

*The following article is one in a series, sponsored by the LWV Southern New Mexico, on individuals who accompanied asylum seekers in shelters in the Las Cruces area.*

## Sharing Spanish in the Showers

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By Pauline Hovey

At 89 years old and 5'1", LaJune Smith exuded grandmotherly kindness and comfort to the dozens of asylum seekers she guided to showers at Peace Lutheran Church every Tuesday. Yet despite her petite frame, most men who walked through the door at the hospitality site where she volunteered were smaller and thinner. Their faces exhausted, shy, apprehensive. Never did they convey anything that made her fearful.

"I felt so happy to be part of this," LaJune says of her 16 months accompanying refugees vetted by ICE. Often, her "shift" didn't end until 10:30 p.m., since taking guests to the showers was the last thing to be done, yet LaJune felt "elated" to be there. "All along I felt I was helping my neighbor and that we are all so much more alike than separate."

She'd been concerned about not knowing Spanish, but eventually learned enough to be touched by their stories. Like the woman who said LaJune's face saddened her because it reminded her of a neighbor she'd never see again. The woman's family had saved for eight years so she and her son could travel to them in the U.S. Now he would not be forced to join a gang.

A retired schoolteacher, LaJune was first exposed to migrant children during her early years in Gadsden where migrants came to pick lettuce. She'd teach the children for only six months until the families had to move on to pick produce in California.

"I always had a strong sense of social justice," says LaJune, who eagerly shared her experiences with friends outside New Mexico. "I wanted them to know that this is the reality of the people coming to our border, not what they were seeing on the news."

Now that asylum seekers are being sent to Mexico, she describes going through "withdrawal," as she and fellow volunteers miss these encounters. Despite volunteering in many capacities through the years, LaJune says nothing ever affected her like this experience.

*—Pauline Hovey, Las Cruces resident and writer,  
accompanied refugees at temporary shelters.*