

Broad Strokes and Intentions

If there is one thing I have learned after spending a week in the borderlands, it's that you never know what you're going to get. As I drove into Nogales, AZ for the first time and came around the bend of the terminating highway, I was immediately struck by what I saw; the border wall cut through the town like a scar, splitting the hills, buildings, and streets into two distinct parts. Seeing the wall for the first time was a powerful experience, one that evoked awe, but also made me incredibly uneasy. These two opposing emotions butt up next to each other, each potent and undeniably present. This is a pattern that I have noticed in my time here – the people, experiences, and emotions that define the borderlands are often polar opposites, yet they exist so close together.

The coexistence of opposing emotions and events has been a common thread connecting this week's experiences. One day, we were able to witness the joy clearly evident on the faces of the families we greeted as they stepped foot in the US for the first time. The next, we heard the stories of the trauma and pain that so many have suffered on their treacherous journeys from their homes to the shelters in Nogales, Sonora. As we spent the night in the abandoned desert town of Ruby, surrounded by striking mountains and the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen, the sounds of the coyotes' howls reminded us of the realities of the cruel, inhospitable terrain that define the landscape around us. It is sobering that something can be so beautiful and yet so deadly at the same time. But the stark dichotomies of the borderlands don't end there: humanitarians carrying water drive the same backroads as vigilante militiamen carrying assault rifles, and border patrol's glib words advocating for the preservation of life evaporate as we learn about their policies designed to make those who dare cross the border suffer.

Sometimes it only takes moments to experience the wildly opposing emotions of the borderlands. One hour, we were passing out food and water to asylum seekers and migrants as they crossed through Trump's 18 billion dollar wall laden with holes. The next hour, we witnessed what happens to far too many as they desperately risk everything in hopes of escaping violence, providing for their families, and finding a better life in a world that has done them so wrong: on the side of the road, surrounded by ambulances and flashing border patrol trucks, we saw EMTs unsuccessfully perform CPR on a migrant, a human being with family who may never know what happened to them, who has become a victim of the desert and the policies that forced them to brave it.

What has been most striking about my time here is learning, witnessing, and coping with how

such joy can border such despair. How can, in one moment, we provide life in the form of water and food, and in the next, see it so cruelly taken away? This is the reality of life on the border. It is cruel, joyful, devastating, beautiful, malicious, deeply kind, woefully overwhelming, and also profoundly hopeful. It is so multi-faceted that it is impossible to draw lines between the interconnected, interdependent pieces that compose it. Drawing borders in this way is senseless.

At the end of every week, we reflect on the question, “So what?” What do all of these experiences mean for us? How do we move forward after witnessing such senseless acts of violence? How do we honor and recognize the humanity of the person who was so easily dehumanized? These experiences stick with us, they change our trajectories, they inspire us, and they galvanize us – we will never forget what happened this week and what we saw. We were put there on that road in the middle of the desert for a reason, and although we are not going to fundamentally change what is happening at the border in our six short weeks, what is happening here will certainly change us.

