

# Learning Beyond the Classroom

A reflection from a Borderlinks delegation trip

By Valeria Navarro

## Author Bio:

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There's a difference between learning about immigration in a classroom and physically standing out in the field, front row at the border.

In class, we talk about these things all the time—detention, enforcement, human rights. And those conversations matter. They can be uncomfortable, but they push us to think deeper and question systems that are often normalized.

But being there in person felt different.

Through a delegation trip with [Borderlinks](#)—a nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona that connects people to the realities of migration through education and firsthand experiences—I was able to see what we often only read about. And that experience made everything feel real in a way I don't think a classroom ever fully could.

## The Desert Isn't Empty

One of the first things we did was walk through the desert.

At first, it felt exactly how you would expect—hot, dry, and kind of empty. There was dried grass, scattered trees, and long stretches of land that didn't seem to lead anywhere. But as we kept walking, I started noticing small, colorful flowers growing in the middle of all that dryness.

It caught me off guard.

To me, it felt like hope. Like even in a place that seems harsh and unforgiving, life still finds a way to exist.

We didn't walk very far, and we were already tired. That alone shifted something for me. It made me think about what it actually means for migrants to walk through this terrain—often miles, carrying what they can, under conditions much worse than what we experienced.

We also came across a water drop site. It was fully stocked, which we were told could mean that people aren't crossing through that specific area as much anymore, or that they're finding different routes. But what stayed with me were the belongings left behind—blankets and small traces of people who had passed through.

It didn't feel like we were just looking at objects. It felt like we were witnessing pieces of someone's journey.

Standing there, it almost felt intrusive—like we were stepping into a moment that wasn't meant for us to see. The blankets, the scattered belongings, didn't feel abandoned in the unusual sense. They felt paused, like someone had to keep moving and couldn't afford to carry anything else with them. It removed me of what it means to leave something behind—not because you want to, but because you have to.

There was a heaviness to it. A quiet kind of presence that made the space feel anything but empty.

And then, at the same time, there was surveillance everywhere—drones overhead, infrastructure built into landscape, constant monitoring. Even in such an open space, there was still a strong sense of control.

On one side, you have these personal, human traces—soft, fragile, and deeply individual. On the other, you have systems of surveillance that feel cold, distant, and powerful. The image of both existing in the same space was hard to ignore. It felt like vulnerability and control placed side by side.

Standing there, I remember feeling a mix of discomfort and clarity. Discomfort, because it felt like I was witnessing something deeply—evidence of people navigating survival in a space that was never meant to support them. But also clarity, because it made visible something that is often harder to grasp from a distance: how systems control operate directly against human vulnerability.

That moment stayed with me, especially in the context of my work with the Transcending Borders research team. It reminded me that these are not isolated conditions—they are part of a broader system that shapes how certain groups are seen, categorized, and treated.

The same systems of surveillance and control that monitor movement also reinforce assumptions about identity, risk, and deviance. What I witnessed in the desert made it easier to understand how policies that appear neutral can, in practice, produce uneven and harmful outcomes.

And in that moment, it made the purpose of this work feel even more urgent.

Because documenting these realities, questioning them, and bringing them into conversation isn't just about understanding systems—it's about recognizing the human impact behind them and asking what it means to respond to that.

That contrast between vulnerability and control stayed with me as we moved to the border itself.

## A Border that Doesn't Really Divide

After, we went to the border wall dividing Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora.

What stood out right away was how active everything was. People were crossing on both sides, going back and forth to do everyday things like buying groceries. It made me realize that a border doesn't actually stop people from moving—it just changes how migrants move.

There, we met someone who has collaborated with Borderlinks in sharing his migration story to all delegations. And honestly, it didn't feel unfamiliar.

Growing up, all he ever wanted was something better for his family. He spoke about working as a farm worker, putting in long hours, doing physical labor—yet no matter how much he worked, it was never enough to create the stability he hoped for. That goal was simple: a better future, the same “American Dream” that so many people are taught to strive for.

