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(Refugee) Children's Stories:
Untold Truths
from the San Fernando Valley Refugee
Children Center

Compiled By:
Erica Weaver and Students of
Refugee Literature at UCLA

in collaboration with
The San Fernando Valley Refugee Children
Center

The Regents of the University of California
Los Angeles, California
2019

The narratives and testimonials in this book have been set down to the best of the authors' ability, although some names and details have been omitted or changed to protect the privacy of asylum seekers.

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First edition

Book design by Donovan Acevedo, Jackaline Bello, and Maris Tasaka

Cover art by Lauren Aquino, Diego Hernandez, and Amber Reagan

The cover is inspired by both the work of Fernando Llorca and Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals.

Generous contributions to support the publication of this volume were provided by the UCLA Department of English; the UCLA Center for the Advancement of Teaching; the UCLA Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; and Dean David Schaberg via the UCLA Division of Humanities Dean's Discretionary Fund.

For more information about the larger project, visit refugeestories.humspace.ucla.edu.

*... I really hope you listen to my story,
because that is all I have left.*

– Our Mother

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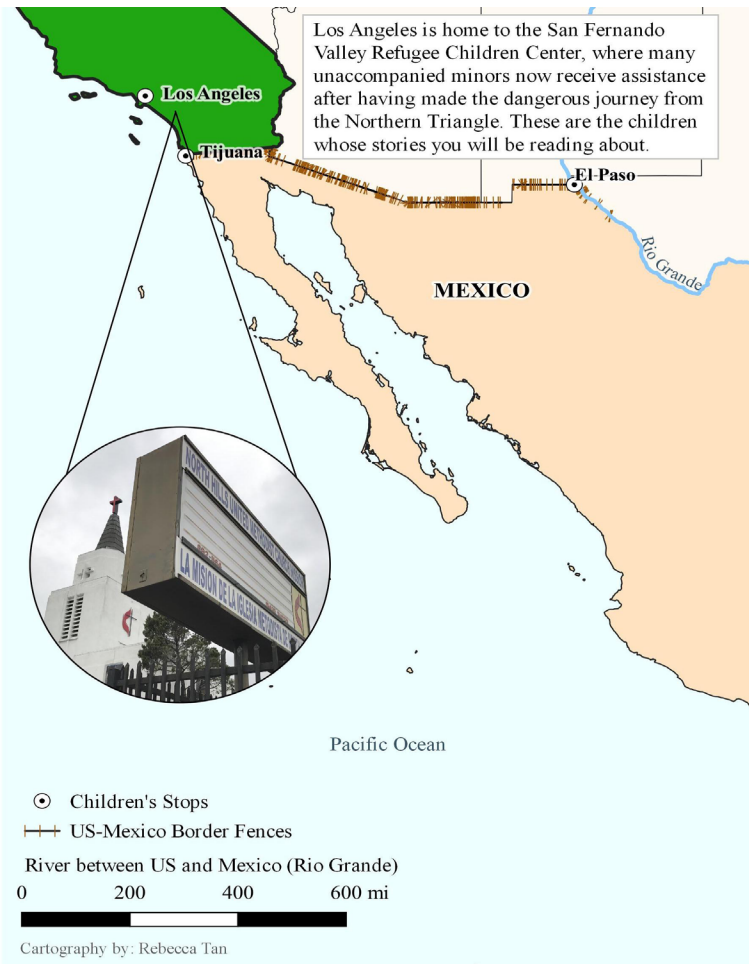
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PREFACE

By: Dr. Erica Weaver

This book was compiled by my students and I as the collaborative final project for my Spring 2019 English class at the University of California, Los Angeles in conjunction with the staff, volunteers, and—most importantly—families of the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center (SFVRCC) in North Hills, CA. It is meant to honor the Center and their families by assembling their stories and thus raising awareness of the plight of these children, some as young as only two or three years old. In escaping gang violence in the Northern Triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, these children and young adults have made the dangerous voyage to the Valley, escaping from their homes, travelling through Mexico and across the U.S. southern border, and surviving the “iceboxes,” the ICE detention centers where children’s shoelaces are taken away on arrival, because the risk of suicide is so high.

Inspired by the SFVRCC as a “Refugee Children Center” specifically, we envision this collection as a kind of children’s book for adults, which takes the idea of the “children’s story”—with all of its usual connotations of domestic comforts and happy childhoods—and provides

a refugee twist. Unlike traditional children’s stories, then, these are not fairytales or fictions. Even though they sometimes seem unimaginable in their cruelties and their dangers, they are true accounts from the survivors who have found a home at the Center.

To assemble these refugee children’s stories, we conducted a series of interviews at the Center in May 2019, speaking with children and young adults ranging from 14 to 23 years old. In each case, we recorded the conversation, which was usually conducted with the help of a translator who provided simultaneous translation between Spanish and English. We then worked directly from these recordings to stay as close to their original words and experiences as possible in producing the narratives in this book. At times, we condensed or omitted some answers to minimize repetition across the collection, but we were very strict about not adding anything. These are thus all unembellished true stories; they have simply been taken out of interview form and minimally edited so that they read smoothly as narrative autobiographies rendered on the page.

The main omissions you may notice are personal and place names, especially for small villages or potentially-identifying locations in California. In tribute to the SFVRCC’s tendency to refer to “our families,” each interviewee was instead asked to select a pseudonym based on a favored hobby or trait (e.g. “Our Photographer” or “Our Mother”), so that we would have a way of giving them a personal identifier for the book while preserving absolute anonymity. As you’ll see in the pages ahead, many of the refugees behind these stories are still waiting for final approval of their asylum applications and thus are very much at risk of deportation, so it was essential to preserve their privacy and protect their information in this way, particularly for those of our interviewees still under the age of eighteen.

As a set, these stories provide rare glimpses into intensely personal lived experiences, telling about some of their reasons for taking flight, some challenges of both the journey and the American asylum process, and some of their hopes and goals now that they are building a new home here in Los Angeles with the help of the SFVRCC. As you will see, each journey is slightly different, because all of our children are unique individuals with unique victories and traumas, fears and aspirations.

With generous support from the UCLA Department of English; the UCLA Center for the Advancement of Teaching; the UCLA Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; and Dean David Schaberg via the UCLA Division of Humanities Dean's Discretionary Fund, we print their stories here together with art and shorter reflections from some of the Center's younger children as well as powerful testimonials from lawyers, case managers, and trauma therapists who have worked with them.

Our book is divided into three sections: Histories, Stories, and Testimonials. The first section, on refugee histories and the history of the SFVRCC itself, opens with a carefully researched introduction in order to give an overview of the broader "refugee crisis," particularly as it intersects with Los Angeles, with the southwestern United States, and with the Northern Triangle. This is followed by moving accounts from Rev. Fred Morris and Amanda Escobar Romero about the founding of the SFVRCC and its growth over its first five years. After this helpful framing, we then hear the stories themselves, with the core of the book consisting of eight of the children's stories from our interviews along with shorter reflections and some of the children's art from the SFVRCC's art therapy sessions. Then, a series of testimonials rounds out the collection by bringing the insights of attorneys and trauma therapists, who have worked with the children, to bear on our larger project. Crucially, these testimonials all provide suggestions for

readers hoping to get involved. Whether you share these stories, donate to the Center, or volunteer directly, we hope that you will continue to think about our families long after turning the final page.

As a whole, this book is thus meant both to center the children's stories and to contextualize the important work that the SFVRCC is doing in providing them with legal representation and healthcare as well as intangibles like "lots of TLC" and a "welcoming embrace" for some of the most vulnerable—and, too often, the least welcomed—residents of greater Los Angeles. We hope that you will join us in welcoming them, listening to their stories, and supporting the SFVRCC in fighting for them to be granted asylum.

As you will see in the pages ahead, asylum is truly a matter of life and death, and we acknowledge all those who didn't make it as well as all those who haven't yet arrived. We hope that the SFVRCC will always be here to welcome them when they do.

University of California, Los Angeles

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without collaboration at every stage between the incredible team at the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center (SFVRCC)—Pastor Fred Morris, Amanda Escobar Romero, Liana Ghica, Nancy Avelino, Abril Escobar Romero, Pedro Rivas, Mayra Medina-Núñez, Christine Calderon, and Maria Dolores—and the terrific undergraduates in my Spring 2019 UCLA English class on “Refugee Literature Then and Now”: Donovan Acevedo, Lauren Aquino, Stephen Barker, Jackaline Bello, Jamie Buell, Riley Bui, Tyler Chan, Elisa Ciappi, Brittany Demogenes, Venus Eltaki, Madison Fuentes, Mackenzi Greene, Maureen Ha, Diego Hernandez, Noah Hundley, Hannah Kaye, Chloe Lannes, Terrence Lin, Pauline Odabashian, Nadia Pandey, Amber Reagan, Zeina Rezaei, Oscar Rodriguez, Yi Su, Rebecca Tan, Maris Tasaka, and Leia Yen.

Elisa, Madison, Mackenzi, Oscar, and I conducted the interviews with SFVRCC families, with crucial translation assistance from Valerie Espinosa and Rosalinda Rodriguez for several conversations. Elisa, Madison, Mackenzi, Stephen, and Tyler then painstakingly transcribed the conversations and shaped them into the stories in this book. At the same time, Brittany, Noah, Oscar, and Yi Su carefully researched the broader historical context for the

families arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border and condensed their findings into our factual introduction, which provides a helpful overview of the difficulties facing the children whose stories you will be reading. Amanda, Nancy, Liana, and I worked together to gather the testimonials from attorneys and therapists who volunteer with the SFVRCC, and we are profoundly grateful to everyone who shared their experiences with us: Ninette Ayala, Yolande Brizendine, Ivette Pineda, Aimée Porter, KC Porter, Mayra Medina-Núñez, Anchulee Raongthum, and Guillermo Torres, who all work tirelessly to protect and support the most vulnerable. I organized and edited their testimonials as they appear in their present forms, so any mistakes remain my own.

Lauren, Diego, Amber, and Rebecca formed our fabulous art and design team and created our stunning cover and visuals inspired by both the work of Fernando Llort, who is considered by many to be El Salvador's national artist, and Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals. We are indebted to Rebecca for the very helpful custom map that opens this book—and that she patiently augmented and revised as the stories' geographies came into view. Above all, Donovan, Jackaline, and Maris, our terrific layout team, deserve full credit for the fact that this book exists at all. We would have never been able to navigate InDesign without their hard work and expertise.

Beyond this print book, our project has also taken shape in other media, and I want to call attention to our website, refugeestories.humspace.ucla.edu, which was created by Riley, Terrence, Pauline, Nadia, and Leia to provide a space for more information about this book as well as about our class more broadly. On that site, you can also find a podcast about this book and some of the larger questions it provokes by Jamie, Maureen, and Chloe in conversation with Pastor Fred, which first aired on UCLA Radio on May 28, 2019, as well as a video trailer for the book created by Venus

and Zeina, which features several volunteer readers from BruinWalk and gestures to this project's larger investments in fostering dialogue and inclusivity on UCLA's own campus as well as in greater Los Angeles.

In terms of our class' own work in and with the broader LA community, I want to credit the additional site supervisors and partner organizations, who have been working with my students throughout the quarter and who likewise inform their approach to this project and the kind of community engagement it represents: Mayra Medina-Núñez at the California-Pacific Neighborhood Immigration Clinics (Cal-Pac-NIC), Arlene Amaya at the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), Zuleyma Barajas at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), Carly Boos at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Mehrnaz Saadat at the PARS Equality Center. It is through the Cal-Pac clinics that I first learned about the SFVRCC, so I am particularly grateful to Mayra for helping to coordinate our first meeting.

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Last, but certainly not least, I wish to give one more round of thanks to the sponsors of this project, whose generous

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UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

By: Brittany Demogenes, Noah Hundley,
Oscar Rodriguez, and Yi Su

Across the world, almost 25 million individuals are classified as refugees, what the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines as a “person forced to flee their home country to escape war, violence, or persecution.”¹ The UNHCR estimates that 24 people are forced to flee their homes every minute and that 1 out of every 113 people worldwide are refugees or asylum seekers.² Of those forced to flee, over half are unaccompanied minors who must travel without the support of their families.³

The number of children fleeing from the Northern Triangle of Central America—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—has increased rapidly over recent years, rising 2249% from 2011 to 2016 and constituting the main group seeking asylum at the U.S. southern border.⁴ This marked increase in the number of people fleeing from El Salvador can be attributed to the economic collapse and social strife caused by the Salvadoran Civil War during the 1980s. The war spawned “a militarized society” that left most of the country “unable to earn enough to survive.”⁵ Worse still, in 1996, the approval of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act allowed the U.S. government

to deport tens of thousands of convicted criminals to Central America. With 65,000 active gang members now terrorizing El Salvador alone, citizens are under constant risk of extortion, enforced gang recruitment, and sexual violence.⁶ Now ranking 4th in total homicide rates across the globe, El Salvador has consequently been considered one of the world's most dangerous countries for years.⁷

Guatemala and Honduras have similarly been plagued by the proliferation of gang violence, government corruption, and economic distress, with the Guatemalan military themselves massacring Maya—and, to a lesser but still horrific extent, Ladino—civilians in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, around the same time as El Salvador, Guatemala suffered its own civil war, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of citizens, constituting genocide against the indigenous Maya population, and contributing to a ravaged economy, which has left 75% of Guatemalans below their national poverty line of \$1,364 per year.⁸ While Honduras did not face a civil war of its own, it has been deeply affected by these surrounding conflicts and is now the country with the world's highest murder rate.⁹

As of May 2019, 75% of migrants from these countries “demonstrate a fear of return that satisfies the credible fear standard.”¹⁰ To satisfy this standard, asylum seekers must prove that their lives are in danger in their home countries—circumstances so severe that they are forced to flee, undertaking grueling and life-threatening journeys in search of basic safety.

