

Solidarity Hospitality:

Refugees, Migrants, and the Casa de los Amigos

by Nicholas Wright and Jill Anderson



Jill Anderson

A family of Haitian earthquake refugees relaxing in the Casa de los Amigos kitchen

On its Jubilee anniversary in 2006, the Casa de los Amigos, a Quaker Center for Peace and International Understanding in Mexico City, rededicated itself to its founding mission of doing the work of Friends in Mexico. The Casa presented several new peace

programs. Since then the “Solidarity Lodging” program--partnering with other organizations to house migrants and refugees--has become a significant contribution in Mexico City. It is a daily service that relies on the Casa’s strengths: a Quaker guest house, a community environment, and amazing volunteers.

Four years later, the Casa received a clear validation of these strengths: in October 2009 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Mexico approached the Casa with a proposal to permanently reserve space for refugees. The powerful, collective experience of almost 100 refugees, migrants, asylum-seekers and human trafficking victims had become well-known throughout the migrant and refugee rights community.

Quakers in Mexico have long held a concern for migrants and refugees. In the 1930s, Friends in Mexico City formed a loan program to help Spanish Civil War refugees start small businesses. During the 1980s, the Casa de los Amigos aided, advised and housed thousands of Central American refugees fleeing war and violence. The Casa continues to be uniquely positioned to respond to critical migration and refugee concerns of the day.

Mexico, Migrants and Refugees

Mexico is the world’s most prolific expeller of emigrants and a leading nation in circular and return migration. It is a destination country for tens of thousands: Mexico’s liberal, celebrated refugee policy makes it a haven for those fleeing war and violence; and for many so-called “economic

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Holly Storck-Post

The Omidzavehs, an Iranian refugee family that stayed at the Casa for two months.

migrants,” *Mexico* is the rich country to the north. Mexico is also the busiest migration transit corridor in the world. Each day about 1,000 people, mostly Central Americans, pass through the southeast region on their way to points north. The vast majority left home to find work, and are not legally considered refugees.

Migrants here are off the radar; this migration is not seen as a pressing, mainstream issue. Despite the fact that Mexican migration to the United States is a central part of the national mythology, migrants inside Mexico are invisible. They ride the freight trains, hidden from the public eye. They are prey to

Join the Casa Community!

The Solidarity Lodging program is just one part of the peacework of the Casa. You can learn more and get in touch with us at www.casadelosamigos.org.

The people who stay here, live here, and work here make the Casa a home. The Casa is open to all. Get involved: Visit the Casa, support a Casa volunteer, or consider participating in the Casa’s incredible volunteer program.

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Casa de los Amigos. The Casa volunteer program offers a wide array of opportunities for individuals to contribute to the work of the Casa; detailed descriptions are available on the website. Those who are fluent in Spanish and able to commit between six months to a year of service are especially well-suited to volunteering with us, but there are many other options.

If you are coming to Mexico City, please let us know, stop by to visit, or consider staying in our comfortable guesthouse. Reservations are strongly recommended.

The Casa is an independent, Mexican non-profit organization. We are able to receive tax-deductible donations from the US, thanks to the help of Orange Grove Monthly Meeting. You may make contributions on our website using PayPal, or mail a check made out to Orange Grove MM to the following address:

Casa de los Amigos, A.C
c/o Orange Grove Monthly Meeting
520 East Orange Grove Blvd.
Pasadena, CA 91104

Please note “Casa de los Amigos” on the check.

Email loquepasaenlacasa@gmail.com to get on our weekly email update, or become a Casa contact to share news and updates with your Meeting.

violence, accidents, extortion from corrupt authorities and increasingly, kidnapping, which is often

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controlled by organized crime. Before many migrants even get near the US-Mexico border to face the challenges there, they risk everything in Mexico. The desperation of the hemisphere is concentrated here.

In the Casa’s peace-guesthouse, there are always recently recognized refugees and those who are awaiting a response to their asylum petition to the Mexican government. This year alone, we have housed 52 people through the Solidarity Lodging program from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, the Congo, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conakry, Haiti, Honduras, Iran, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. Like the rest of our guests in the Casa’s social justice oriented guesthouse, they participate in the Casa’s rich community life, love being here, and feel the transformative power of this amazing place.

