



FLORENCE
IMMIGRANT
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RIGHTS PROJECT

NEWSLETTER

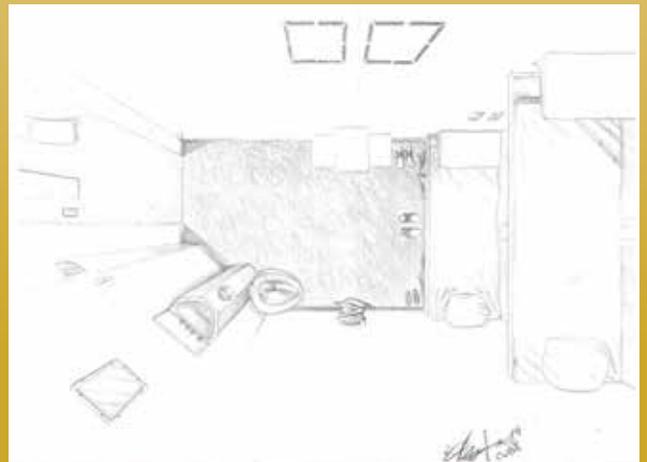
SPRING 2020

Patricia's Flight to Freedom

One day, a tiny bird flew through a window at Eloy Detention Center, and when Patricia saw it, she wished they could trade places. The 24-year-old Nicaraguan student wanted to fly over the ICE detention center's razor wire fencing and glide through the Arizona desert. But to be free, she had to win asylum.

Patricia wrote a declaration explaining her political activism and persecution in Nicaragua. She described her harrowing migration story and gathered statements from friends, family, and religious leaders attesting to these events. All of these documents needed to be translated to English, a language Patricia does not speak.

"I was alone in the detention center looking up words in a dictionary and feeling bad because almost no one helps you," recalled Patricia. "For a person like me with few economic resources, the unfortunate thing is we can't really do these hard things."



Detention cell drawing by anonymous client.

Patricia holding the rosary she carried during her asylum journey.

The Florence Project met her after she attended a “Know Your Rights” presentation. Patricia explained that in 2018 she joined a protest movement against the Nicaraguan government and its violent crackdowns on civil disobedience.

The “blue and white” movement—so named for the flags they waved during marches—began with nationwide protests against social security cuts. Yet it evolved into a pro-democracy movement after police and paramilitary forces viciously attacked demonstrations and, in the days, weeks, and now years afterward, killed hundreds in a campaign of terror to punish government critics.

“I never in my life imagined that I’d live through this and see it with my own eyes,” Patricia said. “My father had told me things about living through the [Nicaraguan civil war], and then at one moment I was running, feeling bullets for me, whizzing by my side, and I said, ‘Dios mio, this is a nightmare.’ I kept running with tears in my eyes.”

Many of the movement’s organizers were university students like Patricia, who had majored in social work so she could assist her community. Patricia was active in her church and worked in a market. But for one year, her life was turned upside down as police and pro-government militias brought her in for frequent interrogation or accosted her in public. Each encounter ended with a beating. The first time she was released, a hospital refused to treat her injuries on orders not to admit victims of state violence.



The Florence Project immediately shared the requirements to apply for asylum. Her experience *outside* of Nicaragua also raised important questions about the Trump Administration’s Third-Country Transit Bar, which forces people fleeing threats in Central America to seek asylum elsewhere before being considered in the United States.

Patricia initially fled south to Costa Rica. She found work with a produce vendor and lived alone in a small room. Then one day, armed men grabbed her at a bus stop and forced her into a car. They brought her back to Nicaragua, to a notorious political prison. In several days of violent questioning, they demanded information about protesters hiding in Costa Rica, something Patricia knew nothing about. Upon being released, she went to her family’s house. They agreed that Patricia should flee to the U.S.

“My mother told me that she would rather see me alive, even if it was from afar, than nearby, but in a coffin,” Patricia recalled.

The journey north proved difficult. Honduran officials extorted her. In Guatemala, a gang robbed her. Mexican officials demanded bribes at several checkpoints. But the most frightening event happened on the U.S. border. Because of the “metering” policy, which forces migrants to wait months to present at the port of entry and start asylum proceedings, Patricia was exposed to criminals in Juarez.

