

Lecheria: An Albergue System Diary

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Migrants waiting for the train just outside the Lecheria Freight Yards on the outskirts of Mexico City

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An Albergue System Diary

Within the last six years a system of church-funded, privately run migrant shelters has developed throughout Mexico. At the direction of church groups, two or three lay people will typically rent or buy run-down warehouse space near the rail yards where Central American migrants hop freight trains to come to the United States. After minimal renovation, the albergues invite migrants in to get warm meals and spend the night. Casa de Migrante, in the municipality of Tutitlán, just north of Mexico City, opened its doors in early 2009. Like most albergues, it has traditionally only permitted migrants to spend three nights before resuming their perilous journeys. The overwhelming majority of the migrants are hoping to become part of the undocumented labor force in Northern Mexico and the United States, but a few may be returning to Honduras or Guatemala after working for months or years in the United States. This is a diary of the author's two-day stay in Casa de Migrante in November 2009.

Lecheria Albergue: Casa de Migrante

After sleeping through the seven-hour bus ride from Guadalajara to Mexico City, I have to pee so badly that I immediately stagger toward the first restroom that I see in the Mexico Norte bus station. I hand over 3 pesos and walk into the crowded restroom lugging my tripod, large camera bag and backpack, clunking to the front of the line toward a urinal, and then to the sink to rinse my hands and splash some water on my face. I've become expert at doing such things while continuing to shoulder my 60 pounds of gear.

Emerging from the restroom into the crowded main hall of the station, I hear someone yelling my name, "Schaeff, Schaeff." I'm stunned to see Rodrigo, grinning in front of me. He says that he and his father, Carlos, had heard I was coming to the Norte bus station on an

overnight bus and had decided to intercept me. I'm dumbfounded to see him at 6:30 in the morning and he's laughing in amazement that all his hunches would be right and he could find me among the morning crowds.

Rodrigo Guzmán Serrano is a journalism student at Tec de Monterrey, Estado de México, on the northern fringe of Mexico City. He had been with us last summer when five U.S. and Mexican students and three faculty members had gone south to two migrant shelters – “albergues” in Spanish – and other migrant stopovers in Oaxaca. We had seen first-hand how Central American migrants were making their way through Mexico to the United States. As a star pupil, and a Mexican, Rodrigo had frequently taken on the role of cultural interpreter, and once again he had taken it upon himself to help me, as I journeyed, much like Mr. Magoo, to see and document yet another landmark on the migratory track from Central America to the United States.

Lecheria Colonia – colonia meaning neighborhood or district – is a one-square mile area dominated by a large railroad freight yard, small factories and warehouses and a seven-block area of shops on the northern outskirts of Mexico City. Because various freight train routes converge at the rail yard, migrants who are hopping trains through Mexico know it well as the place where various northbound trains emerge, and as one of the most dangerous spots on their perilous journey northward.

After dropping Rodrigo and his sister off at school, Carlos and I arrive at the Lecheria albergue. About 15 migrant men, all Hondurans, are waiting on the side street, their breath visible in the cool morning air. One man approaches me who speaks English very well. We shake hands and introduce ourselves, then I hug Carlos Guzmán goodbye. He looks a bit dazed, as I'm sure he fears for my safety, but has no idea how he can intervene any further on my

behalf. I do not look back at him as I gather my things and walk off with the two Hondurans I have just met.

The three of us go up the block to get a cup of coffee *olla* – coffee made from unfiltered grinds that is flavored with canella and sugar. I buy all three coffees from the street vendor and then ask the two Hondurans to show me the rail yards. I had already surmised that I could trust these two men in the broad daylight, but I continued to carry all my gear during our tour of the area. After a half-hour of looking around the southern tip of the freight yard, it is now 9:15 a.m. The albergue opens its doors at 9 a.m., so when we get back and knock, a young man named Gustavo bids us to come in.

As we introduce ourselves, I begin to understand all the confusion I had experienced on the phone trying to make arrangements for my visit. When I visited here before with Rodrigo and some others in July, two Mexicans named Gustavo and a woman named Guadalupe were running the albergue. Now, that older Mexican named Gustavo was gone, but a new, much younger Gustavo was performing most of the maintenance tasks. He is a Honduran in his 20s.

And instead of the lone Guadalupe with short cropped hair who had been managing the albergue last summer, there were now two “Lupitas” – a nickname for Guadalupe. The 40-ish Sra. Guadalupe who was there before now says she just comes a couple hours each day. But now there is also a shorter and slightly younger Guadalupe doing the cooking. I have no idea whom I had spoken to recently on the phone when I asked for “Guadalupe” or “Gustavo,” but I now know why sometimes one Guadalupe and Gustavo seemed to recognize me, when in the next phone call Guadalupe and Gustavo could not recall our conversation from the day before.

As I clunk my way through the split metal garage door front entrance to the albergue, my metal tripod, attached over the top of the duffle sized camera bag, rings an announcement of my

arrival, and I realize what an inconvenience I am to all these people. The Lupitas and the younger Gustavo had just managed to get things in order from the night before when the Grand Gringo comes in knocking into everything. I'm one more thing for them to deal with, but both Guadalupe and Gustavo seem pleased to see me and each offers to help, asking me what I need to succeed. It is a humbling moment, making me realize that I will never fully explain to my U.S. compatriots what the journey north is like, and the importance the system of albergues plays in providing a few meals, temporary shelter and a slight measure of safety to the hundreds of thousands of Central Americans and southern Mexicans who migrate north. Despite its significance, this migration is an unknown phenomenon to most U.S. citizens, who picture the migrants' northward journey as being like the steerage journey many immigrants to the United States made a century earlier. But this journey is different; it is unauthorized, making it far more dangerous than that made by my Irish and German grandparents at the turn of the 20th Century.

Like each migrant who walks through the door of the albergue, I am motioned over to a table to sign in, placing my name and nationality among the others on the record. I tell Sra. Guadalupe that I would like to film some of the migrants getting on a train and see where they wait, board and get off the trains. She responds by immediately calling over a large Honduran – a guy about six feet tall and muscular. He is Vlad, probably about 27 years old, and he speaks a little English after living for three years in the Bronx. His good looks automatically encourage trust. Vlad, I learned later on, had been given a historical name by his grandfather, who admired Vladimir Ilich Lenin.

