“It was what I had always dreamed of.”

Six years after migrating from Guatemala to start a new life in the United States, our client Carolina* has been granted Legal Permanent Residency. We celebrated her win with a photoshoot to honor her resilience and introduce her and her daughter to our supporters. Here, Carolina reflects on her journey in a Q&A with the Florence Project Communications Team. The conversation was edited for brevity.

Q. Can you share a little about why you left Guatemala?

My dad was sick. I was one of seven children. We were in school, but after my dad got sick, his treatment was very expensive, and he couldn’t afford to help us anymore. I decided to come here so I could help my dad and my family. My dad would say, “Don’t go. The journey is too dangerous.” I was 16 years old.

Q. What happened when you arrived?

I was at a [government-run] shelter for about three months. I was going to live with an uncle in South Carolina, but then I could no longer go with him, so my aunt [in Phoenix] started the proceedings to be responsible for me, and that’s why I waited longer at the shelter.
Q. How has winning your case, and now being a Legal Permanent Resident, changed your life and the future for you and your daughter?

Honestly, it’s very nice to know that now I officially have my residency. I had almost lost hope by the time [the government] gave me the news that yes, I qualified for it. I felt very happy at that moment. It was what I had always dreamed of. My life has changed so much because now it’s safe for me to be here. I’m working and no longer afraid of being deported. I am confident, especially for the future of my daughter, because one day she will go to school and have what I didn’t have.

Q. Could you talk a little about your experience working with the Florence Project?

Since I arrived, I had 3 lawyers. They were all women. They treated me very well. They would always tell me, “Don’t lose hope. We are going to find a way. If we can’t help you in one way, we will find another.” They would encourage me so I wouldn’t lose hope, and we finally won.

Q. What are your dreams now for the future?

My dream is to persevere, work, and one day buy a home. Before, I didn’t have these plans because I thought that at any moment something could happen. But now, I can make my dreams a reality. Having a home, working, my daughter going to school—God will determine what dreams I will fulfill, but yes, I have many dreams I plan to fulfill.

Q. What is something that has been an adjustment for you? Or something that is different, or new, compared to Guatemala?

Well, how do I explain this… honestly, it is much calmer here. In Guatemala, crime happens very often and you are always at risk. But here it is safer. My biggest fear was being deported. I am calmer here.

Phoenix is very nice. I like the heat.

Q. How did your daughter like our photoshoot?

When we left, she was so tired she fell asleep in the car. Later, when she woke up, she said, ”Mom, the photos!” She got happy. And because she smiles a lot at home, but when others are around she’s very serious, I told her, “Why didn’t you smile like that earlier?” She said, “No, mami, I don’t like to.” And right now, I showed her the video [of the photoshoot on the Florence Project Instagram page] and she said, “Wow, mami, it’s me!” It’s the first time we’ve taken professional photos. It will be a lovely memory for us. Thank you.

* Pseudonym used to protect privacy

Carolina’s final immigration appointment, where she thanked attorney Zoe Sperber with a bouquet of flowers.
In 2020, a young man named Ahmed* fled Yemen after the country’s civil war engulfed his community. He crossed the globe in search of peace and safety, eventually reaching the U.S. Mexico border. A childhood friend lived in the United States, in Missouri, and they’d offered to help Ahmed start a new life there.

At the border, Ahmed was processed as an asylum seeker and sent to endure detention at La Palma Detention Center in Eloy, Arizona. The Florence Project met with Ahmed in detention and learned of the persecution he suffered in Yemen. Ahmed lacked the financial resources to secure counsel, and so our Pro Bono Program arranged for a team of attorneys at the law firm of Perkins Coie to represent Ahmed free of charge.

Acknowledging the complexity of immigration law, and the high stakes of each case, the Florence Project matches the generosity of time and talent provided by pro bono attorneys with individualized mentoring. To that end, Katharine Ruhl, a managing attorney in the Florence Project’s Pro Bono Program with over 15 years of experience, partnered with the Perkins Coie pro bono attorneys and mentored them on the nuances of asylum law. Recognizing the key role of language translation in communicating with Ahmed and preparing his case, the team also arranged for a volunteer interpreter, Mahfoudh Jemaa, to translate between English and Arabic.

At that point in the COVID-19 pandemic, people in immigration detention were suffering extended lockdowns and anxiety over outbreaks in the facilities. While screening Ahmed’s case over the phone, Florence Project staff worried about his mental health, as he would frequently break down under the stress and anxiety of detention.

