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in the book "American Mosaic," Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabiskys piece together a century of first-hand accounts of men, women and children who came to our country to make new lives for themselves and for us. We are all immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Even native Americans, Joan and Charlotte remind us, "walked across a land bridge from Siberia some thousands of years ago." At the end of a trying year for all Americans, it might do us good to listen to what they saw, and how we can remember our immigrant past, present and future.

Pauline Newman was seven or eight years old when her family crossed the ocean in 1911 from Lithuania to New York. Her father, a carpenter, and her mother, a woman of great discipline, were determined to give their children a better life. They knew how things are and what needs to be done to ensure the future of their children.

The importance of education was emphasized by their parents, who instilled in them the value of hard work and perseverance. They knew that education was the key to their family's success and the opportunity to build a better future for themselves and their community.

The community of Amigos de las Escuelas, you'll be convinced that their opposing styles work. They are committed friends of the people of the colonia, not one-time visitors focused on self-fulfillment. The kindergarten wall is a good example. Amigos helped build it to prevent immigrant workers from disrupting influences. Now that Amigos volunteers have added a playscape and mural, the youngsters can play and learn in a bright and beautiful environment.

Many children in the colonia quit school after the sixth grade and go work in the campo or in maquiladora factories. Such places are today what the Triangle Shirt Factory was a century ago. Mayra and Rosario, two sisters in a family of eight children, were going to do just that. Birchall arranged for them to stay in school. Today, they are thriving, straight-A students.

Thomas G. Palaima
REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

"There's a land so I've been told / Every street is paved with gold / and it's just across the borderline."

- Across the Borderline by Ry Cooder, "Across the Borderline."

Above, Katie Foree, 2, celebrates her birthday with the kindergartners at Ferrocarril No. 4. Her father, Rob, works with Amigos de las Escuelas, which helped set up the school. The school has provided opportunities for many children, including sister Rosario, below left, and Mayra. The girls had been ready to find work to help their family when volunteer Sam Birchall arranged for them to attend school instead. The girls are now straight-A students.

Volunteers worked with colonia leaders and residents. The Professor Donacio Munoz Martinez School now serves 35 kindergarten and 110 upper-elementary students. Birchall's incurable "do-gooderism" began when he joined the Peace Corps 15 years ago. He stressed his knowledge of small businesses and Spanish. The Peace Corps assigned him to Swaziland, Africa, where he taught woodworking and technical drawing to high-school students for three years.

"You know these government folks," he says with dead-pan good humor, "Sometimes they know more than you, and you have to defer to their greater insight."

Birchall took away an insight of his own. "I realized a good education was the most important thing that happened to me in my life. People from the border communities will continue to come to our country. It is better for their and our future that they arrive educated and already know how to be Americans." And so he goes there with Force and 60 volunteers for a week every Thanksgiving and every March. Force's wife, Julia, and daughter Katie, now 2, go, too. The community of Ferrocarril No. 4 is safe and welcoming for his whole family. This is partly because Force works hard making sure the Amigos workers are true and committed friends of the people of the colonia, not one-time visitors focused on self-fulfillment.

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Alicia enjoys "spending time with people who appreciate the tiny simplicities we take for granted. She laughs warmly about the old mapache doll children gave her after she painted raccoons on garbage cans to teach the importance of throwing away trash. Force says, "I am motivated to find answers that make sense to me."

These families were effectively "illegals" in their own country, squatting on railroad property until they united and collectively petitioned for community status; Their water.

A chicken tied up near a house is still a symbol of well-being. 'Apart from educating the most important thing that happened to me in my life. People from the border communities will continue to come to our country. It is better for their and our future that they arrive educated and already know how to be Americans." And so he goes there with Force and 60 volunteers for a week every Thanksgiving and every March. Force's wife, Julia, and daughter Katie, now 2, go, too. The community of Ferrocarril No. 4 is safe and welcoming for his whole family. This is partly because Force works hard making sure the Amigos workers are true and committed friends of the people of the colonia, not one-time visitors focused on self-fulfillment.

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