Guadalupe also calls over Douglas, one of my coffee buddies from earlier in the morning. Almost all the men in the albergue are Hondurans. Most are in their 20s, but they range in age from 16 to 47, with Douglas being the oldest. Everyone says Douglas is trustworthy. He speaks

English very well – not street English, but grammatically correct English, the kind of English one might hear from a young college grad on a job interview. Douglas tells me he learned English at a community college in San Diego – a city he says is very nice.

I empty the clothes from my knapsack and place the black video camera in my yellow knapsack so it wouldn't be visible. Lupita locks my clothes, camera bag and tripod in the back bedroom of the albergue. Carrying only my knapsack, the four of us, Douglas, Vlad, another Honduran and I, go to the northern end of the Lecheria freight yard, about 1.5 miles from the albergue. We are nervous about the camera.

It takes about 25 minutes to walk to Puente al Norte, also called Norponiente – the spot where all trains heading north leave the freight yard. A handful of people are camping around a fire under the west side of the tracks. They look like they had been there for weeks. We climb a make-shift construction scaffold that takes us over four sets of railroad tracks and brings us down by the northbound track. Two taxis are parked there, along with about 15 other migrants, mostly Hondurans huddling in small groups, talking and joking, waiting for the right train.

By now, it is 10:30 a.m. and we hear that the train might come at 11 a.m., but it doesn't. We go to a tienda a couple hundred yards from the tracks and I buy the four of us soft drinks. Vlad buys us all tacos. He has realized his “Sueño Americano” – American Dream -- by working in the U.S. and saving money. He doesn't advertise it, but he has money bundles on his person and he has sent money home to his wife and kids in Honduras. His plan is to return to Honduras and start his own cell phone business. Vlad tells me that he worked in the Bronx and lived with seven other Hondurans in a two-bedroom apartment. Through a cloud of smoke created by his Montana brand cigarettes, he tells me he worked construction for a “really good” man who paid him \$12 per hour.

Meanwhile, Douglas advises me to tell people that I am shooting video for a Mexican government project; otherwise, if I tell them I'm a journalist, they might rob me. "Say that you're working for the federal governments of Mexico and the U.S.," he says.

Waiting is a big part of this project and I realize how bad I am at it. I never want to wait more than five minutes for anything, let alone wait several hours for a train that may or may not come.

We return to find a couple from a church passing out chicken meals for the migrants. The woman and her husband have been doing this for eight years and they've seen terrible things. She opens the trunk of her car and pulls out mounted photos of mutilated bodies – bodies torn up, separated limbs, bodies turned into huge masses of hamburger...all taken there at Norponiente. She says the worst month was October 2008, when 25 migrants either died or were mutilated trying to board trains in that spot, but on average only 5 people a month are killed or mutilated there.

As she pulls out the photos and several migrants and I look at them, a silent reverence falls over us. The migrants know they could end up that way. Only a day before, in my anxiety over the trip, I was questioning what I was doing. As I film the photos, I said to myself, that this was where I belonged.

Just then a blonde man with a European accent approaches, "Hey, what are you doing here?" He is carrying one of those \$3,000 still cameras that shoots high-definition video and behind him stands a 30ish friend toting a tripod. I tell him I am doing documentary work on immigration and he says that he and his friend are also shooting video and conducting preliminary research for a documentary, specifically for a part to be played by a famous English/European actor. Since I know very few European actors, the actor's name means nothing

to me, but I give them my card. As I head back toward the tracks, they began picking out migrants to interview.

I wait for another 40 minutes, but only one train comes. It is going too fast to catch, as two of the younger migrants try to run alongside and grab on, but it has to be traveling between 20 and 25 miles per hour and accelerating as it leaves the yard. I watch them anxiously sprint alongside it, but they do not reach out for it, knowing they would likely be swept under the gleaming rims of the metal wheels.

We head back to the albergue for the 3 p.m. comida – meal. Vlad and Douglas suggest we walk back through the weeds and trees on the west side of the track. They say it would be dangerous to go alone, but not as a group of four. It is a bright, sunny day and I am not concerned.

We traverse through a semi-trail by the tracks. Makeshift shelters of cardboard and black plastic dot the area, but all are empty. Judging by the remains of fire pits and depressions made by bodies slumbering in the grass, it's obvious some migrants had been camping there.

One of my Honduran bodyguards goes inside a cardboard and plastic cubicle and I follow to shoot video. I've had the video camera out for a while, struggling to keep it from getting smacked too hard by the weeds as we bushwhacked. I was particularly concerned for the lens, not wanting it to get dirty or damaged.

As we walk, the guys stop occasionally to tell me where a train is going. There's a big one going to Kansas, but they say none of the migrants want to go there. Instead, they're headed for more favored locations, like California, New York or Houston.

Railroad employees keep migrants off the automobile cars, or "autotrack cars," as well as the flat cars. The covered hopper cars, which are typically gray and carry all variety of goods, are

okay for the migrants, as are tank cars, some box cars and the low-open gravel cars, technically called “gondola cars.” The gondola cars provide the most safety because they have places to lie or sit and be out of the wind, wires, bullets, and rocks thrown by Mexican kids. Rock throwing kids can knock migrants off the train, causing death or serious injury. Still, the gray covered hoppers are the most common cars coming from the south and they are frequented by migrants, who prefer to ride in the openings at the front and back of the car, rather than on top, despite the fact that most movies picture them that way.

Back at the albergue we enter in time for the comida – the afternoon meal. Little Gustavo takes a head count and places bowls and glasses of water at the two tables by the front door, enough to match the head count. Sra. Guadalupe offers an extended prayer of thanks as the men line up for food. Lupita’s prayer includes events from the day and ends with the sign of the cross. To a person the men lower their head in reverence as she offers the prayer.

It’s a warm, sunny afternoon so the men take the opportunity to shower out back and stretch out against the angled roof of the A-frame chapel. The showers are warm, if not private, and the men can wash their clothes in the buckets available for hand washing. No one has towels so the clothes and their bodies air dry in the warm afternoon sun.

During the meal, and whenever I’m in the albergue, Hondurans approach me to ask questions, hoping that making small talk with an American might help them in their migration. They ask if I’m a priest, or if I’m writing a book, because they see me taking notes. Some lose interest when they realize I can work no miracles. Others become more interested, asking me about my work as a professor-researcher, or just asking about my family.