The Perkins team met with him in person to build a rapport, and they worked diligently together to gather evidence of Ahmed’s persecution in Yemen. Finally, eight months after Ahmed first entered ICE custody, they went to court for his asylum hearing. The team presented his claim of fear, and an expert
delivered testimony on the situation in Yemen. The immigration judge acknowledged that, if credible, Ahmed had a strong claim for protection in light of the serious risk of torture. However, failing to believe Ahmed, the judge ultimately denied Ahmed’s asylum claim.

Trusting in their client’s credibility, the Perkins team appealed the immigration judge’s denial and brought on a new Perkins attorney for the appeal - Alisha Herman. A former U.S. refugee officer who also speaks Arabic, Alisha quickly earned Ahmed’s trust and built a rapport as his advocate. She worked with the team’s Arabic interpreter, Mahfoudh Jemaa, to document the many ways in which the government’s interpreter at Ahmed’s asylum hearing had failed to provide competent translation, prejudicing the proceedings and contributing to the judge’s negative credibility finding. Since Mahfoudh had been present at Ahmed’s court hearing, Mahfoudh provided a declaration of these observations for Alisha to present to the Board of Immigration Appeals.

Meanwhile, as months passed, Ahmed grew despondent. It became evident to him that the U.S. government was discriminating against him because he is Muslim.

One day, a guard confronted Ahmed during his morning prayer, claiming that his faith practice disturbed the other people in his detention pod. Without further explanation, the next day, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) placed Ahmed in high-security custody and isolation, a gross violation of his human rights. Ahmed’s attorneys demanded to know why their client was sent to isolation. ICE claimed, without evidence, that Ahmed was too dangerous to be among the general population.

Ahmed began a hunger strike to protest his cruel and unjust detention and isolation. Ahmed felt empowered by this decision, though as the hunger strike went on for weeks, his mental and physical health severely declined. He could hardly speak. The detention center put Ahmed under medical observation and eventually sent him to a hospital while ICE pursued a court order to allow them to force feed Ahmed.

Alisha and the Perkins team argued that the detention facility was ill-equipped to conduct force feedings. This dangerous procedure involves subduing a person and inserting tubes in their nostrils. The team sought for Ahmed to be kept in the care of the hospital until his case was resolved. Despite this advocacy, the judge granted ICE permission to conduct force feedings.

Ahmed’s legal team was right—the government was ill-equipped to conduct this procedure, putting him in danger.

During one of the violent force feedings, Ahmed suffered nerve damage and lost partial use of his left hand.

His attorneys filed an emergency motion and restraining order to halt the force feedings. They also scheduled a visit from a doctor to evaluate Ahmed’s injuries, but before he could be seen, ICE transferred Ahmed to an immigration detention center in Florida.

The legal team was preparing for a new bond hearing and, if necessary, habeas litigation—a challenge against illegal imprisonment—in district court. But to argue for Ahmed’s release, the Perkins team needed Ahmed transferred back to Arizona. They fought to have him returned to their jurisdiction and, finally, he was.

During the bond hearing, the government declined to submit evidence for their argument that Ahmed posed a danger to society. The justification to release him was overwhelming, including the documented language issues at his initial hearing, the serious injuries he suffered as a result of forced feedings, the pending district court litigation, and his strong connections to his sponsor. He’d been detained for 18 months by that point. Finally, Ahmed won release. He exited ICE detention and took pictures with Alisha and Mahfoudh before flying to reunite with his childhood friend, who will host him for the remainder of his immigration proceedings.

In 2021, the Biden Administration granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Yemeni immigrants, meaning that they cannot be deported back to the war-torn country while the designation remains in effect.
Ahmed’s TPS application is pending, and he is thrilled to be free and enjoying peace. The Board of Immigration Appeals dismissed his asylum appeal, but the Florence Project continues to zealously advocate on his behalf. We are currently appealing his case to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Sadly, doctors say that Ahmed is unlikely to fully recover from the nerve damage he suffered during the violent force feedings, especially given the delay in medical treatment while he remained in ICE detention for months after the injury occurred. Ahmed recently received surgery on his hand and will pursue physical therapy and long-term treatment for his pain. He is currently preparing to submit a claim under the Federal Tort Claim Act to receive compensation and hold the government accountable for its negligence and abuse.

