¡Hasta Luego, Victoria!

This past June, Victoria López took her leave as the Florence Project’s Executive Director. At this time, it is worth recalling from where she came and what she has been about. From the beginning, Victoria has taught using her personal experience to inform her lessons. Born in Chicago, to an immigrant Ecuadorian father and a mother of Greek descent, Victoria grew up traveling the country and gaining a feel for America’s great diversity. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Champaign, she moved on to the University of Pennsylvania for law school.

At Penn, she intended to pull off a difficult one-two scholarly achievement—a doctorate in English and a J.D. in law. Her goal was to teach, specifically to use her literary training as a platform for delivering her legal wisdom. While the literature Ph.D. didn’t survive the grind, the spirit of the aspiration did. Victoria became a particularly creative and broad-minded legal thinker, with an urgent need to spread her learning to people in need.

Those in need came into particular focus for her in college. She became involved with women’s studies and become more aware of global indigenous movements. That newfound alertness to social movements carried through to her graduate study and eventually to her post-graduate practice. Law became the ideal medium and means to express her support for social movements that sought to improve the lives of the oppressed.

During college and law school, she worked with farm workers and Central American refugees. But it was immigration rights that seemed to galvanize her energies and intellectual capacities, especially in the context of her legal training. Immigration issues merged all of her social callings—indigenous rights, the status of women, labor inequities, and criminal justice.

For her second summer of law school, Victoria won a summer fellowship from the National Lawyer’s Guild that enabled her to work with the Florence Project. Through this experience she was able to learn more about detention issues and she never looked back. After graduating from Penn, she came back to us as an Equal Justice Works Fellow and stayed on as an Eloy Staff Attorney. She later rose to the challenge of becoming the Florence Project’s Acting Executive Director and, two months after that, becoming our Executive Director. Throughout her tenure at the Florence Project, she has brought that passion for learning and teaching to work every day.

Victoria’s imprint on the Florence Project is visible in all these experiences and in the life and projects she has undertaken in Arizona. Since moving here, she has started a family with her husband Robert, and is the proud mother of two-year-old Lucia and step-mother to 10-year-old Hannah. Her proudest achievement at the Florence Project is overseeing our transition into bigger and better quarters and the new and growing programs that animate it. Examples include: The Arizona Defending Immigrants Partnership (AZ-DIP), which provides free information and advice to defense attorneys on the immigration consequences of Arizona criminal offenses in order to minimize the impact of potentially damaging convictions; strengthening the Florence Project’s work in Eloy; and the Children’s Fellowship.

Victoria’s commitment to immigrant and refugee rights, her family and her community have only begun to be realized. We’re lucky she’s staying with us in Arizona, even as she moves on to new challenges and new lessons. Thank you, Victoria, for all your hard work and dedication. We are not saying “adiós,” to you, but simply “hasta luego.” We look forward to watching your future unfold.

—Submitted by Milagros Cisneros, Board Member

Detention Expansion in Florence – Pinal County Jail

Increased enforcement and detention has resulted in more beds for immigration detainees in Florence. Under a federal contract with ICE, the Pinal County Jail is now operating a newly constructed wing designed exclusively for immigration detainees. On any given day, the Pinal County Jail is currently housing approximately 300 male and female immigration detainees, with the capacity to house 600 detainees total. The expectation is that ICE will fill the full 600 beds in the coming year. The Florence Project has been working with this new population through our rights presentations at the Florence court and individual visitations at the Pinal County Jail. We are also developing a working relationship with this new detention site to ensure detainees have access to our services.

To keep up to date on where new immigration detention centers are opening in Arizona and other states, be sure to visit the detention map on the Detention Watch Network website, www.detentionwatchnetwork.org.
Pro Bono Spotlight
Interview with Shameen Woods, Esq.

Shameen Woods — a new private immigration attorney in Phoenix — took her first pro bono case with the Florence Project this spring after attending one of our trainings on asylum and cancellation of removal. She successfully represented a mentally ill Trinidadian woman win cancellation of removal for lawful permanent residents. Her client was living in a New York homeless shelter before ICE brought removal proceedings against her for a minor drug conviction and detained her at Eloy.

