

## Sisters Kay Conroy and Katherine McGrath: Welcoming the Stranger

Loved and energized by the One who calls them, Sisters Kay Conroy and Katherine McGrath responded to an appeal for volunteers at Annunciation House, El Paso, Texas at the border of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. They were there in 2018, 2019 and most recently in late summer, 2021. Both Sisters had been on mission for a number of years in Peru. While many Sisters their age are considering retirement, Sisters Kay and Katherine are not. Through the spirit and mission of the Sisters of Charity, and to honor Jesus Christ by serving their brother and sisters in need they feel grateful, blessed and honored to serve migrants in critical need as they arrive in the United States.

The Sisters witnessed the difficult barriers these asylum seekers encountered in entering the country, from lack of language skills, attaining the basic necessities of food, shelter, employment insecurity and systemic racism. Settling into new life in the United States is tremendously challenging for these migrant people. However, they feel the conditions they fled from in their own country, leaving family, etc. only encouraged them to face these new challenges.

The Sisters, along with other volunteers at Annunciation House are quite often the first welcoming presence these migrants encounter when finally crossing the United States border. They are soon met with an unspoken-language-free welcome of a smile and an open heart at the door of this shelter.

Most of the people Sisters Kay and Katherine encountered are asylum seekers who have escaped countries of civil unrest, war, violence, poverty, particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Haiti, Mexico and even Turkey. The dream of arriving in the 'land of the free' in America is what encouraged them during arduous days, weeks and sometimes months as they made those long treks to the border of the United States. Upon reaching the border many are placed in detention areas before finally being released with their legal documents to Annunciation House.

The staff/volunteers at Annunciation House are unfazed by the daunting tasks of welcoming and assisting these 'new guests' during their days at the shelter. Sisters Kay and Katherine fully embrace as their mantra, 'when we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ'. Listening and a caring presence is so needed and warm hospitality is the living out of these words expressed in assisting with meal preparations, providing clothing, basic translation assistance, helping with the calls to their family/sponsor in the United States etc. It is the family/sponsor who provides for the transportation (bus, plane) from El Paso to their final destination. When the 'guests' are leaving they are provided with travel bags containing snacks, etc. and a sign stating, 'I do not speak English. Please help me to find my way to (terminal, gate for ....) Thank you.' Words of deep gratitude and often hugs and tears are shared at the time of departure from Annunciation House.

The Sisters have so many stories/experiences to share. They spoke of a young man who fled across to the border by river. Unable to swim he grasped the leg of a stranger in front of him. He arrived despite the strong currents which often are too difficult for some. This young man then walked fourteen hours through the desert with others. He lost one shoe in the river, his socks and other shoe were worn thin and so splinter like sores formed on his feet from the harsh desert grass and tumbleweed. He never stopped, complained but just forged ahead to his destination – the border and then to Annunciation House.

Another, a father of six had jumped a border wall and then paid a smuggler to bring him closer to the Mew Mexico border crossing. He was one of many in an overcrowded truck that ran a checkpoint, only to crash and all passengers were hurled onto harsh terrain. Border Patrol agents soon arrived and this father of six had to be helicoptered to a hospital because of very serious head injuries. Fortunately, he was later released to Annunciation House where he arrived with his 'legal documents', was able to contact his family in New Jersey and would soon be able to continue his trek to a better life against all odds.

There are other stories of mothers, with newborns, toddlers, teens, deeming the harsh reality of getting to the US border and family in the US worth the tremendous risks compared to the poverty, violence, etc. of their own country. Many paid smugglers with borrowed monies, or by selling their home or whatever piece of property they might have owned. They endured paltry conditions in overcrowded vehicles, malnutrition, violence, illness, etc. just to keep going to life, hopefully a better life.

Sisters Kay and Katherine were so edified and grateful for the many kindnesses/assistance the residents of El Paso also have contributed these many years to the migrants. Many help, despite fearing for their lives for 'harboring fugitives' just for giving food, water, a ride. Many of the community of El Paso remember their own personal stories of having been migrants themselves.

And that is true for all of us also if we remember our family histories. We were all immigrants to our countries of America and Canada. We must remember that the unrest in our world is manmade. We have the responsibility despite the politics to also see and focus on the humanitarian crisis suffered by those innocents in need. These migrants have taught us by their example to never lose hope of our dreams and to be always mindful as Christians 'to love our neighbor as ourselves'. A phrase in Spanish expresses what is needed with today's crisis – 'conscientization' – consciousness raising.

The lived charism of Charity of Sisters Kay and Katherine is so inspiring! Through the invaluable support of the Congregation and our donors they have hope that there will be more opportunities for them and/or other Sisters to enable dreams of migrants to become a little easier and a reality.

Sisters Kay and Katherine invite us all to remember daily in prayer 'the stranger in our midst'. 'Now that you know you must respond with compassion. You have the response-ability.'

Let us pray often:

“The cry of these asylum seekers is ‘will you let us in’ and it is your cry to us at this time, O God. Give us hearts that break open when our brothers and sisters turn to us with that same cry, then surely this is what will follow:

Ears will no longer turn deaf to those voices,  
Eyes will see a moment of grace instead of a threat,  
Tongues will not be silent, but instead, will advocate,  
Hands will reach out working for peace and justice in their homelands  
and working for peace and justice in our land where they now seek safe haven.”  
(from a Catholic Charities prayer)