

My name is Ewelina, and I am a Senior here at Northwestern studying Biology. I was very fortunate to serve as this year's leader for the Arizona Mission Trip. Going into the week, I expected to focus on logistics, ensuring everyone's safety, punctuality, and organization. What I didn't expect was how much the experience would ask all of us to slow down, listen more carefully, and allow what we encountered to stay with us.

One of the most grounding parts of the trip was participating in water drops in the desert. These drops are placed along migrant routes to help prevent death from dehydration. Carrying gallons of water across dry, open land brought everything back to its simplest truth: survival. Each jug represented time, distance, and life. Standing in that hot sun made it impossible to ignore how easily water is taken for granted, and how invisible that privilege becomes until access to it is uncertain.

Our travels led us to Centre de Esperanza, the Center of Hope in Sonoyta, Mexico, which serves as a migrant resource center, where the experience shifted. Playing with children and spending time with families reminded us that joy can coexist with struggle. The kids didn't ask why we were there or what we believed. They asked us to play, to laugh, to stay. Those moments showed us that presence matters and that connection does not require explanation, only willingness.

During our time in Sells, we were fortunate to learn directly from members of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Hearing their stories and experiences reshaped how we understand land, borders, and identity. Their history is not something of the past; it is lived every day. Their words revealed how borders are not just political talking points, but realities that shape daily life and belonging.

Our trip to the border wall served as one of the most moving moments of the week. The land felt eerily quiet, almost heavy. The height of the wall was overwhelming, imposing, and deliberate. Standing there, it was impossible not to feel how much hatred and division had been built into the landscape itself. What struck us most was how unnatural it felt, cutting through land that once held no such barrier, transforming open space God intended to be shared into something meant to intimidate and separate.

Throughout the trip, privilege became impossible to ignore. We were able to arrive, learn, and leave freely, while others live with restriction and uncertainty as part of everyday life. The desert and border communities asked us not to look away from that reality, but to sit with it and listen.

Spiritually, this trip challenged my faith in unexpected ways. I didn't find God in clear answers, but in discomfort, silence, and the responsibility to witness without turning away. In serving others, I felt my faith shift from something I carried privately to something I was called to live, especially in moments of discomfort and silence. My faith was stretched toward humility and presence, toward trusting that being open to being changed is sometimes the most faithful response.

This trip did not offer simple answers. Instead, it left us with a deeper awareness of the land we stood on, the people we met, and the stories we were trusted with. It reminded us that learning begins with listening, and that what we carry forward from experiences like this matters just as much as being present in the moment. I encourage fellow students to consider stepping into this kind of experience themselves, whether through the Arizona Mission Trip or another service opportunity, allowing it to challenge them, ground them, and shape how they move through the world long after the trip ends.