



Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center

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LAS AMERICAS IMMIGRANT ADVOCACY CENTER

A Voice for All

Summer 2004

Las Americas

Immigrant Advocacy Center

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Client Stories: Success on the Border

By Yessenia Vasquez Mendez

My name is Yessenia Vasquez Mendez. I left Guatemala in October of 2000. I was 15 years old at this time. It took me 3 months to come here walking and jumping trains when I could. I would join up with immigrants from many different countries on the way here. Because of this I have many new friends. After three attempts to cross the border, I was picked up by immigration and brought to El Paso. I remained in Southwest Key, a detention center for unaccompanied minors, for approximately 10 months. Las Americas, an organization that assists immigrants by providing legal assistance, helped me to find a foster home and gave me legal assistance so I was able to obtain residency here in the United States.

When I turned 18 I no longer

qualified for foster care but was not ready to live independently because I did not know the language and needed to get my GED. A counselor at the Child Crisis Center helped me get a place to live with the Sisters of Charity. I am now 20 years old and have passed my GED and am in my 9th level of ESL (English as a second Language). I am working as a medical assistant and hoping to



Yessenia Vasquez Mendez

Thank You Las Americas

eventually study nursing.

It has been 4 years since I left Guatemala. I have learned and grown a lot. I have many good and bad experiences, but God has always been looking over my shoulders. People say that I have many angels taking care of me. In December of this year, I plan to go back to Guatemala to visit. The sisters paid for my plane ticket as a graduation present for passing my GED. I miss my country and am excited to go back and to visit friends and family. But it is also good to know that I can return legally to continue my education and career. Coming to the United States has given me opportunities and experiences I never would have had in my home of Izabal in the town of Cayuga.

Save The Date:

2004 Annual Border Heroes Event

October 15, 2004
At
The El Paso
Country Club

Honoring

Lynn Coyle, ESQ.
Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas

Contact Las Americas for
tickets and info.

To Contact Las Americas

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Children in Detention Doubled !

This June, federal government agencies more than doubled the number of unaccompanied children being detained in El Paso. Las Americas, the only non-profit organization that provides free legal representation to the children was not notified in advance of this dramatic increase and has been working tirelessly to ensure that all the children have representation in their immigration court proceedings.

More Kids and Not One Provision for Legal Representation! The federal government does not provide indigent immigrant children with legal counsel. As a result, more than half of all detained children must go before an Immigration Judge ALONE. Alone, they have only a slim chance of successfully presenting their

cases and fighting for their right to reunite with U.S. family members.

In response to the dire plight of these children in El Paso, the American Bar Association (ABA) sent out a national urgent request to all attorneys interested in helping the children. Through this effort, several attorneys have contacted the ABA to offer their services and support. Irena Lieberman, Staff Director at the ABA Commission on Immigration Policy, Practice, and Pro Bono, will continue to filter inquiries to Las Americas. Las Americas is also seeking funding for additional legal staff so we can continue to address the criti-

cal needs of these children.

Las Americas remains committed to protecting immigrant children who have fled from dire circumstances in their home countries—poverty, war, forced prostitution, domestic violence, forced marriage, servitude, ethnic tensions, abuse, and neglect. Please contact Las Americas for more information on how you can help!



Our children's first view of America!

Message From the President of the Board

Dear Friends,
This has been quite a busy summer at Las Americas. Staff and volunteers have worked incredibly hard to provide high quality pro bono legal services and advocacy to the rising number of unaccompanied minors being detained in the El Paso area. Our mission at

Las Americas continues to be to protect the human rights of El Paso's most vulnerable population: unaccompanied immigrant children, indigent refugees and asylum seekers, and battered women and their children. Since our inception seventeen years ago, we have provided legal services

to over 9,500 people from countries in all major continents. Thanks to all the staff, volunteers, and our generous supporters who have helped Las Americas keep its door open to indigent immigrants in our community. Sincerely,
Marie Taylor

Executive Director Speaks at Training Conference

By Sr. Liliame Alam, FMM

I was asked to speak at the opening day of the Legal Orientation Training conference in San Diego this past June. This is just a portion of the address I delivered.



Dunia Barahona

Courtesy of J. David McNamara

“This smile brought to you by Las Americas”

The children represented by Las Americas are caught in a nightmare of a system that pays no attention to their voice, are seldom heard, and cry out desperately for your help.

I am eager that you leave here today understanding the child crisis that is the vigil and ongoing commitment of Las Americas Advocacy Center. Las Americas is the only charitable organization that provides *pro bono* legal representation for immigrant children being detained in El Paso. My name is Sister Liliame Alam. I come to you from El Paso, Texas, New York City,

Paris, Cairo, Rome and Beirut. I feel at a personal, if not technical, level singly well suited to share my thoughts about the critical issue facing the immigration of children.

The journey I took in no way resembles the frightening and abusive struggle made by children every day to the gates of America. Yet it is a journey of hope. The children warehoused in the detention centers which are run by ORR come from countries where human dignity has small meaning. They avoid contact with authority; never trusting what has hurt them before or may threaten them now.