Many refugees hope to seek asylum in the U.S., but in order to reach their final destination, they must first traverse the length of Mexico. Both Mexican and U.S. border policies make life difficult for those seeking refuge.¹¹ For anyone attempting to escape the violence of the Northern Triangle and get to the U.S., the Guatemalan-Mexican border is a major initial obstacle. With financial assistance from the U.S. of \$4.8 billion, Mexico has reinforced its own

southern border.¹² Even if migrants make it into Mexico, they still need to obtain a mode of transportation: some attempt to hitchhike, others walk, but many climb atop the vast Mexican train network.

Many have come to describe this Mexican train network as *el tren de la muerte* or the train of death. The train of death can be better described as trains of death as it refers to a network of trains that travel from southern Mexico to the U.S. border. This train network is meant to carry freight, not designed for human transportation. No seats are available, so asylum seekers endeavoring to make it to the U.S. must travel atop different trains for 20 days before they reach their destination.¹³ Over the decades, migrants have used this “death train,” often risking loss of limbs or death from falling.¹⁴ This mode of transport is especially dangerous for women seeking asylum, who are particularly vulnerable while finding ways to traverse the length of Mexico, which ranges from 1100- to 2400-plus miles depending on the final destination. Studies have indicated that 60-80% of women are sexually assaulted or raped during their trek northward to the safety of the United States.¹⁵

In 2014, Mexico sought to quell the number of migrants traversing the country in this dangerous manner and began to register trains traveling north. With U.S. financial backing, Mexican police began to establish checkpoints along all roads that lead to the U.S.-Mexican border. At the same time, caravans carrying migrants from Central America, through Mexico, to the United States have garnered headlines and now lead many newscasts. As such, many believe that the Mexican government allows migrants to silently travel atop freight trains rather than make further news.

Once asylum seekers have completed their often physically and emotionally taxing journeys to the U.S., they are forced to confront the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Especially since the 2017 administration change, ICE has painted incoming asylum

seekers as a danger to U.S. national security. The ICE website statistics focus on an increase in arrests painting immigrants in a negative light, stating that in 2018 there were 158,581 “aliens” arrested, “90% of whom had either criminal convictions (66%), pending criminal charges (21%), or previously issued final orders (3%).”¹⁶

After an ICE arrest, asylum seekers are held under an “immigration hold,” where ICE determines whether they will be detained or released on parole.¹⁷ From there, asylum seekers must wait to be granted a court hearing that decides whether or not they will be granted refugee status.¹⁸ While they wait for their court hearing, which can take months or years, they are frequently placed in horrifying detention centers where nooses have been found in detainee cells and juveniles have reported that they have attempted to kill themselves.¹⁹

Asylum seekers frequently do not receive proper medical, psychological, or legal treatment in the detention centers, which are commonly known as “iceboxes” due to their freezing chambers and the lack of furniture or adequate blankets. A woman from El Salvador recently hemorrhaged for over two months before finally receiving emergency care, and the centers lack the trauma-informed services and mental health care that can help asylum seekers cope with the trauma they have endured.²⁰ As of May 2019, six children have died in U.S. custody over the past eight months: a ten-year-old girl from El Salvador and five children from Guatemala aged two, seven, eight, and sixteen.²¹ Four of these children became ill while in the detention centers, and it remains unclear whether they received suitable medical care or attention.²²

Even once they make it to court, the proceedings are often unfair, and many lack legal representation, which is closely correlated with successful outcomes. Without an attorney to help them navigate the jargon-laden legal paperwork, they are especially vulnerable, particularly given profound

language barriers that leave asylum seekers unable to fully convey the very experiences that make them eligible for protection.²³ In 2016, only 20,455—or just 11%— of the estimated 180,000 applicants were granted asylum in the United States.²⁴

Moreover, even if asylum is granted after all of these hardships, these refugees still face numerous barriers to pursuing future goals in the U.S. Given that many refugees from Central America only speak indigenous languages, many have trouble just communicating with those who are detaining them, let alone getting access to education or work post-detention. And even if they can re-enroll in school, they are already behind. Most refugees have only an elementary school education. Limited familiarity with English and little access to higher education further circumscribe job opportunities.

After leaving their loved ones behind, traveling on trains of death, and surviving the hardships of detention, refugees from the Northern Triangle arrive in the U.S. hoping to be embraced by the community. However, refugee children, who have already had to defy the odds to successfully arrive in the U.S., are forced to confront innumerable barriers on a daily basis. Once they arrive, they often feel like the United States is not somewhere they can truly consider home. This is why organizations like the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center, whose mission is to offer “a place of welcome and healing through partnerships with community organizations to provide for basic needs, services and resources,” are fundamental in creating new homes for refugees.²⁵

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereafter UNHCR), “What is a Refugee?” <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

² Chris McKenna and Brennan Hoban, “Problems and Solutions to the International Migrant Crisis,” The Brookings Institution, December 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brook->

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⁴ UNHCR, “Why People Are Fleeing Honduras & Guatemala - Central American Refugee Crisis,” www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/central-america/.

⁵ Cecilia Menjivar and Andrea Gómez Cervantes, “El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Driving Migration,” Migration Policy Institute, August 29, 2018, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/el-salvador-civil-war-natural-disasters-and-gang-violence-drive-migration>.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Deborah Bonello, “Trump’s Border Policy Takes Its Toll On Mexico Where Migrant Caravans Are Turned Away By Overwhelmed Locals,” *The Telegraph*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/10/trumps-border-policy-takes-toll-mexico-migrant-caravans-turned/>.

¹² Mark Stevenson, “US Pledges \$10.6B Aid For Central America, Southern Mexico,” *AP News*, The Associated Press, December 18, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/0fc-da32812024680ad98676379c47233>.

¹³ Mark Stevenson and Sonia Pérez, “In Mexico, migrants turn to ‘The Beast’ after highway raids,” *AP News*, The Associated Press, April 24, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/f46fd-14d73484369ad441aa390953e01>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Anjali Fleury, “Fleeing To Mexico For Safety: The Perilous Journey For Migrant Women,” United Nations University, May 4, 2016, <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/fleeing-to-mexico-for-safety-the-perilous-journey-for-migrant-women.html>.

¹⁶ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), “ERO [Enforcement and Removal Operations] FY18 [Fiscal Year 2018] By the Numbers,” Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, Last accessed May 23, 2019, www.ice.gov/features/ERO-2018.

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THE FOUNDING OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY REFUGEE CHILDREN CENTER

By: Pastor Fred Morris

In 1974 I was living in Brazil, working as a missionary of the United Methodist Church, completing my eleventh year as a legal resident of that country and planning to spend the rest of my life there. I loved Brazil and had adopted it as my home. Suddenly, I was kidnapped by the Brazilian Army because of my close friendship with the Archbishop of Recife-Olinda, Dom Helder Camara, and after 17 days in their torture chambers, I was deported back to my country of origin, the United States. I arrived in New York with a suitcase of clothing and \$7 that I found in a drawer in my home as I packed my belongings under the watchful eye of Major Maia, the chief of the torture chamber where I had been held. Unemployed and unemployable because of the "lists" I was placed on by our government and my own church, after nearly two years I moved to Costa Rica, starting my life over again in a new country with a new language and customs to learn. I was to live there for 12 years, before returning to the US and resuming ministry in the United Methodist Church.

Moving ahead to 2014, as I was arriving in North Hills, CA to assume my new responsibilities as pastor of a to-be-formed new United Methodist Church Mission, I had a most remarkable spiritual experience. My wife, Argentina, a

native of Costa Rica, and I arrived in North Hills on July 14 and stayed at a motel for the night, as our belongings were to arrive with the movers the next day. During the night, I was awakened around 2:30 a.m. by a couple of drunken neighbors, looking for someone named Raymond. As I was trying to go back to sleep, I found myself reflecting on the plight of the Children of the Frontier, which was what the media was calling the thousands of Unaccompanied Minors arriving at our southern border from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, fleeing gang violence in those countries. Under a law signed by President G.W. Bush in 2008, any child under 18, from any country not contiguous with the U.S. (i.e. Canada or Mexico) could come to the U.S. and ask for asylum.

In the pre-dawn darkness in that motel I realized that those children were experiencing what I had gone through in 1974: being forced to leave the country they loved to seek a new life in a new place. Of course, I had been forced to return to my home country, but it was against my will and desires, and I arrived with no resources, just as these children were arriving here. The next morning, as the movers were unloading our belongings from their truck, Margarita Diaz, a community leader in North Hills, came to introduce herself to me and to welcome us to the community. With unanticipated inspiration, I asked Margarita if she thought people of the community would come on Sunday to a special prayer service for the Children of the Frontier if I opened the church again for that purpose. She guaranteed me that many would, so on Sunday, July 20, 2014 we opened the sanctuary for the first time in five years for a prayer service for those refugee children. More than 100 persons showed up at 4:00 p.m. for that service.

Many of them were confused by the situation of the children and confessed to not understanding how their mothers could allow them to make that trip across Mexico alone. Before we began our prayers, I explained that those three countries

had become overwhelmed by gangs that had begun back in the 90s when the Los Angeles police decided that the best way to deal with their gang problem was to deport gang members who had come to the U.S. back in the 80s as infants as their parents fled the wars the Reagan administration was supporting "against communism" in those countries. The deported gang members, who only knew how to form gangs and extort money from people, immediately did that in their new communities. They quickly made alliances with the Colombian Narcos, and later with the Mexican mafia, to the point that by 2014 those three countries were pretty much dominated by organized crime. As they had done in LA, they recruited new members into their gangs by threatening the children and their families with death if the child did not join the gang. So, mothers and fathers made the terrible decision to send their children to the U.S., usually to be with an aunt or uncle who had fled to the U.S. in the 90s to escape the wars back home. As a matter of life or death, the mothers and fathers decided to pay a *coyote* to take their child to the U.S. for refuge. This brief explanation produced an immediately understood response by the Hispanic community members of North Hills, and the following prayer time was a poignant experience for all.

A few months later, when the Rev. David Farley, leader of the Justice and Compassions Ministries of the California-Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church came to me with the idea of seeking a grant from the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) to start four "Welcome Centers" for the Unaccompanied Minors arriving in our conference, I eagerly responded with willingness to aid him in that project. Together we put together the grant request, seeking more than \$300,000 as seed money to put together four Welcome Centers in North Hills, Watts, Escondido, and Claremont.

I must confess we were both surprised and immensely pleased when UMCOR came through with the grant. I

immediately formed a team here in North Hills to begin dreaming of what shape the Center would take. I invited Ivette Pineda, the Executive Director of the North Valley Caring Services, located here on our campus to be part of our team. She suggested Anchulee Raongthum, a member of her Board, who accepted and has been invaluable. We put together a group of 10-12 people and began planning a community event to launch the Center on July 15, 2015. More than 200 community members came for BBQ, piñatas, and raffles, including 3 refugee children.

David Farley also brought Amanda Romero and introduced her to me as a person who could help us get the Center going. Amanda is originally from Honduras and was raised in El Salvador. She endured the Civil War during her early teen years to early adulthood. She became a leader within her local church under the leadership of Father Ernesto Barrera and aided those displaced and fleeing from the war in El Salvador, at much risk to her person. At 17 years old, she became part of a laity commission led by Mons. Óscar Romero and was able to work alongside him in defending "the voiceless." When Father Barrera and Archbishop Romero were assassinated, she was persecuted and forced to flee. In 1992, she arrived to the United States and immediately joined the pro-immigrant fight in the Padre Luis Olivares Project and the Interfaith Coalition in Los Angeles. Being an immigrant herself, she felt compelled to fight alongside the immigrant community and support efforts for immigrant rights. Through her work, she has served within the United Methodist Church since 1999 and worked alongside agencies who have aided refugees such as CARECEN, Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project, Immigrant Defenders Law Center, KIND, and Public Counsel and the Salvadoran Consulate. Having these connections, she was able to contribute to initiating the center in North Hills.

We had received \$15,000 from the UMCOR grant, but that was not enough to fund a staff position. I brainstormed with Amanda about how we could enable her to work here

at the church to get our Center off the ground. Finally, we cobbled together enough resources and set up an office for the Welcome Center. Shortly after, I took the initiative to form a non-profit corporation, the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center, Inc., in order to be able to receive donations from foundations, who are usually not willing to give funds to church groups.

The government said that there were more than 3,000 refugee children in Los Angeles, but would not tell us where the children were/are located. (And that number was three years ago!) So, the children had to find us. One of our new Board members, Jaime Tapia, took the initiative to have 5,000 flyers printed up telling of the Center and of the services we offer to refugee children, and we began posting those throughout the San Fernando Valley. Bit by bit children began appearing, until today we have nearly 290 children registered in the SFV Refugee Children Center, Inc.!

We provide them with legal assistance, as without an attorney they have a more-than 90% probability of being deported back to their country of origin; with an attorney, they have around a 70% possibility of winning their case, though that number is going down under the impact of the Trump administration's anti-refugee policies. We provide them with excellent medical care through MediCal, and we have created a Trauma Therapy group, with the help of a number of professional trauma therapists from Pasadena who come to the church every other Sunday for a session of Group Trauma Therapy for around 20 children and a similar number of foster parents. We are providing tutoring for students as needed and requested and as much TLC as possible. In the past year, we have put together a staff of one full-time person and five part-time interns. In addition, we have been receiving the help of Professor Erica Weaver and a group of her students at UCLA, who put this book together.

These first-person accounts by the children themselves of their pilgrimage to the United States, seeking refuge and an

opportunity for a new life, are deeply moving proofs of the need for more and more support for the children. We hope that as you read them you will appreciate their courage in making this journey and their desire to find and make a home here with us. As we are all—except for the Native Americans in our midst—immigrants and refugees, it behooves us to receive these children with love and care and to provide them with all the support possible.

