



A Better Life?

Two Cities Called Nogales

In March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, the U.S. sealed its border with Mexico. In the neighboring cities of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico, the unintended consequences of the border closure have come into sharp focus.

Mia Warren: This is *A Better Life?* from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Mia Warren. Welcome to our second season. In the coming weeks, we'll be exploring how the Covid pandemic is affecting immigrants in the U.S. and changing the way they think about the promise of America.

So much has happened over the past year, and so much of the pandemic response has become politicized. The masked and the unmasked. The vaccinated and those who refuse to be vaccinated. By now, we're all too familiar with these divisions in our country, our neighborhoods, and our families.

But, picture, for a moment, a different kind of division, a physical wall separating people during the pandemic. On one side of the wall, economic devastation. On the other, life goes on. And for some, it's even gotten better.

In March 2020, when communities across the country went into lockdown, the U.S. government closed the border separating Mexico and the U.S.

The wall, built by the United States to keep out undocumented Mexicans and others from entering the U.S., became an even more stark dividing line. Officials in the Trump Administration claimed that sealing the border would keep Americans safe during the pandemic.

More than a year later, in the summer of 2021, we went to the border to see how the shutdown was working out. Americans could still enter Mexico, but Mexicans could not cross into the U.S. And the result was probably not what U.S. officials had in mind when they said they were closing the border to protect Americans.

Reporters Maritza Félix and Julio Cisneros visited Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora, in Mexico. The two cities straddle the U.S.-Mexico border, and they share a history of strong family ties, cultural connections, and economic interdependence. But since the border closed, their experiences have been very different

Here's Julio in Nogales, Arizona.

Julio Cisneros: Silence at noon. Silence at seven at night. Silence on the weekends. Silence at all hours. This is Nogales, Arizona.

Before the pandemic Morley Avenue was the heart of commerce in this city, it was full of people. Not anymore! In March of 2020, the U.S. government sealed the border, and ever since the stores on Morley Avenue have been empty.

Gregory Kory: You know, it's like watching paint dry. It's like watching water boil, you know, it's been very slow.

Julio: Gregory Kory owns The Cinderella Store. It's one of the few shops that has managed to remain in business, even though they had to close for several months during the peak of the pandemic.

Gregory: We try to stay occupied. We can clean our store as much as we can. We can, you know, stock our shelves as best as we can. We can dust our merchandise because it's not being moved. You know that's- that's a fact.

And we're so used to being, you know, running around and dealing with three or four customers, at a time, Mexican customers, and they're just not here. They're just not here right now.

Julio: Most of Kory's customers are on the other side of the border. The two cities, Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, Mexico are separated by the border wall.

Gregory: I would say, if I were younger, I could throw a football over the fence. [Laughing] I would say I'm about one hundred fifty yards away from Mexico. So, our store is on a block that connects to the border entrance into Mexico.

Julio: Kory sells shoes and accessories for special events like proms, weddings and quinceañeras... Those events have all been canceled because of Covid.

Gregory: It's been a very uphill battle ever since. We missed a lot of parties. So, graduation parties is kind of our bread and butter. That's what we do.

Julio: The Cinderella Store was started by Gregory Kory's grandfather. He was a World War II veteran who moved to Arizona from New York.

Gregory: He originally lived in New York, and he had a sister who was a wholesaler who recognized that there was a lot of business being done on the border to Mexico. And when he came back from the war, she told him, "You need to go to a border town, pick one. Pick a border town." And him and his brothers decided to go to different border towns throughout the United States and open small women's clothing stores.

Julio: For decades business was good. When the pandemic hit everything changed.

Gregory: But, this store has always served the pedestrian. The pedestrian consumer that comes back and forth, and finds a better deal on milk, you know, in the United States, and goes back home. And that's what we're losing.

Julio: Kory estimates that his business is off by 70 percent, compared to where it was before the border closed. It's the same story up and down Morley Avenue.

At the La Familia store, two women pick through racks of cheap merchandise. Jeans for 4 dollars, dresses and backpacks for 2 dollars.

Julio: Ahora, ¿que anda buscando aqui?

Guadalupe Valenzuela: “Pues le andaba enseñándole a ella por si quiere venir a comprar cosas así para ir a vender así.”

