Passing it along: The generous people of Fortín de las Flores

by Amy Frykholm in the May 19, 2009 issue

As yet another cargo train thunders past her house in Fortín de las Flores, Mexico, Benita Juárez wraps a scarf around her head and looks up. In addition to its usual load of sugar cane, coffee and automobiles, the train carries migrants traveling north from Central America. As the train passes, Juárez, 84, glimpses the migrants who huddle in the wells at the back of the cars, ride on top, or cling to the sides of the train.

She sees pregnant women, women nursing babies, and children younger than her youngest grandchild. She sees people whose lips are parched and cracked from lack of water, and people who are poorly dressed for a trip that will take them into the Eje Volcánico Transversal Mountains, where the nights will be bitter cold. She sees people who have been beaten, robbed and raped. Hundreds of thousands of economic refugees have passed through Fortín de las Flores.

Sometimes, if the train slows down, Juárez sends a grandchild to the train with a packet of food to pass up to the migrants or a plastic bag filled with water to toss up. Her gestures are not extraordinary in this town of around 20,000.

Fortín de las Flores is located at the foot of the mountains in the state of Veracruz. When the mists clear, the 18,490-foot Pico de Orizaba volcano, the highest peak in Mexico, comes into view. While remote from resorts popular with U.S. tourists, Fortín is situated on a well-traveled highway between the cities of Orizaba and Córdoba. An ancient center of agriculture, the area produces an abundance of fruits and vegetables as well as coffee, sugar and flowers.

Most of the people in Fortín are not wealthy or even middle class by the standards of Mexico City. While a few families own large tracts of land and haciendas hidden behind high stone walls, most people live in tiny homes built close together. Families support themselves by running a small shop or café, by teaching or working for the government, or by doing a little shoe shining, a little farming, a little construction.

Though their resources seem limited compared to the rest of North America, the people of Fortín welcome the strangers who pass through on the trains and share whatever they can. When the trains stop, residents often go down to the tracks and chat while handing up fruit, sandwiches or water.

Sitting in Juárez's courtyard one afternoon with her children, a daughter-in-law and a few grandchildren, I asked them how they can afford to give to the migrants day after day, year after year. Inez, one of Juárez's daughters, looked at me, a little puzzled. "Right now, we're eating," she explained. "When we are finished, there will be a little left over. That we can pass along." People in Fortín talk not about giving away the food but about passing it along—as if the food did not belong to them in the first place.

In her book *Enrique's Journey*, Sonia Nazario chronicles one immigrant's journey from Honduras to the U.S, and she singles out this region of Mexico for its hospitality. I came to Fortín de las Flores because I wanted to witness some of this generosity for myself.

Ciro Gonzáles and his wife, Erika Hernández, run a small café across from the railroad tracks. Every day migrants stop by and ask for food and always come away with something: a *torta* with meat, chicken or beans, a few tacos, a bag of *chicharones*. Gonzáles told me that even if the migrants have money, he won't accept it.

"How do you know they are migrants?" I asked.

"They have a little different way of speaking," he said. "And it's in their eyes."

As I talked with the Gonzáles family over the counter at their café, neighbors began to gather to find out what was going on. From his perch on a stool behind the counter Gonzáles can keep note of the comings and goings of the people along the street, watch the trains go by, talk with the neighbors and keep an eye on his five-year-old son, Rodrigo, who sells me candy and cough drops from a basket that he keeps for just such occasions.

José Romero, one of Juárez's sons, joined the conversation and explained to me that Fortín de las Flores is located in a pass through the mountainous jungle. It is neither an isolated village nor an urban center. Most people know one another, so the presence of a stranger is obvious—but not threatening.

Gonzáles underscored this point as he gestured to the railroad tracks. “They come through every day,” he said without frustration or resignation. “Every day they ask for food. Every day.” He wanted me to understand that feeding migrants is not an extraordinary event or even something to be noticed. It is just a part of everyday life. No organization was formed to do this work. Feeding the stranger is as basic as feeding one’s own family.

“We try not to give them money,” Gonzáles said. “We will give food, clothing, whatever they need. But we don’t want money to go for drugs, and sometimes it does.”

Romero invited me across the street into his mother’s courtyard, and soon I was caught up in the clamor of a family dinner of pork stew and tortillas. The Juárez family told me what they’ve seen and heard along the railroad tracks and argued among themselves about what it means. In this region at least, residents identify more with the migrants than with the authorities who try to control or exploit them. The people of Fortín know that corruption pervades the official immigration system, and they don’t blame people who are living in terrible poverty for trying to improve their lives. Offering help seems to come naturally.

“But how do you know that you will have enough for yourselves?” I asked.

Romero’s wife, Maura Hernández, answered, “Whatever we give, God multiplies. We help because they are suffering more than we are.”

