So much has happened since our team first drafted this “spring” newsletter. With each passing day, the demands on our small and scrappy team have necessitated postponing routine communications such as this. However, it is important to me that you continue to be informed about the critical work you are supporting through the Florence Project.

The recent humanitarian crisis created by the systematic separation of migrant parents from their children has awakened the public conscience. Millions of Americans raised their voices in objection to this inhumane practice and have contributed unprecedented donations to the Florence Project and other nonprofit organizations who work to provide legal and social services to immigrants. We’ve literally been overwhelmed, in every sense of the word.

My gratitude for this overwhelming generosity is only tempered by my outrage and sadness for the children and their parents who have experienced irreparable trauma from this separation. This reality is almost unimaginable and takes a toll on everyone who directly witnesses this suffering.

These recent events only compound a year that has brought a seemingly neverending series of immense challenges for our work. I am filled with pride when I reflect on the resiliency and courage of our staff, and our clients that we have the privilege to serve. We unflinchingly take on each obstacle with determination and hope, despite changes in policy and practice that seem to change on a daily basis.

At the Florence Project, we’re on the front lines of the national conversation on immigration, and we see trends developing in real time. We must be prepared for future threats to our work during these challenging times, and be prepared to strategically respond to our changing world. We need your help more than ever as our work and our values continue to come under attack. Your continued support ensures that we can respond quickly to each challenge, change, and obstacle.

Thank you for standing alongside us and our clients during these difficult times. We will be here, no matter what, and your support and advocacy keep us energized and moving forward. With much gratitude and respect, thank you for reading these stories of hope and resilience, and onward!

Lauren Dasse
Executive Director

A mother and her children, reunited with the help of Florence Project staff.
Joel had a troubled childhood in the U.S. His family migrated from Mexico when he was young. His father was often violent and physically abused both Joel and his mother. “My dad wasn’t meant to be a father,” Joel recalled. His mother was unable to protect him from his father’s abuse. When Joel was twelve, Arizona child welfare workers determined that his parents were unfit to care for him and placed him in foster care.

Joel’s adolescence was marked by loneliness. “Kids would leave the group home all the time, and I didn’t have a chance to get close to anyone. People don’t really care about you in the foster care system.” He watched other kids go home to their parents after school and longed to have the same sense of stability and belonging.

When Joel was seventeen, he discovered that he might qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), which would allow him a pathway to lawful permanent residency. The Florence Project agreed to help Joel through this very difficult process. Our team worked to gain Joel’s trust and gather the evidence needed to prove he had suffered abuse and neglect by his parents. We represented him in juvenile court and successfully advocated to the judge that Joel was a dependent of the state and it would be in his best interest to stay in the U.S., clearing the way for his petition requesting SIJS.

Joel will never forget the day he found out the petition was approved. “I didn’t have the money so I never thought I would get a visa,” he said. “I thought I would have to go back to Mexico because I couldn’t work or go to college without it.” Once he had SIJS, Joel had to face one final hurdle in his legal process: preparing for the adjustment interview that would determine whether he would get a green card. Patrick, Florence Project Children’s Program managing attorney, helped Joel practice for the interview and was struck by his maturity.

“He’s a resilient kid,” Patrick recalled. “He always took the process very seriously, and he never missed an appointment with me.” Joel understood that the interview would impact the rest of his life. He not only practiced with Patrick; he researched the questions and asked his friends to quiz him. When the day came, he was prepared for every question. Patrick was overjoyed to call Joel with the news that he got his green card.

Two years later, Joel was the one calling Patrick with good news: he’d been accepted into Arizona State University. For Joel, having the support of the Florence Project was crucial for his success: “Patrick was really helpful to me. I will never forget him.”
Florence Project: Pioneers in Advocating for Children

Nearly three decades ago, Congress created Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) to protect unaccompanied minors who have suffered abuse, abandonment, or neglect. The process itself requires that a state court find that the child cannot reunify with one or both parents in light of the mistreatment they have suffered, and it is not in the best interest of the child to return to their home country.