There, mere miles from the U.S., she was kidnapped and forced into servitude cleaning a mansion with other women held against their will. After one week, while her captors believed she was in the bathroom, Patricia snuck out of the house, climbed an exterior wall, and slid down a drain pipe. She ran, barefoot and crying, through driving rain until she was far away.

When she finally entered U.S. custody, Patricia had a lot of fear about losing her case. “Imagine what would happen to me if I returned to my country? I still have fear today from all the things that are happening. It saddens me because it’s my country, it’s where I was born, and I still have my family there.”

Florence Project staff Teresa and Leah assisted Patricia with her case.



“My mother told me that she would rather see me alive, even if it was from afar, than nearby, but in a coffin.”

“Her case is a flashpoint,” Teresa said. “It shows what types of harm immigrants subject to current policies were exposed to, and continue to be exposed to, in Mexico and other supposedly safe countries.”

“Because Leah was there accompanying me, I felt more courage, I felt more confident,” Patricia said. **“I’ll never forget all of this support the Florence Project provided me. Ever.”**

Patricia won asylum. Though she faced many obstacles in her immigration proceedings, she maintained a sense of gentleness and optimism that renewed Leah’s hope

in humanity. “When the Judge granted Patricia asylum I felt relieved and exhausted,” she said. “I managed to hold it together for the next hour as I talked to Patricia, called her sponsor to share the good news, and tried to get details on her release.”

Patricia now lives with an aunt in Florida, where she feels free as a bird.

“Today I can sit and breathe fresh air and feel alive and start over with my dreams,” she said. “I intend to study to help the community around me in gratitude to this country that has opened its horizon to me.”

We Asked. You Responded.

You did it! Last July, we announced that the Howard G. Buffett Foundation would match individual donations to the Florence Project dollar-for-dollar up to \$1 million, and in **just six months you rose to the challenge, raising \$1 million for the Million Dollar Match for Migrants! Thanks to your generosity, that's \$2 million for legal and social services for immigrants in Arizona!**

You recognize that the stakes couldn't be higher for our clients. Children are separated from their parents; people are threatened to be deported to death or serious harm; and thousands of asylum seekers are stuck on the border, far away from legal and social services. But thanks to you, the Florence Project is responding.