Shameen worked with dedication in putting together her legal case and preparing her client to testify at her merits hearing. The case was very challenging given that her client had no contact with family and friends to support her case for cancellation of removal, a form of relief that depends on showing strong ties to the United States. Shameen persevered and even located her client’s estranged adult son in New York on the eve of her merits hearing. He stepped forward and offered to care for his mother if she was granted relief and released from ICE custody. Her client won her case in May, the government waived appeal, and she was released from custody.

How did you find out about doing pro bono work with the Florence Project?

By my involvement in the immigration legal community. I wanted to gain some experience in the field and after speaking with a number of attorneys in the Phoenix area, they all recommended your program as a perfect way to help out and gain the experience at the same time. A few of the attorneys I knew had done cases for the Florence Project and told me about the program. Also, I had been researching ways and means to get involved in some volunteer work until I was able to obtain my license. It’s a great way to help out and learn at the same time.

What did you like about working on H’s case?

The number one thing I liked was the fact that I was actually helping someone who had no one else in this state to help her. She had no one at all and I can’t imagine how that must feel being in a totally different state with no friends or family visiting.

Second, the legal knowledge that I gained in the process is invaluable. There is nothing like hands on experience when it comes to immigration cases. Every case has its own nuances so no two cases can ever be guaranteed of the same outcome.

What did you learn from the experience?

I certainly learned more about the whole Immigration Court process - which is fundamental and which you can never truly learn from reading or observing. You have to be there in front of the Judge ready to defend your client and it was a confidence booster knowing that I must have done something right - since our request was granted.

I also learned that it is okay to get advice from those with more experience -- however you still have to know what you are doing, follow your instincts and also keep your client involved. Everyone is different in their approach in how they view the case or handle the case. It is important to get feedback and input - but the final decision rests with me.

If you are an attorney and are interested in taking a pro bono case, please contact Lindsay Marshall, Acting Executive Director, at 520.868.0191 Ext. 101, or by email at lmarshall@firrp.org.
**New Defending Immigrants Program**

Victor is a citizen of Mexico who came to Phoenix in 1997. His wife is a U.S. citizen, and they have four children together, the youngest of whom has severe autism. Victor’s wife submitted a petition for him, and he was two weeks away from earning his green card. One night after finishing his work at the construction site, Victor gave his friend Carl a ride home and, on the way, Carl smoked a joint. Police pulled Victor over for a wide left turn and found the marijuana baggie that Carl had left on the floor. Victor was charged with possession of paraphernalia.

In a typical situation, Victor would normally plead guilty and receive probation. Even though the criminal consequences of such a plea are relatively minor, the immigration consequences would be permanent and severe. Pleading guilty would leave Victor with no possibility of ever receiving his green card or living legally in the U.S. with his family. Victor would likely be put in immigration detention, where a Florence Project staff member would sadly inform him that he could either seek post-conviction relief—a complicated, expensive, and often unsuccessful attempt to clear his record—or voluntarily depart to Mexico.

A new and exciting initiative at the Florence Project may provide increased options for Victor. Called the Arizona Defending Immigrants Partnership (AZ-DIP) and funded by the Arizona Foundation for Legal Services and Education, this resource provides advice to Victor’s criminal defense attorney on alternate pleas that Victor could accept that would not jeopardize his ability to earn a green card and stay in the U.S. with his family. Under AZ-DIP, Victor’s criminal defense attorney can call or e-mail Kara Hartzler, former FIRRP Eloy staff attorney, and discuss better plea options before accepting a deal that would result in Victor’s detention and deportation.

Since April 1, 2007, AZ-DIP has provided advice on the immigration consequences of criminal convictions in 116 cases throughout the state of Arizona. In addition to legal advice, Kara also answers questions from criminal attorneys on immigration procedure and offers suggestions on how to navigate the immigration detention and court system. The project also provides immigration trainings to public defender offices and assists busy and overworked criminal attorneys who do not have the time or resources to research the complexities of immigration law.

