trust, in accompaniment. The companion says: ‘I’ll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads. I’ll share your fate for a while—and by ‘a while,’ I don’t mean a little while. Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it’s deemed completed—not by the accompanier, but by the person being accompanied.” (“Accompaniment: Psychosocial, Environmental, Trans-Species, Earth,” Pacific Graduate Institute.)

For us as Franciscan women, it involves listening, witnessing, and offering specific, flexible, and strategic support. The following reflections present examples of how we lived this challenge in 2017.

Sister Kathy’s accompaniment happens in two areas. As chaplain with Bienvivir All-Inclusive Senior Health, whose mission is to bring quality of life to the frail, low-income elderly of El Paso, Texas, she listens to and guides participants to engage their own spirituality in order to realign their lives while they experience diminishment, illness, loss of loved ones, loneliness, or face their own death. It is a privilege to accompany these wise, faith-filled elders and their families.

Second, as teacher and facilitator of Capacitar mind-body healing techniques, which are offered to the men and women in the El Paso federal detention facility. The detained persons are seeking political asylum due to an experience of violence or torture, the murder of a loved one, or the threat of death or of violence in their countries of origin. Others are persons who do not have the documentation for residency. All face deportation, separation from their families, or a possible future in a country where they no longer have connections or a safe place to live.

On completion of the four-week class cycle, the detainees are asked to draw images of themselves before Capacitar classes and afterward. The “before” pictures often show dark clouds, barren trees, and dry or drooping flowers. These images express feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, hopelessness. The “after” pictures often show green trees and fields, colored blossoms and red fruit on trees, and a bright yellow sun in a blue sky with puffy white clouds.

The “after” pictures express a sense of hope, a surer sense of self-worth, less use of medicine for depression or insomnia, and an inner calmness in spite of facing separation and suffering. Many “thank yous” are expressed by the detainees. It is a blessing and a gift to witness the resilience and strength of the human spirit in the face of such suffering.
To break bread together...

**New Bibles**

The sisters accompany many ministers of the parish, and became aware that many of them were using Bibles with loose or missing pages. When word arrived that there were funds to purchase 70 Bibles, the sisters were delighted. We then determined that if we purchased the Bibles in Juárez, the funds designated for shipping could instead be used to buy more Bibles. A total of 170 Bibles were distributed to these ministers! One young man, a coordinator of the Confirmation group, carried his Bible, hugging it tightly and giving it a tender kiss before he sat down with it.

Now the proclamation of the Word can be done with a new, hard cover Bible, and with a grateful smile on the lips of those who received it.

**Fresh Air from Church to the Kitchen**

The sisters living in Juárez, México, have many opportunities to share some of the difficulties of the people who live around them. One example of this is a very hot church with some 300 parishioners and nothing more than some small fans to cool them.

Last year, thanks to many donors, it was possible to buy a second-hand swamp cooler for $1,500. Swamp coolers are big fans lined with straw mats through which water is run. The air that passes through the wet mats is cool and fresh. The new cooler has made a big difference in how the people feel about going to church.

When the sisters visited some of the families in the Food Program, sitting with them in their kitchens, it became obvious that one third of these families did not have any fans in their homes. With weeks of intense desert heat, these families had to look for relief outside of their houses. Thanks to the generous donations given to the Mission on the Border, it was possible to buy a fan for each family. Now these families can sit together around their fan, enjoy the groceries from the Food Program, and delight in a refreshing breeze.

Sister Carol Jean accompanies a Juárez resident who had no source of cooling before the fan was donated.
To be present on a journey...

Walking, Side by Side, with our Parish Families in Juárez

Sister Josefina is a well known figure as she walks from house to house to distribute the Holy Eucharist and to be present to families in their many struggles. She listens to their stories, and shares their pain and grief. By “being present,” she lifts some of the burdens of their situations. At times, her own heart is heavy with what she learns.

Sister Josefina has discovered that in many families, the children marry very young, in spite of their parents’ advice to the contrary. Serious problems often arise and these new families return to their parents’ homes and leave all the responsibility and expense to their mothers. Other families are extremely poor, and the desperate search for a better life can lead to all kinds of drug dealing and trafficking. With increased availability of crystal methamphetamine, there is a lot of fear and violence in these homes. Assaults and robberies are a daily occurrence.

In addition, almost every Juárez family is suffering from the loss of a loved one, either assassinated or “disappeared” by the police. For a long time, these families have kept silent, but they are beginning to share their painful experiences with those they can confide in.

Sister Josefina sits with these families and listens to their stories; practices Capacitar techniques with them to lessen their stress; and reflects on the Word of God. This helps them to relax and feel more confident to continue the difficult paths of their lives.

One sad example of accompaniment is the story of José. He is the father of three beautiful children, ages one, three and five. One day, he told Sister Josefina that he needed help because he had lost his job due to cancerous growths on his arms. Another time, when Sister was giving him some groceries, José told her how badly he felt to see his wife work so hard and come home so tired, maintaining the family, while he could do nothing to help her or the children. Sister tried to encourage him: He is young, God is with him, and he has a path to walk with his family. He told Sister that she was an angel that God had put in his path. But a few weeks later, José left his family and his mother moved away to another part of the city.

By “being present,” she lifts some of the burdens of their situations. At times, her own heart is heavy with what she learns.

As a neighbor, Sister Josefina understands the struggles of these families, and can testify to the injustices that so many poor people are subjected to. Her listening presence helps to restore self-respect in these families and strengthen their determination to move forward with their lives.

Sister Josefina shares some clothing with a needy family.
Walking, Side by Side, with the People in the Colonias

Sister Elsa’s ministries demonstrate the importance of presence and accompaniment. She literally walks with the people, which has been deeply appreciated by those who live in the colonias, an unincorporated area in the desert of El Paso county.