In honor of Alisha Herman’s unwavering advocacy, the Florence Project named her the Adult Program Pro Bono Attorney of the Year.

“With the support of Perkins Coie, Alisha repeatedly rose to the challenge of protecting Ahmed’s rights, zealously representing him in multiple forums,” says Katharine Ruhl.

“Equally important, she invested time to create powerful trust with Ahmed. She listened to his voice and understood his wishes before becoming his voice in the legal system. That investment allowed her to secure his freedom, and, ultimately, renewed his hope to secure asylum in this country.”

The Florence Project also named Mahfoudh Jemaa the Volunteer of the Year for his Arabic interpretation and for his work identifying the errors that occurred in the government’s interpretation of Ahmed’s asylum hearing.

Thanks to your support, we are able to expand our impact by partnering with attorneys and volunteers in our community who generously donate their time and talent to advocate for our clients. Through our Pro Bono Program, we will continue to drive forward a vision in which all immigrants facing removal have access to counsel, understand their rights, and are treated fairly and humanely. Thank you for bringing us closer to realizing that vision every single day!

* Pseudonym used to protect privacy
Several former clients have received their Green Cards, including Israel*

Israel spent most of his life in the U.S. and is relieved to remain near his family after stressful immigration proceedings to defend his Legal Permanent Residency status. “This opportunity is allowing me to keep on building the American Dream,” Israel says. “I have a job and I’m saving so I can start my own business. All this and much more to come would not be possible if it wasn’t for Mrs. [Katharine] Ruhl and her team at the Florence Project.”

* Pseudonym used to protect privacy

MPP is Over!

Thanks to your unrelenting advocacy and dedication, the Biden administration recently announced the formal end of MPP (Migrant Protection Protocols) also known as “Remain in Mexico,” which put tens of thousands of asylum seekers in grave danger since it was first implemented nearly four years ago.

Together, we bore witness to years of irreparable harm and violations of migrants’ rights under Remain in Mexico, and we celebrate the long-awaited end of this program. As we celebrate these advocacy wins, we carry renewed hope for a more compassionate, humane immigration policy.

This victory is a direct result of years of advocacy by asylum seekers, organizations across the United States, and people like you! Every time we asked you to call your members of Congress, share petitions, and speak up, you rose to the occasion. And you make a tremendous difference.

Border Narratives: Collaboration with University of Arizona

We recently partnered with a University of Arizona art class to create illustrations of our clients and their stories of resilience. One student, Isabella DeFine, was inspired by the story of our client Belinda, who was originally featured in our 2020 Annual Report, and her passion for helping people feel confident and beautiful through her work as a hairstylist.

Another student, Robin Silverman, illustrated Luan’s journey, which appeared in our 2021 Annual Report. Luan played chess with himself to cope with isolation in detention. Robin referenced this detail in a statement he wrote to accompany the art: “I chose [to create art inspired by Luan] because this was something I did all the time as a child, since I was rarely allowed to go do things with others. Although we obviously were in very different situations, I really empathized with feeling such intense
loneliness that you resort to playing games with yourself instead.”

We are looking forward to sharing all of this beautiful artwork with you in the near future! Sign up for our e-newsletter and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to be the first to see it!

Border Patrol Held Accountable for Abuse of Children

We joined other immigration advocacy organizations across the country to file complaints with the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) and the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) detailing patterns of abuse and mistreatment of immigrant children in Customs and Border Protection (CBP) custody at the southern border. Along with our partners, we documented over one thousand reports from children who were mistreated in Border Patrol custody.

We filed more than 130 individual CRCL complaints on behalf of children who suffered mistreatment including excessive detention, verbal and physical abuse, deprivation of medical care, insufficient food and water, family separation, and other human rights violations. More than 780 children reported being detained for longer than the government-mandated limit of 72 hours. We joined our partners in calling on CBP to find a trauma-informed and child-friendly system to welcome, screen, and ensure the safety of children arriving to the United States seeking protection.

For nearly a year, we worked with the Marshall Project on a major multimedia report titled “No Place for a Child,” which was published in June in conjunction with Politico. We continue to monitor the situation and elevate reports of abuse and mistreatment as appropriate. The Florence Project’s Advocacy Team also continues to raise awareness of these injustices through national media and Congressional outreach.
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.