Hugo Pérez, who manages the kitchen at the resort Hotel Fortín de las Flores, has a unique perspective on the culture of Fortín. He left the town for six years to live in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he worked as a dishwasher on a work visa. He returned home because he felt that despite the good money he made in the U.S. by Mexican standards, life in Veracruz offered another kind of abundance.

“The central value of this society,” he said, “is *compartir*—to share. A business in Fortín is first and foremost a place from which to share.” As he said this, I recalled how many times I had heard business owners in the U.S. say—without any belligerence or lack of generosity, just stating the obvious—“This is not a charity. It’s a business.”

Inside the café Mesón Maná del Cielo (the House of Manna from Heaven) five tables are crowded together, and a television blares from the corner. A menu board lists

the specials of the day. A few *tortas* sit under a glass dome. The café is run by Aurora Flores and Abisai Osorio. When migrants come by and ask for food, they're offered a little of whatever is on the menu. "Yesterday," Flores told me, "a girl came and asked for a sandwich. Sometimes a lot of people come; sometimes no one."

She seemed unconcerned about the impact of these migrants on her small business. Shrugging, she dismissed my question about it as insignificant—and refused to accept money for the bowl of vegetable soup that she brought me. Then she animatedly described the frightening condition of the migrants she encounters. More and more women come by her place, she said, and they are often in bad shape. They've been beaten, robbed and raped. "Really ugly things happen along the way."

When I asked her why she helps, she shrugged again. "It's a good thing to do," she said at last. "It's how we are taught. We like to do it. There's one part of the Bible that says to feed and clothe people."

I found some evidence that generosity does not always come easily to the people of Fortín. Flores said that some of her neighbors disapprove of helping migrants and think of them as a lower class of people. Others fear that the migrants are bringing drugs and violence to this quiet corner of Mexico. Flores said she understands their concerns. Her family once took in a migrant for several months, and he turned out to be a drug dealer.

"Would you take in another migrant?" I asked.

"We would," said Flores, "if the circumstances were right. But we have lost a little confidence."

Disasters along the tracks are not uncommon. Last year a young migrant was climbing aboard the train with a soft drink in one hand. He missed the handhold and was pulled under the moving train, which crushed him. José Romero's daughter Dulce, 14, saw it happen.

"He had passed up some food to his friends," she said, "and then he slipped and fell." A small wooden cross marks the place where he died, a reminder of the perils that migrants face. Thousands lose limbs every year, and hundreds die. A woman in Orizaba runs a house for migrants who lose limbs to the train; she raises funds to buy prosthetic limbs and houses people for many months while they recover.

One afternoon I stood with members of the Juárez and Gonzáles families as a train rolled through town. Often the townspeople wave and the migrants blow kisses.

“Why do you wave?” I asked Inez Juárez.

“Just to say, ‘We are with you,’” she answered.

When fruit is in season, the residents share their oranges, pine apples, guavas, mangos, avocados and coconuts. Hugo Pérez takes a bag of oranges down to the tracks and talks with the migrants, asking them where they’re from and where they’re going.

When I asked him about this practice, he explained it with one word: “Empathy. When we see those people on the train, leaving their homes, leaving their families, that is what we feel.”

As I inquired about the hospitality and generosity shown by the people of Fortín, I realized that my questions often reflected my own fears and values. I was looking for a boundary: How much giving is enough? When does a family draw a line to make sure they’ll have food for the next day? Residents of Fortín have few possessions and, at the same time, fewer restrictions on their generosity. They respond directly and immediately to those in need, as if, through the migrants, God is communicating with them personally.

Out on the central plaza, Pico de Orizaba made a brief appearance through the clouds, and my last morning in Fortín was momentarily warm. I was finishing my coffee at a café when a young man approached my table. “I’m from Honduras,” he said. “I’m traveling through. Could you give me some money?”

I handed him some pesos and then watched as he made his way to the central church, where he was joined by another young man. The people on this Sunday morning were spilling out from the church onto the street. The first young man asked them for money and then headed up a side street.

I caught up with the two young men again as they returned to the train. They were brothers, Eduardo, 17, and Miguel, 16. They’d been traveling for 27 days, Eduardo told me, while his brother stared at the ground. Eduardo’s voice was strained by a cold he’d caught on the train. “The nights have been really cold,” he said. They had found a little work along the way, and hoped to make it to the U.S. border in about

two weeks. There they planned to work to raise the $250 they need to pay a *coyote* to take them across.

“Are the people here kind?” I asked. “Have they helped you?”

Eduardo shrugged. His brother had still not looked up. “There are good people and bad people everywhere,” he said. “We have to find the good ones and avoid the bad ones, that’s all.”

“What was your worst day so far?”

“Four days ago, we got chased by the immigration police, but we got away. It was awful.”

Up the street, the owners of a small café were watching. As we turned to go, they called “*Chavos*!” to the young men and handed them a sweatshirt, a jacket, a pair of jeans and a packet of food. “*Gracias*,” the boys said, and then turned toward the train.