On August 9, 2019 we will be holding our Third Annual Fundraising Gala at the Odyssey Event Center in Grenada Hills. We will be launching this book along with our other fundraising activities at that time, but we have great hopes for expanding the work of the SFV Refugee Children Center, Inc. in the coming years to meet the needs of the children coming to us for refugee. We want to thank any and all who are aiding us in this work.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY REFUGEE CHILDREN CENTER

Written by: Amanda Escobar Romero

Translated from Spanish by: Abril Escobar Romero

At the end of 2013, after seeing the increase of migration [from Central America to the United States], a group of religious leaders and laity traveled to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to see the root causes of this phenomenon. More and more children and youth were being obligated to flee their countries and embark on a dangerous journey. When in 2014 this phenomenon broke out into a humanitarian crisis where thousands of minors were presenting at the border, initial numbers of 46,000 minors escalated to 67,000 minors, and border authorities were quickly reaching their capacity. The need rose to respond to this crisis. Legal representation organizations, community organizations, community clinics, churches, people of different faiths, consulates, and more all began to respond to this crisis with the few resources that they had.

The California Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church, through the Justice and Compassion Ministry, was part of this response, encouraging other churches to be part of this initiative to open their doors and hearts by forming a “No Estan Solos” Welcome Center. And so, Rev. Fred Morris, with great compromise and love towards the children, entered in this initiative and sought the support

of others with generous and loving hearts to form in North Hills United Methodist Church a leadership committee and begin to work on developing constant, sensitive, and effective foundations of support in favor of the children in need who came to our community. The hard labor given by Pastor Fred, Ninette Ayala, Anchulee Raongthum, Jaime Tapia, Ivelisse Markovits, Pastor David Farley, Guillermo Torres, Blanca Alcantara, and Rosie Rios have made a real difference to children, youth, and their families who have arrived to the Center seeking a bit of hope and certainty so that they can reach their dreams.

The commitment of professionals and wonderful people who give their time to accompany the suffering and pain of the girls, boys, and youth has also made a great impact on children's lives, such as Ninette Ayala and her brother in empowering their goals, a group of compassionate therapists led by Linda Pillsbury, the incredible effort of Yolande Brizendine in working with children and families individually, and the loving dedication given by Aimee and KC Porter. We are also grateful for the incredible collaboration of many others who have given their time, knowledge, and resources through organizations like Esperanza Immigrant Rights Project—more specifically to Mercedes Nuñez Roldan—Immigrant Defenders Law Center, KIND, Bet Tzedek Law Services, CARECEN, as well as a network of empathetic attorneys who have bravely defended our children in the legal front.

Being from Honduras and El Salvador myself, having lived and grown up in El Salvador as young girl during the civil war, and knowing from up close the reality that refugees and displaced persons went through then, I can see in perspective the causes that gave origin to the suffering and pain that the children and their families are going through now. When we meet a minor, we also meet their family and their environment and we become aware of their needs and worries as well as their hopes and dreams. Since I joined

the Center in 2015, I've had the blessing to accompany our children from the Center with my daughter, Abril, who is also part of the SFVRCC team since. We see the importance of not only seeing the child, but also their family and their reality. Since this work is very sensitive and emotional, it becomes lighter when it is done in family. We are glad that many others who support our work in the Center also have this idea, since others also help us as a family like the Porter family and the LaRue-Callahan family as well as the very same families from the Center who wish to help other families that are going through the same thing as them.

These past two years, it has been greatly difficult and discouraging for families who seek help since the interpretation of laws and policies have changed even from week to week. The declarations of the current administration and the criminalization of minors and their families is a constant rhetoric of the president just like in the different branches of this cruel government.

In the Center, we have been able to see how a child who is helped to leave extreme poverty and danger, can lead to a substantial change in their lives and become valuable members of this country.

One of our girls said once, "In my country, we youth don't exist and are only taken into consideration when we are needed to vote." In the countries that make up the Northern Triangle, education, health, and work for all are extremely limited. In rural areas, children face realities like walking 3 kilometers to school or to poorly-stocked clinics for emergent situations, and being forced by the circumstance to work from a really young age—8 to 10 years. When they arrive here, to their dream, they find an environment more often hostile than not, and an administration that criminalizes them, a home life that is impacted by the need to survive day to day, and this is not what they imagined. I constantly remember the words of a 12-year-old boy who said to me with resignation and much sadness, "Well, this

is it..." I asked, "What is?" "This is the life I was meant to live." And with a heavy heart, I said, "Well, know this, this is what *we* have to fight against, together."

We are happy to know that our accompaniment has paid off. We have helped almost 300 minors, and, from these children, around 32 have won their lengthy and tiring asylum cases, another group of youth have graduated high school, another group are about to graduate, and many are currently seeking higher education. As the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center, our founding mission is that we want children to feel that they are welcomed and that they are not alone.

THE (REFUGEE) CHILDREN'S STORIES

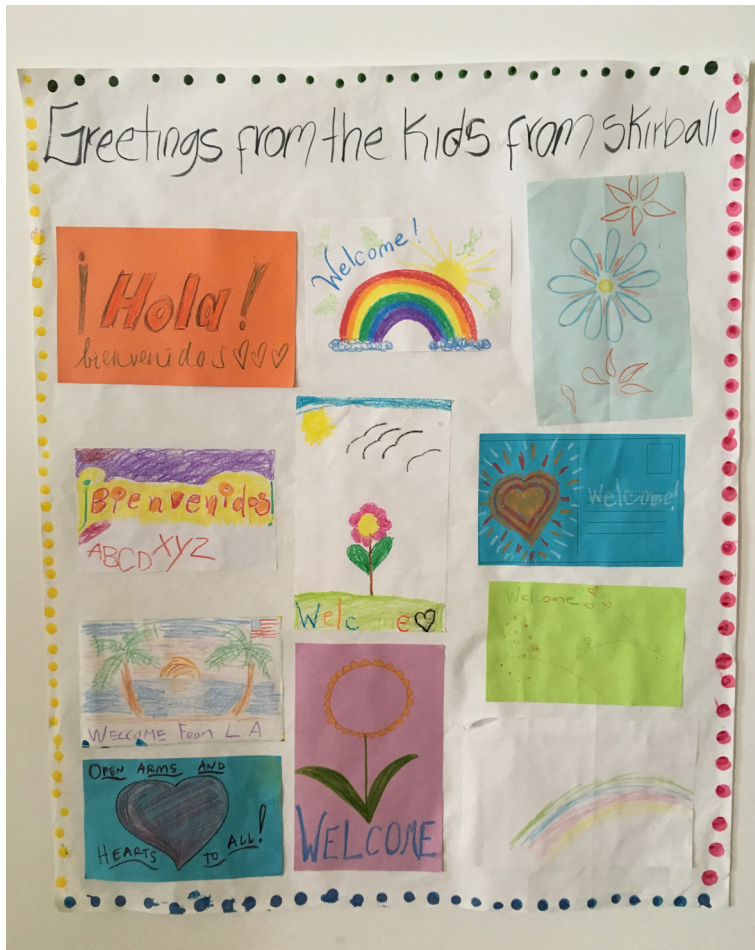


Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

Art from the children's bimonthly art therapy sessions at the SFVRC, which Aimée Porter describes in greater detail in her testimonial in this book.

Our Mother

I am twenty-three years old, and I come from El Salvador. I was forced to leave my home because I was being threatened by gangs my son's father had previously been involved with. They were threatening me because I refused to pay him visits to the penitentiary he was held in and had chosen to cut ties with him entirely to focus on a better life for me and my son.

When I left my home, I felt liberated, calm. My son and I travelled by car until we reached the U.S.-Mexico frontier, where we would arrange the crossing of the border with a smuggler. The struggles of the journey were smoothed by the fact that I truly believed I was heading towards a better future for me and my son. These feelings of independence and freedom, however, were soon replaced by hopelessness. The smuggler would only take us up to a certain point, and after that my son and I were on our own. The only instruction we were given was to keep walking only straight ahead to avoid potential violence and kidnapping. While crossing an immense river with my three-year-old son in my arms, anxiety really started to kick in. We had been walking for hours, but found nothing—not even an immigration patrol. Yes, we may have managed to cross the wall, but we faced a thicker and more abstract one created by our own fears

and differences. I began to cry, desperate as my son would repeatedly ask what we were doing and why we were so far from home. Finally, an ICE patrol found us and detained us. They asked me an overwhelming amount of questions, such as where I was coming from and how I got here, and then they took us to the detention center. The people in charge had a very condescending attitude, and their verbal mistreatment stripped us from most of the hope we had left.

The first months in the U.S. were complicated, specifically because we were unfamiliar with the situation here. Everything is completely different from El Salvador. The United States is a very competitive country, and if you want something you must really fight to get it. Things were even harder considering we didn't speak the language properly, or at all, really. Thankfully, I had my mom, who supported me both financially and emotionally, and a friend of hers told us about the SFVRCC. I try to come here often and keep in touch with Amanda when I can't make it in-person. They help provide food, clothes, and healthcare for my son. I felt a lot of pressure since I didn't have a job, particularly because I had to sustain my kid, but eventually I found a job as a janitor. Little by little we did our best to integrate into society. It is hard, but what gives me hope is that in the future my case goes through and we are granted asylum. No lawyer wanted to take my case, but the Center did. The group therapy is helpful, too, because we share how hard our journeys here were.

I want my son to have a life here, to grow and take advantage of all the opportunities this country has to offer. But it is hard to do so when our credibility is questioned. If there is *anything* I can ask from you, it is that you please don't doubt what we have gone through and the suffering we have endured. You keep saying that we all have the same reason for coming here, as if somehow that made our motive less valid. It may be true

that we all have a similar reason, but that doesn't take from the fact that it is real. What do we have left to do, coming from a country that is full of corruption, violence, and lack of freedom? A country whose authorities are incompetent and cannot handle the situation?

Please, I ask of you to open your heart to us. I have been here for a year now, and I still grow tense before a court hearing, unable to sleep and losing my appetite. It is hard for us to digest that our whole life depends on the decision of a *single* judge. I really hope you listen to my story, because it is all I have left.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“My mommy and I miss my daddy every day. He was the best; he used to hug me and play games with me all the time. But not anymore. The guy on the motorcycle shot him in front of us and we ran inside the house until it was over. When the motorcycle left, we found my daddy on the ground and he was gone. My mommy and I fled Honduras and we came to the United States. I go to school here and I’m learning English, but whenever I hear the sound of a motorcycle I get really scared.”

– OUR 6-YEAR-OLD FROM HONDURAS

Our Graphic Designer

He left us when I was one. Mother raised me by herself until things became difficult and I was sent to live with Grandmother. When I reached the age of eight, my mother, who was now remarried, wanted to include me in the new family. I moved to the capital city of San Salvador, where I now had a one-year-old brother and a new step-father.

I began attending school, but as time went on problems started to arise. My new step-father and his brother were gang members, which made me a target for their rivals. When I was almost twelve, the two began confronting me away from my mother, insisting I join the gang. It was not a simple matter of refusing, since they took this as an offense—or as evidence I had joined another gang. I continued to resist their advances, however, until the day I was taken out by the pair and beaten for it. This became my realization that home was no longer a safe place and that I needed to leave.

I took to working odd jobs to raise money for the journey. Soon though, my mother caught wind of what was happening. She came to agree it was safest for me to leave and thought I should seek out my father in the United States. Over the next year we raised enough money for a

low-rate coyote. At the age of thirteen, I climbed into the bed of an old truck with little more in my backpack than a change of clothes and a cell phone with my father's number saved in it.

During the drive to Guatemala, I share the back of the truck with a mother and her young son, as well as a girl, probably around ten, who like me is unaccompanied. After three hours under the windowless cap of the truck, we are let out of the truck into the rural countryside. We walk as instructed until we come upon a new black truck with two men waiting inside. They are supposed to take us into Mexico. Our drive along the desolate road is interrupted late in the night by the police. I watch out the windows, not knowing what was happening, as the two men speak to the police outside. The men return to the truck and we continue until we arrive at a house. The inside of the house, full of mattresses, appears to be a kind of waystation, and our place of rest.

The handlers wake us around five in the morning and row us across a river in a boat. This is the border of Mexico they say, and as far as they will take us. Following instructions, the four of us walk further until we reach a microbus. The driver seems like he is the contact of our previous escorts. He takes us to a marketplace where we are joined by more people. He tells us we are his family members if the police ask. He drives to another point and everyone gets out to wait for a grey car to pick us up. We are in the grey car for a long time, until finally, we arrive at another house around dusk. It is a relief to eat and rest after only having water throughout the day. I don't know where I am, but they tell us we will be heading to Mexico City next.

We ride out into the desert on a caravan of motorcycles towards our next bus. Then ten of us board the bus which drives us to a fork in the road and stops. They order us to hide ourselves in the tall grass nearby until a taxi comes. All ten of us pile into one taxi. Our progress suddenly comes to

a halt with flashing lights however. From my compressed spot in the middle, I watch for almost an hour, as the driver argues with the police for our custody. We reach a restaurant about midday and spend two hours preparing for the next leg of the journey. There are cars here waiting for us and the taxi driver directs my original group of four into one of them. We wind up mountain roads for another four hours until we reach our resting spot for the night.

I wake up the next day and learn from the driver four days have passed. The four of us are taken to a village where we get on motorcycles. I sit on the rear fender, with the young girl between myself and the driver. The road leading down into the desert is unpaved and rocky, causing a near-disaster when it jars the phone from my pocket. Fortunately, it is sand and not rock in the landing zone and we were able to recover it—saving the only link I have to my father. At one point, the drivers instruct us to get off and go into the nearby trees, so they can scout ahead for police. When they return, we resume our long trek toward the city. When we arrive at a house in Mexico City after dark, my shoe is melted from the muffler, and I haven't eaten anything since morning.

