

SOJOURN



American Friends
Service Committee

Newsletter of the AFSC Austin Area Program

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We find in our life of service a great adventure. We are committed to this Spirit-led journey, undertaken "to see what love can do," and we are ever renewed by it. (AFSC mission statement)

Farewell and welcome!

Last night as I closed the door of the AFSC office after one of the innumerable committee meetings so familiar to Friends and AFSC staff, I thought "pretty soon I will close this office for the last time." Last July, the Executive Committee of the AFSC-Central Region decided to devolve this program due to budget constraints.

Hard hit by the international financial crisis, the national organization was obliged to cut its budgets by almost 50 percent. So, on September 30, 2010 the Austin AFSC office will permanently close.

Before that day, I want to acknowledge and celebrate that for 12 years I have opened this door to work with one paid colleague and hundreds of donors and volunteers who have shared the AFSC vision. Together we have worked to "transform conditions and relationships both in the world and in ourselves...."

I wish to thank all of you for the many ways you have supported our programs: doing office work, organizing the annual Women and Fair Trade Festival, providing scholarships for our border delegations, making other donations, or serving on our Program Committee. Because of you, this small office located on the East Side of Austin has achieved a lot, far out of proportion to our resources.

As I say farewell as an AFSC program director to our wonderful community of friends and peace seekers, I look forward to continuing to work for peace and social justice. Our work here feels too important to let go. So, during these past few months several members of our Area Program Committee and long-term volunteers have been working to transform our current AFSC program into a new, independent non-profit organization.

We will call it Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border). Our border program as well as our annual Women and Fair Trade Festival will continue under this non-profit, retaining the Quaker values that have inspired our work these many years. We will devolve from AFSC, and we will evolve into a program that seeks peaceful solutions to achieving dignity in the workplace and the just treatment of immigrants in our midst. As your loyalties and resources allow, we hope you can join with us in this endeavor.

In peace,

Susanna M. Castillo

Outwitting History

Austin Tan Cerca is 10 Years Old

by Judith Rosenberg, volunteer

In defiance of the official story about “free” trade and NAFTA, Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin so Close to the Border) has built and nurtured a 10-year cross-border solidarity relationship with Mexican maquiladora workers. In a place where borders of nationality, language, class and culture separate people along an increasingly militarized and violent line, our Austin group is thinking and acting according to a new script.

In partnership with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras/os (Border Committee of Workers), our project contradicts an ingrained historic pattern of inequality and exploitation of which 19th century Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz was a leading proponent. According to legend, he later recognized the dubiousness of this course, quipping “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.”

Austin Tan Cerca was born September 1999 when AFSC’s Austin office and Mexico-US Border program brought three maquiladora workers to visit U.S. cities. In Austin, the workers spoke at the Church of Cristo Rey about NAFTA and the maquiladora system from the unique perspective of their experience. They spoke about their stand against global corporations and about how, as communities in solidarity, they were making changes for social justice.

Austin was fertile ground for their message. Solidarity with Latin and Central American popular movements had flourished since the 1970s. Political activists and faith groups, including Quakers



and Methodists, had responded to political violence by building grassroots connections with communities in Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala. In 1986 Casa Marienella began offering shelter and services to political asylum seekers. Starting in 1988, the Political Asylum Project of Austin promoted human rights of refugees and immigrants, then things changed and in the 90s “economic refugees” poured into Austin, particularly from Mexico in NAFTA’s wake. Local service and solidarity organizations shifted to meet new needs.

1999 proved to be seminal. A keen local and global awareness of how international financial institutions, corporations and trade rules hurt labor and human rights, farmers, the environment and democratic processes came to a head at the World Trade Organization’s ministerial meeting. This became known as The Battle in Seattle. In Austin, the Texas Fair Trade Coalition had helped focus citizen concern on trade and legislative policy. The Austin Peace and Justice Coalition led a monthly picket of the GAP’s central Austin location as part of a national and international campaign to stop sweatshop practices in manufacturing.

ATCF was born at the same time. After the maquiladora workers’ church presentation, the Austin Peace and Justice Coalition invited them to join the picket at the GAP. There on the sidewalk outside the store, our founders connected the dots: If we care about labor conditions in Southeast Asia, why not four hours away in Mexico where labor abuses are equally systematic but ironically invisible to us despite being so close?

Within weeks we had organized our first three-day delegation to the border. We were on our way to becoming a new source of information about the maquiladora system, showpiece of free trade international economic arrangements. We were opening a channel for workers’ voices, never before expressed so directly, never before so well respected. After that first delegation in 1999, more than 40 followed. And delegations are just the beginning.

Delegations Are Just the Beginning

by Gail Rothe, volunteer

We ground our work at the community level both at home and abroad in partnership with those who suffer the conditions we seek to change and informed by their strength and vision.

