“My first hope was that I would live”: Alam’s Immigration Odyssey

In 2019, Alam and his family in Bangladesh faced violent persecution over their political beliefs. The government had begun a crackdown on anyone who opposed the ruling regime, and Alam, desperate and afraid, fled the country. “I was scared. And when I left, I cried a lot, and my family cried a lot,” he says.

Alam’s destination was Pennsylvania, where his extended family promised to help him resettle. His uncle runs an Indian restaurant in Pittsburgh, and Alam could work there.

“It is very difficult to survive in Bangladesh based on the political situation,” Alam says.

His trip to the U.S. was a modern-day odyssey: he traveled to India, then flew to Brazil and made his way north through jungles, deserts, and rivers, often sleeping outside. He was 17 years old.

When Alam arrived at the U.S. border and asked for asylum, another odyssey began—this time with the immigration system.

As a minor, Alam was initially placed in a government-run children’s shelter in Phoenix. He felt very alone. No one else spoke Bengali. However, instead of releasing Alam to live with his family, the government sought to send him to an adult detention center.
Ignoring Alam’s birth certificate and records showing he was 17, government officials claimed Alam was an adult by presenting dental x-rays as evidence, even though forensic experts say that x-rays cannot show a person’s exact age. Alam’s own statements about his age should have also been considered, according to rules regulating the custody of migrant children. But Alam was still sent to an adult detention center in Eloy, Arizona, to remain in prison-like conditions while his asylum case played out.

“That was one of my worst points,” Alam says. “They housed me with older people. I had a lot of struggles when it came to getting proper food and medications.” Alam suffered from a skin rash that made him extremely itchy and uncomfortable, and he had asthma, both of which went untreated for months. “It was really bad then,” Alam reiterates. “I was always alone.”

Our Advocacy Team went to work challenging the legality of Alam’s detainment in court. A judge dismissed this petition. We appealed. An immigration judge also denied his asylum case. Alam remained detained during the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. He was finally released at the peak of the pandemic due to his respiratory condition, which made him particularly vulnerable. He remembers that day well.

“When I finally left the detention center, I saw the security and I couldn’t believe that I was inside of there for almost two years. I was so happy that I would soon be reunited with my family.”

Alam was dropped off at a Greyhound station. While he waited for his bus, he enjoyed the moment of feeling free and watching everything around him, the city, the people, the cars going by. No one has ever been so happy to pass time at a Phoenix bus station. He asked someone to borrow their phone to call his family in Bangladesh, and they agreed. His family was overjoyed to hear that he was released.

“I just want to say thank you,” Alam wrote in a message to Florence Project staff.

“I will never forget that you have done a lot for me. I get shocked when I think about my case — I had nothing, no status for my case two years ago. Now I have everything because of you.”

We are incredibly happy for Alam and excited to share his words of gratitude with you, our supporters, who make this work possible!

However, he was still under threat of deportation. We worked closely with Alam’s private counsel in Pennsylvania to appeal his asylum denial. The Ninth Circuit Court agreed to re-hear his case. We later took over representation of Alam’s asylum appeal.

He finally won asylum this past May and is currently living near his family in Pittsburgh, working at this uncle’s restaurant, and practicing his English.

“My first hope in coming to the United States was that I would live, that I would be able to survive,” Alam says. “My second hope was to be able to have a job and sort of live the American dream.”

He hopes to someday open his own Indian restaurant. In the meantime, he has enjoyed family trips to places like Niagara Falls and is making friends in his new community.
Safe, Free, and Joyful – A Day of Fun with Our Clients

In April, we celebrated our first in-person Spring Client Appreciation Event since 2019!

Arranging opportunities to have fun with our clients—some still in government custody, others already released to live with family—is a highlight in our work.

Our Integrated Social Services Program and our Children’s Legal Program work together to organize client appreciation events that include food, games, arts and crafts, gifts, and prizes. These occasions provide a momentary escape from the uncertainty our clients face in their legal cases. This year, we were also able to have a photographer join the event to capture the fun and offer family portraits. Our clients loved it!

Witnessing our clients being safe, free, and joyful is one of our greatest privileges. The Florence Project does everything possible to make sure our clients feel celebrated and cared for, and we hope they enjoy these moments as much as we do.
Florence Project legal assistant Sofia Kalogirou meets with unaccompanied children at a government-run shelter in Phoenix. She came to this work having grown up in an immigrant family; her father is from Cyprus and her mother emigrated from Mexico.