We spend the next four days resting up for the long stretch that lays ahead to Tijuana. The motorcycle drivers give us new phone chips but stress the importance of keeping our contact information. They also give us blankets for the bus ride ahead and tell us to feign sleeping should police come aboard. Not once do police bother us with this trick, and we reach a house in Tijuana, where we await further instructions.

We get in a car at the Tijuana house, and they drive us over a bridge, continuing along until we are met by a tall, formidable fence, constructed of solid steel poles. As we drive down a road running parallel to the fence, I see houses all along its south side. The car comes upon a boulder, which the drivers gesture towards. From the rock, I help boost the mother and children over. The driver then tells me



Photo courtesy of Erica Weaver
Describing the U.S.–Mexico border wall, “Our Graphic Designer” points out its height relative to the chapel we are sitting in at the North Hills United Methodist Church, where the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center is based. As he explains, the wall stretches from the floor of the church to the flag and is entirely solid at that point.

I am big enough to do it alone.

They point in the direction we are to walk, and after twenty minutes the border patrol picks us up. The plan was to be captured all along. I am frisked, and they bring us in, along with two older males in handcuffs I learn nothing about. At the detention center all my belongings are confiscated down to my shoelaces—to prevent suicide—and then the questions begin: *Why are you here? Who brought you here? Who is your contact in the U.S.?* My stay there won't be long they tell me. Newcomers are divided among four rooms: male and female are separated as well as children and adults. The rooms are covered with mattresses, and it is always cold. I am given an emergency aluminum blanket to cope with *hielera*, or the “icebox”, as many people call the detention center.

Shortly after I arrive to the room the two others in there are taken away. I'm now alone, with no window to look out and nothing to do. My sense of time exists through the cafeteria burritos they bring me every so often. I have had three, so I think that maybe a day has passed. When they bring me outside for transport, it is dark, and I am told it is 5 a.m.

They bring me to what seems like a police station, where I am put into a holding cell with two other boys about my same age. This time I can see outside through a narrow slit of a window that runs the length of the room. Given the circumstances, we are treated fairly, there is a television to watch, and the guards ask if I am comfortable. I don't think they are bad people. This lasts only a short time, as they come again to transport me somewhere else. I am boarded onto a plane.

The plane touches down in Chicago in November. I am brought to a five-story apartment-style building to process my claim for asylum. There are only other children here. The floors are arranged by gender, and I am placed in a room with three sets of bunk beds. I am given a toothbrush

and a new set of clothing. They allow me to choose which color shirt I would like to wear. Everything is on a schedule here, and there are many rules—most importantly “no touching,” but I like having order. Each morning we wake at 7:30 and go to class. They test us in Spanish and give us lessons in basic English. I am given a notebook and binder for classes in math, science, and English; I still have that. Sometimes we bundle up in big jackets and boots and go out into the Chicago winter to play sports.

I pass the time trying to avoid trouble, mostly keeping to myself and reading during free time. Behavior not only determines your privileges here, but also affects your case. I continue to read and finish all three books of *The Hunger Games*. There is boy who kicks a hole in the drywall in anger. I learn he was separated from the brother he travelled with and has been here for two years. After two weeks, the people processing my claim reach my biological father with the number from my phone. Soon after, I board a plane bound for Los Angeles with a chaperone. When we reach LA, I am handed over to my father, and they give me a packet with an ID number. They tell me I am to call to receive a court date. It is then they can determine if my plea for asylum is valid.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“My grandma said to me that my mom left when I was 2 years old. I didn’t remember her, but I knew I missed her.”

– OUR 6-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

Our Photographer

I was three years old when my mother left for the US, leaving me behind with my father, brothers, and grandmother in the south of Guatemala. She decided to leave because of the physical abuse that my father inflicted on her, but he eventually transferred the abuse onto me in more psychological forms. Because he couldn't take care of me, I decided to do what my mother had done 12 years earlier and leave him for a better life in the US.

I figured out the process of crossing the Mexican border on my own and took a bus to cross the borders. However, I was then detained by ICE in El Paso, Texas and taken to a detention center, where I stayed for two days. They asked for my ID and let me call my mother with a phone number I had written on a piece of paper, and after my mother told them that she could pay them, I could leave. I was then sent to a refugee asylum in Miami, where they provided me with healthcare and psychological services. After being there for almost a month, I was finally able to reunite with my mother in California.

I have now been in the US for a year, and I feel better and safer now that I am here. A friend told my mother about SVFRCC, so while she works on Sundays, I usually come

to the Center. When I'm there, I can play games, buy food, and join the weekly group therapy sessions.

For now, I continue going to school. I wake up at 6:30 every morning and attend my classes, which consist of geometry, science, two English classes, a lunch period, Health, and PE. The language barrier has been hard, but now that I'm going to high school, I'm finally able to learn English. I recently had a school ceremony where I was awarded a medal and 5 diplomas for one of the projects I did. My dream is to graduate high school one day and study agriculture, criminology, or photography, which is one of my favorite hobbies. In the meantime, I take photos of my friends, people, flowers, and places that I go. I had a friend back in Guatemala who did portraits, and it inspired me to start photography as well.

Though my situation has granted me so many new opportunities, living here is still hard because I have to fight for them along with everything else. Sometimes, it's difficult to tell between the people who are good and the ones who are bad because some will offer help just to get something in return. And while I haven't had to deal with the explicit discrimination firsthand, I continually see other people who have to. But every time I want to help, I'm told to not get involved because it's not my place as a refugee.

My case is currently still open for refugee status, but I am hoping to win it. Still, I miss home, especially my grandmother. It's sad to know that one of the terms of winning my case is that I won't be allowed to ever go back to Guatemala to see her.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“My grandma told me to not be frightened by the threats that came to the house; that I was going to be okay. I didn’t know what the notes said, but one day my 15-year-old aunt and I had to leave home. We were going to the United States where my mom was. But to get to the United States we had to travel a long time through dangerous parts of Mexico. I never let go of my aunt’s hand. I was scared and my aunt too.”

– OUR 6-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

Our Black Belt

I knew that the gangs were looking to recruit me when they started hanging around my house. They would pretend to casually smoke and linger around, but I understood that they were starting to track my movements. I had just turned fifteen and was coming to the age when they seek boys out. Because I had done karate for eight years and had earned a black belt, I was especially sought out, and would be in real danger if I refused. In El Salvador, the consequences of refusing a gang are physical abuse and death—for you, and for your family.

Knowing the inevitable violence I would face in El Salvador if I remained, I decided to travel to the United States. I left alone, leaving behind my parents and two little siblings, who were six and four years old. Because my grandmother lives in California, I hoped that I would be able to join her, but I really had no idea what would happen. I could do nothing more than hope as I made the journey north.

My mother arranged for me to travel with a coyote, and I was joined by a couple of other young people I did not know. We traveled from El Salvador to Guatemala, walking for hours. The coyotes paid people so that we could stay at

their houses, but usually I slept on the floor. It was hard to be away from my family, and to only have the company of strangers. No one really helped me—if I needed anything, I had to ask the coyotes, who would ask my family for money. It was a very lonely process.

Because there were too many police to go by land, we had to make our way up Mexico by traveling on the sea. We rowed by ourselves along the coast from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. My hands and back burned from the exertion. We finished traveling through Mexico in the back of a truck for two days, hidden between suitcases. To get to the United States, we rode in an inflatable raft, and once at the border, the coyote told me to walk with two kids I did not know. Despite the attempted camouflage, immigration caught us, and I was sent to a detention center. Though I was only there for six hours, it felt like an eternity, because of the anxiety I felt at the thought of being sent back. I don't know what I would have done if I had to make the journey back alone. They gave us sandwiches, but I couldn't eat mine.

I was given an asylum case and started the process at the detention center. Then I was sent to a refugee center for a month while the authorities contacted my grandmother and made sure she could care for me. My grandma had to prove that she had an acceptable income and that she could assume guardianship of me. While at the refugee center, I went to school and participated in activities. I enjoyed playing soccer and the fact that I had my own bed. We would sometimes talk about our journey to the center, but it was not pleasant to recount. We all suffered a great deal on our journeys, and it's not something we liked to talk about. Once all of my grandmother's documents were in place, I was allowed to leave the center, and my grandma paid for a flight for me. I had been in an airport before, but navigating through an American one with little English knowledge was quite difficult. I appreciated the people who took the time to help me.

Getting integrated into life in Los Angeles has been difficult, but I am lucky to have been granted asylum status and maintain a stable job while attending school. Though the majority of my fellow students were Hispanic, many treated me like an outsider because I was from another country. Playing varsity soccer allowed me to finally form friendships and find common ground with people my age. I began to feel more comfortable speaking English.

Karate was a huge part of my entire life in El Salvador, but I have not been able to continue it while in the U.S. It is hard to balance academics and a job and other activities, and there are no karate studios near where I live. I am proud to have earned my black belt and hope to one day continue working on my craft.

My family has since joined my grandmother and I in Los Angeles, but I am afraid of them being sent back to El Salvador. I know that only violence and corruption await them there. Because we are here, I can pursue higher education and am excited to attend college in the fall to become an electrician. I hope to one day earn a doctorate in electrical engineering.

My story is one of a family starting over. I got to start a new journey with my grandmother, have been reunited with my parents, and am excited for the life my siblings will be able to grow up with. I look forward to the opportunities we all will have here, but we will carry our refugee status with us and work towards being seen as equal.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“When we finally made it, we were taken to a very cold room where there were a lot of people. I felt like we were there for a long time, and when we got out, we were reunited with my mom. I gave her a hug. I feel safe with her. Everything is new in this country, and the language is different, but I know that I am safe. Still, I wake up at night with the fear of being separated from my mom.”

– OUR 6-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

Our Gamer

Growing up, I would see dead bodies all around my home. The gang violence in El Salvador is getting worse year after year, so my mother, brother, and I left to seek asylum in the U.S. Even though I would miss my family and friends, including my three sisters who stayed behind with their own families, we knew we had to leave to have access to a better life.

Our family had a friend that helped us find a way here. We took a bus all through Mexico, bringing nothing except clothes, food, and my ID. Once we got to the border, they took down our information and allowed us to come into the U.S. From there, we were taken to the detention center in Texas.

The whole time I was at the detention center, I felt antsy and just wanted to leave. I hadn't been used to being somewhere without being able to do anything. They served us burritos, sandwiches, different flavors of juice. The experience was okay for us, but there were other people in the same holding cell who got separated to be punished. If there was ever any commotion or people were being loud, the guards would make them stand for three hours—even the children. Some of the guards would speak more respectfully, while others

were more forceful. When sleeping, we had no mattresses, so we would just sleep on the floor or on benches, though there were not enough for everyone to sleep on. After five days of being there, our family already living in the U.S. helped pay for us to get transportation to LA, and we were released.

I have been in the U.S. for three months now, and it's nice to feel safe. Adjusting to LA has been good because I can go to school securely without the risk of violence. I still miss my family and friends, but I realize that I had to come for the better life free from gangs and better educational opportunities. I'm currently in 9th grade and have the same classmates for every class, as they've all been in the circumstances as myself.

I still want to learn more about the United States. My teacher speaks to us in English and speaks too quickly sometimes, but there's a translator in every class since everyone can't really speak English. I still refer to her whenever I need to know how to pronounce something, but my English is getting better day-by-day.

My family knew about the SFVRCC because of my grandmother. She volunteers here and already knew all of the information about what they offer here, so she helps us find resources and clothes. I usually come to the Center every other week for the activities they have, where I help any new families who come and direct them to the kind of services they need. I personally see a therapist, and they help me with my case. They help me relax and think more positively to clear my mind.

I'm still in process of getting asylum, and I haven't thought much about the future. I would just like to get a good-paying job so I can help my family, but I don't know what to do. Right now I don't have too many friends because I'm still new, so I play video games and help my grandma around the house. But I really like to play video games. It's an escape whenever there's something on my mind that's frustrating.

Plus, staying inside is a better alternative to going out and doing bad stuff.

I want to be remembered as a person with an experience that may help other people in their lives, in whatever way it can, and I hope that anyone in my same situation would be able to come here to LA and to the Center and have the same opportunities that I've received to have a better life.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“The trip through Mexico was horrible, and I’ll never forget what I went through on my way, but I made it to the United States. My sister and cousin soon after followed, and I feared for their safety on the trip. When they were kept in a detention center, like I was, I feared they would be sent back. But they made it safely home, and my sister and I reunited with our mother after 13 years apart.”

—OUR 17-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

Our Engineer

I am from a small town in El Salvador. I am the older brother of three, the son of a good man who has my name, and of my love, R.

Two months before I left home in the summer of 20--, I had just started the first semester of my career in civil engineering at the University of El Salvador. I never imagined I would have to leave my family, my home, and everything behind. I used to take two buses home from the university to get to my house; one that took me to the center of the capital and another one that left me right in front of my house. One day, when I boarded the second bus, I did not see anyone from my hometown, and all the seats were taken, so I stood holding on to the handlebar. Suddenly, a kid my age got on the bus with two other guys. The instant I recognized him, my heart began to throb uncontrollably, and a shiver ran through my body in fear of the most dangerous gang member in my hometown. Without a word, he and the other guy began to beat me inside the moving bus with the greatest hatred as if I had caused them the greatest harm. The third kid kept a look out for the police. They hit me all over my body and I threw myself on the floor so that I could cover my face and genital area from their blows. I ended up

with multiple bruises and a bleeding nose but thanked God they had not pulled out a gun or a knife from the backpack one of them had on. "You're lucky we found you here," he said, before running while I lay on the floor.

