



la línea the newsletter of THE FLORENCE IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS PROJECT

Cover banner based on a painting by former Staff Attorney Luis Mancheno

25 YEARS OF THE FLORENCE PROJECT - A REFLECTION ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND BEYOND

By Lauren Dasse, Executive Director of the Florence Project

This has been a year of celebration, which in our line of work, can be difficult. While we continue to face challenging legal cases, increased need for social services, and a steady stream of children, women, and men in immigration detention in Arizona, we cherish the victories and important work that the Florence Project staff and volunteers have been doing for the past 25 years. We also deeply value your support to the Florence Project—support that allows us to continue this important work.

In 1989, attorney Chris Brelje, supported by his law firm Lewis & Roca (now Lewis Roca Rothgerber), answered Immigration Judge John J. McCarrick's call to the legal community to assist detained immigrants in Florence, Arizona. Thus, the Florence Asylum Project began, which is now known as the Florence Immigrant &

Refugee Rights Project. The Florence Project remains the only organization in Arizona that provides free legal services and coordinated social services to children, women, and men detained while fighting their immigration cases. While our mission hasn't changed over the past 25 years, our flexibility has allowed us to strategically respond to growing need.

Our work with detained immigrant men and women began in the small prison town of Florence; however in 1998, we began working in neighboring Eloy to serve adults detained in a large detention center, including many asylum seekers seeking refuge in the U.S. from all over the world. While the number of unaccompanied minors making the dangerous journey north drastically increased last year, the Florence Project has been serving immigrant children for the past 15

years. Our Children's Program has expanded in order to serve the increase of abused, abandoned, and neglected children who need our help, growing our office in Phoenix and opening an office in Tucson. Finally, our Social Services Program began in 2001, recognizing that our clients have more than just legal cases and need extra support to obtain release and successfully settle into our communities.

We're excited about what is on the horizon to strategically address the needs of detained immigrants in Arizona. We will continue to hone our cutting-edge legal services, which consist of legal representation, pro bono case placements, and assisting those pro se who are forced to represent themselves in court because there remains no public defender

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"CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER" - YOU'RE INVITED -

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FROM DETAINEE TO LEGAL WONK: ANDREJ'S STORY

By Matthew Johnson, Florence Project Legal Intern

In 2013, for the third time in as many years, the Serbian government prohibited its LGBT citizens from holding a Gay Pride Parade. Hours after the government's edict, the Florence Project's client Andrej¹, together with his then-boyfriend, exited the office of a Belgrade gay-rights organization. Immediately, the two were surrounded by armed men, blindfolded, shoved into a waiting car, and taken to an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city. There, Andrej and his boyfriend were beaten and tortured, before finally being released the next morning. Death threats followed, and Andrej soon fled the country to seek protection in the United States.

I first met Andrej in September 2014 at the Eloy Detention Center, where he had been detained since May. It was apparent from our first meeting that, while detained, Andrej had devoted himself to the study of law—not only had he filed complex and legally sophisticated motions in his own case, he was also assisting numerous other detainees in preparing their cases for presentation to the immigration court. During our subsequent meetings over the next eight months, Andrej routinely peppered our conversation with questions seeking information he needed to advise and assist others.

As a second-year law student and legal intern at the Florence Project, I was comforted by Andrej's legal fluency; he was, after all, my very first client. After agreeing to represent Andrej under the supervision of Senior Staff Attorney Ben Harville, I developed a collaborative, horizontal relationship with my client. Andrej and I worked together to assemble evidence to support his claim, develop our legal arguments, and prepare his testimony for the hearing; together we climbed the steep and often unforgiving learning curve of immigration law.

In April 2014, Ben and I represented Andrej before the Immigration Judge. Andrej explained to the court the devastating consequences of deportation: "Being forced to choose between hiding my sexual orientation and facing harassment, threats, abuse, and even death would be a defeat of my liberty." However, Andrej never had to make that unjust and intolerable

decision. Just hours after his hearing, Andrej walked through the gates of the Eloy Detention Center, a free person for the first time in some 13 months. A few days later, Andrej joined his brother in New York City and called his mother in Serbia to deliver the good news; the judge had withheld his deportation and he would not be forcibly returned to Serbia to face further persecution.