A recent AZ-DIP case involves Leslie, a lawful permanent resident who lived in Tucson for over twenty years. Leslie bought a number of items at various pawn shops and was charged with trafficking in stolen property. Leslie’s attorney consulted AZ-DIP, and Kara confirmed that accepting the plea bargain offered by the prosecutor would result in Leslie’s immediate deportation. Kara suggested pleading to a different subsection with alternate language that was less likely to trigger deportation grounds and then reviewed the plea agreement before Leslie signed it. Although Leslie had been told that immigration authorities would probably arrest her at the sentencing hearing, she was not detained. Leslie continues to live in Tucson and hopes to become a U.S. citizen in the next several years.

Across the country, our nation’s leaders are expanding funding for immigration detention facilities by almost one-third. Traditionally, the Florence Project has worked exclusively with persons detained in these facilities. However, AZ-DIP represents an exciting new Florence Project initiative in which staff members attempt to intervene in immigration cases before people like Victor and Leslie are detained and permanently separated from their families—in the hopes that they never will be.

**Amnesty International Volunteers Visit Florence Detainees**

In conjunction with the United Nations World Refugee Day, The Florence Project and Amnesty International organized detention visits for some of our refugee and asylum-seeking clients. On June 20th, Amnesty volunteers traveled to Florence for one-on-one visits with several detainees at the Florence Service Processing Center. The purpose of the visits was to provide moral support and encouragement to the detainees as they go through their immigration proceedings. We received very positive feedback from the detainees and volunteers and hope to make it an annual event so the special needs of detained refugees and asylum seekers are not overlooked. World Refugee Day serves to raise awareness about the situation of refugees and asylum seekers around the world.

**U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants Visits Florence**

In May the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Jorge Bustamante, spent two weeks touring the United States on a fact-finding mission to investigate the conditions of immigrants and migrants living in the United States. In preparation for his visit, The Florence Project worked with a national coalition of non-governmental organizations and legal service agencies to submit briefing papers highlighting human rights and due process violations occurring at immigration detention facilities and offering recommendations for reforms needed to restore justice and humanity to the immigration system. Florence Project staff contributed to briefing papers on the detention and deportation of unaccompanied children, mandatory detention, and the prolonged and indefinite detention of non-citizens.

The Special Rapporteur’s visit included a tour of the ICE Service Processing Center in Florence. Florence was the only detention facility he visited in the United States after his scheduled visits to facilities in Texas and New Jersey were cancelled by ICE. A full report on his visit to the UN Human Rights Council is expected to be published in the next year.
Summer has been a time of transition for the Florence Project—we said many goodbyes and hellos! Raha, Laura, and Victoria, as we say goodbye, know that you are loved!!!

In late summer, a new group of staff arrived; please help us welcome them to the Florence Project.

**Thalassa “Tally” Kingsnorth, JD, Eloy Staff Attorney,** began with the Florence Project in September 2007. Tally graduated from the University of California, Davis, in 2007, where she worked in the Immigration Law Clinic for over two years. As a law student, she also worked in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and at La Raza Centro Legal in San Francisco. Before law school, Tally worked in Mexico City.

**Erin Maxwell, MSW, Eloy Legal Assistant,** began with the Florence Project in August 2007. Erin graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with her BA in 2003 and her Masters in Social Welfare in 2006. Before joining the Florence Project, she worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other organizations in Panama.

**Katharine E. Ruhl, JD, Florence Staff Attorney,** began with the Florence Project in September 2007. Katharine graduated from Wellesley College with her BA in Latin American Studies and Art History in 2001 and JD from University of California, Davis, in 2007. As a law student, she worked in the UC Davis Immigration law clinic and at the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies. Before law school, Katharine worked with Amnesty International, the Nationalities Service Center, and Cohen, Fluhr & Gonzalez.

Raha Jorjani, Esq. left her Florence Staff Attorney position in June 2007 to start as the Supervising Attorney at the UC Davis Immigration Law Clinic. She is still working on several cases for detainees in Florence.

