

GO, GRANNIE, GO!

With a rented van full of donated items, and no firm idea where she was headed, California Grannie Elisa O'Callaghan's first trip to the border was just the beginning



Elisa O'Callaghan is a member of the Grannies Respond Board of Directors

It was in November 2018 when California native Elisa O'Callaghan first saw news clips of U.S. border police tear-gassing unarmed migrants, including women and barefoot children, at the California-Mexico border. Unable to change the channel, and moved and determined to do something, Elisa rented a van, took out the seats, filled it with donations, and with two friends drove 10 hours down to the border.

"We didn't know where we were going," Elisa said. "We figured all that out on the way there."

A Southlake pastor directed her to Team Brownsville (TB) in Brownsville, Texas where she replenished TB's empty storage shelves with donated jackets, sweaters, diapers, underwear, water, non-perishable foods and other goods.

That was the first of several trips Elisa has made to the border to meet migrants, volunteer at shelters, hand out clothes, food, diapers, and homemade dolls, and spread a little bit of hope.

"That first trip was very organic," said Elisa, who is now a member of the Grannies Respond board of directors. "At first I was thinking of going to California, but then friends suggested I drive south (to

the Texas border). Other people told me, 'I feel the same way, but what can I do?' I was the outlet. I said, 'I'm going. Give me diapers, shoes, clothes, things like that.' The news spread. Friends and like-minded people donated."

After that initial 2018 trip, during the height of COVID, Elisa made monthly treks to Brownsville and Matamoros, Mexico, a border town which at the time was the site of a large, outdoor migrant camp where, alongside Team Brownsville members, she served meals "to thousands" and taught art and English to children.

A new destination

Once COVID eased, Elisa changed her monthly destination to the House of Migrants (Casa del Migrante) in Reynosa, Mexico, an indoor, semi-protected shelter for migrants who are ill, pregnant, elderly, or who otherwise should not shelter outdoors. (Three other overcrowded, nearby outdoor camps consist of tents or other improvised shelters, posing risks of illness and physical attacks to their inhabitants.)

On each of these trips, she filled a rented seven-seat van with donated goods. Her first stop was always in the border city of Hildago, Texas, to pick up a friend who has family in Reynosa, a 20-minute drive but a world away, and knows the area well.

Sometimes, she traveled during school breaks, when her husband and two teenagers accompanied her. But, they remained in Hildago while she continued to Reynosa, which she describes as "not the safest place. But, I drive with someone who is knowledgeable and who knows the area." Elisa, whose parents were from Ecuador and Mexico, grew up speaking Spanish. "I am Hispanic, so I can pass."

Planning trips has become more difficult — and more expensive — for Elisa.

"I rent the van, buy the gas, pay for the hotel, and rent storage." Subsequently, her efforts have turned closer to home.

She wanted to hand out supplies to migrants at the Dallas Greyhound station, but discovered that only ticket holders are allowed inside.

"I have to buy a ticket to go into the station," says O'Callaghan. "The cheapest ticket is \$48, so I buy that one."

No food, water

She says one time, she met a father with an infant who had just traveled several hours with no food or water. She gave him water and formula.

"Why would you not want someone to have food or water?"

When his bus left, Elisa phoned Grannies Respond representatives at the man's next stop and

asked someone to meet him with a stroller; the baby had spent part of the trip on the dirty bus floor.

Recently, Elisa was interviewed by a Telemundo reporter and decided to conduct part of the interview inside the bus station. Elisa, with the reporter and two cameramen, walked freely into the station, carrying food, water and other supplies.

Elisa says her emotions were perhaps rattled the most when she visited a Dallas boys' migrant detention facility. "This hit me. This could have been my father. It was like a prison. The kids were depressed. Some were suicidal. It was heartbreaking."

She handed out toys and books, played cards and listened to their stories. She told authorities that one boy in particular was severely depressed and needed help.

"Two days later, he was sent to a different unit. They wouldn't tell me where he was. I have no idea what happened. I'll never know."

O'Callaghan is also passionate about serving her local immigrant community. She is the chair of the executive board of directors for Justice for Our Neighbors, a non-profit immigration service that provides legal services to DACA recipients, migrant families facing deportation, and community services, such as Know Your Rights workshops. In this volunteer position, she gives direction and advises staff. Normally a two-year position, she was asked to serve a third year.

O'Callaghan's family history, cultural identity and personal experiences have made it impossible for her to simply turn away from suffering and injustice at the border.

"I am them," she said. "I am part of this history."