People from my town would see him around that area where I used to take my second bus. I stopped going to the university because I suspected they wanted to "make me disappear" at that time, but it was too risky for them to do it on the bus in broad daylight. They were from the 18th Street gang and they attacked me because I had witnessed the kidnapping of a man who lived where they operated. They wanted me to tell them who the kidnappers were, as the crime was perpetrated by members of the MS 13, a rival gang in the territory where I had always lived and studied. Indeed, I knew one of the hooded kidnappers. To my regret, during the kidnapping I looked him in his eyes for a second and he noticed. We had been neighbors and even played soccer together before he became a gangster and left his house. Later, after I had stopped going to the University, he told me that they were going to kill me if I told anyone what I had seen, and that I had better watch where I was going because they were going to be "monitoring" me.

I did not go out anymore. I was terrified that if someone told the police or anyone else that he had been involved in the kidnapping, he would think that it had been me, or that the rivals would think I had something to do with the kidnapping just because I lived where the MS 13 gangsters were. I was anxious and reasonably paranoid to the utmost degree of what could happen to me or any of my family members. We knew the gangsters have no respect for life.

My uncles in the United States found out about what was happening and offered to bring me here. When I called them back, I found out they had already planned everything, and the group I was going to travel with was leaving in less than a month. I pictured my mom and something inside me fell apart. Days flew by, then I had some farewells, and

suddenly it was time for me to go. The day the coyote was at my house, my younger brother would not understand what was happening at first and ran away when I tried to hug him goodbye. He spread his small arms and began to cry, questioning me on where I was going and asking me to bring him a chocolate candy.

It took me twenty-one days to get to the Mexico/U.S. border. On the journey, I barely slept and ate. I remember feeling tired most of the time, going on a pickup truck across rainy mountains trembling with cold, traveling on buses and falling asleep while standing, sleeping on the floor. I remember being cursed at and threatened with being left behind by a man because I had cut oranges from a tree because I was hungry and had unknowingly put us at risk. I remember feeling persecution and prejudice but also compassion from people we came upon. Like the time I got a torta from a good lady in a Mexican motel who didn't see me as an illegal or a wetback. The journey was difficult, but the hardest part was feeling that I was getting farther from home and my family, not knowing how many years would pass before I could see them again.

When I crossed the Rio Grande, I was taken to the icebox, or "Hielera," by the border patrol officers. I was held in the cold room for about a day with only a thin piece of aluminum covering. Then I spent two and a half months at a shelter for minors. My experience there was not bad for the first two weeks, but then it became tedious to do the same thing every day and to be treated as if we were dangerous just for coming from Central America. I understood, however, that there were stereotypes about people like me.

I flew from Texas to Los Angeles when I was released in the fall of 20--. I met my two uncles at the airport for the first time and finally felt safe and relieved that the journey was over, but also challenged by the unknown that remained ahead. I remember driving to my uncles' house and finally feeling free.

A month later, my uncle was driving around near the Methodist Church in North Hills and saw a poster that said they were the Refugee Welcome Center. He took me there the next day and that is when I met Amanda. Amanda treated me the same way she treats every kid that comes to the church seeking help: with so much love and empathy that we find a mother. She found an organization called CARECEN that was willing to take my case. A year and a half later, in April of 20--, I was granted asylum, and two years after that, I got my residency. Not only that, in the beginning of 20--, Pastor Fred took me to a Methodist Church in Pasadena and I met a man who will remain nameless as I know he is very modest. He began to support me economically so that I could study and go to college. It has been almost three years since he started helping me and all that has happened overwhelms me with gratitude.

Coming from El Salvador and knowing that my relatives who had previously come here had not gotten any kind of status, I did not expect to get my residency, let alone have the opportunity to study, which was what my family and I always wanted back home. Words fall short to express how thankful I am to God for the Welcome Center, Pastor Fred, Mamá Amanda, my good friend T., and the parents and kids who have become my new family. I hope to follow their examples.

In four years, I can apply for citizenship, and start the process for my family. I am studying in college to become a civil engineer and supporting myself by doing roofing while in school. One day I will go home and build things for the country that raised me. I hope to contribute to improving their infrastructure and to give back to the community I had to leave.

I know that there are people who come to this country, people who come from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, that do not have good things to do, but that is very few of us. The vast majority come here with a completely

different mindset from the bad people, but it is the few bad people who ruin the reputation of the ones who come to do good. There are some people I know from my country who I wonder why they are here if they don't have anything positive to contribute. But I want it to be known that the vast majority of Salvadorians I know are here because they want to do good and help their families.

I am here to be able to help my family. They are here to help their families. There is nothing wrong with that, and they shouldn't be looked at like they are wrong.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“We live with my grandma, and my mom is always taking care of me, but some nights I have nightmares of being back home and of my dad not being there anymore. I know I’m safe now, but we can’t go back to Honduras and there’s a man on TV saying we have to.”

– OUR 6-YEAR-OLD FROM HONDURAS

Our “Thomas”

[*Note: This is not his real name.]

I really love going to school. I love learning new things and studying all sorts of subjects such as English and science, but math has always been my favorite. On the weekends I hang out with my friends and play basketball and soccer. Basketball is my favorite. I don’t really like soccer that much, but my friends do, so they encourage me to play. I would rather just watch it on TV. Even though I enjoy school now, though, I still remember a time when I was too afraid to even attend. That was a year ago, before I had come to the U.S.

I started receiving threats from gangs. I was 13 then; I’m 14 now. They wanted my brother and I to join them, and would say or do anything in order to make that happen. They told us that if I didn’t join them they would hurt me or my brother. They would be waiting for us before we left for school, and they would find us again on our way home. When I was with my uncle and aunt I was safe and they wouldn’t approach us. But whenever I was alone, or with a small group of friends, they would find me and tell me terrible things.

I remember how after a year of constant pressure, I was tapped on the shoulder one day. When I turned around, a

boy not much older than me told me that if I didn't join them they would kill me or my brother. That was the final point; I knew that if we stayed there and did nothing that they were going to do something very bad. After that, I didn't go to school for a week out of fear. I stayed home and didn't go outside.

My family started planning how my brother and I would escape to the U.S. I had to wait to be un-enrolled from my school first in order to receive the paperwork containing my grades and date of birth. I didn't need those to apply for asylum, but I was planning ahead because I knew that I wanted to go to school in the U.S., and I wanted to make sure that I wouldn't have to start over; I wanted to be able to prove what grade I was in so that I could start right where I had left off once I made it here to California.

When we were still living in El Salvador, my uncle and aunt took care of my brother and me. I wasn't even two when my father and mother left to come to the United States, so it was very difficult not having my parents. But my other brother and Dad worked here and were able to send money back to El Salvador to pay for my brother and me. With that, we were able to afford a coyote to take us across the border.

I prefer not to say much about the trip over here, but what I can tell you is that it took about two weeks, because we were in Mexico for 5 days or so, and we took cars, buses, and airplanes along the way. Coyotes helped us cross over into Texas but didn't help us once we crossed; they just gave us instructions for what to do. We walked straight until immigration patrol picked us up.

After the detention center in Texas, we got to Los Angeles to rejoin our parents. That was difficult at first. Because my parents moved here when I was so young, I didn't really know them in-person. And now that I do, and we're together again, it is not like how I remember. Now, my parents are separated, so we don't live together, but we all live close

my. My brother and I currently live together with my dad in his apartment.

Five months ago, when I first arrived in California, I started coming to the SFVRCC. I like everything about the Center. My aunt had come here and received help, so that's how we heard about it. My brother and I usually come every other Sunday for therapy. We just talk about our journeys here and what was so terrible about it. It allows us to just get it out of our systems. I really like the therapy; it really helps.

School here is difficult for me because everything is in English. The content would be easy to understand otherwise, but the language barrier makes everything hard. Before I came to the U.S., I thought people would be better educated and more accepting. I thought there would be more opportunities for people like me. These were some things that took some adjusting to. Luckily, I have made several new friends after coming here, and we all love to joke around and have fun. Recently, they nicknamed me "Thomas" as a part of an inside joke. That's not really my name, but if you wanted to give me a nickname for your book you could call me that, and my friends will think it's funny.

If there was one thing that I would want people to remember after hearing my story, it is the reason why I am here—because that's the most important thing. I wanted to get my education and not to be afraid. There was a lot of danger from the gangs, and that was just the way life was in El Salvador. Here, my brother and I are safe. I want to study at a university and become a police officer so I can offer protection for other people in need of help. Compared to how I was doing a year ago, I would say that right now I am good; I am doing well.



Photo courtesy of Talei Fernandez-Farrand

“I was studying at university back home, and when the time came to go home in the evenings, I grew fearful. I knew of the increasing dangers with gangs in the area from people in my neighborhood, but I never thought I would ever be affected directly. On my way home from school one evening, I was violently beaten by two gang members. I was able to escape their grip and run away and didn’t stop until I got home.”

- OUR 17-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

Our Future Pilot

*W*hy did you leave El Salvador?” the judge asked.

I stood there, motionless, staring blankly at him as I tried to recall the memories of my journey and the time before. All the hardships my family and I had gone through. But I was so nervous my mouth felt dry. Paralyzed. Unable to manifest my exhausted train of thought. My mind went blank. Not only could I not speak; I couldn’t remember. I tried focusing on the paper. Yes, the paper. Now I have a paper where I wrote my entire story, because it was three years ago already that I came here.

My story of displacement begins several years before I actually left my home country: when I was one year old and my mother and father left me and my sister behind to move to the U.S. in hope of a better life. The next eleven years I lived with my grandma. I remember playing soccer with my friends and swimming in the ocean with my sister while it rained. On Sundays I helped my uncle collect coconuts and mangoes. Christmas celebrations were my favorite. I

recall everything being very peaceful. As we grew older, however, things got more complicated as the presence of gangs became more prevalent and spread closer to our home. Gang members would force young boys like me to go knocking door-to-door to collect “rent” money for their cause. If we refused, they would threaten to hurt us or our family members.

The turning point for my family was the day of the big soccer match. My family was on a boat trying to get to the site where the match would be played. Suddenly, their boat was ambushed by the gangs, who were trying to rob them. After taking control of my family's boat, they took all their possessions and aggressively harassed the men, forcing them all to strip down. When the men in my family jumped in the water in an attempt to escape, the gang members began shooting at them. My uncle and cousin were able to escape by swimming to a nearby swamp, pulling up from and hiding in between the mangroves. However, my cousin had been injured by a gunshot and was nowhere to be seen. While looking for him, we realized that two other men, unable to escape, had been killed. Their bodies seemed to be clinging to the mangroves but lay completely still. I remember vividly how vultures took the remainder of their livelihood as the smell of rotting flesh entered my nostrils.

After what felt like a week, we finally found my cousin lying close to the shore. We took him to the hospital to cure his wound. Grandma took care of him as well, because she knows about traditional medicine. Following this incident, my family was asked by the police to testify against the gangs. However, they refused to do so, because gangs had threatened them. The police saw their silence as a sign of cooperation with the gangs, and decided to imprison my uncle. After this, my family got a letter from the gangs addressed to my uncle, threatening him further. This is why my sister and I decided we had to leave for the U.S.

I left El Salvador when I was twelve years old, and it seemed like the journey would never end. We began walking from El Salvador upwards towards Mexico. Although we were able to occasionally get rides from strangers, we mostly walked. At one point, my sister and I were in a bus full of other migrants who were also heading up. We were finally able to get some rest. Suddenly, however, our bus came to a halt. Apparently someone had reported us to the police, alerting the authorities that we were trying to get to the U.S. They made us all exit the bus and took us to a prison.

Within the span of two months, we were taken to four different prisons. The conditions were terrible. My sister and I were separated. Capacity was way over its maximum, so my sister was forced to sleep underneath one of the bunks to maximize space. We were woken up at five a.m. with the banging of a bald, hostile police officer on our beds. After showering in ice-cold water, we were immersed into activities that resembled that of a military boot camp. The food was terrible. So much that it made us weak and sick.

After enduring these terrible conditions, we were told they were going to send us back to El Salvador. We were put on a plane, and my aunt, uncle, cousin, and grandma were waiting for us at the airport. Although they were happy to see us, they knew that it was not safe for us to return to the island even for the night because the gangs were waiting for us and would kill us if we went back. I was so hungry when we landed I ate four pupusas, but as soon as we left the airport, we had to say goodbye again and start our way back up again.

The first time we attempted the hike up from the Northern Triangle, we had done it by land—right through the center of Mexico. This second time, however, we went up along the coast, following the beaches. Although the journey was longer—many more days, it was not as packed with

authorities and immigration control. We continued to make our way up until we got to the Rio Grande, where we felt an overwhelming sense of hope. My sister and I began to jump and scream with excitement at the sight of Texas at the other side of the river. We made our way across it as the gelid water brushed around our bodies. There was a pregnant woman, too, who we helped to cross on a float. The current was very strong, hauling us away from our goal. But eventually we made it. As soon as we were on American soil, we turned ourselves into the authorities.

We were taken to the detention center. My sister and I were separated once more: men, women, girls, and boys are all kept in different sections. The youngest in mine was probably eight I'd say, because the kids younger than that would cry a lot for their moms, so they would take them to be with their moms to make them stop. Here it was hard to keep track of time because we could not see the light of day. I tried to keep track of time by counting a day every three meals we were given. They would give us a cold, cold sandwich. That was what we ate. And the blanket that they gave us was what you would cover your food with—just aluminum foil, incredibly thin. It was freezing all the time, and they would put the air conditioning on very, very cold as a punishment. They called it the 'hielera'—the icebox—and as a punishment, they would make it even colder. For whatever reason. If we complained or cried, they would make us freeze. From there, they took us to another center. I don't know how many days we were there.

In the next prison, we were enclosed in cages—like what you'd put a dog in. The first one, we could move around. They were refrigerators, but we could move around, with police officers in the middle on their computers. The second place, we couldn't move around at all. There weren't even

windows in the bathroom. You couldn't tell if it was day or night, and we were just in the dog cages all day. They were very big, with twenty of them in all. There were probably fifteen people in my cage with me. My sister was in a different cage, but I could see her.

