

Rio Grande Borderland Ministries

Episode 2, Season 4, Hometown Podcast

SPEAKERS

Nellie Fagan, Allison Duvall, Mike Wallens, Kendall Martin

Allison Duvall 00:10

Why do you support refugees?

00:12

I support refugees because my family were refugees.

00:15

I support refugees because we are all God's children and we all deserve a safe place to grow in God's love.

00:21

I support refugees because God made us all in God's image.

00:25

I support refugees because I'm a legal guardian of a minor asylee named Carol from Burundi.

00:32

I support refugees because my Lord was a refugee.

00:36

Because I welcome and I love my neighbor.

Kendall Martin 00:40

Hi, and welcome to Hometown, a podcast from Episcopal Migration Ministries, the refugee and immigration ministry of the Episcopal Church. I'm Kendall Martin.

Allison Duvall 00:49

And I'm Allison Duvall. Today's episode features our interview with the Reverend Mike Wallens, cochair of the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries (or RGBM) for the Diocese of the Rio Grande and Nellie Fagan, Project Coordinator for the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries through Blueprint.

Kendall Martin 01:04

Mike Wallens is the vicar of an Episcopal Church in Marfa, Texas and serves four other churches in the Big Bend region of Far West Texas. The Rio Grande Borderland Ministries, which Mike serves, covers all of New Mexico and Far West Texas. Their ministries include working with the Anglican Diocese of Northern Mexico, as well as shelters on the US side of the border. Mike helps coordinate responses to

the humanitarian crisis along the southern border of the United States, maintaining open communication with the Border Patrol and the Big Bend sector and supporting Rio Grande Borderland Ministries partnership with Boquillas Beyond Mexico Mission Incorporated.

Allison Duvall 01:37

And Nellie's role is Project Coordinator for the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries. She focuses on developing and implementing strategy for marketing, communications and fundraising. Nellie is passionate about social justice, advocacy, and building community.

Kendall Martin 01:50

Allison, I really enjoyed today's conversation with Mike and Nellie. And I'm really excited for folks who don't know a lot about the ministry to learn more about the important work that they're doing.

Allison Duvall 01:59

Me too. And one of the things I love most about doing the Hometown podcast with you Kendall is getting to know local ministries across the Episcopal Church. And I especially think that at this moment, it's so important for folks all across the country to hear what's happening along the southern border and what the experiences of Episcopal churches and dioceses and local ministries are at this moment. So listeners, we really hope you enjoy today's conversation.

Kendall Martin 02:30

So thank you, Mike and Nellie, so much for joining us today. We're so happy to talk with you. And, Mike, we'd love to start off with you and have you talk to our listeners and tell them about the Rio Grande Borderland Ministries and how it came to be and what it looks like today.

Mike Wallens 02:45

Thank you for having Nellie and I talk with you. I really appreciate it. I appreciate all the ministries that Episcopal Migration Ministries performs and does and and it's great to be part of the new new approaches with asylum seekers and detention centers. So thank you for that. Rio Grande Borderland Ministry, I came into it about three years ago, three and a half years ago, when I moved to this area. And it was it's been in existence for nine years. And when it first started out, it basically took people from three different areas along the border: one is the region that I'm in is called the Big Bend region basically goes from Big Bend National Park to just outside of El Paso. And then the next region is El Paso and Juarez. And then on the west side of the diocese, which goes up to the Arizona border, it's in Deming, Columbus and Palomas, Mexico. And so when it first started out from what I can tell, it basically was just funding for to clergy, part time funding for two clergy in the El Paso/Juarez region and in Deming and Palomas. And then it started to expand in the Big Bend region. And we started to look at what the needs were here when I came. And so we've expanded that along with the expansion into Juarez with two other shelters and into Palomas with a women's co-op. And so when I just after I first got here, Reverend Paul Moore was the founder of it. And then Susan Hutchins, Kathleen Cannon McNelis were both part of it. And as the needs arose on the border, we can't, we started to focus a little more as to what could be done, especially with the people seeking asylum. And so when, when, as that issue started getting greater and greater, we realized that we, we meaning in the Diocese of the Rio Grande could not do this all by ourselves, nor were we doing it all by ourselves, we focused on creating a Borderlands summit, which the first year it was in El Paso. And at that summit, we invited all the

