

“Hey! I am from Chicago and this is not cold!”

In the colonias, the temperature is below freezing tonight and the blankets, socks and sweaters I distributed are being put to good use. Everyone is cold. Some people will do dangerous things to warm their homes.

Sometimes we see two cardboard rooms, separated by a small space. In this space, the people build small campfires. Other cardboard homes have campfires too close to the home. In many homes made of cinderblock, the people build indoor fires or have patio fireplaces in their homes.

There are only two fire-stations in this city of almost 200,000 souls. It seems that the fire fighters most often arrive in time to prevent fires from spreading to more than a few homes in the colonias. Their response is hampered by the dirt roads and huge holes in these roads that make them impassable.

How I define ‘cold’ changed after I began walking the colonias. In some parts of the United States we think nothing of freezing temperatures. Visit the Dakotas, Wyoming or even Chicago and people will laugh when you complain about near freezing temperatures. However, I noticed something different in the colonias.

In most of the United States we say, “It is cold outside.” In the colonias of Mexico the people say, “It is cold.” This is because there is little difference between the outside and inside temperatures. The schools have no heat, no insulation and often there are broken windows. The teachers and students wear coats. The houses in the colonias seldom have heat or insulation. Some have blankets hanging from doorways.

Maria handed me a steaming cup of Avena (oatmeal) and I looked around her one-room house. The little gas stove was connected to a container of bottled gas. Her two children, Marcos and Anna, stood as close to the stove as possible as they dressed for school.

Maria said, “It was so cold last night! The wind kept lifting the tin roof up and after a blast of cold air came in; the tin roof would bang down. I don’t think the children slept very much. Anna said that she was too cold to sleep.”

I looked at the roof and there was simply no way to nail down the corner of the roof. The cardboard house was built very poorly.

Maria got the children off to school and then boarded a bus that will take her to the factory where she works. The children will come home to an empty house. They are 8 and 10 years old. Their mother will get off work at 5 pm and stop to pick up some food for tonight’s meal. She will arrive at home after dark. There is electricity in the little house – at least enough for a few lights. It is an illegal electrical connection.

I know that the pajamas and extra blankets we left will help, but Maria and her children will still feel the cold.

We've seen campfires at the door of cardboard house. We see many cinderblock houses were an old metal barrel is used as a stove. The photos show two homemade barrel stoves. Both were in the kitchen and served to heat the kitchen, dining area bedroom and living room.



Many homes are without heat. Showers are often outside and consist of garden hoses hung over plywood walls.

Besides giving away blankets, warm socks and pajamas, we also drive through the colonias while children await school buses. When we see a child in need, we give the child a sweater, a woolen cap and jackets.

The simplicity of seeing a child shivering in the cold and immediately putting a cap and seater or jacket on the child is one of the most enjoyable things that we do – thanks to you.

We cannot take used clothing into Mexico and it makes more sense to buy used clothes from a poor woman that sells them to earn a few pesos. When we look back, it is a great day. We help poor people buy buying used clothes that they have cleaned and repaired. We help the children by giving them the warm clothing that they need. Everybody benefits.