She has formed Bible study groups, and visited the sick and elderly especially those near death. She evangelizes without words by going through the streets, showing fidelity and perseverance in her pastoral work. Her acts of love and compassion are done for all the people she meets. Her accompaniment in times of joy, sorrow, and crisis situations means everything to those she serves.

One day a man stopped her on the street and said that he and his wife wanted to pay the rent for the trailer where Sister Elsa and another sister lived because the sisters’ presence meant so much to the community. They didn’t want the sisters to leave.

Now Sister Elsa ministers at a parish in El Paso serving the sick and elderly. One elderly woman said “I’m so lonely. Your presence in my home, praying with me, brings joy to my day.”

Recently, Sister Elsa has been invited to teach classes on the sacraments to the unaccompanied Catholic youth being held in protective custody (detention) until their immigration cases are resolved. What joy is seen in the eyes of the Guatemalan youth when they learn that Sister Elsa is also from Guatemala!

“I’m so lonely. Your presence in my home, praying with me, brings joy to my day.”
To accompany means to offer strategic support and facilitate growth...

**Reading Promotes Success**

Ten years ago, Sisters Joan McCoy and Fran Hicks began operating small libraries, in the unincorporated *colonias* area in the desert outside El Paso. The mothers in various homes were chosen to be the “librarians.”

Reading is so important for these children, whose first language is Spanish, so they can increase their English skills. Public libraries are ten miles away and in other areas, a family needs to pay for their library card.

Every summer, between 50 to 87 children and youth have participated in the reading program. Here are some of their comments about reading: “When I read, I’m not so angry.”

“I’ve read 50 books over two summers. This year I passed the English proficiency test and I’m no longer in bilingual classes.”

“I didn’t like to read and I only read books to get my school supplies as a prize for reading. But now I like to read, even if I don’t get a prize.”

One group of third grade girls formed their own library club to share books and to read to the kindergarteners.

Yes, the children come to get books to read, but they receive much more. They are accompanied in their learning by the librarians. They are asked to share ideas from what they have read. They are listened to, encouraged, and challenged to read more. They take pride in their improvement and are applauded for their accomplishments by the librarian and their parents.

Accompaniment in reading has made a difference in these children’s lives.

**Promoting Marketing Skills in a Women’s Cooperative**

Besides working with the libraries, Sister Fran is collaborating with the Adrian Dominicans Centro Santa Catalina project in Juárez, Mexico. She accompanies a group of 19 women in their sewing cooperative by developing new marketing strategies and increasing sales. These women are becoming more self-sufficient in their small business and hope to be completely independent in three years.

Another component of Centro Santa Catalina is a homework help program for children and youth, in which Sister Fran assists children with reading difficulties. Sister Fran also teaches English to the tutors in this homework help program so they can advance in their studies. The University of Juárez is now requiring that students entering any Master’s degree program at the university have basic English skills.

In all of these programs, women and children across the border are being given the skills needed to increase their future opportunities.
Sister Arlene provides therapeutic support at the Human Rights Center Paso del Norte in Juárez, Mexico. She, and the other members of the multidisciplinary staff, accompany survivors of torture and their families, as well as family members of forcibly disappeared persons. Instead of turning away from suffering, they bring their presence to what is difficult. They listen with respect to the cries for justice from the families, allowing the hurt to affect them and to influence future strategies of action.

Family members are treated not as clients who need help, but as companions on a journey in search of truth and restorative justice in relation to the offenses perpetrated against them. A process is begun in which these women and men cease to be victims. They learn to leave their experiences of victimization behind, and become survivors. They live with their pain without acting as victims.

Sister Arlene and other staff members leave their comfort zones of professional work styles and walk side by side with family members. They share personal space to allow them to express grief or anger. They attend meetings with government officials and judicial proceedings, forming networks of mutual support and collective action. Together, they struggle to obtain redress for the wrongs committed against the families and their loved ones.

This lengthy, multi-faceted accompaniment often extends over several years, clearly conveying the message that the staff of the center will not disappear from the struggle even when the process becomes inconvenient and dangerous. It engenders confidence among family members, and contributes to their resilience and determination to work together to reconstruct the social fabric of their community.

One example of this approach is the case of a 61-year-old man, José, who had been arrested, tortured, and sentenced to life in prison. The brutal treatment at the time of his arrest resulted in a detached retina in one eye, for which he received no medical help. In September 2017, staff and family members celebrated his exoneration and release from prison after serving six years of his sentence.

The staff accompanied José’s wife for several years during the detention and trial process. Currently, Sister Arlene provides emotional support to José and as he strives to manage his post-traumatic stress reactions and readjust to civilian life. Other staff accompany the couple in meetings with legal and health officials to receive compensation for the physical and economic injuries that José received.

Such accompaniment requires time, commitment, patience, and the ability to be flexible to be of assistance. It is not only about addressing the needs of a particular group of people, but is a commitment to change the societal conditions that sow the seeds of violence.
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
iperez@sssf.org • 414-385-5255

CONTRIBUTE
• Monetary donations to support the ministries of Casa Alexia
• A funding priority for 2018 is the “Across the Border Sharing Project” which provides 100 families in Juárez with 10 basic necessities. The cost of the program for one month is $1,000. Even the smallest donation makes a difference.

TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION
Visit www.casaalexia.org and click on “Get Involved” and then “Online Giving.” Please indicate that your donation is for Casa Alexia in the “Additional Information” box at the bottom of the page. You can also send a donation directly to our mailing address, designating its use for the food.

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