From there, they took us to a house, but it was still part of the detention center. There they treated us well. They took me to buy clothes from brands I'd never had. It was almost like an orphanage with both boys and girls. There was only one girl, and she was pregnant. They took my sister to a different house far from where I was. They would take me grocery shopping, and because I knew how to cook, I would cook whatever I could get for us. For me, it seemed like a long time; I feel like it was a month, but my sister said we were only there for a week.

When we were there, the lady in the house enrolled us in a school, so I was able to go to class, and I would see my sister at school. I went to school in El Salvador, but I had to stop at seven or eight years old. I stopped going to school to help my grandma and work, collecting shells from the ocean to sell.

After this, we were told that we were finally going to be reunited with our parents in California. My sister and I were thrilled. We hopped on the plane, wrapping our minds around the memory of the few pictures we used to have back home of my parents, mentally tracing their facial features to recognize them once we landed.

Right at the exit of the airport, our parents were waiting for us. It was very beautiful meeting up with them; we have pictures and video of when we met them again for the first time. After all, I had not seen them in eleven years. Now, I have little siblings too, but they were born here, so we had never met before. I had talked to them on the phone, but

we didn't really understand them, because they don't speak Spanish very well.

Life in California is a million times better than back in El Salvador. We go to sleep at eight on the dot and wake up at seven to go to school. There we have English, Health, Algebra, PE, and Biology. I really do not enjoy Algebra. The school day ends at 2:30 and then we come back home. On Sundays, the only day my dad gets a break from work, we come to the SFVRCC for therapy and legal aid. Therapy helps me control my nerves and anxiety, particularly regarding my case and the telling of my story. When I first got here and went to court, I couldn't answer the immigration officer's questions because I was scared, and my case was denied. Now, I'm trying again, and I'm going to speak with the judge. This time, the Center is helping us.

I think the hardest thing in terms of adapting to the U.S. is the language barrier, but I know I will overcome it because I want to be either a lawyer or a pilot in the future, and speaking English is an essential skill. I also miss my grandma a lot. She's fifty-five and is facing a lot of back problems because she has two rotated disks. It makes me sad that I cannot see her because she was the one who always supported us when our parents left us. The good thing is that we have managed to buy and teach her how to use a phone to communicate with us every day.

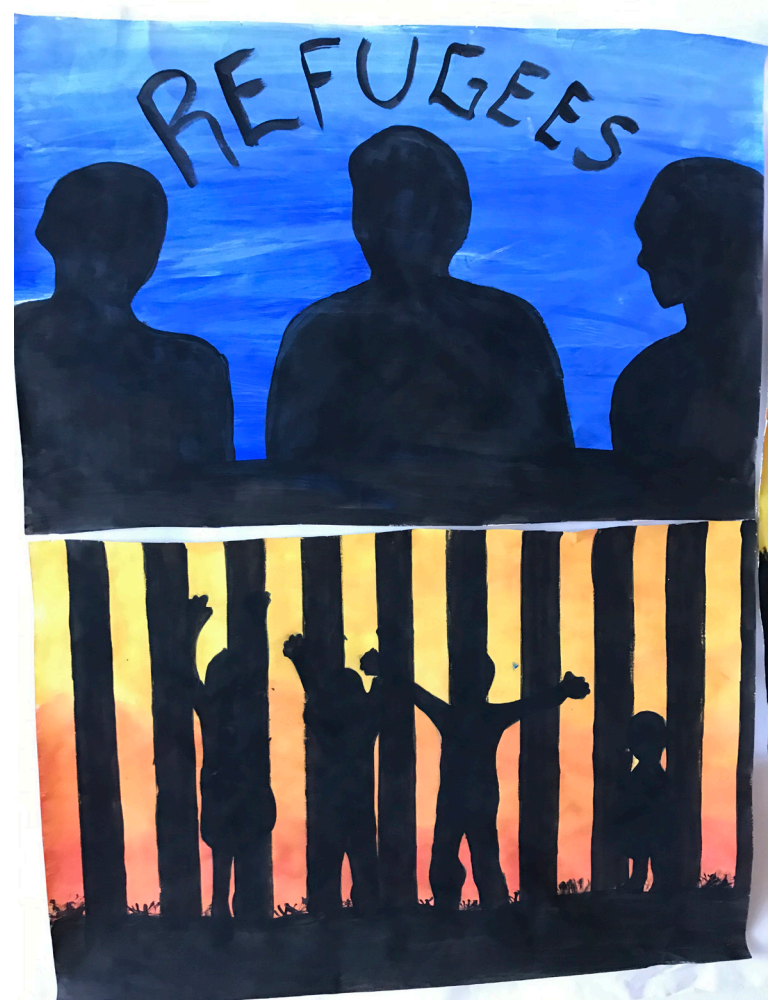


Photo Courtesy of Erica Weaver

“Days after the assault, I was followed as a warning, and on another day, I received a threat to join them. If I didn't, I would be killed and my family as well. Being a youth in my country is dangerous now—I had to flee for safety to the United States.”

– OUR 17-YEAR-OLD FROM EL SALVADOR

TESTIMONIALS

CREATING THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY REFUGEE CHILDREN CENTER

Testimonial by: Guillermo Torres

Interim Director of Organizing at CLUE: Clergy
& Laity United for Economic Justice, where he
spearheads CLUE's immigration campaigns, including
UCARE: Unaccompanied Central American Refugee
Empowerment, the initial coalition that created the
Welcome Centers

In 2014, when the issue of the unaccompanied minors was in the news, myself and Rev. David Farley—the director of Justice & Compassion for the Pacific Conference—and Joseph Estrada (Catholic / Episcopal), we began talking about it and decided we had to do something more public to defend the unaccompanied minors coming. There was a bus bringing unaccompanied minors through Riverside, and people were waiting for them, calling the children criminals and saying “we don't want them here.” That was a terrible thing to see, so we decided we had to do something as a community of faith.

We invited faith leaders to a planning meeting to create an interfaith support network; about fifty people came to that meeting—people from the mayor's office, service providers, attorneys, and top leaders of some of the big faith denominations in Los Angeles. We created a core committee known as UCARE: Unaccompanied Central American Refugee Empowerment. The biggest need then was legal representation and then mental services, so out

of this coalition, the Episcopal Diocese of LA decided to create a program to train people to accompany kids and their families through the whole process, while the Methodist denomination decided to create four Welcome Centers for unaccompanied minors, and the North Hills Center evolved into the SFVRC.

When it comes to unaccompanied minors, a lot of potential family sponsors—aunts, uncles, cousins—are now afraid under this administration to come forward and say they want to sponsor an unaccompanied minor or asylum seeker, because the policies now are to threaten some of these family members. Even if they might have the right to sponsor their kid, if they don't have a status, they might be under scrutiny by the Department of Homeland Security, and so now they might not come forward to sponsor and now the unaccompanied minor might suffer because now he or she gets placed either in a detention center or in the foster care system or some kind of temporary shelter.

A different challenge is with children who were forcefully separated from their families under the “Zero Tolerance” policy, who were turned into involuntary unaccompanied minors. They were not unaccompanied minors originally but became so after being forcibly separated from their parents.

Many parents who have legitimate claims to asylum are now hesitant to flee violence because parents are forcibly having their children taken and sometimes even adopted by other families. You can just imagine what happens if it comes to that. If a child gets adopted from foster care, how is a mother or a father, who is undocumented or who has been deported, how are they ever going to figure out where their child is, especially with confidentiality issues? And, if they ever manage to figure it out, how would they ever manage to come back to the country to claim their child when they've been deported and are not allowed in? That is one of the biggest inhumanities and evils right now.

Another enormous challenge is that a lot of the asylum seekers who are coming are given really high bail amounts—\$25,000 or \$30,000—to get out of the detention centers. How is a refugee or an asylum seeker going to be able to pay that? Another issue is a person fleeing violence or fleeing for their lives, why would you put them in a place like that? People are being kept longer and longer in detention, and officials are putting a lot of pressure on them to sign their own deportations. In some cases, we hear that border control officials are lying to them and deceiving them, in some cases even saying that there is no more asylum and that the laws have been changed.

The fact alone for refugees and asylum seekers to know that there are people who care like the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center is enormous. Silence is violence. I just spoke at a synagogue a few weeks ago at a memorial service for the Holocaust, and they asked me to connect the Holocaust to the situation of asylum seekers today, and one of the most painful things for me is the inaction of governments and fellow human beings when the Holocaust took place and people were fleeing. The indifference to the pain and suffering of such an evil thing—just the silence of people is disturbing. So, having a place like the SFVRCC say “We are here. We welcome you. We love you. We want to help you,” that in itself gives people hope and gives them a glimpse of another side of humanity that also helps silence the voice of hate and anti-compassion. So, SFVRCC just saying “we welcome you; we want to help you” is itself incredibly powerful. So, that’s one way they help refugees and asylum seekers.

The other way is that the first line of defense for an asylum seeker to possibly get asylum granted is having an attorney. SFVRCC has been raising funds, connecting families with attorneys, trying to make sure that all of the kids have legal representation. Without an attorney, the likelihood of them winning drops to 5 or 10%. So, SFVRCC is making that

difference, making sure that all families can have attorneys so they can have some kind of representation.

It’s even more complicated for people from indigenous communities where they don’t speak English or Spanish. Even you being a U.S. citizen and living in this country since birth, if you go to court, it’s scary; it can put fear in you. Having an attorney and having someone from the SFVRCC walk with you in that process so you don’t feel abandoned and alone, that is also hugely important for every member of this community when they have to show up in a courtroom.

I hope that people reading this book will connect to the humanity and the suffering of people right now and of asylum seekers especially. We as human beings are supposed to be the safe-keepers of our city and of our communities, especially for people of faith. When there is injustice or people being dehumanized in any way, you can’t just remain silent or be so indifferent to the suffering of others. My hope is that other people will amplify the voices of compassion, enact, extend a hand, reach out to organizations that are helping, get involved, donate—not even just congregations. You don’t have to be a person of faith. Anyone can sponsor an attorney for an asylum seeker or help bond someone out from these horrible detention centers that should be shut down.

We should not be disconnected from the suffering of others. My hope is that readers will amplify the voices of asylum seekers and the voices of compassion, love, and justice. The current policies right now are so disconnected from the suffering of refugees from all over the world, not just from Central America but also from Africa, from the Middle East, from South America.

People say, “we hope that history doesn’t repeat itself,” but when you have people fleeing a war right next to you and coming to your country seeking refuge from the violence and you are indifferent and do nothing—that inaction, that

silence [was paramount] until the little boy's picture on the beach showed up on the news.¹ Why did it have to take that little boy's picture, that boy's suffering, that death, to wake your conscience?

Do not be silent, do not hesitate to help others, and do not hesitate to find out more information. Sometimes we are bound by information we get from politicians, and we don't see the truth behind it. Find out the truth. Find out about these families, find out what they're going through, connect with them, be in faith with them. Go visit them in detention centers; sometimes they get no visitors at all. Find out the organizations that are helping them and get involved.

I'm grateful to the leadership of Pastor Fred Morris. He has really been the faith leader behind SFVRCC. I want to honor him and recognize all of the efforts and the push to create the Center and the people who now are part of the board, but I want to make sure I recognize his leadership role and his efforts to transition from the Welcome Center to the SFVRCC, which is now a model to many other congregations in how to help our children and asylum seekers. I also want to honor Amanda Escobar Romero, who was there from the very beginning.

¹ This is the now-famous photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi taken by journalist Nilüfer Demir after the toddler drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on September 2, 2015, while he and his family—Kurdish refugees from Syria—were trying to reach Europe from Turkey. The photo almost immediately went viral and sparked a surge of humanitarian concern for the “refugee crisis.” For more context, see Bryan Walsh, “Alan Kurdi’s Story: Behind The Most Heartbreaking Photo of 2015,” TIME, December 29, 2015, <http://time.com/4162306/alan-kurdi-syria-drowned-boy-refugee-crisis/>.

ON PROVIDING A SPACE OF WELCOME

Testimonial by: Ninette Ayala
Founding Member of SFVRCC

The very first time we held an event to welcome unaccompanied minors at the Center was very special. We gathered as a group—teenagers and adults who had also immigrated as children—to share our stories. It was moving to hear their stories, and I felt blessed to be able to share my immigration story so that they would not feel alone. Rev. Fred Morris and I met when the Center was only a concept, and I was thrilled to be able to help children, who, like me, immigrated to the United States from Central America.

My greatest challenge was the day that we received a letter from a not-so-friendly neighbor, who was concerned that the children we serve at the Center would be a burden to the community at large. We were tasked with not only making sure that the children received all the care and services they needed but also felt an overwhelming need to protect them and shelter them from hateful messages.

In a short amount of time, our very tiny Board of Directors and our only part-time staff member were able to connect the children and their families with local resources and caring individuals who have supported the Center since its founding. The children connected to our Center are resilient, and their language development is astounding.

Many of them have already been granted residency and are thriving at school. Yet they continue to be involved with Center as this has become their home away from home in many ways.

My hope is that the Center continues to grow to meet the needs of the children and their families. I also hope that people become more aware of the many challenges our children face the minute they arrive to the States. No child deserves to be cast aside or separated from his/her family. We have seen the effects of that traumatic experience and know that the services we provide help them feel cared for and supported. Our hope is that the Center is able to welcome many more children.

First and foremost, people should continue to advocate for the unaccompanied minors to make sure that they are treated humanely. They can also help the Center directly by donating their time and talents in addition to making a monetary contribution.