Episcopal dioceses along the border of, you know, from Big Bend to California. And then we also had representatives from the Diocese of Western Mexico, the bishops from Western Mexico, Northern Mexico, and El Salvador. And it was Honduras. And we all got together with people who were doing ministry, and we started to form partnerships and bonds. And so the two, for instance, the two shelters that we work with in Juarez, are really under the direction of a priest from the Diocese of Northern Mexico, Hector Trejo, and, and then we've been in contact with, and we started sharing information. So for instance, when people would flood a certain part of the border, then we would help out that part, that need there. So for instance, in Nogales, Arizona, we helped out with Roger, who was there, and has an active ministry on both sides of the border. And so when they were given, for instance, a huge donation, clothes, brand new clothes and everything, we then divided it out, and, and it got sent to all the different dioceses along the border. So it helped us expand our relationships, and share knowledge because, as we all know, everything changes almost daily around the border. And so something happens here that might have already happened in Arizona, then we learn from them, or something happens here that hadn't happened in Arizona, and then all of a sudden does then they call us and so it makes for an important network. And within RGBM, then we have ministries in Ojinaga, Mexico, Boquillas and and all the little villages beyond Boquillas, both in Mexico, that's in my sector. And then I think that's basically it. I don't know if I answered your question. But

Allison Duvall 08:26

Oh, you you answered it beautifully. And more than that, I think what so it's always striking to me. And I think it probably will be for our listeners as well that I think for folks in the interior who are near neither the coastal regions, the northern or the southern border, there's just this kind of generic notion of the border. And there's not this acknowledgement of how different the border looks, and how even Customs and Border Protection Border Patrol separate the border into sections. And so just hearing from how you are partnering across the border with other Episcopal dioceses is on both sides, US and Mexico, and responding contextually with what's happening, but also learning from what's happening elsewhere. I think it's just really important context for our listeners. And you mentioned briefly the work that you're doing in Ojinaga. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the asylum shelter, the indigenous shelter and what that work currently looks like there.

Mike Wallens 09:22

So when I first got here, and as things started to heat up along the border, I basically was wondering what we could do and what was going on in Ojinaga since we're right, almost right there. We're about 45 minutes away. And so a member of our church, Bob Crocket has people who worked for him on his ranch and they commute from Ojinaga up to Marfa, Texas, which is the one of the churches I'm at and so we asked them and they told us about what was going on in Ojinaga and so what happened was the federal government, Mexican federal government, was running two shelters, one for indigenous people who would come down out of the mountains to work in the agricultural fields outside it's it's part of Ojinaga, but it technically it's way out in the middle of nowhere in between Ojinaga and Chihuahua, Mexico. And then they also ran a shelter in Ojinaga and the shelter was for people who were seeking asylum for people and well at that time is just for people who are seeking asylum and for including unaccompanied minors. So that shelter has, well I can describe in just a minute, but anyways, the when the new president came into office in Mexico, they shut they said we're not supporting the shelters anymore. So all of a sudden, the city of Ojinaga had all these people who were not being taken care of. And so the mayor of Ojinaga appointed his wife to take over both shelters. And so the one of the city

commissioners who has connections with us up here in Marfa contacted me and and then I went down and talked with him. And they're, in addition to that, there are those two shelters which I'll talk about in just a minute. There's two other sort of connections, one's a really fascinating one in that the head of the cartel, in Ojinaga, is currently serving time in prison in Chicago, and one of the ministers in Marfa, who has an amazing conversion story, but he was in prison too. And he used to be a drug dealer, but he's now a pastor in an independent church here in Marfa. Through his connections, he talked with the head of the cartel in, in prison in Chicago, and that head of the cartel found Jesus literally found Jesus or Jesus found him. And he then said he wanted to help out. And so in addition to the two shelters we work with, we received a grant from the UTO offering. The UTO grant we received a grant to establish a bilingual youth ministry from Marfa into Ojinaga and that's the highway 60--is called the 67 corridor. And the the former head of the cartel, through his daughters gave us his social club to use for youth ministry down there. And in addition, is funding building a church--he gave us land. He said you can use it for youth ministry but you have to build a church, so we weren't ones to complain. So the church is being built and we use the social club for youth ministry as part of the grant from the from UTO. So that's been great.

