

A run for the border

Working alongside poor in Mexico makes for fulfilling spring break



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How was your spring break?

I spent the week in and around the city of Juarez, Mexico.

For a few days I was in a "suburb" of Juarez — 200,000 people living in the middle of the desert, in homes made out of whatever they can find. The area has been used as a landfill ... what they find is mostly trash strewn all over the hillsides.

The streets there consist of about four inches of loose, red dust. Most of the "homes" that line them are made of used shipping pallets. Yet, in places, some concrete structures have actually been built.

There, we met a church pastor and his wife who were willing to let 20 total strangers with next to zero construction experience help them shingle and floor-tile a building, as well as build a brick wall around it.

The building, dusty and crude, is going to serve as the neighborhood pharmacy and gathering place.

None of us spoke the others' language fluently — so (as you could imagine) communication was as much in tone and gesture as in words.

The pastor and his wife bought a couple of 3-liter bottles of Coke to share with our group every day we were together. To think of the grand expense that those bottles represented to that couple really embarrassed us, but we drank them. To turn down

such a generous and sincere gift seemed unthinkable.

Before we left, we had a church service with a congregation of about seven people from the neighborhood.

When the pastor asked us to contribute, we muddled through a Spanish hymn while I tried to play his guitar. I dropped the few coins I had in my pocket into the bag they passed during the offering.

I wondered how much my measly gifts meant to those people. I guess they may have also been wondering what theirs meant to us.

We appreciated their unabated warmth more deeply than I can say. If any part of our presence meant as much to them, I'd say we'd experienced a miracle.

Some of our motley crew of Caucasian invaders also went to a vacant lot inside the urban bustle of Juarez. A mentally ill woman lived there alone, in a camper shell. Our desire to help was probably no better than a rumor to her, yet she greeted each one of us like a long-lost relative.

We helped her clear the tiny lot of the rubble that covered it, while cockroaches scurried and found new hiding places. We dug a hole for an outhouse in the newly cleared land. We shared our lunch of cold sandwiches with the woman, and said goodbye.

At one point, I stood ankle-deep in dust and trash on the Mexican side of the border, gazing upon the comparative splendor of downtown El Paso, Texas. I had no desire to climb the 10-foot fence in front of me, since my U.S. citizenship insured easy return to America.

As I was wondering if the people I'd met in Juarez longed for the same privilege, I saw a white truck approach.

The U.S. Border Patrol had come to insure us against invasion from

ourselves. We piled into our vans and left, the policemen watching behind tinted glass.

That was intimidation, but we also felt empowerment.

For most of us, it was a real accomplishment to see a short section of wall go up and stay up, by the power of our own hands. And I wouldn't have believed we could survive the vagabond life as smoothly as we did, even for so short a time.

Yet while the trip was empowering, it also smacked us in the face.

By midweek, we found ourselves commenting on one-story stucco buildings as if they were mansions, then realizing how utterly ludicrous that sounded. We learned that 20 is the average age in the El Paso-Juarez area — it's shocking to think that people my age have the weight of society on their shoulders.

That's just one of a thousand reasons why building a thriving border community is so tough. The Texas-Mexico border is also the most impoverished and least educated (as well as largely ignored) political region for both the United States and Mexico.