(Translation: “Now, what are you looking for here?”)

“Well, I brought her here to show her if she wants to come here to buy and sell.”)

Julio: Guadalupe Valenzuela and her sister Griselda live nearby. Since Mexicans are not allowed to enter the U.S. to shop, the sisters are buying merchandise on the U.S. side and bringing it to Mexico to sell. They are what’s known as a “fayuqueras”. Originally, this term meant smuggler, but today a “fayuquera” is a traveling salesperson.

U.S. citizens and residents are still allowed to cross back and forth across the border. But Mexican tourists, who were the economic backbone of the local economy, are prohibited from crossing.

Most Nogales residents agree that the only way to rescue the city’s economy is to open the border.

Arturo Garino is the mayor of Nogales.

Arturo Garino: What we're losing right now basically, even though a lot of the stores are still closed downtown, is that floating population of 50 to 60,000 people that come in from Nogales, Sonora, to Nogales, Arizona daily. And I like to say it this way, without the people of Sonora coming through here, they are the oil of our machine, if we don't have that oil, our machine goes dead.

Julio: Mayor Garino uses the word “horrible” to describe the past year. The economic devastation is exceeded only by the loss of lives due to Covid. 180 deaths and Garino says he knew them all.

Arturo: Here in Nogales, you know who they are. They’re either related to you in one way or another, or their friends or their friends or somebody else. But you do know the people. So it's been- it’s been very sad.

Julio: For Nogales to begin to recover, Garino says the border has to be reopened. The decision to reopen is in the hands of federal authorities, and Garino says they have a fundamental misunderstanding of the border region.

Arturo: They talk about border security. They talk about- and if you notice, they don't talk about the economy. They talk about border security. Our border security is safe. Our city is very safe. We have Customs. We have FBI. We have DEA. We have Sheriff's Department. We have municipal. We have every agency that you can think about at the border when it comes to border security.

But if you don't think about the economy, or what's happening along the border, you're not going to understand the border.

Julio: At night, the border wall looks defiant. The only sound is a chorus of crickets and cicadas.

Maritza and I rest our heads against the warm, thick metal bars of the wall from the Arizona side trying to get a glimpse of Nogales, Sonora.

It sounds and feels different. There is music playing and dogs barking.

Mia: We're going to take a break. When we come back, we'll pick up the story on the Mexican side of the border.

Ad Break

Mia: This is "A Better Life?" from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Mia Warren.

Let's get back to our story in the twin cities of Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona. Here's Maritza Félix.

Maritza Félix: It is Saturday and it is also very hot outside.

Here in Nogales, Sonora, taxis travel with the windows down to save gas and prevent Covid; people go up and down the hills by bicycle, and public busses are full of people sitting down or standing without air conditioning.

While businesses on the U.S. side struggle, on this side of the border the economy is booming.

We are on our way to meet a Mexican entrepreneur who has done well during the pandemic.

Driving here is a challenge — bumpy streets, fast-changing traffic lights, cars speeding through alleys where two vehicles barely fit between parked cars. And then, all of a sudden, we are there. We get out of the car and the first thing you smell is frying pork - *chicharrones*.

Margarito Salvador Fernandez: *"Ok, primeramente buenas tardes. Mi nombre es Margarito Salvador."*

(Translation: "Ok, first of all, good afternoon. My name is Margarito Salvador.")

Maritza: His name is Margarito Salvador Fernandez, but everybody calls him Chava. Chava and his wife run a restaurant called Las Carnitas de Quiroga.

Margarito: *"Son carnitas lo que vendemos. Vendemos de buche, tripita, cuerito, lengua."*

Maritza: He reels off the menu: "We sell carnitas. We sell buche carnitas, tripe, and tongue."

The place is tiny but there is room for 22 tables for four people each. It is actually not a formal restaurant. It's just a tent in a grocery store parking lot. On the street, near the sidewalk, is the kitchen.

When the pandemic started in March 2020, Chava was nervous and didn't know if his restaurant would survive. But he prayed and asked the *Virgen de Guadalupe* to keep his family safe and his business open.

Then, when U.S. authorities closed the border, he realized that Mexicans were spending more money in Mexico. He saw an opportunity.