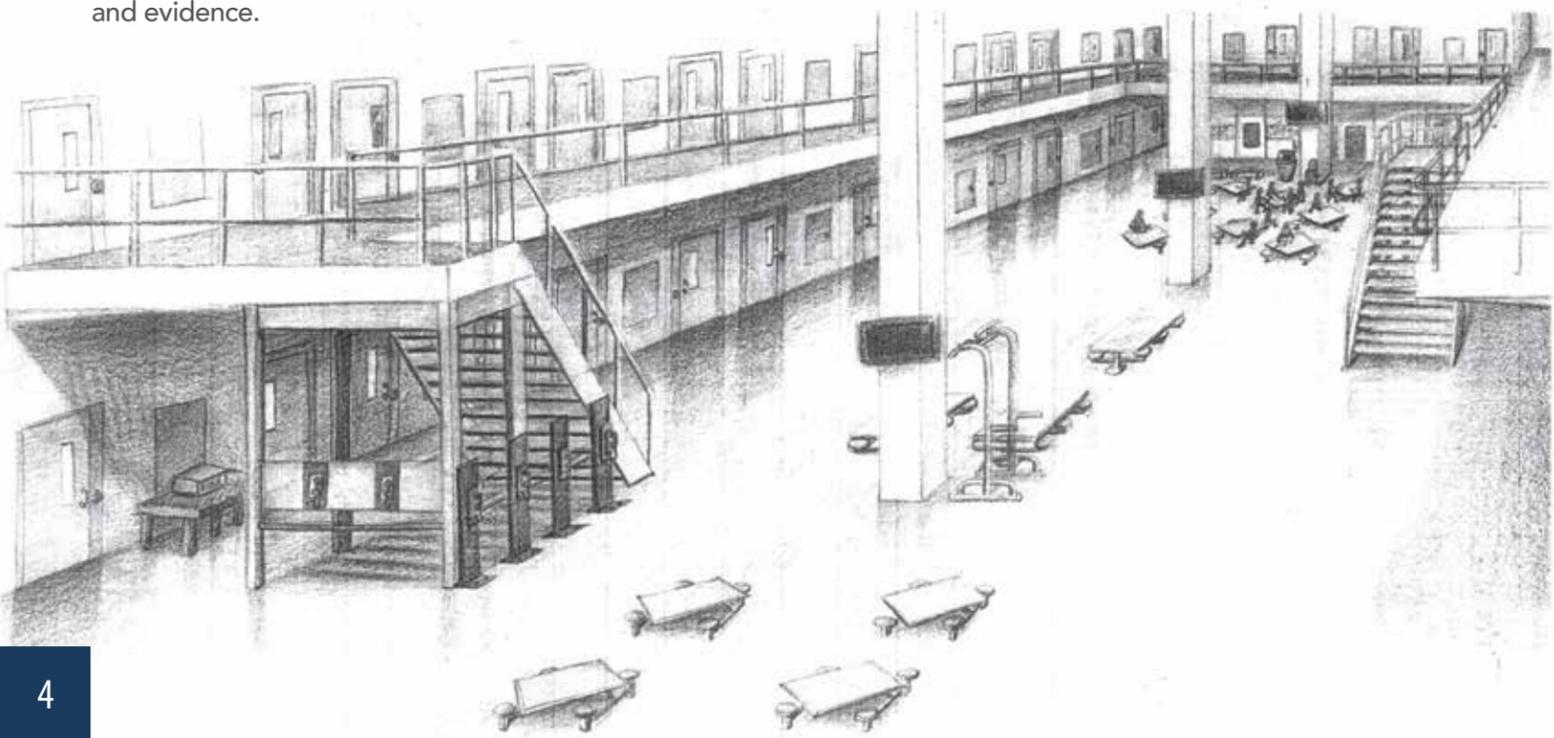
In November, we saw another attack on asylum seekers' rights to counsel and due process. Remain in Mexico was extended to Arizona, a policy that traps migrants in perilous situations in Mexican border towns, far away from legal services and other resources, while they wait for their asylum claims to be adjudicated. Thanks to you, we have ramped up our response. Our Border Action Team, which travels to Nogales, Sonora, to provide legal services in partnership with the Kino Border Initiative, is now there at least twice a week, and they have begun hosting regular workshops to help migrants with asylum applications and gather materials and evidence.

Since October 2019, we have also been fighting back against a pilot program in Phoenix which aims to expedite the deportation of unaccompanied immigrant children. We are extremely concerned about due process violations with this program and are committed to ensuring that each child gets the services they need before they go to court.

Due to increased detention of children and adults, we've hired more attorneys with the goal of increasing legal representation. We have added social workers to the team and created new Managing Social Worker positions to increase mentorship. We've also established an Advocacy Team to work with our legal teams and national partners to challenge issues such as expedited deportations of children, wrongful and prolonged detention, and appeal cases to higher courts.

These challenges and obstacles underscore an important message: It's harder than ever to win an immigration case. Our services are needed more now than ever.

This growth reflects your support for immigrants' rights. This is inspiring! Thank you for standing with us and our clients to challenge these injustices.



Policy Update

Over the past year, Trump Administration policies have significantly worsened the situation for migrants like Patricia. Policies like “metering,” to which Patricia was subjected, as well as Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), known colloquially as “Remain in Mexico,” the Third Country Transit Bar, and the Safe Third Country Agreement with Guatemala have attacked the U.S. asylum system, trapped migrants in perilous situations, and violated both due process and human rights.

Though Patricia was only subjected to metering, her harrowing story is an example of why these policies are so dangerous and inhumane. Our clients' stories reveal that traveling throughout Central America and Mexico can be exceptionally dangerous for immigrants.

