



LA LÍNEA

Together We Go Far: Reflections on Family Separation

“I wouldn’t want this to happen to another set of children and I sincerely hope that it never does, but if it does, we won’t back down. We keep going and we keep fighting because if not us, then who?”

“I showed up at the shelter to do intakes one day and it was screaming children,” says Maite Garcia, a Florence Project attorney on the Children’s Team. “I spent the next three hours with little children screaming for their parents.”



Since the beginning of 2018, the Florence Project has worked with 661 children forcibly separated from their parents as part of the Attorney General’s “zero tolerance” policy. Our Children’s Team staff, who typically work with teenagers, suddenly found themselves comforting toddlers and advocating for five-year-olds.

There were many obstacles to providing quality legal and social care to these children. Florence Project staff would

talk to children and try to assess who their parents were, and then locate them. More often than not, Maite found herself sitting on the floor, doing breathing exercises with children to calm them down enough to get basic information.

“Forget the why,” Maite remembers thinking. “Whose child are you? Think about asking a four-year-old, ‘What’s Mommy’s name?’ They have no idea! It’s just Mommy.”

The Florence Project’s staff mobilized quickly. They collaborated with legal service providers across the nation to develop tracking systems for separated family members. Our social workers offered trauma trainings for attorneys and legal assistants. They connected with the children through play, visited them daily, and explained the legal process through cartoon coloring books.

“I had to get creative and understand that the young ones don’t sit still for more than two minutes at a time. I remember explaining to one child that he was going to go to court as I simultaneously helped him learn how to write the letter E,” says Berenice Sanchez, a Legal Assistant on the Children’s Team.

“How do we develop rapport and do it quickly?” Maite asks. When children are in the shelter, they interact with dozens of people each day who ask them the same questions that they rarely know how to answer. “It’s hard for children to understand that I’m different. I’m trying to help them.”



“I’ll never forget the fear in one child’s eyes when he walked into court. He took me by the hand because I was the most familiar face, and he wouldn’t let go when it was time for him to sit before the judge,” Berenice recalls.

Children’s Team attorney Rebecca Curtis grimaces when she recalls her work this summer. “There are two rights at odds in this situation. There are the parents’ rights to custody, and there is the child’s right to decide what happens in her own case. The government tried to convince parents that the fastest way to reunify would be to self-deport and have their children deported, as well.”

Rebecca, along with all the Children’s Team attorneys, submitted notices of attorney representation for all children whose parents they feared would be coerced into requesting voluntary departures for themselves and their children.

“The idea with due process is it’s the process that you are owed,” Rebecca says. “It’s our job as lawyers to make sure our clients get it. For family separation, there is no such process in place.”

The Florence Project’s Adult Team also met many parents detained in Eloy and Florence who had been separated from their children. In many cases, our attorneys and

legal assistants were the first people to tell parents where their children were.

“Working with the parents was heartbreaking,” says Lauren Kostas, Florence Project staff attorney. “I worked with a mother who was separated from her nearly three year old son for four months. She was the first person I met that was separated from her child, and I remember being able to tell her that her child was safe, and we knew where he was.”

As relieved as our clients were to learn where their children were, it was short-lived comfort. “The mother was devastated that she was not with her child,” Lauren says. “She was devastated that her child must have been incredibly confused and wondering where she was. That he was probably scared and she could not comfort him. As the months passed, that comfort in knowing her child was safe lessened because she could not bear being away from him.”

The parents who we met were thinking about their children every moment of every day and would do anything to be back with them. Lauren remembers: “They wanted to know where their children were, how they could reunify with them. These parents were destroyed by the separation from their children. Parents have told me ‘I don’t care what happens to me, they can deport me, but I just want my child back.’ Other parents just wanted to see their child one last time. They told our staff, ‘if I am deported, I just want a chance to say goodbye to my child.’”

“I would be leaving the shelter and there would be a five or six-year-old curled up on the ground, fists clenched, crying, inconsolable. That’s a trauma that will last their whole lives,” says Rebecca.

“The effect that detention has is well documented—for children especially,” says Rom Rahimian, MPH and MD Candidate at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

Citing a 2011 article from the American Academy of Pediatrics, he continues. “Toxic stress will follow these



children throughout their life course. It can cause substance abuse, violence, obesity, all kinds of health effects that people don't think about. Our country's policies will impact generations."

Florence Project staff take comfort in the knowledge that your support held strong in the midst of this crisis, even though it was an extraordinarily trying time. "When the children cried I wanted to too," says Berenice. "I had to save my tears for the car ride back to the office after every visit for every week the family separation crisis continued."

Many families were reunified, but it feels difficult to celebrate. In this situation, there are no victories, just fierce advocacy to try to right a wrong. "The Florence Project is super connected," Rebecca says. "All the work we've done over the years has positioned us to be ready to respond. And there is nothing else in Arizona. We had an actual effect. We minimized the damage."

Berenice adds: "It is hard to reflect on these experiences because it breaks your heart to think of the pain these children experienced but this is exactly why I wanted to pursue a legal career in the first place."

