

GRANNIES INTERVIEW WITH SANDRA STIMPSON

Today I had the pleasure of interviewing Sandra Stimpson, a lifelong political activist who has been busy at the New Orleans (NOLA) bus station, providing Grannies Respond support. Sandra is a New Orleans native who has lived in many states in our country, mostly working as a union rep in sewing and textile industries and making “good trouble”.

While visiting New Orleans, a friend invited her to the bus station, and there, she was able to make connections with the Grannies’ trip to the border. Soon they started the “Atlanta Overground Railroad” to support migrants going on to their next location.

Sandra reflected that the station in Atlanta then had different needs than in NOLA, where she now volunteers. The NOLA station is not a hub, is just a stop, whereas Atlanta is a hub where buses are changed. From there people went on to places such as SC, NC, FL, Chicago, Philadelphia and Portland ME, with most going to NY. Migrants there were much more needy. When bus transfers were required, there was no one there to speak Spanish. All signs and rules were in English and people could easily make mistakes in those transfers. They often had to wait 8 hours to transfer to the next bus, again with no assistance other than in English. Drivers do not speak Spanish and bus station announcements are all in English.

Their main duty at that time was supplying simple food and clothing. They were committed to cups of soup made from hot water and ramen noodles that they brought to the station. They were responding mainly to migrants coming across the border in McAllen and Brownsville, Texas. Later their support expanded to the Mexican-American-owned bus stations in Atlanta. At that time, the migrants were mainly families from Guatemala.

In NOLA, only a bus stop, few people are dropped off there, most continuing on the bus to Atlanta. Many now go on to Mobile and Montgomery AL. 90% going to Atlanta. It is often a place where bus drivers are switched and the Grannies can provide various snacks, juice, toothbrushes, toothpaste, masks, and a map of where the passengers are and where they are going. A huge help, indeed. Imagine arriving in a new country with little orientation of where you are and where you are going next? Thank you, Grannies!

Since Sandra first started, she is noticing less migrants than in 2018, all from different countries including African and Asian countries, different economic status and different resources. She recently had an incident in the station in which an immigrant woman’s ticket had been misprinted. The mistake on the ticket meant that the woman and her 1.5-year daughter were put off the bus. An employee at the station advocated for them but could not get the ticket changed. Sandra went on to take them to her home to spend the night, then to return in the morning and on to their bus. Consistently, the bus station workers and security guards are never a problem for those the Grannies are there for. Sandra also knows that bringing treats to the station staff is a help! Thank you, Sandra!

She reports that, at this time, the origins of the current immigrants are majority Venezuelan, with some Cubans and Haitians and one Peruvian recently. When asking her what gives her the most satisfaction in her work with Grannies Respond, Sandra replied that she simply likes to help people...and she loves Spanish!

As the numbers have declined, Sandra noted that there is no longer a need for as many volunteers. There previously were as many as 20 available for support in NOLA, coming as often as 3 times a week to once a month. Now there is a consistent 4 to 5 volunteers, who provide the treats and supplies directly to those in need on the bus. Ten to fifteen others are packers and buyers. Sandra collects clothing at estate sales and the volunteers are able to keep tubs of supplies at the bus station.

Sandra added that immigrants hear our national news and the negatives about their journey here. They have great fears. Greeting them with a smile and a “Bienvenidos!” means so much to them. Sandra adds that it is the most important thing the Grannies there can do. And when someone recently missed the bus, she drove them to Baton Rouge. Muchos Gracias, Sandra!

Interview by Pixie Holbrook (Massachusetts)