Nearly all tell me to be careful, and to guard my yellow mochila – backpack. They also advise me not to let anyone know I have money. Nevertheless, my anxiety level drops by the

minute as I realize I have survived the first six hours at the albergue without incident and I have several bodyguards who are now keeping a close eye on me and my belongings.

At about 4:30 p.m., I announce I want to go back to Norponiente to get video of migrants boarding the train. Of the 50 men, and two or three women who ate at the albergue, some 20 indicated they wanted to take the late afternoon train to Nuevo Laredo or Oso, a train yard about 100 miles north of Lecheria. (See <http://www.mexlist.com/> or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Mexican_railroads for info on Mexican railroads.)

Douglas and another Honduran named Omar, dressed in a too-small red pitcher's jacket, volunteer to go with me as protection. One leads me while the other trails. I think we are in a perfect formation if they want to rob me, but I consciously remind myself that such imaginings are unfounded. We plod on until reaching the scaffold a few minutes after 5 p.m. It is windy, with a chill cutting through my blue sweater. Doug and Omar hunch over to avoid the breeze as we descend the scaffold.

Again I stop to take the video camera out of the knapsack and grab shots of the 50 or so migrants and the two or three taxis waiting by the tracks. As some of the migrants spot me, they yell to stop. Others point toward the camera, making me feel particularly conspicuous. It's obvious that both Doug and Omar are a little intimidated. Doug advises me that I should probably comply and stop filming and return the camera to the knapsack. I do so and we descend the scaffold to mingle with the waiting migrants.

All the relaxation I had begun to feel leaves me. Groups of six or seven migrants huddle around several bonfires to keep warm. As darkness settles in, the desperation of the men and my own anxieties mount. The two security guards who were keeping the migrants out of the Lecheria freight yard have gone.

One or two migrants approach me, admonishing me to be careful. Others ask for money. Having spent time with them in the albergue, it is difficult to tell them “no,” but I usually do. I find this to be so hard, figuring out whether or not to give insignificant amounts of money to people who are so needy that they have to resort to begging. It’s obvious that such begging doesn’t come naturally to them. They might offer advice before asking for something, as if to create a reciprocal relationship. I probably give away about 40 pesos, split among five or six people in the half-hour that I am there. Both Doug and I begin to refer to me as “Santa Claus.”

As it gets darker and colder, I begin to worry whether we are in danger of being robbed or assaulted, and if we will get back to the albergue before the doors are locked at 8 p.m. The fear of being robbed makes me reluctant to pull the camera out again. Some of the 50 or so people gathered by the tracks have already seen it. I’m less worried about the Honduran migrants than I am about the dozen or so street people who are drinking and mingling with the various groups of migrants. The homeless are louder and dirtier than the migrants, who tend to keep to themselves and to those they know.

The train could have arrived at 5 p.m., but now the light has left the sky and no trains have approached. With each quarter-hour that the train fails to arrive, everyone gets a bit colder and edgier. The trains have no fixed schedule. They leave the yard whenever they are assembled. My bodyguards seem quite nervous too, with the scene before them appearing unnecessarily risky, given that they are there entirely for my sake. At some point I had reached into the knapsack and inconspicuously set the camera up for low-light shooting, but with no moonlight, filming now would press my luck. I tell Douglas and Omar that I would like to give it 10 more minutes. Douglas grins saying, “You’re the boss – you’re the *jefe*. I’m here to help

you.” My hope is that when the train comes, everyone will be preoccupied with gathering their things and boarding it, so that my running around filming will go unnoticed.

The 10 minutes pass, and I ask for 5 more minutes, saying we can take a cab to get back to the albergue before the doors close. Douglas says that since I am a *gringo* and their special customer, they will let us in even if we return late.

At 7:35, fear and cold finally get to me and I say, “Let’s go.” I think about filming this scene before we leave, but given the anxiety level in the air, the three of us just want to leave quietly. It is completely dark now, so we have to be careful on the scaffolding and be sure not to be sideswiped by an inattentive motorist on the busy Mexico-Cauatitlán Highway.

We are not going to make the 8 p.m. deadline, so we cross the street looking for a bus, taxi or *combi* – a small van that can carry about 10 people. We finally wave down a *combi*, which takes us the two kilometers down the highway, charging only 12 pesos for the three of us.

As we walk past the shops toward the albergue, I feel a wave of overwhelming disappointment. I traveled all night by bus, relied on the services of Rodrigo and his father, both Guadalupe and Gustavos, and various Hondurans...and still I did not have a single shot of a migrant boarding a train at Norponiente. So far, I had missed what I came for.

Across the street from the albergue, Douglas again knocks on the door of the small run-down house. He had made arrangements with his sister to wire some money, but since he didn’t have a passport, he needed it sent to someone who could cash it. Other migrants and the managers of the albergue told him he could trust the person across the street. I’d been with him three times already as he tried to collect his money, but no one ever answered. That situation persisted until I left the albergue the following evening.

Gustavo opens the albergue door and Lupita grins. Everyone is relieved to see us back and in one piece. We are tired, but on time for the 8 p.m. dinner, which is being laid out in bowls on the table. It's the same thing we'd had for *comida*, beans and small pasta shells that looked like half-size sunflower seeds. Either a bolito – a small white wheat oval-shaped roll – or tortillas came with every meal. Interestingly, water is served at breakfast and lunch, but a large glass of café olla comes with the 8 p.m. repast. It has less caffeine than regular coffee so it never keeps me awake. After we eat, we place our plates in a large green bucket Lupita has placed in the middle of the floor. One or two Hondurans volunteer to do dishes.

Usually migrants can stay three nights in the albergue before moving on. Injured or special cases may stay longer. One Honduran, a friend of Vlad's, was injured trying to board the train. Both his heels had been cut off. He showed me the bandages and I tell him he is lucky to have lost only a little piece of each heel. He wants my running shoes. In fact everyone admires my running shoes, which are an off-brand, Vasques. A journalism student who was in the shoe business got them for me, but my 10 ½ extra wide shoes are too big for the Hondurans. Twice hourly, someone will come up and admire my shoes, hoping I will give them away. The quasi-begging is annoying, but it's a natural product of the tremendous need these men have. My confidence in Douglas had been shaken earlier in the evening when we were walking to Norponiente. He asked me if I could buy him a car. I said maybe we should just head back to the albergue, and he backed off, saying he was just kidding. But for the migrants, asking for my shoes, my watch, money, remembrances, and even my knapsack, expressed their increasing comfort in being around me. Most of it meant nothing in terms of U.S. dollars. They also frequently asked to borrow my pen – a cheap freebie from a hotel, but even though I lent it out more than a dozen times, I always got it back.