Laura Polstein left her Eloy Legal Assistant position in July 2007 to attend the City University of New York School of Law.

The border is a strange place. Strands of barbed wire in some places, a sheet metal fence in others, holes and fence posts where it soon will be. Desperation and hope permeate the place, as the border winds its way through cities and deserts. It is summertime, and in Arizona that means temperatures hitting 120 degrees and migrants suffering and dying. They lie still during the day, and then walk through the desert at night, trying to stay one step ahead of la migra, the Border Patrol. For me the border is a check point that I can cross on foot, waving my driver’s license and answering “U.S. citizen” to the agent. But for the detained children that I am working with this summer through the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, the border constitutes the final hurdle to cross after they have come on their own all the way from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador or Ecuador, riding on top of trains, in trailers, buses and boats, finally making it to Mexico to walk for days in the desert before getting caught. They come from extreme poverty, in search of a better chance at survival. Working with the kids, I am learning compassionate lawyering: listening to each child’s heartbreaking story, confronting harsh immigration laws, and trying to reconcile the two in the most humane way possible. And as I spend time on the border this summer, I am witnessing the suffering caused by this artificial line and the immigration policies that accompany it, as well as the determination and resilience of the migrants who will risk everything to get across.
Florence Project Supporters

TORCH OF JUSTICE SOCIETY
The Florence Project created the Torch of Justice Society to provide individuals with the opportunity to support the Florence Project at higher financial levels and supply donors with certain benefits at all giving levels.

INCENTIVE PROGRAMS:

Search the web with www.goodsearch.com and money from Yahoo advertisers will go to the Florence Project without you spending a dime!

The Bashas’ Fundraising program will run from September 1, 2007 to March 31, 2008.

The Florence Project’s number is 24342. Give this number to the Bashas’ cashier one time only. From then on, a portion of every Thank You Card purchase will be donated to the Florence Project.

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We have only listed Jan-June 2007 donations. Please let us know if you believe your name has been omitted in error so that we can correct any mistakes. All 2007 donations will be listed in the next newsletter.

YOU CAN HELP THE FLORENCE IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE RIGHTS PROJECT EARN FUNDS BY JUST DOING THINGS YOU DO EVERYDAY!

The Florence Project relies on the generous support of individuals, corporations, faith-based organizations, foundations, and law firms in order to provide its multitude of legal and social services.

The program centers around the PGA TOUR professionals making birdies – lots of them – during the 2008 FBR Open (Jan. 31 – Feb. 3 at the TPC Scottsdale). Don’t worry; you don’t need to be much of a golfer or even a golf fan for that matter to participate in the Birdies For Charity Program. Simply by making a pledge – as little as one penny – for every birdie made by the PGA TOUR players at the FBR Open, after the tournament, Thunderbirds Charities will bill you for the amount of your pledge written on the official pledge form. The FBR Open and Thunderbirds Charities are giving the Florence Project the opportunity to generate funds from this fun promotion and we get to keep every cent collected. Plus, as an added bonus, Thunderbirds Charities will match 10 percent of the total amount of pledges we collect. The Florence Project’s number is 136. For more information: visit www.birdiesforcharityarizona.com or call the Florence Project at 520-868-0191 x106.
MISSION AND VISION
The Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, Inc., “Florence Project,” provides holistic, free legal services to immigrants, refugees, and U.S. citizens detained by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Arizona for immigration processing. The Florence Project serves men, women, and children, including those with mental health and social service needs. The Project believes that everyone should understand their rights and options under immigration law and have access to legal counsel. Although the government assists indigent criminal defendants and civil litigants through public defenders and legal aid attorneys, it does not provide attorneys for people facing deportation. The Project strives locally and nationally to address this inequity, works toward a more just and efficient judicial system for the rapidly increasing numbers of individuals in immigration detention.

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 Detained Immigrant and Refugee Children’s Initiative, 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 work with the 200,000 men, women, and children who are held in the U.S. annually as immigration detainees.

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