Throughout his time in detention, Andrej remained concerned not only with his own safety, but also with achieving the goal that people "be treated equally regardless of sexual orientation, and that gay people have the right to live and express themselves without fear." Shortly after his release, Andrej called to say that he had begun to volunteer for



Ben, Andrej, and Matt celebrate Andrej's release from detention.

a New-York-based legal services organization, putting his personal experience and legal acumen to use in assisting other LGBT immigrants. The ethos embodied by Andrej—that our own liberation is inextricably tied to that of others—guides the work of the Florence Project. Nowhere is that principle more perfectly represented than in the many Florence Project clients, just like Andrej, who go on to support others who have fled violence, and who face the threat of additional violence in the form of detention and deportation.

¹Name changed to preserve confidentiality.

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25 YEARS OF THE FLORENCE PROJECT - A REFLECTION ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND BEYOND

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

system in immigration court. We are thrilled to report that, thanks to the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, we've increased our social workers on staff, to holistically serve our clients. We also just heard the fabulous news that long-time law firm supporter Perkins Coie is funding a Legal Director position at the Florence Project for two years. The Legal Director will allow us to deepen our advocacy with national partners, and take the most chal-

lenging of legal cases on appeal, even to the 9th Circuit.

While in many ways we wish we didn't have to exist, we are proud of the work that we do on a daily basis, working with people who are marginalized and in traumatic settings. Many of our clients would not have access to information or legal assistance without the Florence Project staff that visit them to offer a know-your-rights presentation, materials, pro-

bono placement, or legal representation.

We will continue to treat people with dignity and fight for basic human rights, to protect those fleeing harm, and keep families and communities together. Thank you for standing with us for the past 25 years, and for many years to come. We could not do our work without you; indeed, our victories are your victories.

THE FLORENCE PROJECT EXPANDS ITS SOCIAL SERVICES PROGRAM, WITH SUPPORT FROM THE HOWARD G. BUFFETT FOUNDATION

By Lauren Dasse, Executive Director of the Florence Project

The Florence Project is proud to announce that our Social Services Program is expanding, thanks to generous support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation. Started in 2007, our Social Services Program was one of the first legal and social services partnerships in the country. Our clients have complicated legal cases, and also have social service needs. The children, women, and men we work with include survivors of torture, asylum seekers, domestic violence survivors, people with significant medical issues, parents at immediate risk of losing custody of their U.S. citizen children, children and adults with mental health issues, and unaccompanied children released from detention who, despite winning legal status, struggle to get settled in the U.S. Our clients have complex needs, often relating to health, housing, education, vocational, and social services. The Social Services Program seeks to address and alleviate individuals' psycho-social needs, support legal requests for release and relief from deportation, and foster successful integration for individuals released from detention by connecting them to existing service providers and support networks in the community.

In the past, the Florence Project has only had funding to have one social worker on staff, based in our Florence office, mainly assisting detained women and men. During the summer of 2014, our staff was overwhelmed with the drastic increase in unaccompanied children crossing the border. The government nearly doubled the number of children detained in Arizona (from 500 to up to 1000

on any given day), opening additional shelters in Phoenix, and began detaining children in Tucson. This only exacerbated the need for more social workers on staff, with dedicated staff to work with children. Through the generous funding of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, we are now able to expand our Social Services Program, hiring three social workers for a period of three years.

We therefore enthusiastically welcome three Master of Social Work graduates to our staff! Anna Marie Smith, MSW, is a graduate of the University of Georgia School of Social Work, and has worked with immigrant communities in the southern U.S. with community groups and the PC (USA) Presbyterian Church. Kaitlin Porter, MSW, and Elizabeth Casey, MSW, are both graduates from Boston College's School of Social Work, with a specialized program on immigrant integration run by Dr. Westy Egmont. Prior to joining the Florence Project, Kaitlin worked with social workers in Cambodia, and Elizabeth (Liz) volunteered at a migrant shelter in southern Mexico. Cindy Schlosser, current Florence Project Social Services Coordinator, is offering training support to our expanding social services team. Cindy will transition out of the program in December, to focus on continuing her studies—after six years with the Florence Project! We are also grateful to have the mentoring assistance of longtime immigrant child and family advocate Laurie Melrood, LMSW, to help us shape our expanding program and evaluate the intersection of legal and social services.

