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Migrants: the next generation

You can find tomorrow's illegal immigrants in the poor colonias of Nogales. Thank free trade.

For Christmas this year, I asked my children for two things: homemade CDs with music I enjoy and gifts of service.

Keep the chocolate I shouldn't eat, I said, and give me a coupon stating you'll join me in a community service project.

In redeeming one of these presents last month, I found myself sitting on the roof of a brick-walled, dirt-floored home in a Nogales, Son., colonia with two small children I'd just met, listening to stories in a language I don't understand.

My college-aged son and I had joined a group from the St. Thomas More Catholic Newman Center for a Habitat for Humanity build in Nogales.

I had no idea where the home would be, but it didn't occur to me that Habitat would build in the colonias.

Indeed, Habitat is building in these desperately poor squatter settlements, brought to you by the North American Free Trade Agreement, which allows American companies to run factories in Mexico, says Tucsonan Scott A. Noseworthy.

He is the "brigade leader" for the Nogales Habitat builds, and each weekend he shuttles groups up the hills surrounding the city to plots of land squeezed between lean-to homes.

On this particular Saturday, his crew consisted of five Catholic UA students, one 30ish Realtor and me, a woman way too close to 50 to be swinging a pickax in public.

Nonetheless, part of our job was hacking the unforgiving soil into submission so it could be leveled ("Imagine being on a chain gang," Scott advised), and the other was shoveling about 5 cubic yards of fill dirt into buckets and dragging those buckets to the build site.

Near the end of the day, the homeowner's children, ages 3 and 7, were growing restless and getting in the way of falling pickaxes and swinging shovels.

Since I needed a rest, I figured I'd provide a distraction for them, determined as they were to show someone the photos they had brought out of their small home.

I got onto the roof, which was level with the hillside on one side of the house. My Spanish vocabulary consists of few words: buenos días, mucho gusto, gracias, casa.

Luckily, the language of motherhood crosses linguistic barriers. I motioned for the kids to sit with me, and they scrambled close, photos outstretched.

The eldest immediately began her native-tongue narration. I nodded and said, "Sí, sí," my facial expression mirroring hers - this minute intense, the next happy, the next pensive.

With this scant encouragement, she bantered more fervently, laughed more enthusiastically and pointed more emphatically at various people in the photos.

Every so often, her younger brother would join in, pointing wildly and offering his own staccato version of the picture's events. They were two of the happiest kids I've ever met.

But when they become teenagers, their parents unable to afford high school and them unable to find work paying more than \$2 an hour, will they look at their life in the colonia - no running water, no sewer lines, unpredictable electricity - and think, "I want something better?"

When they pay \$4.75 for a gallon of milk in Sonora, knowing it is half that much in Arizona, will they wonder why?

Will they, like Scott, become convinced things will never get better as long as free trade policies prevent union organizing in the maquiladoras?

And then one day, out of frustration and a desire for something better, will they wander toward the border fence, peer over at the Promised Land and think of sneaking across?

If you were in their shoes, wouldn't you?

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