Language skills are vital on the Florence Project’s direct services teams, since our clients came from 74 countries and spoke a combined 42 languages in 2022. Sofia speaks English, Spanish, Greek, and French, which she studied for four years at the American University of Paris. She uses these skills to empower the children, and to build a rapport so she can effectively work with them on their immigration cases.

A typical day at the shelter begins with a “Know Your Rights” presentation to new arrivals. Sofia uses child-friendly language to explain how the immigration system works, and if any of the children feel like they are being mistreated, they will have an opportunity to tell her during a private consultation afterward. Sofia holds individual meetings with each child to hear where they came from, why, and what their goal is in the United States.

Florence Project staff are often the first people that migrants meet in the U.S. who are not Border Patrol, ICE, or another federal employee mandated to detain them. To put it another way, our clients often say that their Florence Project attorney, social worker or legal assistant was the first and only person they met in detention who was there to help.

“A lot of them come to live with family, but they get stuck in a shelter, and they don’t know why,” Sofia says. “We explain the whole system and its processes to them, and they’re so thankful. We educate the children on what visas are, what a lawyer does, and more about the legal process, which really sets them up for success in their immigration proceedings.”

Children often ask Sofia how she learned Spanish. She tells them that her mother is from Mexico, and that’s exciting for them to hear.

“They see that generations of immigrants have come here and it’s very inspiring,” Sofia shares. “They can picture themselves having a future here, with a career and a different life. That’s something important those of us who are fellow immigrants or children of immigrants can offer. We serve as a model and give that extra hope.”

When Sofia meets with a child who speaks French — children from Guinea, Senegal, or Mali, for example — they get excited to meet someone who speaks the same language as them. In the shelters, most conversations are in Spanish, with English serving as the second language. Children who don’t speak either of those languages can face additional hurdles to justice. The government struggles to provide language accessibility, even in court.

“They’re so thankful even just to hear someone speak French with them,” Sofia says. “I get to answer all their questions, and I really take my time when I meet with those kids, because I know that I’m probably going to be the last person they speak with for a long time who speaks the same language as them that is not an interpreter, and who can actually see them, face to face, and engage with them.”

Avoiding re-traumatization on a ‘sensitive’ case

Recently, Sofia worked with a 13-year-old girl and her 7-year-old brother who had been released, with their
grandmother, to live with an aunt and uncle in Phoenix. The children’s parents were tragically murdered in Guatemala, and the perpetrators continued to threaten the extended family afterward, compelling the children’s grandmother to bring them to the United States.

“I’m so glad we are here for them,” Sofia says. “There is no court-appointed attorney in immigration cases, and so without the Florence Project these children would have to argue their cases in front of an immigration judge, against an ICE attorney, alone.”

Working with attorney Denisse Gonzalez, Sofia gathered photos, news articles and police reports about the murder. They just needed the children’s version of events to prepare their asylum applications. The team planned for that conversation carefully, knowing the sensitive nature of the case.

“It’s important when inquiring about traumatic events to speak thoughtfully, use child-friendly language, and to continually make sure the client is okay,” Sofia says. “We preface ourselves by saying: ‘I have to ask you some tough questions, and if you don’t feel like you want to tell me right now, that’s okay.’ I’m always paying attention to the child’s emotional state, watching their body language to make sure they are not feeling overwhelmed.”

To mitigate re-traumatization, the team avoids discussing unnecessary details and provides coloring pages, stress balls, and other trauma-informed strategies that help children stay grounded.

The 7-year-old boy colored the whole time. His older sister answered the questions. When Sofia talked to the boy directly, he would smile and look at his sister and wait for her to respond. He seemed very shy. But after the meeting, he started talking to Sofia more directly. She could tell he was getting more comfortable with her. They discussed activities the kids like, such as school and playing with their cousins, to end the conversation with an uplifting topic.

“I am happy to share that the children’s first immigration court hearing went very well,” Sofia says. “We received administrative closure in their removal proceedings, putting them on a more secure route to legal status. They’ve also begun to learn English. The boy is enjoying playing with his cousins, while his sister remains positive, as always, and had a big smile on her face at our last meeting.”

A new outlook and a new position

This fall, Sofia will transition to a new role at the Florence Project in which she can represent clients in immigration court through a special accreditation from the Department of Justice. The “DOJ Accredited Representative” certification process was created to allow for greater access to legal defense for people facing immigration removal.