I dread using the bathroom. There is one women's toilet, and another lone toilet for the 50 or so men. The toilet mechanism is broken, and there's no point in fixing it since no domestic plumbing could withstand being flushed 15 times per hour. Instead, as is the custom in Mexico both men and women fill up a plastic pail with water to do a dump flush after relieving themselves. They fill the bucket from a large barrel by the women's toilet. The toilet stalls are unlit, three-foot by five-foot spaces. There's no toilet paper in them, so the men who need to defecate ask Lupita in the kitchen for some paper. She carefully doles out an exact amount by wrapping it around one hand four times. The men are not allowed in the kitchen where the toilet paper is kept, but I am frequently beckoned to enter and given hushed instructions to watch my equipment and belongings, not to trust so-and-so because they knew nothing about him, or to take a taxi to the station. If I had heeded all the well-intentioned warnings, I would never have come to the albergue. Still, I take them as words of caution and endearment to affirm what I am trying to do, which at times seems far-fetched, even to me.

Not since I was a kid had a toilet smelled so badly. I believe that just breathing that incredibly thick smell of male urine is hazardous. I've seen janitors at the university where I work diligently try to scrub that smell out, but it's nearly impossible – taking maybe a couple hours to disinfect a single urinal. Simply put, I refused to shit for two days.

As the men get ready for bed, I wait to see how things will shake out. In the large men's quarters there are 12 beds along the north wall, including four double beds. Often the men double up, even in the singles, and there are always at least two men to each double bed. Vlad invites me to share his single bed, but I prefer the less-crowded floor. Gustavo Jr. throws a six-foot by 20-foot mat on the floor for some men to sleep on. As the beds become full I throw my baseball cap down on the mat to claim a spot.

Someone bangs a loud knock on the front door. Apparently a train had just arrived and another 15 or so migrants have come to the albergue in search of shelter. Lupita looks through the kitchen window telling them that no one comes in after 8 p.m. It is now 8:45 p.m. After a few minutes of haggling at the door, Lupita instructs Gustavo to let them in.

They were all Hondurans. The group includes at least two women and a boy of about 12. Up to that point the youngest person in the mission was a 16-year-old Honduran who was traveling alone. He would nod to me and say hello, but he hadn't been willing to strike up even the most basic conversation despite my repeated efforts.

The newly arrived 12-year-old is part of a mother, father, and son trio that's delighted to be in the shelter. The others, like most newbies, including myself, tend to hang back – being afraid to let people know too much about themselves, lest they become victims of theft or some other abuse. Indeed, almost like in prison, each of the migrants needs at least one or two others to help him survive. You need someone to watch your knapsack when you go to the toilet or take a shower. If you have someone you trust, you have a larger network of information, and almost all the information in the albergue is through word-of-mouth, so more conversations means more information.

Traveling with two or three others also provides a measure of security – raising the potential price for those who would steal from, rob, harm or kidnap a migrant. Just as Vlad, Douglas and Omar covered my back, so too did those others look out for one another. This is particularly important should a migrant get injured. An injury, like that suffered by the migrant who lost his heels, would generally be fatal if friends didn't stop and get help. A few migrants, perhaps one in five, carries a cell phone, but the phones themselves can be dangerous. First, a cell phone signals to robbers that the migrant has resources – and possibly some cash on him.

Second, and most frightening for migrants, is that the phone indicates he is connected to family back home or in the United States and the phone usually has those numbers on speed dial. This makes him particularly vulnerable to kidnapping, which is an even bigger fear than falling to mutilation or death from *La Bestia* -- “The Beast” as the train is called. Most Honduran migrants are traveling to work and send remittances home to loved ones. Those remittances account for more than one-fifth of Honduras’ GDP. While death is bad, getting kidnapped costs the family even more; as destitute relatives must scrape together extra money to ransom their loved ones.

Douglas is afraid to have his relatives’ phone numbers on a piece of paper. He asks me to keep his phone numbers for him so that if he makes it across the border, he can call me to get the numbers. I agree, as everyone, including me, who has been on the journey for even a few days has met migrants who have been kidnapped and traumatized by that experience.

Instead, the migrants buy, sell and carry the ubiquitous 50 peso calling card and try to call home every week or two. One call home by one migrant can result in a series of calls to other families, as most Hondurans that have enough resources to bankroll an immigrant heading to the United States also have a cell phone and can call families of other migrants.

Finally, the migrants travel in small groups to satisfy the simple need for companionship -- someone to share fears and jokes, someone to huddle with for warmth in a gondola car or on an albergue bed. Humans are social animals, and being constantly on the alert, scared and confused is hard enough, but it is that much harder without someone to share the experience and provide a bit of comfort.

I like humor and maybe I overemphasize its importance, but for me, humor is one of life’s great pleasures. When I first walked into the albergue, I was clearly the center of attention.

A white person enters there maybe a couple times a year. When I enter toting a camera and tripod, I'm even a little more noticeable.

So I make jokes – jokes at my expense about being an “*anciano*” – an old man – who's an expert at speaking Spanglish. The migrants chuckle, but it is an uneasy chuckle, like one offers in response to a lousy joke made by your boss. But, sooner or later something happens, you trip, or spill coffee and yelp in pain, or someone catches you being frightened by your own shadow, and real laughter starts. The kidding takes the edge off. One by one the kidders realize if I look foolish enough, I too will laugh, maybe even giggle. There's something humanizing and bonding about it.

Doug and Vlad each possess a good sense of humor. Doug is self-deprecating. He says he speaks my language, Spanglish, and jokes about how he is charged to protect me. He says things like, “They won't shoot me because bullets are too expensive, but you, a Gringo like you might even be worth two bullets.” Then his upper lip turns up and his eyes flash at me to see if I'm laughing. I usually laugh, but occasionally I am preoccupied or so scared that I dare not respond.

