A grave marker in the desert where an unknown child's body was found. (Courtesy photo)

A trip to the Arizona-Mexico border with an immigration immersion group has had a significant impact on the way a staff member at Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities views current immigration laws. George Wootten, a nurse practitioner at the CPD, travelled to the border June 23-28 with a group called Borderlinks because he wanted more information about immigration and the issues surrounding it. Wootten said the U.S. economy has become dependent on undocumented migrant workers from Mexico and other countries who come to this country to do work others won't, or can't afford to do, primarily in agriculture, but also in other labor-oriented jobs. Costs are lowered by paying these undocumented workers a fraction of what U.S. citizens would be paid. Before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, Wootten said, it was relatively easy for people to cross the border into the U.S., work for six months and then return home. Since NAFTA, however, the Mexican and South American agricultural industries have been negatively impacted by the export of U.S. agricultural products to those countries, resulting in job losses and an increase in the number of people trying to enter the U.S. to find work. To stop this migration, Wootten said, the U.S. is building walls around urban areas where crossings are relatively safe, including in Nogales, which straddles the border between Arizona and Mexico. “Imagine building a wall between Logan and North Logan,” he said. Because of the walls, people looking for migrant work attempt to cross from Mexico into the harsh Arizona desert, Wootten said. Estimates put the death toll from these desert crossings at between 400 and 500 people annually since 2005, he said. “We walked in the desert,” Wootten said. “I saw three memorials where bodies of people who had died in the desert had been found. One was a child.” The group also watched court proceedings for 60 people who had been caught attempting to cross the border. They were sentenced to between 30 and 180 days in federal prison “We watched as they were marched out of the court in handcuffs and leg irons on their way to prison,” Wootten said. “Lawyers were playing crossword puzzles and laughing and joking among themselves during the proceedings. The judge kept yawning. This happens five days a week, 50 weeks per year.”

The city of Nogales lies partly in Mexico and partly in Arizona. This wall separates the two. (Courtesy photo) The group also visited a facility in Nogales, Mexico that offered support to those who were being deported after their time in prison, as well as a school where children and adults are being educated. “Hopefully, this will make the need to cross the border into the U.S. to find work unnecessary,” Wootten said. There was one other, unplanned experience, Wootten said, when the group tried to cross back into the U.S. from Mexico. “We were asked to pull our van off to the side, and were not allowed to step out of our vehicle, use cell phones or cameras,” Wootten said. “The U.S. customs folks made us wait for 45 minutes in 100 degree heat in the van without anyone explaining why we were being detained. Twice they brought dogs to sniff around the vehicle looking for drugs. Then an armed officer came over, made us get out of the van, escorted us into a locked holding facility where we waited for another 45 minutes with no explanation for why we were being held. Finally, the officer came back and said we could leave. We were escorted to our van. Again, there was no explanation for why we were held. Twenty miles north of the border we were stopped at a checkpoint. Our passports were all checked. If I had not had any identification, I don’t know what would have happened. “Needless to say, my awareness of the complexity of this issue, the impact of the current immigration policies, and the need for true immigration reform has been significantly raised,”
Wootten said. “My Other Life” is a recurring feature that highlights CPD employees away from their desks.

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