“Metering” has been used by the Administration for several years to try to deter migrants from entering the U.S. by admitting a very small number of asylum seekers daily. As a result, many migrants have been forced to attempt dangerous crossings between Ports of Entry, rather than waiting in increasingly violent situations. While Patricia was waiting in Ciudad Juarez to present for asylum, she was kidnapped and forced to work in captivity, until she managed to escape and

run away. Sadly, many of our clients have similar stories of violence they experienced while waiting to seek safety in the United States.

Right now, at the Nogales Port of Entry, our partners tell us that officials are admitting only five asylum seekers a day, even though over a thousand are waiting. This means the wait is four months long. Many of the people who are forced to wait to present because of metering will be entered into the Migrant Protection Protocols and forced to return to Nogales after being processed by immigration officials.

The **Migrant Protection Protocols** Program was announced by the Trump Administration in December 2018, and the first migrants were returned to Mexico under the program in January 2019. However, it wasn't implemented in Arizona until January 2020, at which point the Administration started returning migrants to Nogales, Sonora. While Patricia was not subject to MPP, if she had come to the United States just a few months later, she likely would have been. Under the policy, migrants who present at a Port of Entry to seek asylum are forced to wait in Mexico while their asylum claims are adjudicated. While this policy is rife

with due process violations and puts trauma survivors in tremendous amounts of danger, it has spread across the entire U.S.-Mexico border and tens of thousands of migrants have been returned to Mexico over the past year.

In addition, migrants who are returned to Nogales, Sonora are being given court dates in El Paso, Texas and are required to find their own transportation. This is a 10+ hour journey through some of the most perilous and violent terrain along the U.S.-Mexico border. Asylum seekers that our staff have met in Nogales have told us that they don't know how long to wait in the relative safety of Nogales before starting the journey to El Paso and are even factoring in the possibility of being kidnapped on the way in their travel time calculations.

The **Third Country Transit Bar** requires migrants who travel through a third country on their way to the U.S. to seek asylum in that country before they are eligible to seek asylum in the United States. But as Patricia's story shows, this is not a viable solution for most migrants. Patricia tried to start over in Costa Rica, finding a job and a new home, but Nicaraguan officials tracked her

down there, forced her into a car, and took her back to Nicaragua where she was imprisoned and interrogated. She was also extorted in Honduras and robbed in Guatemala on her journey to the U.S., two countries in which she would have been forced to seek asylum under the Third Country Transit Bar. Unfortunately, this type of experience is all too common for Central American migrants traveling to the U.S.

The Administration has also signed an **Asylum Cooperation Agreement** with Guatemala, also known as a "**Safe Third Country Agreement**," which allows asylum seekers to be sent there to seek refuge instead of the U.S. However, these agreements are meant to be signed with countries with similar capacity to process and provide safety to asylum seekers. Guatemala, which has a bare bones asylum system and from which thousands of people are forced to flee annually, meets neither of those qualifications.

All of these policies demonstrate systematic attacks on the U.S. asylum system over the past several years, putting thousands at risk. Florence Project services are needed more than ever, and we thank you for your support.



Florence Project staff and volunteers cross the border to give an asylum workshop at the Kino Border Initiative.



The Future of Immigration is in Your Hands

You can make a gift that will strengthen the future of the Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project and protect our mission to provide free legal and social services to immigrants in Arizona by making plans for the organization in your will or estate plan.

A planned gift as part of your estate:

- Costs you nothing during your lifetime.
- Preserves your savings and cash flow.
- Can be changed or revoked as needed.
- Allows you to be far more generous than you ever thought possible.
- Is easy to arrange—a simple paragraph to your will is all it takes.

You can also:

- Make the Florence Project a beneficiary of your life insurance policy by simply requesting a form from your insurance company and filing it.
- Contribute some or all of your IRA. If you are 70.5 years of age or older, you can make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) from your IRA.

Interested? Contact Gabriela Corrales, Director of Philanthropy
(520) 441-3430 | gcorrales@firrp.org

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The mission of the Florence Project is to provide free legal and social services to detained adults and unaccompanied children facing immigration removal proceedings in Arizona.