Temporarily, we felt what it was like to live in those

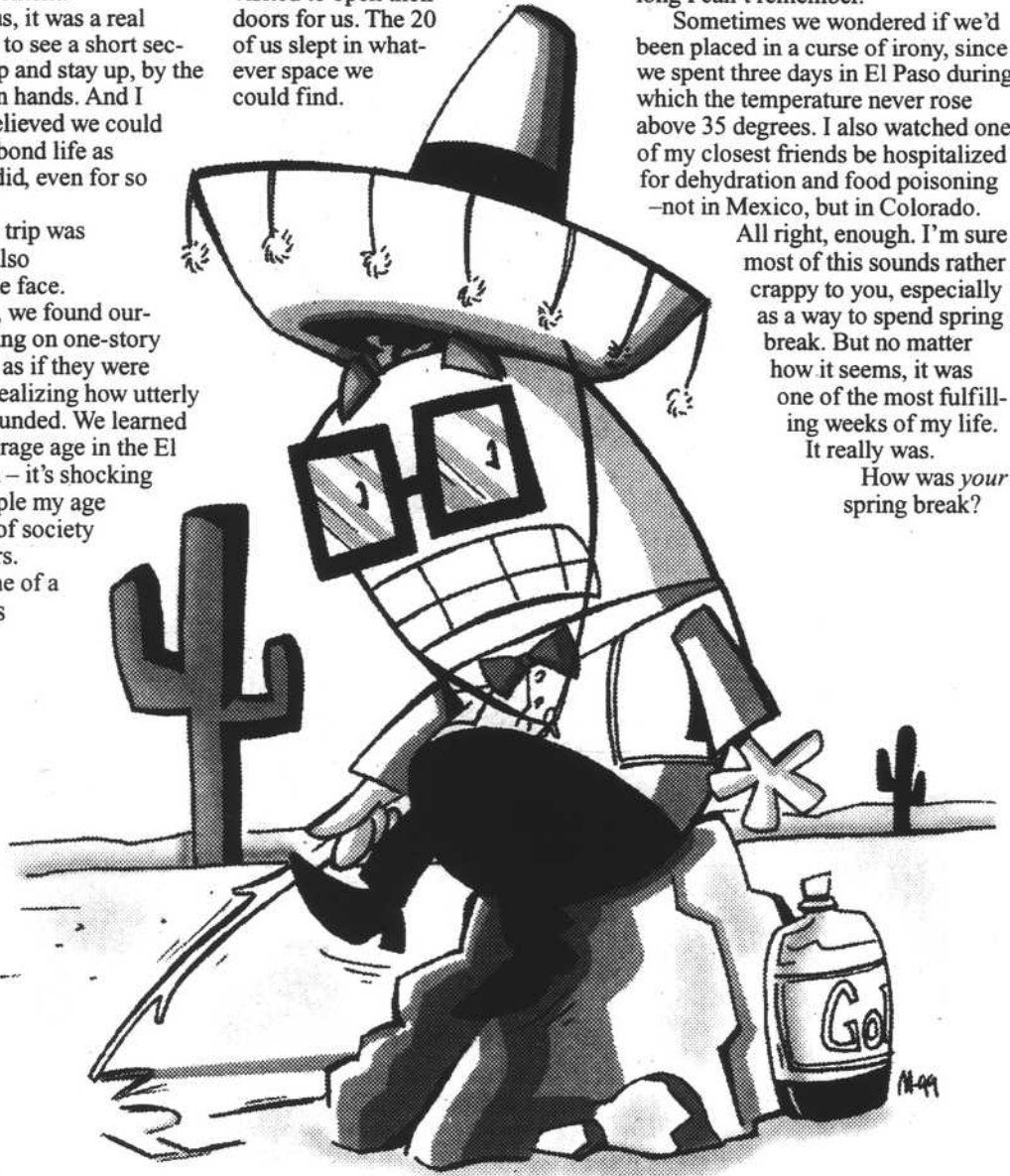
conditions. During the trip, our group virtually lived the life of beggars. For lodging, we relied on churches we had never visited to open their doors for us. The 20 of us slept in whatever space we could find.

We held midnight revivals of sorts, singing any hymn we could think of into empty, darkened sanctuaries. I cried for the first time in so long I can't remember.

Sometimes we wondered if we'd been placed in a curse of irony, since we spent three days in El Paso during which the temperature never rose above 35 degrees. I also watched one of my closest friends be hospitalized for dehydration and food poisoning — not in Mexico, but in Colorado.

All right, enough. I'm sure most of this sounds rather crappy to you, especially as a way to spend spring break. But no matter how it seems, it was one of the most fulfilling weeks of my life. It really was.

How was your spring break?



MATT HANEY/DN

The four A's

Alcoholism, abuse, adultery and abandonment leave lifelong scars



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What I have to talk about this week isn't a particularly pleasant topic.

It's not necessarily gruesome or gut-wrenching.

But it is serious.

It's about problems people experience as a result of abuse suffered at the hands of those they expect love and nurturing from — their parents.

I don't want to hurt anyone — especially my own parents — by writing this. I'm going to reveal some things about myself to you, my readers, people who at best are total strangers to me.

And as I said, my intention is not to embarrass or hurt myself or my family. Rather, I hope that at least one person out there finds some similarities in their own life and makes the decision to get the help they so desperately need.

My own saga began when I was born the eldest of a family of five, the son of an alcoholic. Not only an alcoholic, but a strict disciplinarian with his wife and children, who kept everyone walking on pins and needles — constantly.

As a career military man, my

father, like most alcoholics, held on fervently to the one thing that most alcoholics hold on to until they sink to rock bottom — his job. And holding on fervently to a military career means adopting the mind-set of the organization — strict discipline and rigid, unquestioning adherence to authority.