Vlad is different. Instead of heading north, he is returning south. He was in the United States working demolition, living in the Bronx with seven other illegals in a two-bedroom flat, making \$12 an hour and sending home \$100 or \$200 at a time. He says he paid the standard rate of 10 percent to send money home. His English isn't so good, so we speak mostly Spanish. Once in a while he will ask the translation of a Spanish word into English, such as “*coup*.” Built like a high school linebacker, at six-feet tall and about 180 pounds, he has a 32-inch waist and strong arms simply adorned with tattoos. One on his right shoulder says “Vlad,” and he has a tasteful one-inch band around his bicep, but mostly he's un-tattooed. His teeth are perfect and bright

white, his eyes are clear, unlike Doug's who are reddened by years of huddling around smoky fires. Doug does not smoke, but Vlad smokes about a pack of Montana cigarettes a day.

I tell Vlad I grew up in Queens and Nassau counties in New York and that we were afraid of the Bronx when I was young. He says it was very safe, but much like in Honduras; you just have to be smart and not cross the wrong people.

He is accustomed to American-style food. After eating in the albergue, at least once a day he goes to buy tacos on the street, because he's used to getting his protein from meat rather than beans.

He jokes about the difficulties of the migrant journey, but his jokes come from a position of tremendous self-confidence. The migrant experience has been empowering for him. He carries Honduran identification and has money in his pocket, or somewhere, and takes inter-city buses rather than riding the train.

Vlad recognizes the irony behind his name, given that he has just spent three years working in the bastion of capitalism. He has a wife and a three-year-old child in Honduras and he is returning because his wife is about to deliver again. I quiz him about his pregnant wife and he tells me that eight months ago he returned to Honduras for a couple months. He says he knows how to cross the Mexico-U.S. border in Texas without using a coyote. It occurs to me that he might even have documents that allow him to cross.

He is so self-confident that I fear for him. During my second afternoon of filming at Norponiente, a pollero – like coyote, a name for someone who helps undocumented people cross into the United States -- charged at me as I filmed a group of migrants waiting by the tracks. In English, the shaved headed pollero yelled, "Hey I don't like that. You stop taking those fucking pictures right now. Don't you fucking do that, or I'll stop you."

I was about one-flight up on the scaffold filming down on the migrant groups. The filming seemed innocuous because nothing had been going on, but it was unnerving to have the pollero running at me and yelling at me in a threatening manner like that. Perhaps it was even more unnerving because I had not been filming at him, nor seen him running at me until I heard him coming at me. Vlad, who was my only bodyguard that day because Doug was arranging to get money sent, was unfazed by the whole experience. He reassured me because he knew I was afraid. “Don’t worry,” he said, “You won’t have a problem with that pollero, or other people who shout like that. The ones that don’t say anything are the problem. They’re dangerous.”

Vlad stays very calm. I tell Vlad that I don’t want him to fight or even stick by me if people come after me. Instead, I tell him, I want him to warn me and run for help. He looks at me in a way that communicates that he won’t run; he’ll stay and fight. I reiterate that I don’t want him to fight for me and that the best protection he can give me is to report that I am being attacked. I even said that although I am 58, I can still run pretty fast. He just says, “I’m with you. I’m going to protect you.”

Vlad was telling me he wouldn’t abandon me and I both appreciated that and feared for him because I believe my best protection is to have a witness who will report what is happening, or file a formal complaint if I am attacked by police or security guards. I am convinced that being a U.S. citizen; my government will likely react and make the attackers pay a price. But for Vlad and the other migrants, protection is more immediate – they bond together and hang tough, making the attackers pay a price right then and there so they will look for easier targets – the stragglers or those traveling alone. And the Hondurans do not expect that their government is caring or powerful enough to do anything if they are seriously harmed, or even murdered.

I only have enough time to stay one night at the shelter. Before the lights go out Gustavo Jr. decides that Doug and I should share the large double bed in the corner. I take my shoes off, but continue to keep my wallet in one back pocket and my passport and bus ticket in the other. Gustavo had already taken my yellow backpack with the video and still cameras and locked it in the back room where Lupita sleeps. I also had hid about \$100 in my clothing.

It is after 9 p.m. and Gustavo brings out a pile of blankets of various types and each of us takes one. Mine was heavy – heavier than I need to keep warm – so I trade with Doug who is not wearing both a shirt and sweater like I am. Unlike most of the others sharing beds, Doug sleeps with his head at my feet. I'm embarrassed because my feet smell of running-shoe perspiration. I ask him to give me a gentle shove if I start snoring too loudly.

The lights go out but some of the men continue talking softly. For the next half hour, an occasional fart or laughter breaks the silence. I am quite tired after only sleeping on the bus, so I fall off in a few minutes. It is 49 Hondurans, one Guatemalteco and me in the large room. Three women are sleeping in the ladies' dorm, and Lupita and Gustavo are in the back bedroom.

The sun begins coming through the albergue windows at about 6:15 a.m. I am awake, along with a few other migrants, but all of us stay in bed. A steady stream of migrants begins taking turns in the bathroom. I wait until I absolutely have to piss before getting up at about 7:15 a.m. Gustavo is up too and I ask him to help me get my backpack. I am still disappointed that I hadn't pulled out the camera and documented the 20 or so Hondurans waiting to catch the train to Nuevo Laredo the night before, so I will document life in the albergue, if nothing else.

I am in the back bedroom getting the camera when the little Gustavo asks me for a favor. He asks me to help him make a phone call home to Honduras. He says he had arrived as a migrant there three months earlier, but had a bad stomach ailment and couldn't continue his

journey. Because he was sick he could stay beyond the customary three-night limit. Eventually he became a regular albergue worker. I tell him I would be happy to buy him a 50-peso calling card. In hushed tones he thanks me, making it clear he wants this conversation kept quiet, as Guadalupe probably advised people not to hit me up for money or favors. Nevertheless, one after another many of the migrants tried to take me aside to ask for favors or money. It's as if I were spending a weekend around Bill Gates – sooner or later I would pull him aside and ask him to fund my journalism exchange program – such an opportunity simply could not be passed up.

I begin shooting video of the men sleeping. All but a few of the men are still sleeping and I realize that a little video is worth a thousand words. When I stick the lens in Vlad's face he wakes up and smiles. The other men take the filming in stride, as I completely give away my journalistic mission. I film both Lupitas preparing breakfast. I film the men queuing up, eating and then washing their dishes outside.