Migration and the Casa

Liselot Petry is a Young Friend from Germany who, after a year with Peace Brigades International in Mexico, became a Casa volunteer. She works full-time at the Casa on the Hospitality and Migration Programs. “Living and working with refugees and migrants at the Casa is one of the most enriching and rewarding experiences I have had,” says Liselot. “For many, the journey to the Casa started with leaving behind their homes, their families and friends; through struggle, trauma and fear, to arrive in a completely different place in which they don’t know anyone, where they have to start from zero, having nothing or very little. The Casa offers these people a place to stay for a while, to find some stability that enables them to keep going. They enrich this place so much with their presence.”

Manuel, from Colombia, said that it was very hard to leave home, but when his father was killed he had only hours to get ready. “I wasn’t prepared to leave at all...but my life was in danger, and I had to go. It took me ten months to get to Mexico, and I was in the detention center another two months.” While he was at the Casa, Manuel saw others arrive from the detention center in various states of distress. He was

nervous, but there was another Colombian refugee here already, and a Nigerian man that he had met in the detention center. “For me, it was wonderful here from the day I arrived.” Manuel stayed here for five weeks. On the day he moved out to an apartment nearby, he told us, “It feels strange now to be leaving here, there won’t be anyone to talk with in the evenings...but, little by little. Everyone here was great. I don’t want to leave the Casa, really. But we have to move on and make space here for others who might be in the same state of need.”

“Helping somebody make a phone call, use a computer, translating for someone, being present, these things can be a huge deal to people who are basically in a long, traumatic ordeal. We’ve seen people get in touch with their families when they didn’t know if they were dead or alive, and vice-versa.”

For the Omidzavehs, an Iranian family of five, their arrival was quite different. They arrived at the Casa frightened, angry, exhausted and desperate after months in the detention center. All of Mexico has only one Farsi-Spanish interpreter, and she was not available. Over the two months they were at the Casa, they very slowly came to feel safe and to relax, to open up and trust others, and to play and laugh. When they left the Casa it was very hard for them and for everyone here. After living across town for six months, they recently moved to an apartment a block away to be close to the Casa de los Amigos and in the neighborhood they know. Like thousands of Iranians, they are reformists who had to leave Iran due to the violence following contested elections in the summer of 2009. We have housed nine Iranians, and the Casa has become the principal meeting point for Mexico’s small Iranian exile community.

Clay Boggs, a member of Berea Monthly Meeting in Kentucky, is the coordinator of the Casa’s peace programs. “It’s very challenging work, and it is very satisfying work,” he says. “It is challenging because sometimes people come and they have a lot of needs, they may really stressed, especially upon arrival,

they might be suspicious, traumatized, or completely silent. It is satisfying work too...helping somebody make a phone call, use a computer, translating for someone, being present, these things can be a huge deal to people who are basically in a long, traumatic ordeal. We’ve seen people get in touch with their families when they didn’t know if they were dead or alive, and vice-versa, we’ve seen that several times actually. We also love it when people who stayed here come back to visit. Having started their lives in Mexico City, the Casa de los Amigos is a special place for them.”

Enlightening truths unfolded during the Casa’s process of discernment that began five years ago. Time and again the Casa led us to its proven assets—our willing, welcoming community, the fantastic volunteers who just keeping turning up, and our amazing space in the middle of Mexico City. Our work experience has taught us repeatedly to cultivate and plant in this fertile soil. Today the Casa is known not only as a living, visible example of Quaker witness in the middle of a very big city but also for its critical humanitarian work. The Casa is a constructive member of Mexican civil society, and also offers an experience to all that makes plain the rippling power of acts of conscience.

Nicholas Wright and Jill Anderson are the co-directors of Casa de los Amigos. Many Friends met them at IMYM this year, and many more will have a chance to meet them at PYM’s Annual Sessions.



Dinner at the Casa, with Giovanni, Sam, Nita, Holly and Cleophas.