So these two shelters, the one that's for indigenous people is really stark. They they have they're a series of two small rooms. And because they don't, they're used to cooking on fires outdoors, there's no kitchen, so it's like a sink and then an area where they can store some food. And then the other room is for sleeping usually four to six people and fresh water has to be trucked into them once a week and then they have to use that water to take showers to cook to clean. They don't have washing machines but they built these outdoor washing tubs so, out of cement and there's a scrub place you can scrub the clothes and then the place to rinse it off. But there's we are in the process of putting solar panels in there, because there's really no electricity that comes into this, this place. And the children that are there, there's a school there, but it's the Mexican government stopped the teachers from coming. Due to some financial reason, I don't know all the details there. So we're in the process of trying to help fund some teaching and some some of the classroom the schools there, when we put in solar panels, which we do in other parts of Mexico, as when there's a school not only do the solar panels go in, but we also have enough money raised that we provide the school with computers, and, and refrigerators and things like that. So there's in this in the indigenous shelter, there's nothing there for the children. And usually there's 95 to depending sometimes the families will go, what if they're not harvesting, they will go back up to the mountains, where they came from, and come back again, a large number of people they'll come and stay at the shelters and the kids and when their parents are gone working, there's just nothing for them. There's no educational opportunity, there's really no playground, there's and so the older children who will look after the younger ones, while their parents are out in the fields working. So that that's the one shelter in order to get to that shelter, we have to go and cross through a a federal police. I can't, I don't even what you call it, you know, where they, they inspect your vehicles and everything. And so, and it's also sort of dangerous because of the cartels. So when we go there we go into Ojinaga, and then the city commissioner drives us in his truck. So they don't, we're relatively safe in the city truck, and the cartel won't come near it.

The other shelter that we work with is in the city of Ojinaga, and that is for people who are seeking asylum, or and now have been deported. And as I said, it's also for unaccompanied minors, both seeking asylum, and those who have been deported. We have a section for girls, and a section for boys that have 20 bunk beds in them, and showers and everything. And then there's another section for

families. And then there's another section for single parents and, and their children if they have any. And then what's interesting on one side of the shelter, is a morgue, a funeral home. And unfortunately, when people try and come across they, by the time they get to the shelter, because they've crossed the desert, and they're really physically in bad shape, a number of them die. And so the funeral home is kind enough to provide funeral services and for free to any any person seeking asylum who died at the shelter. The other on the other side of the shelter is a city-run physical therapy building. And so what, what they've been able to do is when people come to the shelter, they're obviously again, not in good physical shape. And so they provide free physical therapy for people and we were able to get 30 wheelchairs, to bring down to Ojinaga so that when they first get there, they're in a wheelchair and because it's only across the street or across the driveway, really, it's easy for them to get to and get taken care of like that.

And so the shelters provide food, clothes and, and then with the connection that we have in our sector that I have in our sector with the Border Patrol, which is a which is a good good relationship, that allows us then to work with them and make sure and this is all pre-pandemic, work with them and make sure that that they get the proper paperwork they need that they know when their number's being called. So I might get a call or whatever. And then I can let the people in the shelter know. The other thing that happened just before the pandemic is we started to receive unaccompanied minors who are being deported. And they ranged in age from seven to 17. And fortunately, because of this relationship with the Border Patrol, they would call and say we're getting ready to bring how many 25 children to the border, to cross back into Mexico. And I really appreciate that. Because what we have to do then is make sure we can get a couple of vans to pick them up. Because if we don't, the minute they cross over that border, the cartel's right there, and they scoop them up and use them for trafficking, whether it's drugs, or sex and everything. And so that's life and Ojinaga. And what we're dealing with right now, with the pandemic, there's not as much traffic going across the border, there's a little and sometimes the, again, what pays off with the relationship with the Border Patrol is, they will call me and say, and I have to say that the Border Patrol that I deal with are compassionate people they're not zealots, like, is portrayed by a lot of people, the ones in the Big Bend sector really have a heart. So they call me and say we've got a family that legally we have to separate. We don't want to, can you take them if we get permission, and so they call up the chain of command, get permission.

And so for example, I had a 19 year old father, 17 year old mother, they were married, and a six month old baby because the mother was under age, they legally or by protocol had to separate them. So that's when they call and say can you take them in. And I'm fortunate that we're where I live, we have four casitas that people have set aside for people seeking asylum. So that when this family came across, we were able to keep them there, we got them food, shelter, and then they were actually--no one wants to stay down here. Okay, they have family or friends some other place. And so this family was going to Detroit. So once, once we got them settled, we got them a physical at the regional medical center that we have here. And once we got them settled, then we contacted the family in Detroit, figured out where to go. The Border Patrol paid for the bus tickets, so we didn't have to pay for those. But we took care of the shelter, and you know, clothes and food and everything. And then we have to put together--they didn't speak English very well. So we put together a series of cards, we knew what the bus bus route was. And we put together a series of cards, you know, numbered 1234. So they knew where they were going. When they got off that they go to the second card, they see the name of the bus, you know, the bus number and the name of the town that that bus is going to for them. And on one side it was in

Spanish and other side it's in English. So they could show someone because well, this young couple, they just had no idea what was going on, you know how to navigate anything. And so and then, so we provided these cards, because they had this stop four times just to get change buses just to get to Detroit. And once they got to Detroit, someone in the family called me and said they're here and and so we've kept in touch. And the other thing that when we're able to do that, like we've sent people to Detroit and Hollywood, Florida, and Denver, Colorado, we then also are in touch with the churches, mostly Episcopal churches, but other churches who then help get them settled. And then that helps increase our network of people who will support this ministry and everything. So that, that's Ojinaga.