Whether here legally or not, these are children alone in a foreign country, not knowing the language or the culture, and very well aware that a great portion of the people around them do not want them here. When I came to the U.S. it was a different time, and I felt welcomed. Sadly, that feeling of belonging dissipated as soon as I saw how these children—who look just like me—were being treated by the country that I consider my home.

TRAUMA RECOVERY AND SUPPORT

Testimonial by: Yolande Brizendine
Licensed Clinical Social Worker and
SFVRCC Volunteer

I volunteer at the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center every Sunday afternoon. I've been doing this most Sundays for 3 1/2 years now. On a typical Sunday afternoon I will conduct individual trauma therapy sessions or evaluations with 1, 2, or 3 families. Alternate Sundays I also lead a trauma recovery support group either for teenage boys or for teenage girls.

I've gotten to know these teens over time. There are about 20 boys and 12 girls from Central America who come to my groups, and there are another 30 or more people who attend groups with other therapists at the same time. All of my teens have experienced some intense losses and traumas in their home countries and during their travels to the U.S. Many have made the journey on their own without their parents. Many girls have experienced or witnessed sexual trauma. Many boys and girls have lost close family members and have witnessed violence, kidnappings, and murders. After arriving here, many have continued to face chronic uncertainty regarding whether they will be deported again, and they face stressors such as extreme poverty. The youth all feel intense stress about going to school in a new language and culture, while managing PTSD symptoms.

I love these kids very deeply, and I enjoy being involved with these teens as a caring mentor and counselor. I feel proud and delighted when I see their spirits rising to the challenges they face. As a therapist, my goal is to help each participant learn tools to improve their moods and reduce the intensity of their flashbacks and PTSD symptoms. I also coordinate with their attorneys to provide psychological evaluations that help support their asylum cases.

[I got involved with the SFVRCC when] a colleague, Linda Pillsbury, asked therapists at a consultation group 3 1/2 years ago if we would like to put together some group trauma therapy tools for the Refugee Center for unaccompanied teens from Central America. I attended a couple of planning meetings with her and other therapists to put together curriculum for the groups, then we started providing groups. I was skeptical at first whether I would have time to do this, but I soon decided to make it a priority. I'm a mom of teenagers too and just felt at a heart level that I needed to be here for these kids. I also liked learning from Linda as she has so much expertise in this field. The other therapists and volunteers are some of the most wonderful people I know. It's been an honor to work alongside them.

One of the greatest challenges we have faced involves the level of controversy that exists regarding immigration right now. We want to speak out about the atrocities that are happening. But there is fear that as we speak out we also expose the refugees and ourselves to additional opposition too. Many of the refugees feel they have been betrayed so many times that they are reluctant to trust even those who want to support them. They live in the shadows, unable to tell their stories safely, except to those who spend a lot of time to earn their trust.

In addition, there are so many people needing assistance in so many ways now. There are so few resources compared to the needs. Situations keep changing, and each time we learn skills to navigate one barrier it seems the situation

changes. The political environment keeps getting even tougher and more hostile towards immigrants day by day. There is definitely a feeling at the Center that this is an uphill battle. For me, it is sometimes difficult to witness so much needless suffering and so many flagrant violations of basic human rights, but I'm proud that I won't give up.

Quite a few of the teens and families have gained their asylum. Others have gone to college or gotten jobs and reunited with additional family members. I also have noticed a big difference in those who have attended the groups over time; they have gained trauma resilience skills, and they practice ways of thinking and focusing that help them to move forward even when challenges are present. Over and over, people say, "Thank you. I almost gave up hope but then I remembered there are people at the Center who do genuinely care." Or, "Then I remembered that I know others in the group who faced these challenges successfully. If they can do it, I can too."

Because I have been in this field for a long time, I have seen politics swing different directions in the past. I believe the current political environment won't last forever. My hope is that these families continue to hold their faith during difficult times, and that volunteers who care are willing to take the risk to give what they have even when it is not enough to solve the problems as a whole.

My hope for the Center is that we continue to provide a safe and welcoming environment for refugees as long as there is a need, that we are successful in bringing enough resources to our refugees to save lives. We sometimes joke about a quote I like from Mother Teresa which describes our situation well: "We have done so much, with so little, for so long, we are now qualified to do anything with nothing."

If someone wants to get involved and make a difference, I recommend they contact Amanda or Abril at the [SFVRCC] office to ask about a specific need they can fill for a specific family. I also recommend coming to a group,

or volunteering with the younger children. I recommend donating money and also inviting others to donate as well. Everything counts; every penny saves lives. The Center does hold Galas, Open Houses, and other opportunities to hear stories of the refugees who attend. Come to the Galas and Open Houses. Bring family and friends who you trust to be supportive.

I hope the people reading this feel inspired to find the hero within them that rises to the challenges when people around them are suffering. Don't be afraid to notice what is happening, to respond and to help someone in whatever ways you can. This is a very strange political environment now. But just as heroes rose up in other eras (such as those who helped Jews escape Nazi Germany or those who helped slaves escape the [Antebellum American] South), I believe many people can find within them an inner hero willing to go the second mile to help refugees. Now is the time.

I'd like to express gratitude to Erica Weaver and her students for doing this project and for telling these stories.

GIVING FAMILIES HOPE

Testimonial by: Anchulee Raongthum
SFVRCC Board Secretary and a member of the original
Leadership Team for the "No Estas Solo" Welcome
Center for Refugee Children

A couple years ago, I was attending an event at the Center where we invited the older kids to hear the stories of people who had gone through similar experiences. I had invited one of the speakers, who is my friend and co-worker. The other speaker was my colleague on the Leadership Team of the Center. Each took turns sharing their story of coming to the U.S. as unaccompanied minors from Central America and recounted the struggles of being in a new country and then trying to assimilate into a new culture, new family, language, school, and group of friends. While they described many hardships, both colleagues also explained how they never gave up on their educations and never gave up on themselves. Both went on to become college-educated professionals who are now leaders in their fields. I watched as the kids listened intently to these individuals who went through similar experiences yet found ways to create their own happy family, home, career, life. I witnessed the change in facial expressions as some came to the realization that this was their new chance at life, too. That was a beautiful moment I still remember.

I met Pastor Fred Morris in late 2014, when he was first

sent out to North Hills by the United Methodist Church (UMC). We were both trying to improve the community and met through the North Hills East Neighborhood Council; he was current president and I was past president. He had such energy, vision, and humanity, and we instantly connected! He invited me to be part of his North Hills Dream Team to help solve local issues, and of course I agreed. When Reverend David Farley presented Pastor Fred with the issues of the refugee children fleeing to our area and the idea of the “No Estas Solo” project, Fred was on board to lead and soon formed the “No Estas Solo” Welcome Center for Refugee Children Leadership Team as a project of the UMC. I did not hesitate to accept when Fred asked me to join the team. I joined because I felt we had a mutual desire to do what's right for children, a belief that we could positively influence the situation, and a shared vision of the number of lives we could save and transform for the better.

Our greatest challenge is dealing with the fact that the need is far greater than the amount of resources we have, but I'm so proud of the small and mighty team that puts their heart and energy into this work. I'm also proud that we have the opportunity to show our community, our country, the world the success stories of some of our kids. These stories teach us that we are all human, all equal in how we deserve to be treated. I'm proud that our Center is an example of why it is a privilege to be able to serve others. Witnessing the transformation of these kids' lives is the best reward.

I saw families who came here in despair, with no hope, in tears because they felt their lives would be lived in perpetual fear and sadness. I also met kids who were so used to abuse that they didn't know they could be treated any differently. After being with our Center, talking to our team members and volunteers, and partaking in activities and events, individuals have let me know that they now have hope and even excitement for the future. I've seen

youth coming to realize that they deserve respect, that they have a voice, talents, a right to be treated with kindness, and I see that they are using their gifts and becoming who they were meant to be.

Ultimately, I hope the day comes when we do not have a need for the Center. In the meantime, I see us expanding our presence, gaining more supporters and funds, and being able to help more kids. I also see more high-profile supporters learning about us and helping us to spread the word of how to help. There are other pockets of Los Angeles County that have similar needs, and I can see us connecting with those organizations to leverage our resources and strengths.

If you want to help, educate yourself on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This will help you and your networks to understand what rights we all have, despite nationality and what country we live in. This is the basis of our Center's work. Contact our office staff to see what the greatest need is. Ask them what activities they may need volunteers for, or what items they may need donated, or what campaigns we may need fundraising for. Share our Center's website on social media to spread the word about our work and our clients stories. We all have a limited time on this earth to do what is meaningful and fulfilling. You will never regret doing something that helps to transform the life of another human being for the better. You have that opportunity with our Center.

Thank you to the UCLA team for developing this book and helping us to amplify our voice.

CHILDREN'S THERAPY

Testimonial by: Aimée Porter
Trauma Therapist and SFVRCC Volunteer

I am a volunteer at the Center and have been serving the children there on Sundays for the past 2+ years during trauma counseling sessions for teens and parents. I work with children ages 2 to 11 years old and have seen the number of kids grow each week to about 15 to 18 children. I coordinate activities to support and engage them including art, sports, games, music, and creative free play. The idea here is that parents and youth need their own time to process their trauma and grief so we try to make this a really fun time that the kids want to participate in with us.

[On one memorable day,] we met at picnic tables outside, and children created watercolor paintings where we included words like “love” and “family”—even “unity” and “peace.” For the first time, one child opened up about his journey to the United States at the age of five after his father was killed by gangs. He talked about feeling so tired of walking, feeling hungry and thirsty and sad. He said along the way good people would help them while others turned them away. He said his legs had never been so tired. I commended him on how strong and brave he had to be during this time and told him I was so glad that he was here now. Other kids started to share things with each other

about how the gangs had targeted their families and how it wasn't safe to live in their original homes anymore.

I think the greatest challenge for me is seeing the suffering in the children and hearing that they don't always feel accepted or supported at school by their peers or their teachers. One expressed that it's very hard for him, but he doesn't want to worry his mom, so he doesn't talk about it at home.

The biggest changes I have seen in the families [since coming to the SFVRCC] is in the children who are receiving an education and learning English very quickly, while the parents are slowly establishing their own businesses and acclimating to life here. I am encouraged when I see many of the youth talk about being in high school or community college or transferring to university in order to become doctors, or lawyers, and professionals.

My hope for the future is in line with how I see the Center changing, and that is that more and more people support it, so that all people seeking asylum, young and old, can have the means to work with an attorney and receive immigration status. I would also like to see more people of capacity speak out on behalf of refugee families and take a stand.

People can help by sharing resources and making monetary donations. I know of kids who don't have money for the community college classes they are enrolled in, cases that could be turned over to low-bono lawyers if there were more funds, etc. I would love for the people who are reading this to try to see themselves, their own children, or families in these refugee children and families.

MUSIC AND TRANSLATION AT THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY REFUGEE CHILDREN CENTER

Testimonial by: KC Porter
Musician and Translator

There is a circle with some music, introductions and sharing of anything important that needs to be shared, then the large group breaks up into smaller groups: for young kids to do arts-based activities, teenage boys and girls separately and in some cases together, and parents in another area. Concerns are shared by parents—issues of trauma with their young children.

We have a good friend who had been working with the kids, and she invited us to come and help out. I am a music producer with a specialization in Latin music, and I was raised in Central America, so I really wanted to get connected to helping in any way I could.

I can see how everyone is becoming a closely-knit community. I feel like the consistency in getting together with the families is really important, and it helps build trust and a stronger sense of unity among all of us involved. I feel like we are building a support group for each other, and see that different families are able to get back on their feet and gradually, with the help of our small community, move forward.

I think the more people hear about the Center, they want to get connected and help out, more people want to tell these

stories, more people want to help financially, or volunteer, and ultimately it would be great to have a sustainable organization that is able to help not only with the needs of those in this community but also to reach even further out to help cover the needs of the influx of refugees in other areas as well.

Amanda is the contact person who can keep people updated on specific needs, because they change depending on the seasons—for example, they might need warm clothing or items for babies or young children, but donations of any kind always help, especially monetary.

The people we are helping are dealing with trauma on many different levels: small children who've lost a parent to gang violence or teens who may have witnessed violence or received death threats... refugees from Central American countries like Honduras or El Salvador are fleeing dangerous situations that anyone would flee, and I think that if we were in the same situation we would be crying out to the world for help, so I think it's a wonderful blessing to be able to help these people in any way we can. Thank you so much for taking the time to find out more about what's going on.

NO ESTAS SOLOS / YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Testimonial by: Mayra Medina-Núñez
Citizenship Project Coordinator for the
California-Pacific Neighborhood Immigration Clinic and
Legal Advisor for the SFVRCC

I work for The California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church. This organization sponsors the No Estas Solos / You Are Not Alone Program, whose mission is to work through its internal growing network of Immigrant Welcoming congregations to be an extension of God's welcoming, healing embrace to the thousands of unaccompanied migrant children (and their families) who have made the perilous journey from Central America to seek refuge in the United States. This program's overarching goal is to connect to children and their families through United Methodist Churches located near this vulnerable population, thus, becoming places of welcome and healing through partnerships with community organizations.

In addition, the California-Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church also sponsors the California-Pacific Neighborhood Immigration Clinic (Cal-Pac Nic), whose mission is to welcome our immigrant neighbors by offering warm hospitality, reliable legal services, and relevant policy and advocacy information. Cal-Pac NIC strives to assist local churches in developing positive relationships with their immigrant neighbors. Cal-Pac Nic and the North Hills United Methodist Mission Church

(which serves as a welcome center of the No Estas Solos / You Are Not Alone Program) have been collaborating since November 2014 by providing free quarterly immigration and naturalization clinics to the underserved, low-income immigrant population of the San Fernando Valley. All cases and documents are reviewed by immigration attorney volunteers who come to the clinics to help. The Welcome Center at the North Hills United Methodist Mission Church developed into what is presently known as the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center (SFVRCC). The SFVRCC has grown immensely and now has developed into an independent 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization.

