

Peace Through Preservation of Life  
United States/Mexico  
Whitman College  
Keiler Beers, Genevieve Jones: USA, Whitman College

## **Section I**

### **Project Goals**

Our project sought to improve the distribution of life-saving equipment used by the humanitarian organization No More Deaths on the US-Mexico border by refining and expanding the contents and drop sites of “harm reduction kits” used in the desert by migrants.

### **Funds**

No outside funds were used in this project besides those provided by Davis Projects for Peace.

### **Evaluation of Project**

Our project came at a very opportune time for the organization. While the kits had been made in small quantities before, No More Deaths had never committed the resources or time to their full expansion. This year, there have already been 76 migrant bodies recovered in the Arizona desert, most of whom died from dehydration. This marks an increase from years past, and suggests the heightened need for humanitarian services. Additionally, the NMD volunteer who had occasionally made them in the past ended up having an incapacitating surgery this summer and so our presence filled a very important void.

Since No More Deaths is an all-volunteer based organization with many transient members, we quickly realized how difficult it was to cull any institutional knowledge on best practices or a consensus on a direction to take. We spent much of the first half of the summer meeting with various members of the community, asking for their feedback on different parts of the kits and ideas of how best to distribute them. While there was some agreement, there was also a great deal of confusion and discrepancies as to what had been done in the past, leading us to believe that our final work needed to be **recorded** in some way so as to avoid the doubling back that we did this summer.

Knowing that our personal expenses were low (we were able to avoid airfare by driving to Tucson and our host family would not accept more than \$400 for the entire summer as “rent”) we knew early on that the vast majority of the grant would be used on equipment. As we deliberated what the kit contents should be, we were initially very frugal with our money, perhaps too much so. There were also some leftover supplies used to make the kits that we were able to utilize until we purchased more. In all, we made more than 2000 kits this summer. We realized that our original target of 6,000 was unrealistic, and likely would not have been able to be absorbed by the shelters we visited. They will be used by migrants from Mexico and Central America.

One of the most difficult parts of our project was never being able to know the exact impact of our work. Long-time No More Deaths volunteers consistently told us that they never know the full effects of their efforts, and that after ten years they have come to accept that as an inherent element of humanitarian work. However, one of the most powerful moments was when we went back to a shelter in Mexico a second time to distribute kits two weeks after our initial visit there. There was a man who excitedly reminded us that he had been there for our first visit, had received the kit and subsequently tried to cross. Despite being apprehended in the desert, he expressed his gratitude for having the kit with him in the desert, saying that the Vaseline prevented him from getting blisters. He had used the Clorox bleach when he drank water from a dirty stream. Of course, he was not able to say whether it was just “helpful” or if it actually saved his life, and so we were left to guess what role our kit had truly played.

There were times when both of us, as Politics majors accustomed to thinking about issues such as migration and global apartheid on a broad and systemic level, grew frustrated with the limited scope of our work—it is, quite literally, a Band-Aid for a deep and far-reaching issue that needs to be addressed at its root. Our project, while vitally important and perhaps even life-saving for thousands, does not hit upon the reasons why someone would leave their home and travel thousands of miles through dangerous territory to reach the United States. Our kits will not prevent a single person from needing to make that journey. However, we had a friend come and visit us for a week in Tucson, and in

conversations with him he was struck by the fact that the two of us are, as far as we know, the only people on the entire stretch of the 1989-mile US/Mexico border who are doing this kind of work right now. It was an important reminder mid-summer that this work, while of course limited, *is* important and in need of attention. If just one person (and likely the number was far greater than that) was able to stave off dehydration and death in the desert because of our kits then our work did indeed have an almost incomprehensibly profound effect.

Even though much of our summer was spent in the United States, we constantly had to consider how our role as white U.S. citizens informed the work that we did. For instance, we were determined to have the distribution of our kits be done primarily by those who ran the shelters. The reasons for this decision were two-fold: practically, it did not make sense to make so many trips into the Mexican interior (the farthest shelter was close to 4 hours away from our home in Tucson) when much of our work required us to be in the USA. In addition, we did not want to reinforce unequal power relations and the all-too-common phenomenon of a White Savior Complex wherein two foreigners would be the ones visibly dispensing aid and thereby setting ourselves up as migrants' rescuer when it was our own country's policy which have necessitated the invention of the kits in the first place. As a result, we resorted to explaining the kits to those at the shelter when we arrived to make sure the nuns had a clear understanding of how to use them, but largely relied upon these women for the continued distribution of the kits once we left. Thankfully, there were very few difficulties with communicating in Spanish. Although Genevieve does not speak Spanish, her comprehension is very high and was still able to be an equally effective communicator while in Mexico.

We deliberately designed our project with long-term efficacy in mind so that it could be easily continued after we leave. Of course, it is unlikely that No More Deaths, with such a limited budget, will be able to commit the same financial resources that we did this summer in the future. As such, we developed a "guidebook" – with detailed information about order supplies, where to take the kits, and a contact list of the relationships we built – that we could leave with No More Deaths to make the project's continuation as easy as possible. In addition, we purchased the supplies to make an additional 2,000 kits – enough to likely last them through the rest of the year and into 2015. Furthermore, we are setting aside funds to cover gas through the rest of 2014 so that interested volunteers are not dissuaded from continuing distribution on the basis of cost.

## **Section II**

As mentioned previously, we occasionally struggled with attempting to reconcile the narrow specificity of our work with the broad scope of "peace," even as tailored to the issue of migration. However, we maintain our project's significance within our initial understanding of peace as "the right to seek economic security and live a life unencumbered by violence and suffering." Again, while our work does not reduce the need for Mexican and Central Americans to migrate, we see our project as vital to establishment of peace within a heavily militarized and violent zone on the US-Mexico border. If our work this summer did anything to reduce the death and suffering among those who choose to pass through the deadly path of the Sonoran desert, then we will have done a small part to preserve peace in a part of the world that so badly needs it. It is our wish that the project will be continued by No More Deaths, and yet we also hope that border militarization, a current fixture of US policy, will in the future no longer necessitate our project.

This project reaffirmed our belief that political activism of any kind cannot be done in isolation. We expanded our work from our original intent by visiting immigrant detainees at a private prison north of Tucson, putting water out in the desert for migrants crossing, and getting involved with growing Tucson/Palestine solidarity organizing in the area, all with the knowledge that each area is intimately tied to and reliant upon the work being done in the others.

*Through the Davis Projects for Peace grant I was afforded the incredible opportunity to work with communities to provide necessary survival tools while also critically engaging in grassroots activism.*

*-Genevieve Jones*

*This project reminded me of just how urgent the work is down here on the border. It always feels like there is more to be done, but this project taught me that I can have a meaningful, if limited, impact even within a short period of time.*

*-Keiler Beers*

