

Aaron Kleinschmidt

30 Dec 2024

Lumos Final Report: FM4 Paso Libre in Guadalajara, Mexico

I arrived in Guadalajara amidst one of the strangest moments of my life. I had spent years jumping from city to city and even country to country, and the smallest part of me almost felt numb to the newness of each chapter. Regardless, I started to find joy in the smallest, most mundane aspects of life in Mexico. I wasn't certain that Guadalajara was exactly where I was meant to be, or whether my project was even the right choice.

I soon realized that this journey wasn't about being in the perfect neighborhood in the perfect city, but rather being in an optimal space to serve the population I came to serve. Despite choosing Guadalajara as my destination, I came knowing very little about immigration at the local level. I had no clue that the harrowing train route I studied back at Belmont cut right through Guadalajara, with those infamous train tracks less than a block from the shelter's door. I had even less of a clue that my work would go well beyond cooking and cleaning – that the shelter cannot function without volunteer power. The fact that I provided security, medical care, structure, food, and so much more to the folks passing through our doors just proves how underfunded such initiatives are. Of course, I was thrilled to take on a more serious role than expected, but the fact that young, often inexperienced volunteers are given such responsibility speaks for itself. I had not really considered that a shelter is a 24/7 facility, and I certainly was not prepared for the complex rules and hierarchies that maintain peace and healthy cohabitation.



Volunteers I organized helping sort donations.



I even ended up giving tours of the shelter to students and interested parties.



Donations like these also powered the shelter and helped us vary our meals!



The international vibe of the shelter helped me simultaneously experience and share Mexican culture.

Outside the shelter's four walls, I wrestled with some culture shock, but it wasn't as deep as I anticipated. Perhaps the years of globetrotting and my experience growing up in a suburb with notable Mexican influence had prepared me well. Even so, I quickly learned that many of my perspectives did not quite align with the Mexican way of life. My ideas of class and race especially were challenged; I was keen to comment on the diversity I saw throughout Guadalajara and the way class and race appeared to impact daily life. In particular, I was surprised to learn that Jalisco has a significant population of European descent, meaning I did not stick out quite as much as I had anticipated (at least not physically). In spite of my innocuous curiosity, my friend Andrés was quick to slow me down, reminding me that Mexicans tend to

focus on their national identity above all else, and that conversations of race and ethnicity are simply different from those we are accustomed to in the United States.

This identity, though usually benign, can contribute to xenophobia, just like it does in the United States. The idea that migrants might take wealth or jobs that “belong to” Mexicans permeates some aspects of Mexican culture, partially propelled by widespread poverty. Even so, most Mexicans have cultural and linguistic unity with Latin American arrivals, making such negative perspectives rarer in Mexico than in the United States. Within the shelter, I saw people from across the Americas bonding over music, food, and their stories, which were sometimes more parallel than expected. Seeing the migrant identity shatter physical borders – and even language barriers – was impactful to say the least. In FM4, all stories and cultures are openly celebrated! My host community in general inspired me with their openness and willingness to help me feel right at home. I have traveled quite a bit, and I cannot say that every city is like Guadalajara; their reputation for kindness is rooted in reality.

The first weeks of working in the shelter were also crucial to my cultural understanding of broader patterns of migration. In the United States, high-profile voices constantly convince us that there is some singular idea of what makes an immigrant. Some believe that they come from poverty and are uneducated or even desperate. However, I met folks of all walks of life who found themselves in situations of mobility. Some had advanced degrees and were seasoned professionals. Others had dedicated their whole lives to protecting their family. Others found themselves rushing to take care of loved ones before their dying breath. The commonly touted idea of the immigrant as a poor, single latino male with criminal or even violent tendencies is incredibly harmful and far from accurate. While I may think I am immune from such prejudices,

it took *seeing* the plethora of faces passing through to shake some of my deep-seeded assumptions.



Our full-time volunteer training in nearby Jocotepec allowed us to better serve those passing through.

My experience working with migrants also led me to ponder the illusion of choice in these situations. Those of us who have never been forced to move often tend to think that migration is simply a choice – a matter of mere convenience. However, most of the migrants and refugees I spoke with had a longing for their home and all they had left behind. In several cases, the threat of violence was so grave that they were faced with two options: immediate abandon of their home, or death. Despite the fact that migration to (or through) Mexico is typically far from ideal, hundreds of thousands make the trek. To then depict those who risked everything to move as a nuisance is shallow, but all too common in today's United States. Frankly, no migrant or refugee should feel that they have to prove themselves to their neighbors, but listening to true

stories told in the first person (when possible) is the best way for us to learn and shape our perspectives.



Kitchen duty was always challenging, but I learned lots of tips and tricks for cooking large quantities!

But then, what even is a migrant? It is hard to say for certain, and this question alone has undoubtedly triggered a never-ceasing debate in academia. At FM4 Paso Libre, the phrase “TODAS SOMOS MIGRANTES,” or “WE ARE ALL MIGRANTS” was displayed across posters, stickers, t-shirts, and social media posts. This mantra absolutely has some truth to it, and I love that it motivates those who choose to work in the refugee space – a field that is not the most financially lucrative. Nevertheless, I hope it does not detract from the utter perseverance and grit exhibited by those who risk it all in search of a better life.

The positive impact my time with FM4 had on me goes far beyond my perspectives on immigration – I now feel more confident that service is vital to fruitful life. There were, of course, stressful days where I felt anything but generous and dreaded my shift. However, I felt so fulfilled knowing that I was trusted to be a resource for people in the most volatile of situations. I now feel more confident in my Spanish, not only thanks to my constant use of the language, but

also because I was given sensitive and important responsibilities in a Spanish context. My bilingualism has helped me professionally in the past, but this is the first time I realized how impactful it can truly be. Further, I now have more faith in a bigger picture beyond this given moment in time. Sometimes, I am tempted to despair at the political patterns that I see, and I worry for the future of our country and the world as a whole. Despite the doom and gloom, I have seen hope from those who have experienced the unimaginable. Some are seeing their countries recover from dire crises and realizing that they may have a chance to return home. Others see hope in a new community – one they never expected to be a part of. I know for certain that I have been impacted in several more ways by this experience, and I think they will come to light as I continue to get involved in the migrant space from the United States.

While I still feel I am processing much of my experience, I can confidently give some advice to other Lumos travelers. First, and perhaps most importantly, I would recommend that future travelers think first about people rather than place. I loved Guadalajara and was thrilled to finally experience Mexican culture, but what ended up being most impactful was its ideal position along one of the busiest migrant routes. Having a big city to explore had its benefits, but the most valuable time was spent at the shelter. Also, be prepared to do things alone! I have a hard time getting out of the house even in my hometown if I do not have company, so trying to explore an unfamiliar environment alone can be quite the challenge. I have few regrets from my stint, and I worked through much of my extensive bucket list, but I will say that I let my fear of going out alone hold me back from fully cherishing every moment. Of course, safety always comes first, but when possible, do not be scared to just get out and navigate your temporary home on your own!

All in all, I had a marvelous experience serving migrants and refugees at FM4 Paso Libre. Though I have very few photos to show for it due to privacy concerns, I have a host of sweet memories and strong relationships to hold tight. The amplitude of tasks set before me caught me off guard at first, but I am grateful for the challenges that helped me grow significantly in just four short months.



Our boss took us out to try torta ahogada!



Towards the final months, I was able to join and help facilitate cultural outings for the migrants.