As Anna Marie Smith says, "working with the Florence Project's Children's Program has exposed me to the many barriers that our clients face in accessing services. The work of connecting clients with medical, housing, education, and other services which support their legal cases is essential, and requires additional time and effort to find agencies willing to work with our clients. The work is rewarding, and with legal and social services working together, the varying needs of the clients can be met." Kaitlin Porter and Liz Casey say they chose to move across the country and work with the Florence Project because it is an organization working to empower those in disempowered situations and assist vulnerable people. Kaitlin also appreciates "the positive emphasis of the relationship between legal and social services to work towards the best interests of the client."

We thank the Howard G. Buffett Foundation for their generous support, in making this important work possible. We welcome our new social workers on staff, and thank Cindy Schlosser for her years of service to the program.



TOP LEFT: Anna Maria Smith, Children's Program Social Worker; TOP RIGHT: Liz Casey, Social Worker; BOTTOM LEFT: Kaitlin Porter, Social Worker; BOTTOM RIGHT: Cindy Schlosser, Social Services Coordinator



Florence Project client celebrates after court with Golden McCarthy, Children's Program Director. Our client was granted lawful permanent residency by an Immigration Judge, which puts her on the pathway to U.S. citizenship.

REFLECTIONS ON MY WORK AT THE FLORENCE PROJECT

BY NATALIE SCHULTHEIS, FORMER FLORENCE PROJECT AMERICORPS VOLUNTEER

My experiences as an AmeriCorps volunteer working at a shelter for unaccompanied minors left me both blessed and haunted by the children I worked with. I loved walking into work and meeting the faces of recently arrived children and helping them adjust to life in the shelter. I adored the moments when children would teach me words in their indigenous languages and ask me what life was like in Indiana, or California, or Utah. And my heart swelled when I witnessed moments of gratitude, like when I saw a student give his teacher a red velvet pencil he had won playing bingo and say, "I do not have money to thank you for what you've taught me, but I have this pencil."

But, as you can imagine, not every moment was so rose-colored. I met children in search of parents they had never seen face-to-face. I taught English and math to teenage girls who had been raped, and carried the evidence in their bellies. I heard countless stories of gang violence, including my favorite student who, after a phone call home to his family, turned to me in shock and said, "They killed my brother."

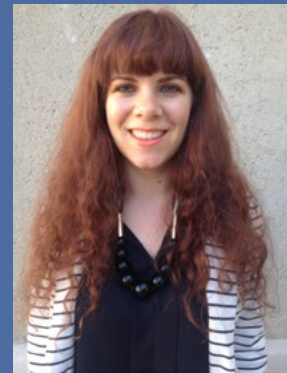
The shelters do incredible work, but without legal aid, many of these children with strong cases would walk into court alone and walk out with an order to return to the dangers they had fled. For these reasons, I left for law school, desiring to help immigrant children secure the safety they so ardently deserve and desperately need. This summer, I

represented a client seeking voluntary departure to his home country with the help of Vanessa Pineda, Florence Project Pro Bono Coordinator. While I was prepping him the day before court, Fernando¹ nervously asked me, "Have you done this before?" I imagine this must be every intern's and new attorney's least favorite question. Trying to convince both myself and Fernando that we were prepared, I responded that Vanessa, my supervising attorney with whom he had been working, had done this many times and would be there in case we needed her help. Fernando looked about as nervous as I felt inside on the morning of his court hearing, because his 18th birthday was just two days away. If the judge was not sympathetic, it was almost certain that ICE would come to the shelter and handcuff Fernando on his birthday and take him to adult detention in Florence for an undetermined amount of time.