Allison Duvall 25:03

Well, it's just, I don't know, if you, you noticed as you were talking for our listeners, we're on Zoom together. And I was just reacting to everything that you were saying. It's it's just stunning how, like how difficult the the ministry context has to be how dangerous it is how that you're not only working with, like US federal officials, but you're working with Mexican federal government and local city government as well, like the amount of work that it takes to do what you do. Do what Rio Grande Borderland Ministries does to, to support and help people. It's just phenomenal. And I know, within EMM, we are one: so blessed by your time with us and so grateful for it. And also, we hope we can continue coming alongside the work that you do to help further connect people to support in their destination cities. So just a plug for listeners coming down the pipeline, we hope that more opportunities, like what Mike has described, will be made available through this continuing relationship that we're in. So thank you for that. And thanks for letting me respond to the amazing work that you do.

Kendall Martin 26:13

Mike, I wanted to ask a question I know, in addition to COVID, but also various legislative policies that have happened as of late, and the way that that's affected folks coming to seek asylum. And I'm curious, from your standpoint, like what you've seen change over the last six months or so I guess both in terms of the folks at the shelter, but then also folks that are needing help on this side of the border.

Mike Wallens 26:43

What's what's happened is that basically our government is using the COVID pandemic, to really stop any sort of traffic back and forth across the border. So what unless you're considered essential, and I'm not, which is all right, and but what what's nice is, at least where we are, because a number of people work here in Marfa or Alpine and live in Ojinaga, they're able to go back and forth. So we're able to at least get supplies and needs met that way there. And not only do we do that for the shelters, but even in the city of Ojinaga, because a lot of times when a family gets deported, they obviously are not going to go back to where they came from, because they're running for their lives from that place. And so, we've been working with the city of Ojinaga, not just in their shelters, but for instance, we just raised enough money to have five other shelters or houses built for some families who were deported and didn't know where they were going to go. And the city of Ojinaga and, and our group, split the costs. And so we we can do some things as far as supporting people who are waiting to come across, but because of the the rules and the protocol and everything that's in place. Now what the federal government has done, there's really, very little movement. Once in a while, some people will come across at a different place, we don't have a wall here. That's sort of the nice thing about being near Big Bend National Park and the way the Rio Grande runs, you can't put a wall. It's just it's even more expensive and really architecturally impossible. So people will continue to try and cross illegally. And

then I will get a call from the Border Patrol and to talk with them. And in some cases, we we work with the Border Patrol and can get them the help that they need. And because there's a trusting relationship, we can keep them here, rather than put them in detention until some decisions are made. And so that that makes a big difference, I think but as far as movement goes, there's not much we used to be able to, to attend hearings. They had the tent hearings and everything but they don't even do that anymore right now, because no one can come across to go to those hearings. So that's sort of where we are.

Allison Duvall 29:58

Yeah, I hope that listeners hear in the subtext of what you're saying how how terribly troubling and frightening it is that the government, the US federal government, the Trump administration has used the pandemic as pretext to deny people the right to seek asylum, which is enshrined in international law as being a fundamental human right. So I hope people hear that and also just appreciate so much the difficulty of the work that you will have been doing that you are doing now to support people when the US federal government isn't allowing them to seek seek safety.

Mike Wallens 30:32

Yeah, just one other thing with that what's interesting is some of the unaccompanied minors who we talk with and work with. were telling us that some of the people that they knew in detention where they were, once they were diagnosed with COVID, were flown back, say to Guatemala, and when they get to Guatemala, they the government doesn't want there's no place for them to go, because they can't go to where they used to go. And so that and because they have the, the COVID they're treated like lepers, and, and really, they're sort of placed out in the middle of nowhere, unprotected, unloved, and uncared for, and it's really cruel, from my perspective, what the government's doing by sending unaccompanied children flying them back and just getting them off the plane. And that's it. And it's...I dunno. It's just cruel, and, and immoral.

Allison Duvall 31:46

Absolutely. Kendall you were gonna, you were gonna add in?

Kendall Martin 31:48

Oh, no, I was just gonna say I'm glad that you mentioned that. I think people need to understand the layers. I was just reading an article in The New York Times. And the same thing is happening to folks that are being sent back to Venezuela and the Venezuelan government is calling them bioterrorists. So it's just a really frightening thing that's happening. And these people are being unprotected.

