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The heartbreaking tales of Guatemalan immigrants

Mary Ann McGivern | Mar. 27, 2012 NCR Today

This past week I have been accompanying Gloria, a sister from Guatemala, on a tour of works of Loretto community members. One Loretto hostess arranged an afternoon meeting with women from Guatemala, all without documents, to tell Gloria about their lives here.

One of the things they described was how they entered the country. None of them had ever talked to one another about finding and paying a coyote -- the one who leads a group across the border and through the desert. One described how she swam through a flood on the Rio Grande. Another was pregnant. A third brought her 6-month-old son.

They talked about what they left behind in Guatemala. They left families and friends and *pueblo* culture. But they also left behind unemployment and hopelessness.

What they came to here in the U.S. wasn't a bed of roses. Two have serious problems with their spouses and no recourse since they don't have legal status. They worked in strawberry fields, hoed beets and followed the crops, doing work U.S. citizens won't do.

One of the women was 16 when she came. Now she has four children and works as a caterer. Her husband, however, has been deported.

Yet another woman told us how she had to learn the Mexican words for things like shoelaces so she would not be recognized as Guatemalan while she traveled across Mexico to get to the U.S. border. Here she gave birth to a child with Down syndrome. Then she had a second, healthy child because Maryland would not pay for birth control. She speaks her indigenous tongue Mam; she speaks Spanish; she has learned enough English to make medical appointments and to work with the teachers at school. But she has never had the opportunity to learn to read.

Gradually, these women settled in one spot, married, started families and began to build their lives. They are poor. They don't have health insurance. If an employer cheats them, they would be afraid to complain.

I looked around the room at these women and I thought, Why do Americans want to punish them for being will to work so hard to make a better life for their families? Free trade is a big political goal. Why not free movement of labor? If these mothers are caught, they will be jailed, separated by force from their children.

These are the best and the brightest, these immigrants who risk all for a better life for their children's future. Our policies against them are downright sinful.

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