

ON THE MEXICAN BORDER

STORY BY
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Photo courtesy of Rachel Mich
A dirty canal runs alongside several homes in one Mexican community. Lacking garbage collection or a sanitation system, residents often dump trash in the canal, in which factories also dump chemicals. "Residents say they can tell what chemicals (the factories) are using depending on the color of the water ... It ranges from neon green to pink to frothy," said Rachel Mich.

The border between kids' dreams



Photo courtesy of Mary Spooner

A little girl stands outside a house in Rio Bravo, Mexico, across from a factory where workers allegedly were being intimidated out of joining a union.

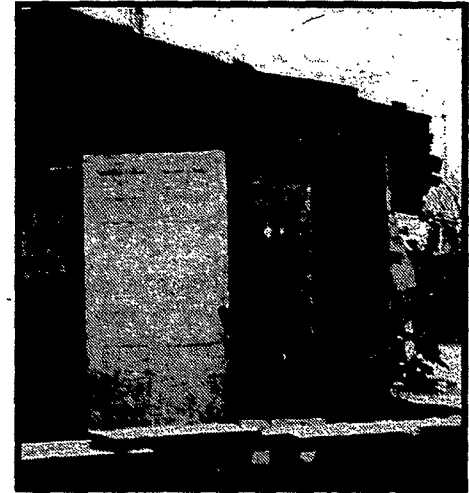


Photo courtesy of Mary Spooner

A house in Renosa, Mexico.

Rachel Mich's newest friend, Aurely, is much like her other friends. Aurely likes boys, dancing, music and the movies.

But there's one crucial difference between Rachel's newest friend and her other friends. Aurely started working in a Mexican sweatshop when she was 14 to help support her family.

"Aurely showed me that she has similar hopes and dreams, likes and dislikes," Rachel said of her Mexican friend. "She wants to go to college to become a lawyer to help her people. The only differences between us were our opportunities in the material world."

Rachel, 17, a parishioner at St. Mary's Parish, Rochester, met Aurely, who is also 17, during a February trip to several Mexican communities near the Texas border. Many of these communities have existed for only a few years, having been established after U.S.-owned companies moved factories to Mexico following the 1994 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The agreement removed trade barriers between Canada, Mexico and the United States. But critics blame NAFTA — and other free-trade agreements — for helping to eliminate American manufacturing jobs by encouraging U.S. manufacturers to move plants out of this country. These manufacturers then opened Mexican factories that pay poverty-level wages to their workers, and force them to work in unsafe and polluted conditions, critics have charged.

Those critics include the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, a group of labor and religion activists including many from the Diocese of Rochester. In addition to the journey in which Rachel participated, the coalition has organized several trips by U.S. delegations to the U.S.-Mexican border. The trips are designed to monitor the effects of free



Andres Dixon/Staff photographer

Nathaniel Mich (from left), Rachel Mich and Mary Spooner traveled in February to towns on Mexico's border with the United States as part of a trip sponsored by the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition.

trade on the lives of Mexican workers and their families, and to educate New Yorkers about the lives of border residents.

Rachel traveled to Mexico with her 13-year-old brother, Nathaniel, who attends Rochester's School of the Arts with her. They were accompanied by their parents, Christine and Marv Mich. Marv Mich serves as director of the Department of Social Policy and Research for Catholic Family Center in Rochester, and Christine Mich is campus minister at Our Lady of Mercy High School in Brighton. It was Rachel's second trip to Mexico, having traveled there with her father on a similar journey last year.

About 20 labor and religion activists, as well as young people like Rachel and Nathaniel, went on the Feb. 17-22 trip, according to Christine Mich. Among those who made the journey was Mercy junior Mary Spooner, 17, of Penfield. Spooner said she became interested in going to Mexico after Rachel gave a speech at Mercy last year about her first trip there.

Along with the rest of the delegation, Mary met several poor Mexican families, and particularly recalled a little boy named Eric who was born with hydrocephalitis, or water on the brain. The 9-year-old boy's head is more than twice the size it should be, and until an American family began helping his family to pay for treatments, the boy suffered 30 to 40 seizures a day. Mary said the boy's mother and father had been working in a steering-wheel factory before he was conceived, and were not told the chemicals to which they were exposed could lead to birth defects.

"They were not given gloves or masks," Mary said of the boy's parents. "The (bosses) told them the solvents were just soap and water."

All three young people said they were

struck by the enormous poverty and malnutrition they saw among the Mexicans, and Mary added that she no longer bought the argument that U.S. companies were alleviating Mexican poverty by providing jobs. She and Christine Mich said the delegation decided to buy food at a local supermarket using the same amount of money that would be available to the average Mexican family on the border — \$45 a week. The delegation found it was actually more expensive to buy food in Mexico than in the United States, and added that some families even cross the border so that they can buy cheaper food in the United States.

All three young people said they came back from the trip eager to share what they had seen with their friends. Rachel had given public presentations about her previous trip, and Nathaniel recently gave one at Mercy along with Mary. He also plans to do a social studies project on his trip. And all three young people said they will never again look at the products they use or wear in the United States in the same way.

"We kind of worship logos," Mary said, mentioning The Gap and Nike as examples of brands popular among her peers. "We worship brands, but we don't think how that affects other people. We don't think, 'Who made my Nike shoes?'" Rachel said she thinks about the people she met in Mexico every day.

"When I go shopping I have huge guilt trips," she said. "I may have befriended the person that made what I am buying." But all three young people said they will work to change how U.S. companies treat their Mexican workers, and to educate others about the plight of the Mexicans. Nathaniel said he sometimes brings up what he saw in Mexico with his friends. They aren't always interested in listening.

"But I'll keep trying," he said.