Allison Duvall 32:08

And then, as you mentioned earlier, Mike, even before the pandemic, when unaccompanied children or anyone is deported, if there's not someone there on the other side to help make sure they make it to a safe place. They'll be kidnapped into human trafficking, drug trafficking like it is it's a terrifying, terrifying scenario. And I hope that people appreciate that when they're advocating for asylum protections and for asylum seekers, they are also advocating against these terrible practices that both both you and Kendall just mentioned. I was wondering if you kind of turning turning a leaf hopefully to something about more ministry on the ground and partnership. Could you talk to us about what's what's going on with Boquillas and Beyond Mexico Mission, and how you're working together with them>

Mike Wallens 32:56

Boquillas and Beyond Mexico Mission is run by Rusty Nelson, who lives in Marfa, Texas. And when I first came down here, Rusty came and talked with me, and wanted to see if the church could be involved with them, which we are. And it is, it's an amazing he, he worked really hard to establish a relationship with the people Boquillas. I guess most people wouldn't know about Boquillas, but Boquillas is a small village. And you can only you can get to it by two ways. One is you can cross the border in the truck and drive for nine to 12 hours, depending on how well the roads are and everything. Because you have to go around, there's no direct route to Boquillas, except if you want to go into Big Bend National Park. And then the crossing is by boat only. And it's not a oh, it's a it's a rowboat. I mean, it's not one of those big ferries. It's a rowboat. We call it the international ferry. But it's people on the other side will row across, pick us up. And that's how we bring all the equipment and stuff that we use there. Boquillas when right after 9/11 happened. Basically the whole town shut down. Because there's no nothing crossing the borders. And then and then it opened back up. And then when the pandemic came now it shut down. But when it opened back up, back up, we were able to go across and begin to work with the people there and when I say work with we don't go across and tell them "here's what we're gonna do for you", we go across, and establish relationships and listen to them, and then figure out what the needs are. And so we ended up figuring out what the needs were in Boquillas.

And then there's a small town in La Union. And then there's another small town in in Jaboncillos. And in those two towns, they didn't have electricity. So we came across, put in solar panels. And we're sort of protected because we, when we first started this, the, the local, federal government or federal police came and asked us what we're doing. And they asked us if we could put solar panels into their compound. And because they didn't have, there's not really good electricity, where we are, and everything. And so we did that. So that afforded us now protection, and they help us make sure that what we put in and bring across isn't stolen, or taken. And so we put in a school in Jaboncillos. And we're we finished that school, we painted churches in Boquillas and and these two towns, we have solar systems put in to the school at La Union. And we included of course, computers and digital projectors. Part of the reason we focused on La Union we just almost finished with the middle school is because they had current primary school and high school, but the middle school students would have to go to a town that was really only about 30 minutes, 30 miles away. But because the roads are so bad, it took two hours to get there. I mean, it's just and it's not a safe road so the people in the town asked if we would consider building the middle school. And so we obviously said yes, but they're the ones they want to do the work. It's not we work side by side with them, but they, they don't want people necessarily to come in and just do for them they want they want they they buy into the whole thing, and they want to be part of it. So for instance, the two schools, a primary school and the high school, were on federal land, and they were Mexican, you know, schools run by the Mexican government. They told us, we don't want to build the middle school on that land, because what happens is, when we put in the solar panels and bring computers and everything, the federal government will come in and confiscate them. So so we they said, Can you can we build the school on this person's property, which was on the other side of town, but this is a small village, it's not like a big town, on the other side of town. And, and that way, the federal government can't touch whatever you put there. Plus, then when you bring computers and stuff and bring in to the high school or the primary school, we can store them in, you know, in the middle school, and then no one's going to steal them. And so and the federal government won't come in. So that's what we've done. And we're almost We're almost finished. And then the pandemic hit, so we're not quite finished with that. Unless I mean, we we can't we if we bring

the materials, the long way around on the roads, the cartel will take the truck confiscate everything. So part of this is we were waiting we are able to store some materials in Ojinaga at the shelter. That will be for Boquillas that is for Boquillas. But right now we're just that type of hold too. We're we're in the process of working to educate people about what's going on here. That's part of what RGBM is doing educating people, trying to build up volunteers and, and relationships with other churches so that when we'll be able to cross eventually and when that happens, we just want to hit the ground running, finish up what we've done, we've got some new plans and ideas in the works. And we don't want to be slowed down once we can get across.

Kendall Martin 40:28

You know, I'm so amazed at the amount of relationship building and partnerships, I think that's so foundational for, for doing really good work. And for folks who really want to get involved, what what type of opportunities are there in terms of volunteering or staying up to date, figuring out how they can be a part of all this awesome work?

