

Gifts of Aid Dot Fence At Border

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT
BY PINAR ISTEK

They call themselves the Tucson Samaritans, and since 2002 they have dedicated themselves to the survival of people who make the perilous trek from Mexico to the southern Arizona desert.

Carrying backpacks filled with bottles of water and bags of food on a recent Saturday, four Samaritans drove to a remote spot about four miles from the border and walked across a dry riverbed in Walker Canyon, the only sound was the crunching of their feet.

When they reached the border fence, they hung the supplies on the barbed wire.

“The reason I started doing this is because my mom crossed the border 23 years ago,” said Alby Chaj, a computer science student at the University of Arizona who joined the group last month. “She doesn’t talk about it, but I am sure there is a reason why she doesn’t want to talk about it. I guess this is important, ‘cause I want to help people. I don’t know if anyone helped my mom when she crossed.”

Samaritan members try to leave supplies almost every day. They estimate that their offerings of food and water, permitted by the Border Patrol, have helped thousands of migrants over the years, but they do not know for certain.

The numbers they do know are the reason they continue their work: More than 150 migrants have died since January 2014, according to Dr. Gregory Hess, the chief medical examiner of Pima County.

“What I do compared to what they are going through, it is nothing,” said Robert Kee, a retired dental technician who has been working with the Samaritan group for 10 years.

He told the story of a man who had just crossed the border and was handed a backpack by a young girl who was with his group.

“We gave him some food packs and water,” Mr. Kee said. “And he says, ‘Wait, someone else might need that.’”

“Oh my gosh!” Mr. Kee continued. “You are in the middle of nowhere. And you are thinking about someone else. He is a better man than me. So that’s probably why I do what I do.”



Tucson Samaritans brought packed food, water and other essentials in bags to leave at the U.S.-Mexico border for migrants. A bag with food and bandages left at the border read, “Go With God.”

“I’ve been asking, ‘Why God? Why me?’ and I know he has given me something to fight for.”

ROSA ROBLES LORETO | 41

For Immigrant Mother in Sanctuary, Life in Limbo

TEXT BY JASMINE AGUILERA
AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY SANTIAGO MEJIA

Two brothers kick a soccer ball back and forth across a church courtyard under the watchful eyes of their mother, Rosa Robles Loreto, who is standing in the shade, making sure they do not break anything.

“Vamos a la alberca?” (“Let’s go to the pool?”) Gerardo Jr., the older boy, asks her.

“Ay, quieren todo,” Ms. Robles says. (“They want everything.”)

But the boys, who are visiting their mother, know that she can’t take them to the pool, can’t go to their baseball games and can’t pick them up from school. Ms. Robles, 41, is confined to the Southside Presbyterian Church, where she claimed sanctuary in August after receiving a deportation notice. There is no indication that she will be leaving the church anytime soon.

In the months since she took up residence in the church, her story has spread throughout Tucson, where homes and businesses display “We Stand With Rosa” posters and a Twitter account keeps tabs on her case. Her hashtag is #LetRosaStay.

Supporters hoping to block her deportation to Mexico have organized rallies, circulated petitions and written letters to President Obama. But her situation remains unchanged.

Ms. Robles and her husband came to Tucson from Mexico 16 years ago, although they returned to Mexico for the birth of Gerardo Jr., 12, and his brother, Emiliano, 9. The couple came back to Tucson with their children, where Ms. Robles worked as a maid. Her husband, Gerardo, who has a different last name, keeps his identity private because he is now the sole breadwinner.

Ms. Robles was driving her employer’s van in September 2010 when she drove into a traffic cone near a construction site. A Sheriff’s Department officer saw the incident, pulled her over and determined that she was undocumented.

She said she was held for 40 minutes before a Border Patrol agent arrived and recalled weeping at the thought of leaving her children.

“I kept begging and begging the officer to just give me a ticket, but he wouldn’t,” she said.

Ms. Robles spent a month in a detention center about 60 miles northwest of

Tucson before being released on \$3,000 bond. Margo Cowan, Ms. Robles’ lawyer, said her client did not understand the immigration process at the time. She said Ms. Robles unwittingly asked the judge for voluntary deportation in 2012.

After realizing her mistake, Ms. Robles appealed, but her appeal was rejected in



2014. When she received a formal deportation notice, she sought advice from Ms. Cowan and learned that she could turn to the church for protection.

“Sanctuary is more of a spiritual and political tactic than a legal one,” Ms. Cowan said. Although there is nothing to stop Immigration and Customs Enforce-

ment from taking Ms. Robles into custody, Ms. Cowan said a level of respect is maintained between ICE and the religious community.

A representative of ICE said that the agency would not take action on her removal order but added that her request to drop the deportation case had been denied, The Arizona Republic reported in August.

The 2014 Immigration Accountability Executive Action by President Obama states that the deportation priority list includes only those who are a threat to national security and public safety. Ms. Robles’ record is clean.

Noel Andersen, a coordinator for the Church World Service, a global organization whose work includes immigrants’ rights, said that there were hundreds of churches around the country that offer sanctuary for immigrants, but few have had active cases.

Sanctuary was more common in the 1980s, especially in the Southwest.

Ms. Robles is the latest of more than 40 people who have crossed the border illegally and who have sought shelter at Southside Presbyterian since the 1980s. She sleeps in her own room, roughly 15 by 15 square feet, with twin-size bunk beds, a TV and a mini fridge. She has a

routine of TV and Internet surfing, cooking and sitting in meditative thought. She listens to Christian music. She prays.

“I have a lot of time to think,” Ms. Robles said. “I used to think that the entire world hated me and my family, and we felt so marginalized. But seeing so much support is what has made us so strong and feel like we’re not alone. We realize that when we are heard, the support comes.”

“This is not an easy decision for someone to make,” Ms. Cowan said. “The moment she claims sanctuary, she’s not just trying to protect herself she has become a civil rights leader.”

Ms. Robles has become a rallying point for the immigrant rights movement, and she is proud of it. “I’ve been asking, ‘Why God? Why me?’ and I know he has given me something to fight for,” she said.

But she misses her old life. She misses work and home. Mostly she misses her children.

She watched Emiliano ride his red bicycle around the church courtyard. Now that her boys are out of school, she said, she hopes her sometimes dark moods might brighten.

“I fear that I might be missing some important parts of their lives,” she said. “But they understand and they know that all of this is to keep us together.”



WAITING AND PRAYING Rosa Robles Loreto, left, tidied up her room, which is roughly 15 by 15 square feet, at the Southside Presbyterian Church while her son Emiliano visited. A prayer group gathered for Ms. Robles at the church, which has held a vigil for her every day since she took sanctuary in August. She received a deportation order after the police found she had entered the country illegally.