But despite that, he shared how people from the immigrant community are often viewed not as hardworking individuals, but as criminals.

That stayed with me.

Throughout my life, I've heard these narratives in different spaces—within my community, in conversations with neighbors, even casually in everyday discussion. Comments about migrants being “dangerous”, about them bringing crime, about needing more enforcement to keep people

“safe”. And for a long time, those statements are often accepted as truth, repeated without questioning.

But the more I reflected, the more I questioned that.

Because when you actually start to look closer, the idea of violence becomes much more complicated.

During our delegation, we also had the opportunity to hear from Nellie Jo David, who joined us as a guest speaker and shared her own experience. As an Indigenous O’odman activist, she spoke about resisting border wall construction on her ancestral land—an act rooted in protecting her community, culture, and environment.

Yet for that, she was detained.

She described not only the legal consequences she faced, but also the discrimination that followed—how that experience affected her education and caused her to lose opportunities at the University of Arizona. Listening to her, it became clear how systems that claim to uphold order can instead punish those who are trying to protect their land and identity.

That moment forced a different kind of question: what counts as violence, and who gets labeled as “dangerous”?

Because while migrants are often framed as threats, many are actually feeling violence themselves—seeking safety, stability, and survival. At the same time, individuals like Nellie Jo David, who resist and protect, can be criminalized under those same systems.

So the more I reflected, the harder it became to accept those simplified narratives.

It made me realize that the idea of “violence” is not just about individual actions—it’s about how systems define it, who they apply it to, and whose experiences are overlooked.

And standing at the border, hearing these stories firsthand, made it impossible to ignore the gap.

## Two Sides, Two Feelings

What I keep coming back to is the contrast between both sides of the border.

On the U.S. side, everything felt heavy. There was a strong border patrol presence, layers of barbed wire, and new enforcement techniques being added. It felt controlled and tense—almost like everything was meant to show power.

Even those leading our delegation mentioned they had never seen it this militarized before.

But then you look to the other side, Nogales, Sonora, and it feels and seems completely different.

There was music. People were gathered. It felt alive. Even with soldiers working right at the border, people continued their day. There was a sense of normalcy, but also something more—something hopeful.

And I didn't expect to feel this way, but I remember thinking how much more welcoming it would have felt on that side.

## Rethinking the “American Dream”

As someone who is fortunate enough to have legal status—to exist on what we're often told is the “American Dream” side—I found myself questioning that idea.

Because standing there, I didn't feel that same sense of ease or comfort on the U.S. side.

If anything, it felt heavier.

And for a moment, I felt drawn to the other side—not because it was easier, but because it felt more alive, more human, and less emotionally draining.

That moment stayed with me.

This delegation trip reminded me that borders are more than just physical barriers.

They're emotional. They're political. They're lived experiences.

You can study them, analyze them, and write about them—but actually being there changes everything. It forces you to see things differently.

And I think that matters, especially when so many opinions about the border are formed from a distance. It's easy to have strong views on something you've never had to witness, to rely on what we hear without always questioning where those narratives come from.

I saw that shift happen in real time.

One of the participants on our trip had never seen the border for himself. His understanding of U.S. immigration enforcement had mostly come from what he had seen and heard through the media. He had come prepared to give a presentation—but after witnessing the border, the surveillance, and the conditions firsthand, he chose to abandon it.

Instead, he spoke from what he had just experienced.

And you could hear the difference.

It wasn't theoretical anymore. It wasn't distant. It was grounded in what he had seen, and it completely shifted how he understood enforcement, surveillance, and control.

There's often a gap between how immigration systems are presented and how they actually function. On the surface, enforcement is framed as structured, lawful, and necessary, but being there reveals something much more complex—something shaped by discretion, inequality, and real human consequences.

Because once you've seen it—the people, the environment, the everyday realities—it stops feeling abstract. It becomes human.

And it reminded me of something simple:

Education matters.

But being present—seeing, feeling, and reflecting—is what turns knowledge into something real.