The border delegations are the main activity of Austin Tan Cerca, but they are not our main achievement. Delegates return to build a better, more just world, informed by their three days in Mexico. Here are a few of their stories:

- Elvia Arriola, a law professor, was inspired to start a non-profit organization for research, publishing, education, and assistance of workers (www.womenontheborder.org).
- Former delegates raised funds to purchase 200 copies of the Mexican Labor Law for our partners in Mexico after witnessing maquiladora workers pull out well-read copies of the law. Workers' knowledge of the law is their most useful tool for fighting daily indignities caused by their employers' illegal actions.
- Allison Davis found work as a labor organizer weeks after returning from a delegation. She has volunteered to lead our May 2010 delegation.
- ATCF organized the Texas participation in a bi-national protest of Alcoa malfeasance against workers in their Piedras Negras plant. Alcoa made changes in this plant shortly after.
- Judith Rosenberg based her Ph.D. dissertation on her delegation experiences. "Crossing the border changes your identity," she says. "It causes you to question assumptions about who you are in this world and what it means to be a citizen of this country."



Women & Fair Trade: Craft Sale and Cultural Festival

by Natalia Em, volunteer

Celia came from Jolom Mayaetik in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, in southern Mexico. She brought the crafts that she and the other women in her community had made by hand: tapestries, table cloths, skirts, blouses, bags, children's clothing and more. All were created using the skills handed down from mother to daughter for generations. Their creative work continues to help define who they are as indigenous women as well as to provide income for their families.

Herlinda came from Piedras Negras, Mexico, on the border with Texas. She brought items made by the Maquiladora Dignidad y Justicia: organic t-shirts, bags, and sweat shirts. This organization is owned and was created by workers illegally fired in 2004 by one of the larger maquiladoras. They have banded together to create a work space and products that are consistent with the dignity and justice all workers deserve.

Petra and Viola came from Fuerza Unida (Strength in Unity) in San Antonio, Texas. They brought products made by Fuerza's El Hilo de la Justicia (The Thread of Justice), a cooperative of women workers laid off from a Levi's plant in 1990. Fuerza Unida offers jobs to older women who are skilled seamstresses but encounter age discrimination in employment. They make all kinds of bedding, household products and clothing.

Jolom Mayaetik, Dignidad y Justicia, and The Thread of Justice came together this past November with five other cooperatives at the 6th annual Women and Fair Trade Festival.

Women from the cooperatives had a unique opportunity to speak about how economic globalization has affected them, the community they represent, and their living and working conditions. Buyers enjoyed fair trade products; live Andean folk music performed by Alexis Ordoñez; a weaving demonstration on the Mayan back-strap loom; a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony; and free samples of fair trade chocolate. In addition, the buyers and sellers engaged in a discussion of Free vs. Fair trade at the Cultural Arts Luncheon, held at the Karibu Ethiopian Restaurant.

Our event brought women together from different geographic locations and cultural backgrounds, but they shared two common strengths: creativity and resilience in an ever-changing world.



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Austin Area Office

1304 East Sixth Street #3

Austin, TX 78702-3355

(512) 474-2399

<http://afsc.org/office/austin-tx>

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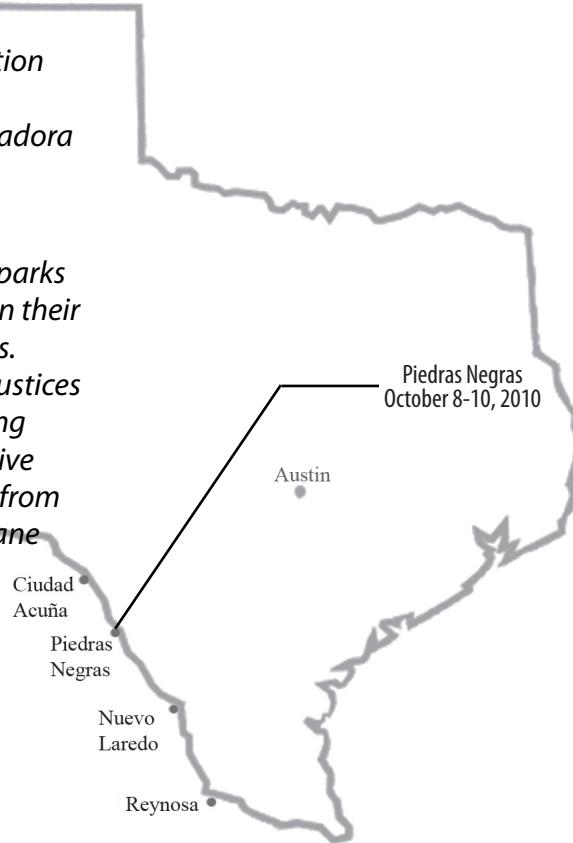
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Delegations to the border:

Join us to learn about corporate-led globalization through face-to-face encounters with maquiladora workers.

Delegates tour the maquiladora industrial parks and meet with workers in their homes and communities. They learn about the injustices the workers are struggling against: physically abusive conditions, harassment from supervisors, and inhumane wages.

*Watch for dates of our 2011 delegations at:
www.atcf.org*



Piedras Negras
October 8-10, 2010

The work of the AFSC Austin office will be continued by *Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera*.

The mission of ATCF is:

To address conditions of social and economic injustice along the US-Texas border particularly as they affect women and communities of color, and to find community-driven alternatives through transnational solidarity. We believe that our environment, our communities and human dignity are sacred and must be respected in the movement for social justice.

Program Coordinator
Josefina Castillo

Edited and Designed by
Morgan Wajda-Levie, Gail Rothe
Natalia Em, Cynthia Waide,
and Tomás Aguilar