One of the Hondurans who arrived last night speaks fluent English. He had wanted to talk to me, but the lights out at 9 p.m. prevented it. This morning at breakfast he starts a conversation in English again. He is about 25 years old with a thin, scraggly beard and low-cropped hair. He says things are very bad in Honduras today because the coup has resulted in the World Bank and countries like the U.S. cutting off cash payments and investments to Honduras.

I know that withholding credit and cash flows to Latin American countries immediately transforms an already weak economy into an economy in deep crisis. Although he doesn't provide all the background on the power struggle between President Roberto Micheletti and deposed Honduran President Jose Manuel Zelaya, it is clear the young man has strong opinions. His command of English and his mention of the World Bank and credit and balance of payment issues makes him stand out in the albergue as a person capable of connecting the dots between

international monetary policy, the Honduran political crisis and the increased Honduran immigration that is overwhelming both the albergue system and controls at the U.S.-Mexican border.

I ask him if we could talk on camera after breakfast and he agrees. Unfortunately, when I look for him after breakfast I cannot find him. Apparently he had left the albergue to make a phone call or gather some money, and gone to catch the 11 a.m. train. I look for him throughout the day, but I had lost my chance to interview him.

Most migrants aren't politically opinionated. Instead they focus on making savvy personal alliances and migratory path decisions, relying on their ability to sense character in the people they meet. For Central Americans, the journey through Mexico can be more hazardous than crossing the Mexico-U.S. border. These migrants have come to expect church-funded institutions to help them on their journey. The albergue system, primarily funded by an interfaith alliance made possible by individual church donations, is overwhelmed, but well run. I have visited albergues in Oaxaca, Ixtepec, Guadalajara and this one outside Mexico City. Typically they are near the railroad tracks that are the main route for Central Americans and many people from Mexico's rural south heading north to the Mexico-U.S. border.

The people who make the albergue system work are like those we met on the immigration trail. The Hinthorns, Nancy Garcia, Javier and Rocio in Oaxaca; Gustavo and Guadalupe in Lecheria; and the padres – Padre Fernando Cruz Montes in Oaxaca and the renowned Padre Alejandro Solalinde Guerra in Ixtepec, and Padre Felipe in Lecheria – use money frugally and have dedicated themselves to providing minimal levels of sustenance, security and human rights to migrants. Nevertheless, due to their illegal status, the migrants are the victims of physical abuses and exploitation on such a regular basis that stories of being

shaken down by Mexican police or threatened by gang members with machetes are just considered part of the journey.

Vlad, Gustavo and Doug are people who would not let me down, who will do the right thing by others. These are the people Mexico and United States frequently treat like criminals and portray as dangerous malcontents. The situation is dominated by fear and ignorance that legitimates exploitation. Against such a backdrop, only human networking and personal alliances make sense as migrant and albergue personnel come to rely on their willingness to trust one another, depend upon one another's honor and vouch for their brethren in what can be life and death situations.

Other migrants approached me to tell me I could trust Doug. I saw that Vlad has befriended the young man who lost the tips of his heels to the train. They may travel back to Honduras together if Guadalupe provides some money so the injured man can take buses home, as his days of hopping "La Bestia" are likely behind him.

After breakfast I conduct a couple of brief interviews, and Vlad and I head back to Norponiente to see what freights might come in the night. It's then that the pollero charges us while I'm filming on the scaffold above the tracks. Sometimes migrants pay off the railroad guards to let them enter the freight yard and board the train while it is stationary. I shoot some video of a couple of migrants negotiating with a guard as they start to put money in his hand. At that point, however, the guard spots me filming and waves the money away demonstrably. Ahh, the power of the press!

Vlad and I go to get a coke at the store and miss an opportunity to film a handful of the migrants hopping on a train. When we return only one migrant was still there trying to catch the Kansas City-bound train. A couple of cabbies park their taxis under the bridge waiting for who

knows what. Another car from a church group comes up and feeds the dozen or so homeless and migrants in the area. I speak with them and they asked me about other albergues I visited. They are impressed that I have spent time in Ixtepec with Padre Alejandro Solalinde, a legend for helping migrants in Oaxaca.

I talk with the lone migrant who says he is nervous to be traveling alone and agrees it is more dangerous that way, but he wants to reunite with his family so he is destined to ride the Kansas City freight alone.

It's warm now, and my face is getting sunburned. It is too cold in the shade to wait comfortably, but it's too warm in the sun. Although I live in New Mexico and am wearing a baseball cap, like most migrants, my neck and cheeks were noticeably hot from sunburn. Vlad says he would stay with me as long as I wanted, but I felt guilty for taking up so much of his time, especially since he takes the backpack from me whenever I start filming. At about 3 p.m. we return to the albergue.

There, a group of about eight Hondurans are helping one of the women volunteers shuck peas. I film it for about 30 seconds when Lupita motions for me to give her the video camera. I begin shucking peas with the men who were gathered around the two 25-pound bags. The men put the peas in bowls and discard the shells. Like so many vegetables in Mexico, the peas had been picked ripe and were on the verge of spoiling. This made them more nutritious and flavorful, but within a day or two of spoiling, which might have been why they had been donated to the albergue.

The men talk politics while Lupita shoots some video. She is moving the camera too much but I don't really care about that video. The men question whether or not Obama will help migrants. I offer my standard line – those of us who follow immigration are disappointed that

deportations were up about 40 percent during the first six months of the Obama administration. I also say that the administration will have to introduce legislation in the spring of 2010 to deliver on campaign promises made to Hispanic voters, and that some efforts will have to be made to appease this voting bloc and keep them as supporters of Democratic candidates in the November 2010 elections.

I ask about Honduran politics, knowing that it was a question that bordered on being rude. I had learned that for Hondurans, talking politics is problematic. In the Ixtepec albergue last summer, the older Nicaraguans and Hondurans had been forced to take sides – either they cast their lot with the Sandinistas or the U.S.-backed Contras during the 1980s. Civilians, often family members, were victimized by both groups. So, political discussions were generally avoided on the migrant trail. In private interviews an older migrant might tell me he fought or sided with the Contras or the Sandinistas, but they didn't want others in the camp to know it, lest someone become incensed over the violence their side had committed. Often, as was the case in Guatemala, the dreaded death squads that pillaged the villages and families of outspoken activists, had received some training or backing from the United States. To this day, the largest U.S. military installation in Central America is in Honduras.

