

A day in the bus station ministry Sister Denise La Rock

Serving at the Greyhound Bus Station offers help and support to asylum seeking mothers and children, most of whom are fleeing violence and poverty in Central America. This direct service is very rewarding so it is difficult to know which of us receives more from the ministry, the families or the volunteers.

The Bus Station Ministry is part of the Interfaith Welcome Coalition. The IWC gives me travel money to share with families who will be on a two or three day bus trip.

Recently, a few women were in touch with their families to request money through Western Union. All but one was able to receive the transaction. I took that one aside and gave her some money because she had none. I was concerned about her long trip with her children and having no money. I offered her the money and she asked how she was going to be able to pay me back. I told her it was a gift from the churches. She began to cry and hugged me and cried in my arms.

Later that day, I received a call from American Airlines. One of the mothers seeking asylum and traveling by plane was

at the airport and was too sick to travel and had to be taken to the emergency room. I met up with the mother and her child there. After being tested and treated for strep throat and tonsillitis, she was released from the hospital. I provided overnight shelter at my house to her and her son. My job at the hospital was at first to calm the mother and entertain her 2 year old. I enjoyed playing with him. As his energy became too much for his Mom's ER room, we went for a walk after buying some Doritos. After he ate most of them, we walked outside for a while. He was very inquisitive as we walked and tested out every bench. Several times as we were walking, he placed his hand in mine for me to hold it. In holding his hand, I felt that connection that unites all of us.

It is such a blessing to know that in our outreach, we can support others so they feel safe and cared about.

Sister Denise La Rock of the Daughters of Charity is the Director of the Bus Station Ministry



Sister Denise La Rock, of IWC, speaks with one of the families at the station in late September. Source: Jose Arredondo/folomedia.org

Reflections and memories of the Greyhound bus station Michele Rembault

I started volunteering with the Interfaith Welcome Coalition's Bus Station Ministry around December 2016. This was my response to the election results. I shared with my family some impressions from those early days.

Reflections from yesterday's shift...

I arrived at the bus station at 1pm, fresh from Travis Park United Methodist Church, which serves as our group's supply unit. My trunk is filled with backpacks and sack lunches and the rolling suitcase filled with clipboards, itinerary and map sheets, over the counter meds, toys and diapers.

I sit down in "my spot" to the side and away from the main hub. I settle in, organize my stuff, wonder who might show up today.....I look around and, holy cow, there is a mass of women and children refugees sitting right there in plain sight, somehow I miss them walking in! So I walk over, introduce myself and what I am doing and begin the now familiar pro-

cess of "triaging", figuring out which ones have busses leaving soon, then working through individual intakes and conversations. Just as I finished that group, I look up to see incoming new refugees. Just as I finished that group, my new friend, Robert, the station manager, gives me a heads up, there are about 30 who just landed. The work is non stop for hours.

Here are some of the memories I took home with me from the dozens I served yesterday....

So many adorable, curious, eager, beautiful children
The boy with the huge, gorgeous brown eyes
The ten year old girl with no front teeth and a big grin
The teenagers, the babies

None seem to complain, just accept

The 30 year old Guatemalan woman who was going to see her mother. Wonderful, I said, when is the last time you saw her? Twenty -seven years ago. She had to leave when I was three.

The young mother with the grinning ten year old tells me

that she had to leave her home in Honduras. The man who had been trying to kill her had been let out of jail and she knew her chance to survive was to leave. The stateside friend who offered to sponsor her told her she could bring only one child so she decided to bring the ten year old and leave behind her seven month old with her fifteen year old daughter. It was either that or certain death for her and probably all of her kids.

Around 5pm, most had already departed and only three families were left. I took them to eat at the bus station cafeteria....fried chicken and hot dogs. Just then a new family

arrives and I am out of backpacks, medicines, and exhausted. I try to give them the best advice possible and then I leave. It's like the kid who is trying to save starfish on the beach – you can only do so much and hope that you could at least make a tiny difference to that one.

Throughout the day, the constant CNN news flashes about making America Safe Again, securing our borders, ensuring terrorists are returned home. There are no terrorists here, only mothers and children seeking safety and survival.

This work breaks my heart, but also heals it Carly Leech

After I learned that most of the women leaving the immigration detention centers are dropped off at the bus station with next to nothing, having exhausted their travel funds, there was no turning back for me. I need to show up for them. It's hard work, but the women bring me strength and keep me from drowning in my own personal struggles. One woman who I will never forget was dropped off late in the afternoon by ICE with her two children. I had already been there for hours helping other families, and I had run out of sandwiches. Luckily, I still had two backpacks with supplies and snacks. When she realized she had to take three buses and would not reach her destination for two full days, she panicked, tears rolling down her cheeks. Immigration officials had somehow given her the impression she would only take one bus and arrive the same

day. She didn't know what city we were in. She had no idea how far away California was from Texas. She had no money and had no way to get money to feed her children. Desperately, she showed me the commissary number on her immigration identification, wanting to be able to spend her remaining balance. I explained to her that it only worked in the detention center, which only increased her panic. Then suddenly, she rallied, calmed herself down, and told me, "Voy a aguantar con esta comida." ...I will get by with this food. She was finally able to smile and she thanked me. She said she didn't know what she would have done if I hadn't been there. This work breaks my heart, but also heals it.

An Act of Compassion Treedy Chapa

I was raised to believe in compassion for those in need. I learned of the Bus Station Ministry almost a year ago. This was a venue to practice compassion and share my time.

I joined the group of volunteers that help the asylum seekers that cross the Texas border and stop at the San Antonio Greyhound Bus Station. We assist the Mothers and their children reach their next destination in the US safely. The majority of the women are young, vulnerable and very frightened. Sadly, there are many people out there ready to take advantage of them during their journey. Many of them have been traveling for months with little or no food or means of transportation. Once being released from the detention center, having been sponsored by a family member or friend, they begin their journey to the unknown. These ladies have left everything that was familiar to them; family, friends,

language, customs, culture and community in hopes for a better life for themselves and their children. The majority of them are under 5 years of age.



Treedy Chapa, one of our volunteers, handing out a travel backpack to one of our mothers at the bus station.

I have witnessed the strength and resilience of the young women, their character and humility. One example is when one of the mothers asked me how to buy a soft drink in the restaurant and when I showed her how she immediately asked if she could buy me one as well, she who has so little and I who have so much. Many women have shown some of their vulnerability and fears yet they fight for a better life for their children and themselves. These women are

amazing and a testimony of the value of human life and the pursuit of safety and well-being. Please don't forget the value of human life and the worth of our youth.