Terrorism is a very real threat and one that must be thwarted as early as possible. Adults know the risk they undertake when they

present themselves for asylum, but the children have little or no idea of the detention process. Their isolation and confusion is difficult for any of us to comprehend. But it is real and terrifying for a child.

At our office at Las Americas we are working as many hours as possible. We do this without fees. How can we? Our clients are the poorest of the poor. How can't we?

I found a family in the El Paso community that I did not know I had. With all the dramatic issues facing the border region there is not a community more understanding or open hearted than the people of El Paso.

But my friends our mission is not complete – far from it. **There is a child in jail in El Paso, Texas counting on me – counting on you.**

State Bar Set to Take Major Steps

Justice Commission to Raise Funds for the Needy.

According to the 2000 Census, Texas has 3, 117,609 persons living below the poverty line. Only California fares worse. Texas, however, is ranked 42nd in dollars spent per poor person. This is the unfortunate atmosphere in which Las Americas must work. New immigrants to the United States enter a state that already ranks too high in the number of persons living in poverty. Providing *pro bono* legal assistance to non-citizens post-September 11 is a difficult task. Our clients, particularly the children have become unintended victims in our current immigration system.

The State Bar of Texas is now taking steps to bring funding gaps in critical services to the poor. The Texas Access to Justice Commission (TEAJC), chaired by James B. Sales of Fulbright & Jaworski, L.L.P. in Houston, recently held a one-day conference and information exchange for legal aid providers in Texas. The purpose of the event was to inform TEAJC about the real issues facing agencies supported by State Bar IOLTA funds so that TEAJC can do its job effectively. Mr. Sales told participants that TEAJC was intent to know what the “boots on the ground” or in

the courtroom were faced with, and what TEAJC could do to really help. As a result of the meeting, TEAJC will seek further input from providers on issues specifically related to immigration.

Sister Liliame took the opportunity to inform meeting participants about the plight of detained children in El Paso and Las Americas' emergency status and doubled caseload. Most participants were not aware of the situation of immigrant children in detention, but once informed they pledged their support and Las Americas looks forward to working with other Texas legal advocates on this issue.

Interns Serve Vital Needs

Our Interns are a creative and magnificent group of people. Las Americas would have great difficulty functioning were it not for their tireless efforts. In this newsletter we honor these wonderful members that are the fabric of Las Americas.

Sister Christiana DeGiorolamo, OSF. Originally from New Jersey, is a student in the Masters of Social Work program at the National Catholic School of Social Service, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C..

David Haro is currently a second year law student at the University of Wisconsin – David grew up in Juarez and moved to El Paso to attend Irvin High School and UTEP. He will work at the Oxford Federal Correctional Facility while he finishes law school.

Angelica Cortez is currently a Senior Political Science major at Williams College in Massachusetts. She is a native El Pasoan, graduating from Maxine Silva Magnet High School for Health Care Professionals. Her interests and activities include political action, children's health, studio art and music.

Michael Brownfield is currently a Senior at the Wharton School University of Pennsylvania. He is a native El Pasoan, graduating third in his class at El Paso High School where he was an active member of student government. In Spring 2004, he studied in Madrid, Spain and plans to work in Mexico when he graduates.

Iliana Sosa is currently a Sophomore, Latin American Major at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas and on the Dean's list.



From left to right: Michael, Angelica, Sr. Christiana, Pedro and David.

She is a native El Pasoan, graduating from Franklin High School, and a current Gates Millennium Scholar. She completed summer work in Honduras for Save the Children and presented papers at two conferences on Latin American Women. Iliana plans to attend law

school.

Craig Wishnick is currently a Junior at McDaniel College in Westminster, Maryland. He studied in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico and plans to study and work in Guadalajara, Mexico with indigenous people. Craig aspires to focus his work on helping those caught in the trap of poverty.

Lance Bossard is currently a Senior Government and International Politics Major at George Mason University, the School of Globalization.

Lance was born in Gillette, Wyoming and lived for twelve years in Barranquilla, Colombia. He served four years in the Army and presently is participating in a Border Studies Program.

Pedro Hernandez is currently a Senior Sociology major at UTEP. He is a native El Pasoan and retired from the U.S. Army in 1995 after twenty-two years. Pedro initiated the “Time Dollar” program at La Fe Clinic and volunteers at Sparks Community Center, investigating the feasibility of a youth club.



Managing Attorney Micaela Guthrie preparing the client case with David and Michael.



One of Lance's daily contributions

Las Americas gains national attention

Prestigious law firms from across the nation have sent word of their interest in finding ways to partner with Las Americas. An international law firm with its roots in Texas, Baker Botts, has sent a note of concern and questions about how they might be able to help. Other firms have sent similar contact. Sister Liliame and the Las Americas staff

are investigating creative ways to use this talented and meaningful support.

Other attorneys who have paid careful attention to the actions of the USDOJ, INS, Dept. of Homeland Security and the Office of Refugee Resettlement are also interested in finding ways to offer their services. Las Americas has also been

contacted by Duong & Associates, PLLC and Kirkpatrick & Lockhart, LLP.

As always the El Paso legal community has stepped up to offer their services. We will continue to partner with our local attorneys and remain grateful for their commitment.

Please contact Las Ameri-

“The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted.”

Mother Teresa