I had learned from private conversations in the last few days that a few Hondurans favored Micheletti and many others favored the elected Zelaya regime, but few if any wanted to speak out about their opinions publicly. Like so many Central Americans, they had learned that political discussions were best managed carefully in hushed tones because being outspoken is dangerous.

After the peas were shucked and the camera returned to my knapsack, Lupita calls me to the kitchen. I take the 600 pesos, worth about 50 U.S. dollars, out of the hiding place in my

clothes and give it to her, telling her to spend it on the albergue. She takes it and says she'll give it to Sra. Guadalupe. I expected nothing less, but as I start to walk out the door she calls me back and asks my plans. I tell her that I came to get video of migrants getting on the trains, so I'm going back to the "Puente" to film after comida. I tell her I plan to leave at 8 or 9 p.m. to catch the midnight bus back to Guadalajara. There, I'll spend the morning with three young people who are starting an albergue for migrants, and then I'll take an afternoon plane back to the United States. She asks me how I'll get to the Norte bus station in Mexico City. I tell her I plan to take a "combi" – or bus to the Metro, and take the Metro to the bus station. She tells me to take a cab, saying it only costs 120 pesos. She says I can find a taxi about three blocks away on Calzada Lopez Portillo, but I tell her I have plenty of time and prefer to take the combi or bus and Metro. I don't tell her it will save me about 110 pesos, and that I think catching cabs on the street presents more kidnapping possibilities than taking buses or the Metro.

She shuts the door and gets about 18 inches from my face. I know I'm in for a lecture, but I'm not sure about what. She tells me to be very careful when I go back to the "Puente." She says that these migrants are people who just pass through and she cannot say for certain who could be dangerous. So, she said, I need to be careful. She asks me who I'm going back with and I respond, "Doug and Omar."

Now she's talking very, very fast – too fast for me to understand, but I know that she is essentially saying that I shouldn't be too trusting and that she cannot vouch for my safety. She says she doesn't know Omar at all. She keeps telling me to be careful and not to be too trusting. I say that I'll be as careful as I can be, but I need to get the footage. I kiss the air near her cheek in typical Mexican fashion and thank her for her concern.

Omar is one of the bigger Hondurans in the albergue. He is extremely quiet around me and I usually don't trust quiet people, but I instinctively trust him. He doesn't have enough clothing for the journey north, not even a pair of socks to wear with his old running shoes. Before we leave the albergue I get a pair of athletic socks from my gear and lateral the socks into Omar's belly. He catches them and is very pleased. I also give Gustavo the 50 peso calling card he requested that morning.

Doug, Omar and I head out of the albergue at about 5 p.m. I anticipate staying considerably later tonight to capture that elusive video of the migrants boarding the Texas-bound freight. During the 25 minute walk to "La Puente," I tell Doug and Omar how important it is for me to get the video of migrants catching the train. Doug asks me if I would help him cross the border when he gets there and I tell him that I am afraid to do that because the authorities would be very angry with me and throw me in jail. I also say that it would jeopardize my work. As I say this, I realize I'm not willing to throw caution to the wind to help the migrants cross. I look him in the eye and say, "I'm sorry. I'm not willing or ready to take that risk now." He says, "OK," but I still feel guilty.

As we approach the scaffold by the "Puente," I hear a train horn and see that one northbound train is just about to go under the "Puente." I run up the scaffold and over the tracks, fumbling to get the pack off my back and the camera out as the engines pass under the "Puente." About one-and-a-half stories up on the scaffold, I stop, turn on the camera and begin filming the migrants scampering down below. They are in a frenzy securing backpacks and gathering in groups of threes and fours to begin mounting the train.

The light isn't good under the bridge, but I have to keep shooting from this spot or I will miss most of the migrants getting on the train because it is already picking up speed. The two

engines are a couple hundred yards outside the freight yard. In the last 40 seconds, I watched the train accelerate from an easily boardable 10 mph to a much more difficult 15 mph. At that higher speed only the most nimble and sure-footed migrants dare board with backpacks, after throwing their spare jackets, clothing and food up to those already on the train. Fifteen miles an hour is about as fast as a young healthy person can run alongside a train with several layers of clothing while dodging railroad ties on the uneven ground along the tracks. The tendency is to grab onto the ladders at the front and back of each car – a tendency that will swing one's body under the wheel carriage if the migrant can not grab high enough on the ladders to get one leg up on it while transferring weight from the ground to the train.

What I witness is turning into a nightmare scenario for some migrants as the train accelerates. Most of the 20 or so migrants who were waiting to board have already done so, but the slower, less nimble can no longer board. Some families are split up as I see a heavy 30-year-old woman struggle in vain to match the train's speed. The stragglers' best hope is the last car. It is a covered hopper, painted flat red with ladders on both sides and a ladder and railing on the back. The last car poses less risk because grabbing the ladders in the rear is safer, as the worst that can happen is one can be tossed onto the tracks. There are no wheels coming from behind to cut off limbs or grind a body into hamburger. Although migrants can experience nasty falls trying to board the last car, mutilation and death are unlikely. Those catching the end car can climb over the other cars to reunite with group members further forward on the train. If not, family members who did board will usually jump off to reunite with those from their group who failed to board.

About six or seven migrants begin running at the last car, the hopper, when it approaches. But there is only room for three to grab on as the car passes under the scaffold and out of my

view. As I turn and point my camera northward at the moving train, four people are still running after it.

Astonishingly, the train begins to slow again and the stragglers keep running toward it as it grinds to a halt about a quarter of a mile north of the “Puente.” I zoom to telephoto and see people jumping off the train and motioning to the stragglers. Others are jumping off and repositioning to more forward cars. The image captured by my telephoto lens shakes wildly whenever a truck passes over the bridge or someone moves on the scaffold. Within two or three minutes, all the stragglers have caught up to the train.

Doug tells me I’m lucky to finally have gotten my footage. I ask why the train stopped and he says, “Who knows?” I speculate that someone might have paid the engineer. I’ve been told that it’s a common practice to bribe engineers, but I think it unlikely that this would happen in view of the freight yard. Nevertheless, I am pleased that it all happened when there was still marginal light for videotaping and that both the boarders and I have achieved our objectives.