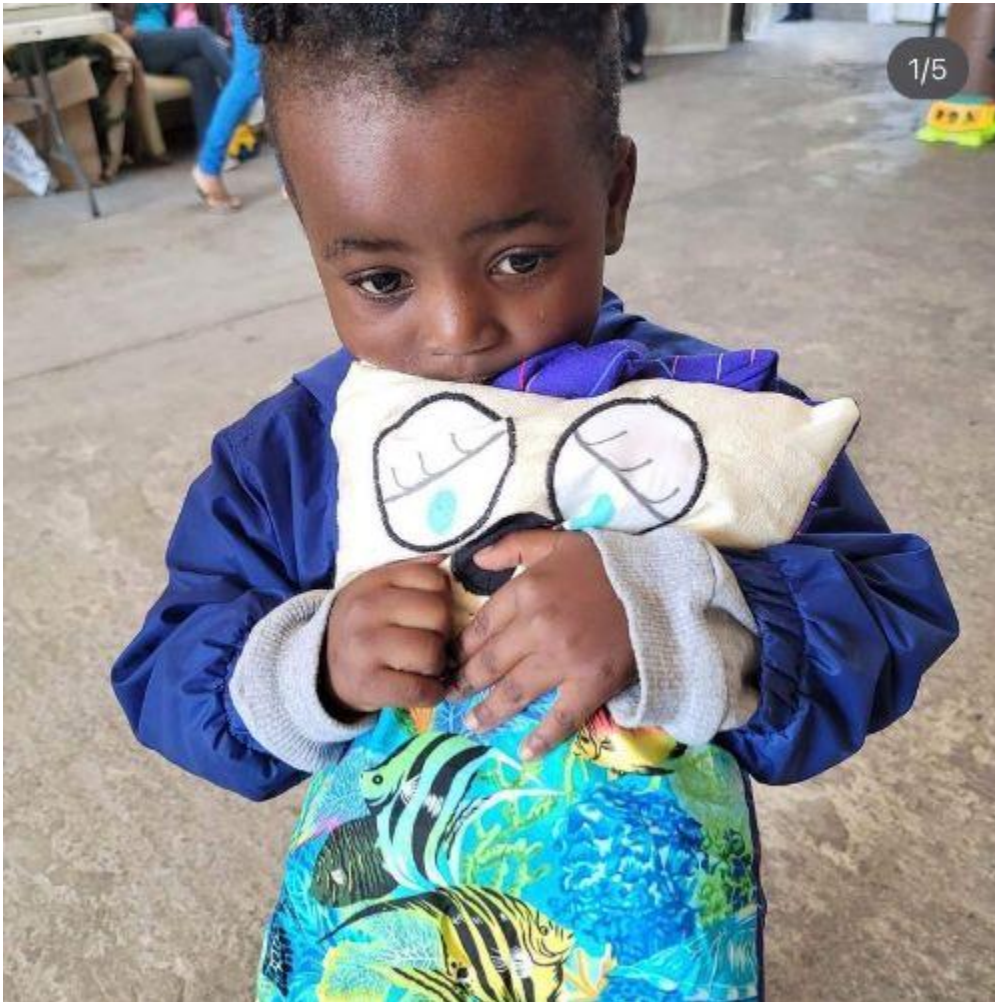
Everyone needs a hug

When Elisa O'Callaghan first delivered food, clothes, and diapers to migrants in Mexico, she saw children substituting sticks for toys and concrete for beds. Some of these kids were separated from their parents and had few, or no, comfort items.

Through her many one-on-one conversations with the children, Elisa says, most are scared and anxious, especially those separated from their parents. She wanted to give them something to remind them that, despite their despair, they are not alone. She started sewing what she calls "comfort" dolls. "I want them (the children) to remember years later that, when they felt alone, 'someone loved me.' "

During her 10-hour drive back home, she kept thinking about how she could alleviate even a small piece of these kids' misery. She bought material and made a cushioned, huggable doll that could substitute for a pillow. After a few tries, she perfected her Create a Loving Memory (CALM) dolls.

This project, called CALM Dolls, has grown from a one-person endeavor to include groups of volunteers. So far, Elisa says, she has hand-delivered, along with hundreds of jackets, sweaters, and diapers, more than 2,000 dolls to border towns in Mexico, Texas and Arizona.



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"I always hand-deliver the dolls. I want the human connection with a child. I read to them, we talk. Many tell me their stories. They feel safe talking to me."

Now, volunteers make the casings and she stuffs them. She tells volunteers to buy kid-friendly material with soft, colorful material and happy designs. When creating the face, "I tell them (volunteers) to make it smiling and friendly. This may be the only happy face they see in awhile."

Elisa created a pattern to ensure that every child receives the same-sized doll. She also tries to

maintain uniformity by asking volunteers to keep faces simple. Some elaborately-designed dolls made by more experienced seamstresses were sold in fund-raisers.

Volunteers sew the outer shells, leaving a 3-inch opening, allowing Elisa to stuff them. So far, she has hand-delivered more than 2000 dolls to appreciative boys and girls in three states. "It's about reminding children that they are valued and loved."

For more information on making your own CALM dolls, contact Elisa at ocallaghan1971@aol.com.