

WHAT TEAM ADAS FOUND ACROSS THE BORDER

By Ruth Kleinrock and Manny Schiffres

When a group of Adas Israel members arrived in Mexico in mid-January to provide assistance to asylum seekers languishing in the border town of Matamoros and to bear witness to their suffering, we had some idea of what to expect. But nothing could have prepared us for the reality on the ground: Hundreds of tents cramped together just yards from the bridge to Brownsville, Texas; the sight of individuals bathing and washing their clothes in the Rio Grande River, which some also used as a latrine; the lengthy lines of people, many of them children, who came out for the two dinners we would serve them--one of two daily meals they received if all went according to plan. It didn't always. The situation was—and remains—dire.

Our group, under the leadership of Sharon Burka, consisted of 12 Adas members and four out-of-town relatives. Four in our group ranged in age from 12 to 21. We worked closely with Team Brownsville, a non-profit that assists asylum seekers stranded in Matamoros. Their numbers have swollen because of U.S. policy to require asylum seekers to remain in Mexico while they await their hearings (known formally as the Migrant Protection Protocols).

On our first day, several of us participated in the weekly sidewalk *escuelita*, helping to teach kids art, math, and yoga. We found the children eager to learn and engage. That night, we served dinner to about 1,000 people. A local restaurant prepared the meal with funds raised by Adas members.

On day two we prepared dinner for 1,000, an operation that involved massive amounts of shopping and shlepping, not to mention the food prep itself. The menu: 24 enchilada casseroles, coleslaw, fresh fruit (a special treat), cookies and bottled water. As soon as we crossed the Gateway International Bridge and arrived in Matamoros with our meal-bearing wagons, it was clear that we were meeting an important need, as many families had already lined up for dinner. We served non-stop for two hours. Afterward, we hauled the carts and ourselves back across the border.

Adding to the poignancy of our trip, one of our members, Jackie Hoffenberg, and her sister (both fluent Spanish speakers) encountered two Cuban asylum seekers who told them that they were kidnapped by Mexican police, beaten and held hostage for five days before a relative in the U.S. paid a \$4,000 ransom. The men feared for their lives and had evidence--videos and photos--to back up their claim. Jackie, who happens to be an immigration lawyer, was able to arrange an interview that could have resulted in the men being allowed to remain in the U.S. while they awaited their asylum hearings. She was able to represent one of the men at his preliminary hearing in the so-called "tent court," a makeshift tribunal located just a few hundred feet inside U.S. territory, surrounded by barbed wire and adjacent to a kennel with barking police dogs. Ultimately, both of their requests were denied and the men were returned to Mexico to await their asylum hearings.

The deck is stacked against the asylum seekers, Jackie explained. "The migrants, who often

have limited education and language skills, must navigate a complex legal process alone,” she said. “We were particularly disturbed to learn that the asylum officers told the Cubans that they did not need to see their evidence before rendering a decision. They now must spend several more months in the squalid tent camp.”