



KPB Immigration Law Firm

San Francisco (415) 777-4445

Los Angeles (323) 782-3877

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Article: My own journey to a refugee camp south of Tijuana

By: Christopher A. Kerosky

This month, I am sharing a guest column from Liz Linde, a Sonoma County resident, about her recent trip to a refugee camp in Mexico holding many thousands of asylum-seekers awaiting their asylum interviews at our Southern border.

I am a resident of our beautiful Sonoma County who, like many of us, descended from immigrants. My family arrived to the U.S. from Sweden, Germany, France, and Mexico, with some British Isles thrown in the mix somewhere. For the last two plus years it's been difficult to listen to all the anti-immigrant rhetoric that people have felt free to spew. After all, I'm one of the lucky benefactors of previous eras' more immigrant-friendly policies toward white northern European countries. I suspect my great-grandfather from Guadalajara didn't bother with getting permission to cross an imaginary line in the sand that was shifting between Mexico and the U.S.

On Sunday, Nov. 25 I casually turned on the BBC news and heard the screams of women and children—they playing audio of American border agents shooting tear gas at a crowd at the border. A sob broke through me, and I instantly knew I had reached my breaking point. Over the last 2 years I've attended my share of demonstrations against our current federal government. Often I've wondered what would need to happen to make me put down my sign and act in a more concrete way to protest the actions of our government. This was it. It was incomprehensible to accept children being knowingly shot at with anything, much less tear gas. I knew right away that I had to go stand in the way should our government try it again.

I took a few days to formulate my plan and sent out an email to a group of my friends and family letting them know I was heading down to San Diego to deliver donations to refugees in the migrant camp. Within four days of sending my email, my little car was packed to the roof with donated items. I was bowled over by the generosity of friends who quickly responded with necessities of all kinds and cash gifts using every payment method possible. By the time I began my road trip I had over \$5,000 in cash donations. Tears of gratitude flowed non-stop those few days.

I drove my stuffed car over the Tijuana border to see if I could find the migrant camp and deliver all the donations. I wish I could say it was all smooth sailing but that would be far from the truth. I had quite the series of adventures during my solo seven-hour border crossing. But it's enough to report here that with the incredible help of some wonderful local Tijuana residents I was able to find one of the migrant camps and safely distribute all of my car's contents and some cash donations to women and children. I've always

known that poverty breeds desperation, and my experience at the camp was confirmation.

The first thing I was asked by the five men at the barricade surrounding the migrant tent city was whether I was there for good or bad. I explained that I had a car full of donated supplies and needed to speak with the leaders of the camp. They said there were no leaders. About a dozen men decided I wasn't a threat and moved the large concrete blocks just wide enough for me to squeeze my little car through if I flattened the side mirrors. The moment I slipped through the men put the 10 foot concrete barricades back in place. The watching crowd immediately swelled to over 150 people with more streaming in every second.

I began to worry for my safety so I pointed to three men in the crowd who I determined did not look desperate. I asked for a private conversation with them. One of these men, Raul, seemed to have some gravitas with the others. Raul spoke English which allowed us to speak in private. I told him I wanted women to be in charge of distributing the donated. I was constantly approached by individuals begging for specific items like shoes or tents. One 12-year-old boy pleaded with me for a tent for his mother and little sister. I was able to get the last tent from the remaining pile of supplies. My heart broke that a young boy who reminded me of my own sons ten years ago could be in such a desperate situation.

I later learned from Raul that he is a City of Tijuana trash collector and was spending his day off in the camp with his younger brother sweeping up feces. (I didn't see any sanitation facilities at the camp or another non-Hispanic person or vehicle while I was there.) Raul and his brother were the bright spots of the camp. They were strong and healthy compared to anyone else I met at the camp. I was continually swarmed by mobs with desperate pleas. In order to leave the camp I asked Raul and his brother to get in the car with me. Raul demanded the barricade be opened and I breathed a giant sigh of relief as I drove them home to downtown Tijuana.

I'm going back to Tijuana in January and February to continue finding ways to distribute the cash donations safely. I'll be working with a couple of individuals in Tijuana as well as Border Angels, a well-respected organization whose staff makes weekly trips to the migrant camps with food and supplies.

My American Dreams is raising money to relieve the plight of asylum seekers and other refugees; one half of the money raised through January 31 will go to Border Angels' effort to deliver necessary supplies and legal services and one half will support MADF's presentations and short films about immigrants in need. My American Dreams is currently making several videos about asylum seekers who have lived through similar ordeals in asserting their own claims to asylum. This is a story that must be told and you can help.

Help us help these desperate refugees. To make a contribution, please go to the [My American Dreams' website](#) and make a tax-deductible donation.

Thank you!

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About the author:

CHRISTOPHER A. KEROSKY is a partner with Wilson Purves in the law firm of KEROSKY PURVES & BOGUE, with offices located in San Francisco, Santa Rosa, Ukiah, Napa, Walnut Creek, San Jose and Sacramento. Mr. Kerosky has been an attorney licensed to practice law in California for 25 years. He is a graduate of UC Berkeley (Boalt Hall) School of Law and a former trial lawyer for the Civil Division of the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington D.C. For 9 years, he has been honored as one of Northern California's top lawyers by San Francisco Magazine, "Super Lawyers" edition. Mr. Kerosky speaks English, Spanish and Polish and has also working knowledge of Russian.

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