Doug, Omar and I walk back to the albergue in the dark. Being three people, we take a shortcut along the tracks, saving perhaps a hundred yards, but more importantly it allows us to avoid walking in front of the small police office, which usually has a few Mexican police out front. When we walked by the other night I noticed my bodyguard companions gazes move directly forward and down and they stopped talking lest their accents confirm what the police probably already knew, but didn’t care to pursue – that these were illegals in Mexico, Hondurans traveling north by rail. I had moved to the side by the police, and for once I was running interference for my bodyguards. I was prepared to respond loudly to any questions and demonstrably pull out my passport and show the police the contents of my pack while my

Honduran bodyguards would hopefully continue walking. But nothing happened and the moment of tension had passed.

At the albergue, Lupita again suggests I take a cab, but I say I want to take a bus and the Metro. I thought that Vlad might accompany me to the Mexico Norte bus station, but he says he and the Honduran with the damaged heels are staying. He gives me a red lempira bill and asks me if he can have something to remember me by, and he smiles. I give him three \$1 bills -- one for each of his two children and one for him. I also give one to the guy with the cut off heels who is sitting on the bed with us. Apologetically, I say, "It's nothing, but it's all I have." He smiles and says the lempira is only worth about a nickel. I'm disappointed we won't be traveling together, but I tell him I will definitely contact him before I go to Honduras next summer. He says he expects to hear from me.

I eat supper, my last meal at the albergue. Gustavo takes me into the locked back bedroom so I can pack up the video camera in the bag and attach the tripod that I haven't used since coming to Mexico six days ago. Repacked, with my wide-brimmed hat atop my head, camera bag, tripod and knapsack, I say goodbye to Doug and Omar and go over directions to the bus stop once more with Lupita.

As I leave, she tells Gustavo to go with me to show me the way. As we walk together, Gustavo says he now hopes to return to Honduras in a couple of days. At the corner, he asks again if I wouldn't prefer to take a taxi before he points down the road the other way toward where the buses pass.

For the first time in two days I am alone again, except when hovering above the putrid toilet at the albergue. As I walk past the police station toward the bus stop on the unlit Mexico-Cauatitlán road, I stop to verify with a shopkeeper who was talking to a security guard that this is

indeed the bus stop that will take me to the Mexico City Metro. They point to a dark area on the other side of the highway, telling me again that there are two buses that I can take. They tell me to be careful. As I start to walk away, the security guard tells me that he will wait with me. We cross the busy highway and wait in the darkness on the far side. Within five minutes a bus comes and he motions for it. I'm glad he's with me because the direction is just written on unlit cardboard at the bottom of the windshield and I would not have seen it in time to wave the bus down. I give the guard 3 pesos for helping me and I climb on board.

After a 40 minute ride I'm on the brightly lit Metro, and after a single Metro transfer, I'm at the expansive Mexico Norte bus station.

I sleep on the bus and arrive at Guadalajara about 7 a.m., in plenty of time to have breakfast before meeting three 20-somethings – a young German and two Mexicans – whom the Jesuits recruited to start an albergue by the Guadalajara freight yard. After that, I catch a flight to Phoenix and then home to Albuquerque.

Epilogue of Progress and Continued Need

On February 24, 2010, I returned to the Lecheria albergue with a colleague, Carolyn Gonzales, and Gosia Polanska and Rodrigo Guzman Serrano of Tec de Monterrey. Randy and Susan Hinthorn, who run one of the migrant shelters in Oaxaca, informed me that in the first few weeks of 2010 they had been helping three times the number of Central Americans as were typically seen the year before, and that this was putting a tremendous strain on their albergue's resources.

But when my colleagues and I entered Casa de Migrante in Lecheria, nearly everything had changed. The rancid bathrooms had been rebuilt into bright, clean restrooms; the few old beds replaced by two neat rows of new, clean double-bunk beds; the kitchen and shower areas

had been moved and completely rebuilt; and two pantry-rooms had shelves stocked with foods of various types and Red Cross hygienic sundries. Rogelio, who was now assisting Sra. Guadalupe in the day-to-day management of the shelter, said that the transformation had come with a change in government at the state and municipal level.

Millions of dissatisfied Mexicans had gone to the polls in October 2009 to sweep what they perceived to be uncaring, ineffectual incumbents out of office. Mostly that worked against right-leaning PAN incumbents, but in Estado de México, many incumbent left-leaning PRD leaders had been replaced by center-left PRI officials. The new PRI state and municipal leaders had immediately acted to end the increasingly publicized horrendous conditions experienced by the migrants in the state of Mexico. So the new government, along with local church groups, had mobilized resources to improve the mission and educate migrants traveling through the state of Mexico. It was the support of those two groups that had transformed the mission.

Only eight migrants were in the shelter when we visited in February, as the state of Mexico's Commission on Human Rights (Comisión de Derechos Humanos, Estado de México) had picked up a few of the migrants who had decided to give up their journey and taken them to Toluca. There Rogelio said the discouraged migrants were informed of their rights; encouraged to file complaints if they had suffered abuses at the hands of bandits or authorities; and helped to return to their native countries. Rogelio recounted that only a few would typically turn around and go home, as most other migrants who came to the shelter would continue to pursue their migratory dream by resuming their train journey.

Padre Rogelio also recounted how in the last few months, the surge in migrants coming north and caregivers' fears that coyotes had been using the extended three-day stays in the albergues to recruit migrants for the journey across the U.S. border, had forced a change in

albergue policies. Now, unless they are sick or injured, migrants stay only 24 hours in Lecheria and some other albergues, before they are asked to leave, and the Lecheria mission permits indigent Mexicans to eat a warm meal at the mission, but not to spend the night there.

Rogelio also confirmed what the Hinthorns and our own experience had already told us – the number of Hondurans who are coming north appears to have increased dramatically in recent months, perhaps tripling. The Lecheria albergue typically serves about 60 migrants nightly, with some nine-out-of-ten being Honduran men.

Although, one albergue had seen its conditions dramatically improve, the “floja,” or flood, of people taking this perilous journey had increased despite the hazards and indignities they face along the way.

Note: Some migrant names have been changed to protect their identities.