Nellie Fagan 42:41

Well, I just want to echo what Mike said earlier, just that I'm so grateful to be able to have this conversation to share the work of RGBM. And so yeah, so thank you, Allison, and Kendall, for this partnership with EMM and the opportunity to be on the podcast. In terms of ways to get involved: given the given the circumstances of the pandemic, it is hard to get involved physically during this time, but we are meeting regularly with volunteers over Zoom. So if you're looking for an opportunity to learn more, any and all supporters of RGBM are welcome to join in these conversations. And I think the best way is just to connect with us through our web through our website, which is riograndeborderland.org. And that's also where to go just to learn more about RGBM and sign up for our newsletter, which I think is a primary way of learning and kind of seeing the ongoing changes and voices that makeup RGBM. All of our past newsletters are posted on our RGBM Now blog. So I definitely encourage anyone listening to check that out just to see what we've pushed out in the past. Allison and Kendall have been wonderful in contributing advocacy opportunities. And so yeah, so on Facebook and Instagram, we're Rio Grande Borderland and then on Twitter, it's RGBorderland. So again, we're pushing out content fairly, fairly regularly on there as well just to share the story. And please, like, subscribe do all that.

Allison Duvall 44:13

Well, and I also wanted to ask Mike, if you have anything to add to that answer before I pitch you another question.

Mike Wallens 44:19

Two things that come to mind. One is we're in the process of putting together a virtual pilgrimage. We had a pilgrimage all set to go and everything was said we would go from all parts of the border from where I am in Ojinaga and, and Marfa to El El Paso and Juarez to Deming and Palomas, and then the pandemic hits. So we're in the process of putting together a virtual pilgrimage so that people can still experience what's going on the people for instance, in Ojinaga are willing to film it and will have interviews with Border Patrol people and with families who are waiting to come across and and we, we can some of the unaccompanied minors are willing to speak as long as we, you know, hide their faces and everything like that. But so that's that's one thing. Secondly, the I think it's important to know what I think the question was asked earlier, Kendall, about the pandemic. And one of the things that happened

is the two shelters that we work with in Juarez, those were shelters for people seeking asylum, when the pandemic hit, the city of Juarez contacted the shelters and said, we we would like to use your two shelters, as a quarantine place of quarantine for, for people coming into Mexico, whether they're being deported, or whether they're coming up from south of Mexico south of Juarez. And so the whole mission of those shelters completely changed. So now they are, they come to one shelter for two weeks, if they don't have COVID or anything, then they're sent to the other shelter for two weeks. And so our mission there has completely changed because of the pandemic. And so, again, we we can't cross and but what's interesting is that some of the people, most of the people that were in the shelter before the pandemic, are now volunteering and working with the people who've come in there to be quarantined. And so it's really exciting and moving to watch people care for one another, even though their circumstances are are not very good, just sitting around waiting and everything. So that's exciting. The other the other thing I just want to mention, this is more of a fun thing. Every year, we have a celebration called Voices from Both Sides. It was featured not featured, it was picked up by Samantha Bee on her show,

Allison Duvall 47:29

I watched that episode! It was great.

Mike Wallens 47:33

Anyways, that is really something that came 9/11. Once the border was closed, the town on the other side of Lajitas, which is in Texas, is is basically abandoned. And so to keep that up and and keep that up. We work with the people in Terlingua. And do this Voices from Both Sides. And so it's an all day festival. They build stages on both sides of the Rio Grande River. And, and then at the at the end of it, everybody gets in the river and holds hands from both sides. They alternate bands playing from both sides. But to begin it, the the man who slipped my mind his name, but the one who founded it, insisted that start with prayer and the Eucharist. So what we do is last year, our Bishop came down. And what we do is we put everything we need for the Eucharist in a boat. We walk out in the middle of the river, in our vestments and everything, and we pray and we celebrate the Eucharist and then we bring the Eucharist to people on both sides of the river or they come into the river to us. And it's really pretty, it's it's a moving experience. It's a lot of fun. What was interesting is last year, things really started heating up and there was a possibility that the Border Patrol was going to say you can't do it this year. And so as we were talking, you know, the the head of it said, you know, talking to the Border Patrol, and they said, Look, God is going to be with us because that's the first thing we do on the river. And so the Border Patrol said it was fine. They were not physically present there. They were off away just watching and what because they didn't want anybody to cross illegally. So at that one, for instance, the only person that crossed illegally was from Croatia. And they caught him, no one else crossed illegally. I mean, the the youths there are a lot of them will cross the river to go to school, and back and forth. So that's, that's the fun thing. It's always the Saturday before Mother's Day. So once we start it again, all of you are welcome to come.