I have always kept close communication with Rev. Fred Morris, Amanda Escobar Romero, and Abril Escobar Romero, who have reached out to me on various occasions asking for assistance in completing intakes and finding legal representation for some of their participants. In addition to working on a part-time basis for over five years as the Citizenship Project Coordinator for Cal-Pac NIC, earlier this year I was asked to join the team at the SFVRCC in hopes that we can expand legal services, specifically to our current and future participant refugee minors and their families who are seeking asylum and other immigration relief in the United States.

I work out of the SFVRCC office every Thursday and during the first hours, there are usually set-up appointments of people who need to be connected with immigration attorneys for a free consultation. I complete initial intakes by asking a series of questions about participants' arrival information and other relevant information. Once the intake is complete, I connect them in-person or by conference call to a reputable immigration attorney who has agreed to provide pro bono consultations to our participants.

I recently launched a Naturalization Assistance Project at the SFVRCC, where we provide one-on-one naturalization assistance and civic/history lessons to future United States

naturalized citizens. This program will run every Thursday until June 6, 2019, and I am hopeful that it will eventually become a permanent resource at the SFVRCC. On these days, I also meet with participants who have been assisted by the SFVRCC in obtaining legal representation through a collaborating organization via pro bono or low-bono. I go over the "Service Agreement" that serves to highlight the SFVRCC's responsibilities and the participants' responsibilities in their own immigration process.

We are currently working to apply for the DOJ "Recognition and Accreditation (R&A) Program, which aims to increase the availability of competent immigration legal representation for low-income and indigent persons, thereby promoting the effective and efficient administration of justice." This is a cause close to my heart, as I also came as an unaccompanied minor when I was fourteen years old. At the time, I was not familiar with this term, but I also experienced difficulties assimilating to life in the United States. As a result of my undocumented status, I lived in the shadows of fear and limited opportunities for over 17 years. I lived in constant anxiety and stress knowing that I could be potentially separated from my family for the second time (my mother had emigrated to the United States first). I wish that organizations like the SFVRCC existed while I was a youth; it certainly would have guided me.

There are a lot of complex challenges that come with working with refugee children and their families who are trying to find protection in the United States and legal status. First and most of all, the current administration has set up roadblocks for people who are fleeing violence in their home countries, so cases that would normally be offered legal representation are no longer eligible under the current laws. This is exacerbating problems because children and their families are unable to provide a trail of evidence, which is necessary for each case. It is heartbreaking to have to hear that not all of the children and families that we work

for will be able to secure legal representation.

In addition, even if low-bono legal representation is found, most families struggle to pay the attorney's fee because families are not authorized to legally work in the United States and have other utility bills and rent to pay. Sometimes, cases will be dropped because of families' inability to keep up with payments. Therefore, SFVRCC strives to assist in as many ways as possible, including providing food to our families once a week. I am so proud to be part of a committed team who will exhaust all resources to find legal representation for these recently arrived families. I am so proud of our expanding team and expanding resources such as referrals to medical centers and institutions of higher education, our food pantry, and our naturalization assistance events for immigrants who already have permanent residency.

Hope does change children's demeanors, and families can feel our solidarity, knowing that even though they recently arrived in a different country (where sometimes they may not know anyone), they are not alone. This is a mission carried by a group of people with big hearts, who want to do the right thing. Even given our limited resources, the SFVRCC does everything in their power to serve a lending hand to them. These families have travelled thousand of miles to come to the United States, they have suffered countless traumatic events, and they are always anxious about finding out their fates. Once we provide information and connect them to legal representation, they can feel a sense of relief, which profoundly shapes interactions between the parents and children.

[In the future,] I envision [the SFVRCC operating as] a Department of Justice Recognized Agency where we can provide other legal services at low cost. I am hoping that one day, the SFVRCC can have immigration attorneys on staff and that those families who were helped by the Center can become mentors to recently arrived families, as we

know that migration will continue to exist.

We are an organization that is fully funded by fundraisers. We are yet to find grants that can support our work, so we rely on private donations. If people feel compelled to donate, please do so. In addition, we need volunteers who can help with our everyday tasks: immigration intake, food pantry giveaway, declaration taking, and translation and interpretation—especially for indigenous Mayan languages such as Ixil. We need mentors and sponsors who are willing to offer housing to refugees or asylum seekers who have no family in the United States. We need more pro bono attorneys who can continue providing immigration consultations and representation.

I would like people to know that there is a crisis at the borders. Human rights are not being respected, and we should no longer stand in apathy. There are children currently separated from their parents, and these families will not be able to reunify anytime soon. I strongly believe that each human has been given a gift/talent and a privilege (depending on where they were born), so please use that talent and privilege to help the vulnerable, the needy, the outcast.

I am so happy I was able to connect [Professor Weaver's] amazing class with the SFVRCC, so that other people will get to read the struggles of those who come to the United States looking for safety. [Once you read this book,] these immigrant children and families are no longer statistics: they are humans, and they all have a name and a story.

FROM DEFEAT TO COURAGE

Testimonial by: Ivette Pineda
Board Treasurer for the SFVRCC

I am the former Executive Director of North Valley Caring Services, which is a non-profit located on the same campus [as the SFVRCC]. I am proud that I am helping make a difference in refugee families similar to my own family, who came from El Salvador seeking refuge in the 80's. I am very familiar with the struggles that these families face; having to rely on relatives, not speaking the language, and struggling to find employment. Although neither of my parents spoke English, they understood the value of an education and encouraged my siblings and I to go to college. I obtained a Master's Degree in Public Administration and have dedicated my life to nonprofit work to help the less fortunate and disadvantaged. My hope is that the children in the Center have the opportunities I did so that they, too, can succeed and make a difference in the lives of others. As a SFVRCC board member, I am proud to be able to help lay the foundation for this important work by strengthening the organization's infrastructure to ensure that the Center will continue to serve refugee families for many years to come.

We have some great volunteers who provide dance and therapy sessions to the children and parents. It's always

a joy to see the children doing something new like dance choreography. For that moment in time, you can see them forget their struggles, have fun and laugh like all children should. The therapy sessions were also something new to the children and families. Culturally, Latinos do not generally seek therapy or counseling. I was translating one day for one of these sessions, and it was amazing to see how parents opened up to each other mostly about raising their children, and you could see that they could relate to one another. At the end of the session, some exchanged phone numbers and voiced their commitment to support each other.

I have seen many unaccompanied minors secure legal status, graduate from high school with excellent grades, and enroll in college. I have seen families become stable and begin thriving after obtaining services like Medi-Cal, employment, and the support of the Center. Lastly, I have seen extremely grateful families that have received help from the Center and are now giving back by volunteering and sharing their talent: for example, many often cook for the Center's events and to raise funds for the Center.

When children and families come to the Center, they often come overwhelmed about being in a new country and are also dealing with the trauma they endured from their trip to the U.S.—beginning with having to leave their home and family and go into the unknown. Once they are here, they are not able to work, so they depend completely on relatives; they have to attend mandatory appointments and don't have reliable transportation, they don't speak the language, and ultimately, they feel overwhelmed and very uncertain about their future. Once the staff at the Center begins to listen to them and support them, their attitude changes from defeat to courage. Their hope to be able to succeed in this country is also restored.

Like any other nonprofit, funding is one of the greatest challenges [we face in helping them]. Funding is needed to provide services, especially legal services, which

are extremely important and not inexpensive. Legal representation will save many of these children's lives since they are fleeing violence in their countries. As we serve more children and families, we also see that our organization's infrastructure needs to be strong, and we need personnel, which all require funding.

[In the future,] I see the Center's services spreading out geographically by becoming the umbrella for other Welcome Centers in other locations. This work has begun, but I see this becoming more solidified, which will only help serve more refugee children and families.

These families and children need your support. They have left their country like many of us have, to come to this country for a better future. We that have been here for so many years and are citizens or legal residents, are extremely fortunate to have been able to succeed in this country. We cannot forget about how we came and why we came and ignore the need that refugee families are facing. We must also lend a hand and give them the support and opportunities we had so that that they can pursue their dreams and contribute to this great country.

If you would like to help, you can provide monetary or in-kind support. You can also volunteer by tutoring students in school subjects and English. Lastly, you can spread the word about this very worthy cause and engage others so that they can support our children as well. We could also use all the pro-bono legal assistance we can get. Thank you for giving a voice to refugees and helping change the often negative narrative that surrounds them.

ACCOMPANYING THE CHILDREN TO COURT

Testimonial by: Abril Escobar Romero
Staff Member at the SFVRCC

Being part of the San Fernando Valley Refugee Children Center has forever touched my life and heart. I've been able to help youth like me, alongside an incredible team of compassionate people, and learn how best to be a support to others.

At age 16, I began to contribute my time to the Center. I saw the importance in helping in any way I could. The Center at the time was starting out as part of an initiative of the California Pacific Conference of the United Methodist Church. The "No Están Solos" Welcome Centers were created in response to the crisis of unaccompanied children presenting at the border. Being a person of faith, I felt touched that a welcome center was being opened in a United Methodist Church in the community I grew up in, a church I had been a part of years before it closed. Knowing that the church was up and running again, spearheading this amazing work made me very glad to join in the effort.

My mother, Amanda, came to the opening event in the summer of 2015, and we were glad to see the incredible community support gathered in favor of the children. Pastor Fred Morris and Pastor David Farley welcomed us into the effort, and from then on, it has been a whirlwind experience.

To the opening event, we invited three children, three brothers, living in Palmdale, who had to flee because their mother died in El Salvador, and they were left alone. They were the first family the Center received. And as word got out, more families from nearby began to learn that there was help right around the corner. Before we knew it, the logbook of families grew to 20 to 35 to 50 families and more. We received families from Los Angeles, Palmdale, Agua Dulce, and of course, most arrived from nearby.

Apart from focusing on the legal aspect of the children's cases, we tried to focus on them as a whole. We found it important to hold youth gatherings quite frequently and encourage them to join healing trauma therapy. As a Center, we were still learning how best to help, but this seemed to cement the relationship and trust of many families to the Center.

This warms my heart, because to this day, we still keep contact with the first families we had registered in our program, who have won their asylum cases. They still trust us enough to call us and let us know how they are doing, when they have worries they need help with, or that they know of someone who needs help as they did. It's been four years since the Center was initiated and since then, we have only grown in every sense. Administratively, we have grown into a non-profit corporation, and we have larger staff than what we started with. We have a group of volunteers, which grows larger in solidarity as the refugee crisis continues. When it comes to the families themselves, though, it's comforting to know we continue to provide solace in trying times.

These past four years have been a wonderful, bittersweet experience, one I am grateful every day to be a part of. However, it is difficult to express how this experience has affected me on a personal level. When I came to the Center, as stated before, I was 16. I was the same age as many of the youth who were coming to the Center. They had the same

headspace as me, same lifespan. Most of them were entering school upon arrival and were concerned with homework and making friends as I was, doing chores, speaking Spanish at home, and obeying their parents. But a huge difference stood between them and myself, a difference which shouldn't matter. They were not born in the United States, as I was, and for that they were criminalized and targeted upon entry. Kids just like me, whose major ambition is to better themselves and provide stability not just for themselves but for their families as well. Not to rob or hurt anyone.

The type of cases which touch me the most are those which involve youth who haven't seen their family in years. Family reunification can take many forms. In our center, we have seen mothers and fathers reunite with their children, sisters who were separated on the way meet again, and grandmothers who haven't even met their grandchildren, embrace. Those moments are so rare, and we are very blessed to play a part in the reunification of families. The fact that family reunification occurs highlights the broken immigration system we endure in the United States. For decades, family reunification has been a difficult obstacle for immigrant families, one we see reflected in our Center. Just as many parents we meet in the Center, my mother came to the United States fleeing danger and to seek a better life for my siblings, who live in Honduras. Because of the immigration system we have, I haven't been able to meet my siblings in person, and my mother hasn't seen my brother and sister in 26 years. So, when I see a mother hug her daughter so tightly, so tight that it seems she won't ever let her go, it immensely warms my heart.

The work done in the Center is not the same every day. For example, one day can be normal case follow-up and intakes, but another can be as intense as accompanying a minor to a court hearing. I still remember when I accompanied a boy from Honduras to his first court hearing. He was two years younger than me and the kindest soul. I distinctly

recall that when we took our seats and the session began, he quickly took my hand for reassurance. He was shaking, and his hand was as cold as ice. He gripped my hand tightly and gave me the smallest of smiles. He kept a serious and focused gaze towards to the judge who was about to call his name. Thankfully, all went well in that hearing, and he got more time to find a lawyer, but seeing how a young boy was reduced to nerves in a setting that was heart-wrenching. But even more heart-wrenching was a time when both my mother and I accompanied a young girl from Guatemala who wished to be either a doctor or an anthropologist. She was so kind, but her most defining quality was that she was so incredibly intelligent. She had a court hearing. There were a few complications in her case, but everything seemed in order. However, the judge that had her case was not convinced and denied her case. This girl was ready to take the world in her stride, but the lack of legal protection crushed her dreams, and she knew it. Her eyes said it all. Her last shred of hope was gone.

Presently, we have more than 250 minors registered with us. When we meet a youth, we try to converse with them and learn more about them. We find that they love music or sports or that they are artists or great academics. Each child brings a special light, despite their adversities and trials in life. Many have a maturity about them, one that allows them to reason and capture so much, but somehow their innocence and hope still remain. This helps them reach incredible goals like learning a new language, assimilating in new culture, obtaining recognitions, graduating high school, and going to college. Many of them find their voice through something other than words, mostly art and athletics or in their everyday actions. I have been lucky to learn how to help my community through my work in the Center, but what I will cherish forever is what I learn from the resilience and bravery of each minor who comes to the Center.



Photo courtesy of Taley Fernandez-Farrand