Nearly 90% of unaccompanied minors who qualified for SIJS won their case when represented by a Florence Project staff attorney.

With your support, the Florence Project has served brave, inspiring children like Joel for 20 years, pioneering SIJS cases in Arizona. Thank you for allowing us to continue to do this important work.

Florence Project clients at a client appreciation picnic.
As a lesbian growing up in the mountains of El Salvador, Imelda faced constant discrimination and violence. She was bullied for dressing in boys’ clothes, and survived physical violence and beatings from multiple men.

When she was nineteen, Imelda was violently raped by a gang leader. Years later, the gang leader called Imelda from prison demanding that she pay him conjugal visits.

“I was afraid that he would send someone to kill me,” said Imelda. “So I left the country.”

When she first crossed the border, immigration authorities caught Imelda and immediately deported her. “They didn’t ask me if I was afraid. Nobody told me about asylum.” Imelda was deported twice more, a violation of her fundamental rights as an asylum seeker.

Because of these deportations, and despite the fact that her rights had been violated, Imelda no longer qualified for asylum. Instead, she would have to apply for “withholding of removal,” a legal remedy for immigrants who are afraid to return to their countries but are barred from asylum.

“Compared to asylum, it’s five times harder to win withholding,” says Adam, who represented Imelda on a volunteer basis after she was released from detention. In other words, her chances of staying in the U.S. were slim. Still, Imelda was determined to fight for herself, with the support of the Florence Project.

In addition to fighting for herself, Imelda fought for the other people she met in detention. “When people got bullied she would stand up for them,” says Liz, one of her Florence Project attorneys.

Imelda fought for herself through a series of hearings, denials, and defeats. Finally, on the day of her bond hearing, Imelda represented herself and convinced the judge that she deserved a chance to be released. She was released on a $15,000 bond.

She was out of detention but she still had to fight her withholding case to get to the finish line. After months of strategizing with our staff, Imelda faced the court and told her story in the final hearing. Twenty-two members of the local community showed up to support her.

After nearly two years working with her, Adam knew Imelda’s case by heart and eloquently defended her before the judge. Because of their collective effort and Imelda’s steadfast dedication, the judge granted her withholding of removal. Adam and Imelda are still fighting for her to qualify for asylum, which would give her a path to permanent residence. In the meantime, Imelda is working and thriving in the U.S.
Since 1989, we have worked with judges and facility officials to provide access to justice for detained immigrants in Arizona. Our innovative service models over the years formed the blueprint for the Department of Justice’s national Legal Orientation Program (LOP). In April of this year, the DOJ tried to halt the program, but thanks to your calls and Congress’ response, the program continues.

The Florence Project created this innovative service model in response to the great injustice of our immigration system—that if you cannot afford an attorney, you must represent yourself in immigration court. Our service models therefore allow us to reach thousands of individuals who need our help. We offer weekly group legal orientation presentations to educate people about their legal options. We offer individual legal orientations or intakes, listen to their stories, and empower them to make informed decisions about their cases. We offer intensive self-help workshops for those who are forced to represent themselves in court. We connect our clients to pro bono volunteer attorneys and represent cases in-house, always striving to increase legal representation.

Our staff is often the only lifeline for detained individuals like Imelda, trying to understand a complicated system on their own. Without our services, thousands of people would be without access to justice.

Thanks to your support, we are able to continue this important work and stand alongside people like Imelda, who is now released from detention and thriving in Arizona. **Thank you for believing that no one should be detained in a remote detention center for months on end, without access to justice!** Thanks to your help, we can stabilize our legal orientation work and grow direct representation for men, women, and children.

*Carlos, a client who received services through our program, is now released from detention.*
With your support, the Florence Project provides free legal and social services to detained adults and unaccompanied children facing immigration removal proceedings in Arizona.

With your support, the Florence Project ensures that all immigrants facing removal have access to counsel, understand their rights under the law, and are treated fairly and humanely.

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