"Working at the Florence Project has given me an amazing opportunity to be an advocate and I am incredibly inspired by the many staff members here and at other organizations like ours. Our drive to continue fighting for justice amidst the many hurdles we have faced has kept me energized to continue this work."

As we mourn the trauma that thousands of migrant children and their families faced this summer, we are heartened by the generosity and solidarity of our wider community. **With YOUR help, we pool resources. We mobilize. We advocate.**

THANK YOU!



Alfonso: Reunified with His Mother after 14 Years

Alfonso, like many Florence Project clients, was separated from his mother by thousands of miles, multiple borders, and many years. When Alfonso came to the U.S., he had no idea what the asylum process would entail. **The only thing he knew was that he had not seen his mother in fourteen years, and he desperately wanted to be with her.**

Alfonso grew up in Guatemala. Around the age of seven, he started experiencing epileptic seizures which were nearly impossible to control. Alfonso recalled the numerous obstacles he encountered in looking for a treatment: “The doctors would give me medicines that didn’t do anything, and there basically were no specialists in Guatemala.”

In addition to his medical issues, Alfonso endured abuse and neglect. “My father abandoned me.” His mother fled Guatemala when Alfonso was young, and his father left him in the care of his grandmother. His grandmother frequently beat him and refused to believe that his epilepsy was real, sometimes even withholding his medication in order to punish him.

When Alfonso was sixteen, he journeyed to the U.S. in hopes of being reunited with his mother. After he crossed the border, he was detained in an immigration facility before reunifying with his mother and his siblings in Arizona. Unfortunately, this was not the end of the journey. Alfonso’s mother knew that, unless they fought for him to stay in the U.S., their reunification would be short-lived. **She brought Alfonso to the Florence Project office because she knew it was the only place where Alfonso could secure quality, free legal representation.**

Florence Project attorneys worked diligently to build trust with Alfonso to better understand his asylum claim. One attorney, Larry, was impressed by Alfonso’s level of commitment, not only to his case but also to his future.

Alfonso would come prepared for every appointment, sometimes riding for hours on the bus back and forth from the Florence Project office. “Alfonso is a truly resilient kid,” said Larry. “In spite of all that he’s been through, he doesn’t let hardship be a barrier to his success.”

After submitting Alfonso’s asylum application and gathering evidence, Larry and Alfonso prepared for the most painful step of the process: the asylum interview. For many of our young clients, being interviewed by an asylum officer is a retraumatizing experience. They are made to sit with a complete stranger and tell the full story of what they have suffered during an interview that sometimes lasts for hours.

On the day of his interview, Alfonso turned to Larry to center himself just before speaking to the asylum officer. “I felt so anxious,” he said. **“But Larry helped me to breathe and relax. He helped me feel better.”**

Thanks to you, the staff at the Florence Project was able to advocate for Alfonso, and he was granted asylum. Alfonso and his family will stay together, safe from harm.



What's Happening Now?

This summer, family separation at the border became a national crisis. The Florence Project was there, responding every step of the way, with you by our side.

Although that policy has officially ended, we continue to serve children who remain separated and detained. Most of their parents have already been deported.

It was recently confirmed that the government's zero tolerance policy at the border was premeditated and meant as a deterrent—a policy designed to scare people and keep them out of the U.S., which inflicted real and lasting trauma on families.

The attacks on our clients' fundamental human rights have not stopped. The Attorney General has further restricted immigration judges' ability to exercise discretion in their courtrooms by setting strict parameters for when cases can be terminated. He also referred a case to himself to decide whether asylum seekers referred for credible fear are eligible for bond hearings. He has made changes to the law that severely restrict asylum for survivors of domestic violence or gang violence, reversing years of precedent. These actions represent threats to due process and peoples' rights under the law and in the courtroom.

Both children and adults are spending more time in detention. It is all the more difficult to advocate for release, with recent case law and policy changes affecting who is eligible for bond. Children are detained for longer periods of time due to difficulty in locating viable sponsors under current government policy, which shares information about family members' immigration status with ICE, putting them at risk for deportation. The government has also started holding hearings via video teleconference for both children and adults, which rushes the process and makes it more difficult for to have a fair hearing. We fear that this practice is growing, will result in fast-track

deportations, and will only make it more difficult for our staff to advocate effectively on behalf of our clients.

Sometimes it seems the obstacles to justice are never ending. But our resilient clients don't give up easily, and neither do we.

Thanks to you, we continue battling these obstacles with our clients. With additional funds raised this summer, we have been able to:

- **add a family separation team**
- **increase legal representation for both children and adults**
- **add a social worker to our team**
- **increase much needed legal assistant support for our attorneys and clients**
- **add an advocacy attorney**
- **increase our pro bono team to work with more volunteer attorneys**
- **increase administrative support**
- **hire a volunteer coordinator**

The Florence Project is on the front lines of immigration policy in this country, as we have been for the last 30 years. **Thanks to you, we are prepared to face future challenges head on, and we are ready to respond quickly and nimbly to the next crisis we face.**



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KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

For every immigrant in detention, there is a loved one separated from them by detention center walls, anxiously awaiting their release.

Thank you for standing by our clients
in these challenging times!

GIVE,
VOLUNTEER,
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