The problem in the family environment with that mind-set should be obvious. Risk-taking behavior, which ordinarily involves trial-and-error learning, is stifled. Anything that could possibly result in the verbal or physical wrath of the abuser is avoided like the plague. Hence, learning experiences, especially those that might involve any kind of a possibility that Dad might get upset — simply don't happen.

When you're walking on pins and needles, afraid of the wrath of the abuser, you're never sure what's going to get your ass in trouble. So you don't try even the most innocent of things — like stringing your shoes differently than how you're told.

People always thought I was extremely shy and withdrawn as a child. The truth was, I was afraid of doing anything to embarrass my father.

When Dad was around, which wasn't much, he was the disciplinarian. He could make you feel smaller than the eraser on a pencil for the simplest of blunders — like making gouges in the peanut butter jar rather than removing it in smooth, even increments.

His tirades weren't directed only at his children, either.

I can't tell you how many nights I was kept awake as a child listening

to my parents screaming at each other until the wee hours of the morning.

It wasn't just Dad, either.

Mom wasn't too bad when Dad was around. She relied on him to dole out the discipline.

Dad went on a lot of "temporary duty" assignments while he was in the military. He'd go off somewhere like Thailand or Korea, usually for 90 days at a time.

But when he was gone, she was often unbearable because her discipline was more physical in nature — and more unpredictable. We never knew for sure what types of behavior would get our asses kicked.

Then Dad would come home and be upset with the behavior of myself and my brothers and sisters, then blame my mother for not being strict enough with us.

And fight with her some more.

Then toward the end of their marriage, he started taking unaccompanied tours overseas and living in the barracks at stateside duty stations while keeping his family tucked away in small-town Nebraska.

He had me stay in his barracks room one summer as a 12-year-old so I could work with him at his part-time job cleaning an office building.

The SOB even introduced me to his girlfriend. And spent the nights with her.

As I learned later, it wasn't his first experience with adultery. Hell, he even borrowed substantial sums of money from at least one of his previous mistresses.

Eventually, he couldn't stand being around any of us any more, so

he left — in the middle of the night — without so much as a word.

It wasn't until last summer that my life became so unbearable I had to do something about it and discovered what had been the source of my agony for so many years.

Relationships suffered horribly. I was terribly depressed.

For a whole host of reasons I won't go into here, I finally got myself into counseling to try to find out why I was so damned unhappy.

(No, I'm not crazy — and I reject the notion of being stigmatized by the ignorant attitudes of people who think that everyone who receives mental health treatment is somehow deficient. If anything, it makes us smarter.)

What I learned about myself is that because of the abuse and abandonment issues I'd harbored for so long, I couldn't trust anyone enough to allow them to get close enough to hurt me.

Abuse and/or abandonment victims go through life with a protective bubble around them. They don't let anyone inside, for fear they'll get hurt, or worse yet, give their love to someone only to be abandoned by that loved one.

If you've ever watched the MTV show "Loveline," you've probably heard Dr. Drew Pinsky talk about abuse and abandonment issues. Dr. Drew is particularly adept at identifying callers with abuse or abandonment issues.

These callers engage in all kinds of self-destructive behaviors. They allow themselves to be victims.

They let people abuse them sexually and/or physically. And they

don't have the necessary self-esteem to be able to tell themselves that they deserve better.

And those are just the ones who call.

The ones who don't call are the abusers. They were victims in their formative years. The only difference is that they're caught up in the same vicious cycle of abuse the victims are, only as perpetrators of abuse.

I'm not just making this all up as I go, either. One of the leading experts on the issue of abuse is a man by the name of Stephen Karpman, at least according to a friend of mine who was a victim of some pretty severe abuse as a child.

She told me about Karpman's Triangle.

Karpman theorizes that victims of abuse fall into this vicious triangle whereby they remain perpetrators, victims or rescuers — for the rest of their lives.

Rescuers try to help victims escape their perpetrators.

I've often wondered why I was so attracted to the legal profession. Maybe I understand it a little better now.

It's kind of like being the ultimate rescuer.

Wherever I may be in Karpman's Triangle now, I know one thing for sure — I'm happier now.

I've learned a lot about myself and how I behave in relationships. Being able to understand the root of the problem helps me be more open and trusting now.

By the way — there's a fifth "A." It's for *acknowledgment*. Only by acknowledging that there's a problem can the healing begin.