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Incomprehensible violence, loss on Mexican border

by Maria Miranda Maloney



Mexican soldiers patrol downtown Ciudad Juarez, Mexico's most violent city. (CNS photo)

El Paso, Texas

I am a teacher at a Catholic school, Our Lady of the Valley, in the border city of El Paso Texas. The sixteen students in my class, mostly 12 and 13-year-olds, arrive daily from Ciudad Juarez, a dense metropolis of about 1.5 million in the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

The sister cities are divided by the Rio Grande River, but bound together by the growing terror of drug cartel violence and daily murder. This violence has become part and parcel of our school life, most dramatically in my English as a second Language class.

Today, my student Miguel's desk is empty. He is one of some 69 students in our school who are U.S. citizens but reside in Juarez with their Mexican parents. These are primarily middle-class parents who work hard to send their kids to Catholic school. The youngsters cross the international bridge on foot daily to meet a bus that drops them off at Our Lady of the Valley three miles away.

I scan the classroom. I clear my throat, and ask if anyone has seen or heard from Miguel. Samuel, a tall, 13-year-old, says Miguel is out of town, visiting a relative. I'm relieved - for the moment at least. As in

schools everywhere, absenteeism is cause for concern, but here that concern takes the form of cold fear for the lives of our children - particularly in the case of Miguel.

Five months ago, Mexican soldiers, on a tip that Miguel's father was allegedly involved in drug cartel activities, raided Miguel's residence in the middle of the night. The soldiers broke the door down while the family slept. Once inside they dragged him, his parents, and sister out of the bedrooms into the living room where they forced them face down on the floor as the soldier ransacked the house.

Miguel was absent for almost a week after the incident. After he returned to school the dark-eyed, 12-year-old recounted the nightmare quietly to me. The Mexican soldiers had destroyed his home, he said. They hit his ailing, diabetic father several times, shoving Miguel to the floor, while soldiers pointed machine guns at them. When the soldiers did not find what they were seeking they took his father with them and made away with the family's cell phones, iPod, VCR, and other electronic valuables, according to Miguel.

His father currently sits in jail awaiting the outcome of the investigation. In Mexico, a person is considered guilty until proven innocent. The family is denying the charges and has hired an attorney. According to Miguel, during the interrogation that ensued after the raid the Mexican soldiers denied stealing from the family, but the young boy is convinced the soldiers are abusing their powers.

"The soldiers are here to protect us, but they are not. They are hurting and stealing from innocent people," he added.

I thank him, and looked out the window where a cloud of thick, dark smoke was steadily making its way across the Rio Grande from Juarez. Last week, the sky on the Mexican side was smoke-filled as several businesses burnt to the ground.

My students insist it is the "bad guys" setting the fires. I am not sure who these "bad guys" are: the hundreds of disgruntled police officers fired for corruption and drug activities or the drug cartel members.

Twelve-year-old Marisa, a gifted painter, lives in a gated, middle class Juarez neighborhood. In 2008, before the drug cartel wars began, the children roamed the neighborhood freely, riding bicycles, playing basketball, she said. It all changed when parents began noticing "strange vehicles parked here and there," said Marisa. "We got scared."

Several weeks later a neighbor was picked up on kidnapping charges. The neighbors were stunned. Now the children are not allowed to play outside and the neighborhood's entrance gates, which used to be left open, are closed at all times, according to Marisa.

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Samuel's father stopped going to his business after receiving threatening calls from one of the "bad guys." His father fears for his life, according to Samuel.

"But, it hasn't affected me. I'm okay," Samuel adds. Despite his bravery, his eyes water and voice trembles. I realize this may explain Samuel's declining motivation at school. He has gone from a happy-go-lucky teen, to morose and quiet.

Paola, a shy girl of 12, whose mother runs a private school, says her parents disconnected the telephones at home after a man called demanding money. The same week the extortionist left a note at the school

demanding a monthly quota from the teachers; otherwise, students would be kidnapped, according to Paola.

The stories are countless and violence rampant. Tony, a rambunctious, bright 12 year-old will not forget the day his college-age, sister, Pamela, was threatened with kidnapping just outside their family home. She was forced to turn in her car keys at gunpoint and for many weeks thereafter she and Tony lived erratic lives, leaving the house at various times of the day for school in order to deter the kidnapers. Luckily, the family survived the ordeal but not without drawbacks. Pamela's voice trembles when she recounts the story, and she and Tony are always "watching their back".

"Our students live in two worlds," says Sister Caroline Vasquez, the school's principal. "Since the drug cartel wars became more violent, our students from across the border, live in constant fear. Life in school is not the same."

But for many of my students school is a sanctuary, a place where they can feel at peace and secure, without fear of being taken by cartel, police, or federal army, says Sister Caroline.

"Teachers, staff, and students from this side of the border journey with the students in their struggle to understand the incomprehensible destruction of a wonderful, culture and country," she says.

Maria Miranda Maloney is an elementary school teacher and writer.

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