Sofia recently became a mother, and she says the experience has made her even more sensitive to the circumstances her clients have fled.

“I feel invested on a deeper level now on what it means to help these children. If my daughter had to come here by herself, I’d hope somebody would be able to explain to her what’s going on,” Sofia says.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like for a parent having to send their kids, not even knowing what their future holds and just hoping it’s better than the circumstances they leave behind,” she adds. “I’m thankful to have such an inspiring job. It’s very rewarding to know I get to help the most vulnerable of immigrants—the unaccompanied children who come to this country.”
Ongoing Injustice at the U.S.-Mexico Border

Introduction

When the Title 42 border closure ended on May 11, 2023, it was replaced by other policies that continue to block access to asylum for thousands of people. People seeking protection at the border, including families with small children, must still wait in dangerous conditions for weeks or months while they grapple with a new asylum ban, which has two components:

- A transit ban that bars people from receiving asylum if they passed through another country en route to the U.S. when they did not seek asylum in that country first. People who present at an appointment secured via the CBP One app are exempted.

- An entry ban that bars people from receiving asylum if they enter the U.S. between ports of entry, despite that historically being a legal method to seek protection and a necessary route to safety for people fleeing imminent harm.

The ban inflicts disproportionate suffering on Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers; asylum seekers with disabilities, pregnancies, or medical vulnerabilities; and those who don’t read or write English or Spanish. Under the asylum ban, people should be allowed to enter the U.S., but they will have to overcome a presumption of ineligibility for asylum throughout the legal process, an incredibly high bar. Many will be deported.

Here’s a more detailed look at how things work on the ground in Nogales, Sonora, MX, which borders Nogales, Arizona:

Arrive at the Southern Border

Migrants served at the Kino Border Initiative’s Migrant Aid Center can receive legal orientation and education by attending a group orientation from the Florence Project’s Border Action Team (BAT). Learning about asylum law, current border policies, and ways to access humanitarian protection in the U.S. empowers people to make the best decisions for themselves and their families. BAT answers any questions and offers individual consultations to provide information to indigenous or third language speakers or to discuss private concerns, like potential family separation or urgent humanitarian circumstances.

Present for Asylum at the U.S. Port of Entry

Appointments Through the CBP One App

In January 2023, the U.S. government began to require asylum seekers at the U.S./Mexico border to access asylum by using a smartphone appointment app called CBP One. Using the app to schedule an appointment at a port of entry to present for asylum is the only way to access the asylum process now.

A system that relies on access to a cell phone, tech savvy, and internet access is inherently unfair and discriminatory. To obtain an appointment, one must be able to read in one of the two languages the app offers: English or Spanish. There are additional guides or resources available for Haitian Kreyol, Portuguese, or Russian but the app is not available in those languages. Since there are exponentially more people seeking appointments than there are appointments available,
What about people in urgent situations?

We file humanitarian parole or expedited processing requests on behalf of people with life-threatening medical conditions or imminent safety concerns to help them access care or protection in the United States quickly. However, CBP officials in Nogales have historically ignored or denied requests for humanitarian parole, so this is an advocacy priority for our border and advocacy teams.

What happens after people enter the country?

People who do secure an appointment through the CBP One app undergo a security screening and generally receive parole to enter the country and a court date to begin their asylum proceedings in their final destination communities.

People who present for asylum at the port of entry through the metering line are processed into the country in a similar manner to those with a CBP One appointment. Some are detained and put into expedited removal proceedings, a fast-track deportation process that allows low-level immigration officers to rapidly deport recently-arrived immigrants back to their countries in a matter of days or weeks without ever seeing an immigration judge.

Through community partner collaborations, BAT identifies people who received our legal services in Nogales and were then detained and meets with them before their credible or reasonable fear interview, the first step in the expedited removal process. Access to counsel is critical; passing the fear interview is the only way someone can get out of expedited removal and have their case heard by an immigration judge. For people who have the asylum ban applied to their case, access to counsel is even more important because they must meet higher standards to pass the interview and are more likely to be deported.

Since Title 42 ended, over 66% of the people that BAT has prepared for their fear interviews have passed, been scheduled for regular asylum proceedings, and released from detention – a huge win! More importantly, there are thousands of people who were able to avoid detention altogether through accessing BAT’s legal orientation program at the border and understanding the options available to them and the potential consequences of those options. Through this service model, we have been able to provide critical legal information and to minimize the amount of time that people are detained.
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.

Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project

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