After some back and forth between the immigration attorney and myself, the judge granted voluntary departure and wished Fernando happy birthday. I saw the look of relief that spread over Fernando's face as he slid down a bit in his chair, releasing the fear that had kept him rigid with anxiety. Instead of going to adult detention in handcuffs on his birthday, Fernando would celebrate at home with his family and have a second chance to create better opportunities for himself than the ones that life had presented to him in his childhood.

Luckily for these children, the Florence Project exists, and lucky for me, they welcome summer legal interns. This summer, I saw how unaccompanied minors' battles continue after they overcome the hurdle of reunifying outside of the shelters. In the Children's Team office, I saw how the hours of drafting declarations, filling out applications, researching the law, and interviewing clients resulted in an awesome transformation from fear and uncertainty to hope and security for the future. It is all worth it to keep children out of chains and give them a chance at a better life.

¹Name changed to preserve confidentiality.



Natalie Schultheis is a second-year student at Berkeley School of Law, with interests in immigration and human rights. She was recently an AmeriCorps volunteer with the Florence Project.

As the Florence Project celebrates 25 years, we've experienced a tremendous amount of growth and change. We welcome our new social workers, Anna Marie Smith, Kaitlin Porter, and Elizabeth (Liz) Casey. We also welcome new legal assistants Annabel Barraza and Carmen Smith-Estrada. Elizabeth (Liz) Bradley, Lola Sophia Bovell, and Jasmina Nogo joined our Florence Team as new staff attorneys. Patrick Helling and Larry Sandigo joined the Phoenix Office Children's Program staff attorney team. We also welcome Hugo Polanco as our new Development & Outreach Coordinator.

We say goodbye (and wish happy studying) to legal assistants Stephanie Quintana Martinez, currently studying for her M.Div. and MSW degrees at the University of Chicago, and Nathan Regenold, currently studying law at Georgetown. Released Children's Specialist Michele Rudy left to continue her work with immigrant youth, and Development & Outreach Coordinator Mariana del Hierro moved to Denver to join her family and pursue new opportunities.

Gladis Molina Alt, Children's Senior Staff Attorney (and former Children's Program Director), and her husband Christopher Alt welcomed baby Alexander on July 25th. Congratulations Gladis and Christopher!

We wish our outgoing staff the best of luck in their future endeavors, and we welcome with open arms the new members of the Florence Project family!



PICTURED LEFT: OUTGOING LEGAL ASSISTANTS OF THE FLORENCE PROJECT, NATHAN REGENOLD AND STEPHANIE QUINTANA MARTINEZ.

BELOW: ON JULY 25, GLADIS MOLINA ALT AND HER HUSBAND CHRISTOPHER WELCOMED THEIR FIRST CHILD, ALEXANDER ALT. GLADIS WILL RETURN TO WORK IN THE PHOENIX OFFICE IN JANUARY.



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THANK YOU, PERKINS COIE!

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ABOUT THE FLORENCE PROJECT

The Florence Project's work is carried out primarily through four programs: the Florence "Justice and Efficiency" Model, the Eloy Pro Se Model, the Immigrant and Refugee Children's Program, and the Integrated Social Services Program. As part of its direct legal services, the Project has created "Know Your Rights" videos and self-representation packets as an educational resource for non-profit service providers and detained people nationwide. Nationally, the Florence Project advocates for positive change in federal policies and practices towards those detained and it serves as a resource-development and training center for detention program "best practices." The Florence Project undertakes its national advocacy through membership in the Detention Watch Network, a coalition of more than 100 nonprofit organizations that work with the 200,000 men, women, and children who are held in the U.S. annually as immigration detainees.

MISSION & VISION

MISSION

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.

VISION

The vision of the Florence Project is to ensure that all immigrants facing removal have access to counsel, understand their rights under the law, and are treated fairly and humanely.



TO DONATE TO THE FLORENCE PROJECT:

Mail a check or money order to:

The Florence Project
P.O. Box 654
Florence, AZ 85132

Visit our website and DONATE TODAY

www.firrp.org

TO VOLUNTEER FOR THE FLORENCE PROJECT:

Call or email:

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