Allison Duvall 50:28

I really want to go. And as I was listening to you talk about how that event starts with the Eucharist. And the river, it just, again, makes me reflect upon how unique your ministry, circumstances and environment are that you're interfacing with federal governments of two countries, you are working with migrants who are fleeing persecution, violence, poverty, and drug cartels, you are doing all of that in the

context of a pandemic. But what the church does, the church cares for people and their times of need, and the church brings their real presence of Christ, and the holy amongst the people wherever the church is, including celebrating the Eucharist in the middle of the river. That's just, it's beautiful. And it's phenomenal. So we're hoping that people who've listened to this conversation are feeling really energized and motivated to support the work of RGBM. So Nellie, could you tell our listeners where folks can make a donation or how they can fundraise to support RGBM?

Nellie Fagan 51:33

Yeah, so if you'd like to make a donation to RGBM, you can do so on our website, which again, is riograndeborderland.org, or you can send a check directly to the Episcopal Diocese of the Rio Grande at 6400 Coors Boulevard, Northwest Albuquerque, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87120. Just be sure to indicate that your gift is directed to RGBM by earmarking the check with Borderlands or RGBM or something of that nature. And, yeah, just I really hope that, as Allison said, listeners feel called to give because truthfully, financial gifts are what is sustaining RGBM right now, because we can't physically go are most like met, our volunteers cannot necessarily go and do the work that they'd be doing normally. And we can't be bringing up suppl--, as Mike said, we can't bring supplies. So sending financial gifts, this is how we support RGBM at this time, so please consider giving.

Allison Duvall 52:35 Thank you, Nellie.

Kendall Martin 52:37

Oh, I was just gonna say I just feel really energized and excited. And I love following along with the work that you are doing. And I'm just so grateful for your time. And we'll continue to make sure folks know what what you all are doing. And we're excited to keep connecting and partnering as much as possible.

Nellie Fagan 52:52

Thank you all so much. Yeah, I'm hoping I'm hoping that we'll see kind of another edition of the Hometown/RGBM collaboration one day, because we, as we've mentioned, there are many kind of facets of RGBM. So lots of stories to tell. So

Kendall Martin 53:08

Yeah, so in this this fourth season of Hometown, we've been going back to sort of our roots of how we started in the first season, which was talking to people about what home means to them, and realizing how similar it is, regardless of your situation. So I love for both of you, Mike and Nellie to answer the question, What does home mean to you?

Nellie Fagan 53:28

I'm really grateful for this question. And that caused me to do some thinking, which is always good. To me home, I feel like home isn't necessarily one place or even necessarily a place at all. But home is the feeling of being safe and having a sense of belonging. And when so I'm I'm fairly new to this ministry I started with, I started collaborating with RGBM in May. And when I was reading the ministry's mission, I really resonated with the part of it that says, I'm going to quit our mission, but you can see it on our website. This is just a part of it. That says we are currently adopting to meet the needs of the

humanitarian crisis unfolding in our border community. The compassionate response of RGBM to this crisis is simple: to feed, shelter and care for our neighbors who are coming to the frontier of our diocese, seeking safety and the promise of a better life for their families. And I just think practicing God's call for us to love our neighbors as ourselves is what gives a sense of home. And that certainly is something that RGBM practices, which makes me so grateful to be to support these ministries, and hoping that we can continue to define and redefine what home looks like and be able to offer that or support the work of those that are offering that to individuals, and that it doesn't necessarily mean a place but feeling, I guess, and a sense of security and belonging.

Mike Wallens 55:04

So I was wondering if I could tell a story. A baseball story about home.

Kendall Martin 55:11

You had me story. And baseball, so yes.

Mike Wallens 55:15

Okay. Oh, good. Because to me when when you ask that question about home, I think about baseball because that's the goal of baseball is always to get home. And it's also this story illustrates, I think, what RGBM and this ministry does, and it's all about so it's a, it's a story about my all time favorite hero, baseball hero, and that is Ernie Banks. I grew up in Chicago, right near Wrigley Field. And it was, it was home for me in the sense that I would go to--my grandfather would bring me to every opening day, from the day I was born until I turned 18. So I've got ticket stubs from, he carried me in his arms into Wrigley Field there. So, so this happened one of the times when I was at the game, Ernie Banks was to me a role model for professional athletes. He was always the first one there before the game starts warming up, enthusiastic, and he was always the last one to leave. And when the game was over, he would he take his spot, just outside the dugout. And people knew that and they would come down and talk with him. And I think for anybody who's never been to Wrigley Field, it's a neighborhood ballpark. It's not one of these big gigantic stadiums, it's just part of the neighborhood. So after a game was over people, especially those of us who were in the bleachers, and bleacher bums would just sit and talk and catch up with one another. But we always knew to keep one eye on Ernie Banks because you never knew what was going to happen. So on this particular day, and this was actually a part of a story written in the Chicago Tribune. So that's how come I know some of the details. But what happened was, this man came down with his daughter to talk to introduce her to Ernie Banks and everything. And he, he goes up to at the after the game was over, he goes up to him and says, Mr. Banks, this is a great game. And it was a great game because they beat our archrivals, the Milwaukee Braves. And so that was good. Anyways. And so Ernie Banks before the man could say what he wanted that book and he had a program. So he said, Here, give me the program, and I'll autograph and what's your daughter's name? So he autographed it and everything. He said. And Ernie said, Well, what else can I do for you? He said, Well, actually, this is my daughter's first game. First baseball game ever. And I brought her here and, and I she loved everything. She loved the the noise the crack of the bats, the smells. She loved the food. She ate everything there was to eat, and everything and Ernie Banks, you know, just smiled and said well that's great. He said, but my daughter is blind. And she can't see she couldn't see what was going on. I tried to describe to her what the what the baseball diamond looks like and everything, but I don't think it worked.

