

An Eye-Opening Experience: Students Continue to Journey in Solidarity During Second Year of Virtual Border Immersion

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(Author's Note: The word "migrant" is used instead of "immigrant" because the word "migrant" refers to a human making temporary movement and the word "immigrant" refers to a permanent resident. Because "migrant" can be more broadly used and because perhaps none of us has a "permanent" place, the word "migrant" will be used in this article)

This summer, 13 [Jesuit Portland](#) students and two faculty members, Campus Ministry Associate Al Kato and Alumni Director Kathy Baarts, participated in a virtual border immersion experience hosted by the [Kino Border Initiative](#) (KBI). Over the course of the week, students talked to migrants, learned the many aspects of immigration, and experienced a diverse range of opinions regarding the immigration issue as well as life at the border.

Although this year's immersion was virtual due to the ongoing COVID-19 virus, these students walked in the footsteps of previous groups as their challenges and goals were the same as the previous immersion experience: Humanize, Accompany, and Complicate.

"Although the experience was not in person this year, I think the students got a good sense of the struggles faced daily by the migrants and the never-ending work of the KBI workers and volunteers," said Al Kato, a Campus Ministry Associate who accompanied students on the virtual experience. "It may have been the first time some of us have witnessed injustice so severe. KBI did a good job taking us with them virtually throughout the week, but I'm hoping it will be in person soon."

Throughout the immersion, students went on virtual walks through the desert, crossed the border, and listened to personal stories from migrants. Many morning sessions were filled with stories of heartbreak, terror, joy, and triumph. However, one major theme woven through the migrants we talked to was how tired they were. Sergio, a migrant from Guatemala told the group: "Most migrants just want to work. They want to be able to provide for their family."

Students were also encouraged to reflect upon what they heard each day, both in their journals and during the afternoon sessions.

"I am incredibly grateful to have been able to participate in Kino Border Initiative's virtual immersion this summer," reflected Quinn '23. "This experience has simply pushed me to evaluate my role as a global citizen in a global community. In the past, it has been difficult to

look outside my little bubble of people, places, and experiences...Through speaking with the migrants I've realized that there is an interconnectedness between all of humanity, and ultimately it is our responsibility to care for our fellow global citizens."

These reflections and personal stories complemented a broad expanse of knowledge. These ranged from carpet shoes (special shoes with carpet glued to the soles to make traveling silent) and black water jugs (painted so that the water inside would not reflect light) to Operation Streamline, a program that has the goal of achieving 100% criminalization of unauthorized border crossings. Students combined their emotional and educational growth through exposure to practices, laws and to those affected by the immigration process. Most sessions were split into two parts: a morning session allowing students to talk and listen to migrants, and an afternoon session allowing students to focus on learning about a specific aspect of immigration.

As expected, the virtual aspect resulted in a unique 2021 KBI Immersion Experience. During the Pre-Immersion Prep Meetings, multiple students expressed fears that their ability to experience all the KBI Immersion program had offered to previous students would be limited because of its virtual format.

While it is true that the virtual experience automatically decreased immersion in areas of importance, such as experiencing a walk in the desert or seeing migrant's body language as they spoke, the Kino Border Initiative still allowed students to experience personal stories, learn new information, and have a better understanding of the challenges that migrants faced. At the immersion's end, students expressed how the Kino Border Initiative succeeded in bringing the same emotions, stories, and connections that previous students had experienced.

"The Kino Border Initiative revealed to me the challenges migrants face in trying to start new lives in the United States," reflected a student. "Yolanda, the woman from Guatemala, had a particularly powerful experience coming to the US in a construction trailer. In reflecting on her, I have come to see the injustice in our asylum process, how it handles many people, each with their own story. It made me sad and also hopeful that we can make it (the asylum process) better, and more humane."

At the end of the immersion, the 13 Jesuit Portland students were tasked with continuing the experience through DASH, an acronym that stands for Defend, Accompany, Share. Students brainstormed ways to continue the experience including creating art and videos, giving short talks, and speaking at assemblies. During the last session, students were also given time to create an "Elevator Speech," a short conversation starter that could create a room for discussion for those who were not knowledgeable about the immigration issue. Students were reminded to bring a personal aspect to the conversation by focusing on real humans who were involved. As Jaret Ornelas, S.J., the education coordinator of KBI, reminded students: "The goal is not to win debates, it is to change hearts and minds."

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