

Caring for Unaccompanied Minors

By: Karen Barajas Powell, Catholic Charities Hogar Staff Attorney

How do you make a box?" The 7-year-old boy smiles as he waits in anticipation for the response.

This young boy is currently in Immigration Court Removal Proceedings, and I am his attorney.

After trying to explain the client-attorney confidentiality agreement to his understanding, I asked if he had any questions for me. That's when he asked about the box—reminding me of his innocence and youth, despite his circumstances.

He fled to the United States with his 9 and 12-year-old sisters—escaping an abusive living situation and gang violence in their native country of El Salvador.

At only 7 years old, he has already lived through so much. In addition to his trials at home, he's had three weeks of detainment and two hearings at immigration court here. Yet his resilience shines through.

A large majority of these unaccompanied minors come from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—countries ravaged by gang violence that remain among the most dangerous in the world.

In a study entitled *Children On The Run*, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reported that "in the context of entrenched poverty, an escalating threat posed by drug trafficking, polarized political systems, weak law enforcement and social hardships such as poverty and unemployment, insecurity is on the rise in communities and in homes in the region [of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala]. The humanitarian impact of this situation includes the displacement of a record number of children who separate from their families and flee unaccompanied."

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" -Matthew 25:35

Boys who remain in these dangerous areas often have to decide between possibly dying at the hands of a gang they refuse to join, the hands of a rival gang, or the police if they do join a gang.

Girls choose between becoming the "property" of a gang member or being raped and possibly killed.

Therefore, this fear of gangs and violence, along with the poverty and abuse, are driving factors as these children flee to the United States. They are seeking



The three siblings are now safely living with extended family in Alexandria and are applying for a special legal status to keep them in the U.S.

compassion and relief; an opportunity to live a life of authentic dignity and inherent value.

Children are the most vulnerable of all. We must ensure they are given the protection and care they so desperately need and deserve.



GET INVOLVED!

We need bilingual, pro-bono attorneys and bilingual translators to volunteer with this program. If interested, please contact us at 571-208-1572 or volunteer.hogar@ccda.net.

"Coffee and Conversation" is an hour-long session for Hogar students to practice speaking skills they are learning in English classes. Conversation is important to our students, and it fits in with our mission to help immigrants become more self-sufficient. The sessions mimic a real-life coffee shop – there's no structure, students just start with small talk and use what language they know and struggle through what they are still learning. It is a comfortable environment to practice their skills without making a mistake in front of the class.

For more information on Catholic Charities Hogar Immigrant Services, please contact Brooke Hammond-Perez at BPerez@ccda.net or 571-208-1572, ext. 101.

Since the Coffee and Conversation sessions were introduced in January, 55 students and 20 volunteers have participated at our Manassas location.

