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**Immigration and LGBTQ Intersections:
A Pioneering Project on the San Diego/Tijuana Border¹**

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Immigration is a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer issue, but the intersections between immigration and LGBTQ issues are often ignored. It is estimated that there are at least 267,000 LGBTQ undocumented persons in the U.S., and many U.S.-born LGBTQ persons—who have documented or undocumented family members, partners or friends—are also affected by decisions made regarding immigration.

The San Diego LGBTQ Community Center advocates for the rights of all of our community members and their families, including immigrants.

The Otay Mesa border crossing, located along the city of San Diego's southern limit, is one of the busiest border land crossings in the world.² While the border separates San Diego and Tijuana, the two communities remain connected culturally and economically. The San Diego-Tijuana region has a combined population of at least seven million people. These communities sit right next to each other with only a fence separating them.

¹ This is the text of a presentation on the panel on “The Weaponization of the Border” at the 2019 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in San Diego, California. I am grateful to Prof. Naomi de Anda of the University of Dayton for the invitation to participate in this panel.

² Otay Mesa and San Ysidro (a few miles apart) are located on the southern limit of the city of San Diego, on the Mexico/U.S. border. Jointly they are the busiest border land crossing in the world. Separately, San Ysidro is the busiest in the Western Hemisphere and third in the entire world, while Otay Mesa is third in the Western Hemisphere.

San Diego's LGBTQ community and our Center³ have a long history of supporting the needs of the LGBTQ and HIV communities in Tijuana, as that city does not have a formal LGBTQ center and has just a few small HIV-serving organizations. Our commitment has always been to serve the needs of all LGBTQ people in this region. Providing support to the LGBTQ asylum seekers in Tijuana was a natural fit.

Our Center's mission is to support the health and well-being of the LGBTQ and HIV communities, by providing activities, programs, and services that create community; empowering community members; providing essential resources; advocating for civil and human rights; and embracing, promoting, and supporting our cultural diversity.

The San Diego Center partnered with RAÍCES,⁴ *Al Otro Lado*,⁵ and the Los Angeles LGBTQ Center, collaborating on the first LGBTQ border campaign in history to ensure that legal services, case management, and humanitarian relief were provided to asylum seekers who are LGBTQ, and to those living with HIV, who made it to the Mexico/U.S. border.

None of our agencies had ever coordinated a cross-border campaign before, but we knew there was a critical need. We had the courage to try and we were all committed to addressing the crisis together. We were committed to making this first LGBTQ border campaign in history truly effective.

³ See <https://thecentersd.org/> and <https://thecentersd.org/programs/latino-services/>.

⁴ RAÍCES is a Texas-based organization that provides legal services to underserved refugee and immigrant children, families and individuals. See <https://www.raicestexas.org/>.

⁵ *Al Otro Lado* is a binational organization that provides direct legal services to immigrant communities, and specifically to indigent deportees, migrants and refugees in Tijuana. See <https://alotrolado.org/>.

Al Otro Lado was a key player in providing legal support and preparing clients for when they presented their asylum claims at the border.

Throughout our effort, RAÍCES also provided legal services to the asylum seekers, along with sponsoring the housing accommodations that were made available to them.

The Los Angeles LGBTQ Center⁶ is the largest LGBTQ-serving organization in the world, providing health, social, legal, and advocacy services. Staff from the L.A. Center were vital in legal support, and especially in connecting asylum seekers with host homes in the U.S.

It was because of the financial support of dozens of community members, foundations, and organizations that our collective efforts were funded.

In the summer of 2018, the San Diego LGBTQ Center learned that a large caravan of more than 7,000 immigrants from Central America was crossing Mexico, coming to the U.S. southern border to seek asylum. Many of the individuals in the caravan were escaping persecution in their home countries and were seeking a safer life in the U.S., free from violence and discrimination. Within the caravan, a group of many LGBTQ-identified asylum seekers—including families and pregnant women—separated from the larger group to walk to the border on their own. Knowing that this group was walking to Tijuana, we decided to provide comprehensive humanitarian aid to these asylum seekers while they waited their turn for claiming asylum.

The LGBTQ group was the first one to arrive in Tijuana. The members of this group had come together and self-organized, primarily because of the discriminatory treatment they faced along the way. Marcos, a refugee from Honduras who became one of the group's leaders, told us that from the beginning of their long journey to the U.S. the LGBTQ community members were denied basic needs such as showers and food and received constant verbal and physical abuse,

⁶ See <https://lalgbtcenter.org/>.

including sexual assault and rape, from members of the larger caravan and from people they met along the way. Because most in the LGBTQ group were fleeing similar treatment and other forms of discrimination, they decided to continue the journey to the U.S. as a separate group. They arrived in Tijuana on Sunday, November 11, 2018. We went to Tijuana shortly after the group's arrival to meet with its leaders and offer assistance.

At this first meeting we heard stories of the group's long journey and also learned that no LGBTQ organization had helped the caravan, although some individuals and RAÍCES had begun to guide the group. We also learned of the group's many humanitarian needs. This led the San Diego LGBTQ Center to create a plan to care for the group as its members moved to shelters.

At the same time that this group was arriving to claim asylum, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began implementing a policy to restrict the number of asylum seekers who could present their claim each day. According to the Department of Homeland Security, any immigrant who wants to seek asylum must first get on the list for one specific port of entry, wait their turn, and then present their claim of credible fear of returning home. If their claim is acceptable, they can apply for asylum. This policy restricted the ability of the LGBTQ group members to present their asylum claim in a timely manner and they were stuck in Tijuana for months, waiting for their number to be called. In response, the San Diego LGBTQ Center's Latinoax Services and its partners began the first LGBTQ border campaign in history.

After traveling on foot for months, the asylum seekers were sick, weak, and hungry. The San Diego Center's Latinoax Services department not only provided direct services such as food, clean water, clothing, toiletries, counseling, transportation, and funding for medical and dental care, we also became a trusted partner who listened to the asylum seekers' stories of persecution,

violence, and discrimination. Our goal was always to help them to become healthy and be ready to tell their stories to a U.S. government official.

Due to its size, the group of LGBTQ asylum seekers was housed in several locations that served as shelters. The San Diego Center's Latinoax Services staff, who were in Tijuana almost every day, provided direct humanitarian relief and worked to make life as normal as possible for the members of the group as they waited to present their cases at the border. The Christmas holidays took place during this waiting period and our Center's Latinoax Services staff decorated the shelters, provided meals, and made this time special for the group members, most of whom were away from their families for the first time. On Christmas, special celebrations were held in each of the shelters and presents were given to all of the children. In fact, the children had made holiday wish-lists and the Center's Latinoax Services staff purchased gifts for them.

Part of the humanitarian relief was attending to medical and dental needs, and the Center Latinoax Services staff coordinated appointments as well as the finances to cover these medical visits and related medications. It was also important to provide social outlets for the asylum seekers: movie nights, dinners, and other social events were organized in order to bring about a sense of normalcy and comfort.

By the end of December 2018, the group members began to be called at the port of entry and the asylum seekers began to present their cases. This led us to working in closer collaboration with our campaign partners who were providing legal assistance. The San Diego LGBTQ Center continued to provide clothes, cell phones, transportation, and cash to the refugees, and we held conversations with them to prepare them for when they would present themselves at the port of entry. The last asylum seeker was called in February 2019.

The work with the 2018 caravan is just one example of the needs to which our Center responds and of the work we do, both alone and in partnership with kindred organizations. The work with LGBTQ asylum seekers continues along the San Diego-Tijuana border as more refugees arrive here from across the world.