Margarito: *“Me hizo abrir otro negocio y dije ay, es bonito. Después abrí otro negocio.”*

(Translation: “It made me open another business and I said oh, it’s good and then we opened another business.”)

Maritza: Chava has opened two new restaurants during the pandemic, and he has plans to expand even more. But even so, Chava believes his economic future depends on the border being reopened.

Margarito: *“La verdad es que gracias a Dios ahí vamos saliendo, vamos pasando la enfermedad ...*

Maritza: “The truth is,” Chava says, “by the grace of God we are getting through this pandemic. And for the love of God let’s also open the doors to the United States. I don’t cross the border to the U.S., but we are enthusiastically waiting for them. The truth is, I’m sending a big hello to my customers over there in the U.S., and then we just have to move on.”

Chava isn’t the only one in Nogales, Sonora who has seen his business grow during the pandemic.

International sales increased more than 14 percent in 2020 compared to the previous year.

To get a better sense of the local economy we left Chava and headed a few miles down the road to Julio César León’s car dealership. León is the president of the Nogales, Sonora Chamber of Commerce, known as CANACO.

To León, the pandemic was a shock that affected businesses on both sides of the border.

Julio César León: *“Porque el hecho de tener la necesidad de consumir y no poder hacerlo en Estados Unidos tienen que hacerlo en México...”*

Maritza: “The fact is that you have the need to consume,” says León. “And you are not able to do it in the United States--you have to do it in Mexico.” León says that buying local has helped commerce to recover a little bit from everything they have been suffering. But the recovery is because of the combination of local customers and people from the U.S. coming to spend money.

Even when most of the economic movement is in Sonora, León believes people from both sides of the border learned a lot from the pandemic, and he thinks they need each other to survive and thrive.

León: *“Tenemos que hacer lo posible para crecer juntos como frontera y que también se haga el lado americano, recupere todo lo que ha perdido por la pandemia y vuelva a ser una frontera vibrante.”*

Maritza: “We have to do what we can to grow together as a border,” says León. “And also make the United States side recover everything it has lost due to the pandemic and become a vibrant border again.”

Before returning to the US, we go back to the border wall. This time on the Mexican side. The first thing we see is the fence decorated with motivational quotes, art and crosses representing the migrants that have died trying to cross into the United States.

We see families getting together next to the wall trying to touch each other through the fence. Those on the U.S. side need to be a little bit more careful to avoid the razor wire that has been installed to discourage people from crossing illegally. There are no hugs, they can barely touch, but they can see each other.

In June 2021, the U.S. sent more than one million doses of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine to Mexican border cities, including Nogales, Sonora. It was, in part, an acknowledgment that keeping the border closed is hurting these interdependent communities.

Border restrictions have pushed Mexicans to invest their pesos, or dollars, in their own country. The narrative of trade in the region is changing.

What will happen when the border reopens?

Will life return to the way it had been before the pandemic?

A year and a half without Mexicans is killing the economy in U.S. border communities. The constant flow of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries has long been seen as a sign of United States superiority. But perhaps the pandemic has made a point: the U.S. needs Mexicans as much as Mexico needs the US.

Mia:

This story was produced by Julio Cisneros and Maritza Félix.

A Better Life?'s executive producer is Quincy Surasmith. Jocelyn Gonzales is our technical director. Our editor is John Rudolph. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing. And Katelynn Laws is our intern.

Our theme music and original score are by Fareed Sajan.

A Better Life? comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2005, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

To hear other episodes in this series, or to read more about the story you just heard, visit us at abetterlifepodcast.com.

I'm Mia Warren. Thanks for listening.

John Rudolph: *A Better Life?* and Feet in 2 Worlds are supported by the Ford Foundation, the David and Katherine Moore Family Foundation, an anonymous donor, and readers like you. Support our critical work that brings immigrant voices and award-winning journalism to public radio, podcasts, and digital news sites. Make a tax-deductible contribution today at abetterlifepodcast.com.

CITATION

Warren, Mia, host. “Two Cities Called Nogales” *A Better Life?*, Feet in 2 Worlds. September 30, 2021.
www.abetterlifepodcast.com.

