



Building Bridges

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I got about half of the quiz wrong,
a shaky start for my new border alliances!

But after all, the point of my day was to learn the truth
about life in the borderlands. An American group, Border

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The border gate.



Bob Phillips at the border fence.

Community Alliance (BCA), sponsors tours to Nogales, Sonora for anyone who wants the facts about our friends to the south and our diverse borderlands culture.

I joined a group of these curious folks in Tubac in February.

At the beginning of the tour, a quiz was distributed with several multiple-choice questions about Mexico, the Mexican people, Nogales, and border issues, testing us on our knowledge of these topics. Over the course of the day, answers were provided gradually.

BCA supports humanitarian groups on both sides of the border and educates the public on key border issues.

BCA's mission is to "bridge the border" by providing better understanding between peoples. BCA is in partnership with FESAC (Fundación Del Empresariado Sonorense), a Sonoran NGO (non-governmental organization) funded by philanthropic business interests to improve the quality of life in Sonora and provide a strong workforce.

The theme of "building bridges" came up often during the day.

Bob Phillips, founding Executive Director of the Border Community Alliance (BCA), began the day with the statement "we don't have a political agenda." He emphasized BCA's objectives of public education ("the best way to educate folks is to take them to the border area; we have a prejudicial perspective" of our neighbors), and coordination of cultural and humanitarian activity and resources.

Bob highlighted his career in NGOs. He's a native of Jerome, Arizona and his wife is a Mexican immigrant. Bob also provided some background thoughts, beginning with regional history. "The 1847 Mexican-American War started a history which Mexicans are still trying to come to grips with."



Bibi Ruedaplores and Alma Cota de Yanez at Casa Hogar.

The quiz and our day’s agenda were designed to dispel myths and misconceptions about the border region, trumpet its major social and economic developments, and cite enlightening data such as sales tax revenue resulting from Mexican shopping traffic in the U.S. Per Bob, nine new universities have sprung up in Nogales Sonora in the past 15 years. Eighty percent of sales tax collected in Nogales, Arizona is from Mexican visitors.

We left Tubac and caravanned to the border, parked, crossed through the gates and were promptly met by Alma Cota de Yanez, Executive Director of FESAC. The group hopped into a white mini-bus with a driver.



Casa Hogar.

Emphasizing the positive side of what’s happening in Mexico is a key career goal of Alma’s.

Her objective for the day was to demonstrate the encouraging economic, social, and social transformation in Sonora that’s improving lives and creating a stronger society and more stable border environment. As we motored through the city, Alma was frank and explicit, exhorting us to shed the politics of fear. “Forget what the politicians say, forget what Trump says.”

She provided a lively lesson on the underpinnings of Nogales’ success: “social investment” is making the border community happier, healthier, and safer. And it all started in the last 10 years. She used the language of her work throughout the day: “social capital,” “civil society,” “local solutions for local problems.”

Alma was an articulate dynamo, leading our day as a passionate champion of humanitarianism.

The border is a “potluck from everywhere,” she said, with nationalities from all over the world. It’s like a “third country” because of its mingling of many international cultures, including Chinese.



Gabriela Valle and daughter Ana Paola Valenzuela at Venciendo al Autismo.



DeiJuven Community Center.

Alma stressed that no other Sonoran city enjoys such cooperation between business, government, and civic groups. This includes maquila associations (maquilas are duty-free and tariff-free factory businesses importing materials and exporting finished products using local labor) and other private funds. It's a network coordinated by FESAC.

We began touring new facilities housing the humanitarian groups. As we were told, the construction money was donated by local business people. From Alma's comments, one particularly prominent Nogales businessman is evidently a kingpin for this philanthropic activity, but she declined to provide his name.

The land underneath these new structures came from "tax loss."

Alma's work depends on careful adherence to a policy of making sure that donated money "goes where you want it to." She said ninety-five percent of funds go directly to "the end product" of social investment and are neither misappropriated nor wasted.

Our first visit was to Casa Hogar Para Niñas Madre Conchita, a shelter for children from bad family situations, such as abusive fathers or absent parents, prostitute mothers or parents with mental illness or addictions.

For the child, the sheltering process starts with a report of the his/her plight to the governmental bureau D.I.F. (National System for Integral Family Development), then to Casa Hogar for further evaluation.

Unlike many Mexican shelters, a distinction of Casa Hogar is that young kids don't have to leave at 12 or 13 years of age. They can stay all the way through their secondary schooling.



Our driver taking a break at DeiJuven Community Center.

The staff of Casa Hogar is comprised of Catholic nuns from the religious order Instituto Hijas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, or Daughters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with Bibi Ruedaplores as civilian director.

Alma cited much progress in recent years for women in Mexico: today's average of 2.3 children per family in Mexico versus 7 to 9 in the 1970s.

Nearby Casa Hogar were other new humanitarian centers, including an autistic center, Venciendo al Autismo, where parents must contribute hours of work at the center if they bring their children for care. We heard from parent Gabriela Valle and met her beautiful daughter, learning about how natural diets can improve the symptoms of autism.



Wheelchair craftsman Gabriel Cepeda at ARSOBO.

Next on the agenda was the new DeiJuven Community Center, a youth-oriented facility with a gymnasium, music center, and classrooms for nutrition, health, and English tutoring, used to supplement regular education after school hours or during the summer recess. "How do we rescue children before they become targets of cartels and mafia?" asked Alma rhetorically. The Center furnishes activities to keep youth busy and moreover, provides cultural activities and leadership for long term growth. It's staffed by Salesians of Don Bosco, a Roman Catholic religious institute of men, who live just up the hill.

After a group burrito break, next on the tour was Nuevo Nogales, a Maquila area in the southern city sprawl with factories and new housing by Infonavit, the Mexican federal institute for worker housing. Here, young families can borrow and own their home for the first time, with factory paychecks deducting mortgage payments.

Living conditions in the borderlands, as everywhere on earth, depend upon a dependable supply of quality water. Alma bluntly replied "No" when asked if there's enough water for all the growth in Nogales. For most residences, there are two hours of running water availability per day,



Nuevo Nogales on the southern ramparts of the city.

when holding tanks can be filled and used to apportion water for the remainder of the day.

We drove through another large, brand new neighborhood, more colorful and more elaborate, built for young professionals.

Our final tour destination was ARSOBO, a “social maquiladora” where wheelchairs and other equipment are manufactured by and for disabled folks at a fraction of the regular cost. This is accomplished in part by using innovative materials and sources of supply. Director Francisco Trujillo showed us around the workshop and introduced employees.

Our day ended with refreshments at the luxurious La Roca restaurant, just steps from the border gate. Meeting us was Leshawna Johnson, Vice Consul of the Nogales U.S. Consulate, who offered a few words and listened to a debriefing from each tour participant.

Alma Cota finds support for building border bridges from all quarters: “The U.S. Consulate is very supportive of the FESAC network.”

For more information see www.bordercommunityalliance.com and <http://fesac.org>.