And with that Ernie Banks picks her up because it's a low wall where the dugout, he picks her up over the wall. And they go out to home plate. And they're standing at home plate and he bends down and take her hand and outlines the base at home plate. And then he says Come on, we're going for a run. And so he takes her hand and they start slowly running to first base. And then he stops before they get the first base stops, picks her up and then places her on the bag so she can feel it that way. Then he has her go down and touch the bag. And then they run to second base. Same thing picks her up from down. Now at this by this time, all of us who are there are paying attention to Ernie Banks we always do but this was he had not done this before. So as they were rounding second base and going to third base he signaled to everybody who is still there, you know to cheer and for this little girl and so we we get to third base and he stops, picks her up, places her down. And then he base. He says, you know, we're going home, and they run to home plate. And then right at the end and the crowds cheering and it made you think Ernie Banks at a Grand Slam home run and everything. But the crowds cheering those of us who are there he picked her up. And the picture in the Chicago Tribune as this girl, little girl with this huge smile on her face, and Ernie Banks with a huge smile on his face. And then he placed her on home plate, and he told her, you just hit a home run and you're home.

And I tell that story, because that's sort of what happens here at the border, we reach out to one another and people are coming here trying to find a home, a safe place to be, a place where they can enjoy one another's company, make a living and not live in fear. And, and so just as Ernie Banks took this little girl around the bags, we take the hands of people who are coming here and work with them, to get them to a home base to get them to a safe place. And and the people who are in the stands, are everybody in the church and a the not in the church who work with our ministry and support us even though you don't live on the border. And and it's really it's it takes a whole stadium you know, they say it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a whole stadium of people to work together to provide homes, safety, shelter for people who have none because they're running for their lives. And so I might not have answered your question directly. But the other thing is, there's a prayer poem is written by Ted Loder. It's called Home At Last I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I'll just read the last part of it. Have mercy on us. Heal us, Lord, and deliver us from our self-promotion, cowardice and lack of compassion. And then empower us to be among those who dare to do the things that are just and beautiful, true and faithful, visionary and deeply joyful. So we may be free and whole, at home at last, home where we belong. Home with our true selves, home with each other, home in the human family, home with you, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

1:02:49

Amen to all of that.

Allison Duvall 1:02:52 Thank you. That was...

Kendall Martin 1:02:54 Your story is my favorite answer we've ever gotten.

Allison Duvall 1:02:59 Thank you both so much for all your time and for being part of the podcast. We really appreciate it.

Nellie Fagan 1:03:05 Thank
y'all so much.

Mike Wallens 1:03:06 Thank
you for having me.

Kendall Martin 1:03:12

Thank you so much for joining us today listeners. Be sure to learn more about Rio Grande Borderland Ministries at their website, riograndeborderland.org. Sign up for their monthly newsletter and stay up to date on their ministries and the ways that you can be involved.

Allison Duvall 1:03:24

You can also follow them on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at Rio Grande Borderland and I'd highly recommend all their social media feeds their Instagram is especially like just beautiful. It also really gives you an insight into what the work is like on the ground.

Kendall Martin 1:03:38

You can follow along with EMM on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @EMMrefugees,

Allison Duvall 1:03:43

Join the ministry of welcome by making a gift to support Episcopal Migration Ministries. No gift is too small and all gifts are used to support and grow our work resettling refugees, supporting asylum seekers, and creating welcoming communities for all of our immigrant siblings. Visit episcopalmigrationministries.org/give or text Hometown to 91999.

Kendall Martin 1:04:06

Our theme song composer is Abraham Mwindi Ikando find his music at AbrahamMwindi.bandcamp.com.

Allison Duvall 1:04:12

Until next time, listeners, peace be with you and all those you consider home.