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Young people traveling across the border alone are making it to Maryland—and fighting to stay

By Elizabeth Doerr

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Ana Herrera with her aunt and cousins in Frederick, Md. She traveled here alone from El Salvador. (Tanya Garcia/for City Paper)

You couldn't tell just from meeting Ana Herrera—upbeat and nonchalant—that she's experienced more trauma in her 20 years than most Americans experience in a lifetime. Speaking at her aunt's home in Frederick, she moves swiftly into a narrative that she has developed over her year-and-a-half in the U.S.

"I suffered much before I came to the United States [from El Salvador]," she reads from a speech she wrote that someone helped her translate into English. "Both of my parents abandoned me when I was four months old. My grandmother took me in, but she didn't have a job and she was not able to give me enough food or other things. We lived in a small house with a lot of other people. I was always hungry because we could only afford one or two meals each day. The neighborhood was very dangerous. One day, I saw my cousin get murdered, and the people who did it knew that I saw it. My life was in danger, so I fled the country a few days later."

Her cousin's murder was the catalyst for a treacherous journey. Over the next four weeks, Ana would travel over 2,000 miles by bus and on foot to cross the border in Texas. She was captured by the border patrol shortly after crossing into the country and swept up by the Immigration Service, which sent her to the Coastal Bend Detention Center in Robstown, Texas.

Ana is hesitant to share details of her trip to the United States. She traveled alone and by bus. She speaks abstractly about feeling cold and hungry and tired and alone. She also thinks about the thousands of other young kids who also made the trip alone.

Like so many others before her, Ana was detained at the U.S. border near Hidalgo, Texas. She was held there for three weeks—it's meant only as a temporary holding center for immigrants—before she was transferred to another holding center for which she doesn't know the name. She spent another month there where she remembers the constant wails of children echoing off the walls. Exhausted, hungry, and alone, she was terrified. "I had no one to care for me," she says, "no one came to visit me in this prison." She didn't speak the language or understand the culture; her only family in the U.S. was an aunt 1,700 miles away in Frederick, Maryland.

She thinks about the other children, those even younger than her, who took the trip alone. "They're badly treated," she says as she glances over lovingly at her one-and-a-half-year old cousin, Willis climbing all over his older siblings. "When they're picked up by immigration they are taken to a place where they're cold, they are treated poorly, and the only food they get is a moldy sandwich. These kids are crying and crying and crying because they're tired and hungry and the immigration officer doesn't do anything."

Then after a long and uncertain few weeks, on July 29, 2014, Ana was sent by immigration to live with her aunt in Frederick.

Ana had already turned 18 at the time, so she wasn't considered a minor. But she was in a tricky in-between age, not one of the 39,970 minors who entered the U.S. alone, without parents or relatives, last year, nor one of 3,884 unaccompanied minors that landed in Maryland in fiscal year 2014. But she was young, under 21 and still technically classified as a "juvenile," and she arrived alone.

"What's interesting about these unaccompanied minors, is that they live in terrible, awful, violent circumstances," says Scott Rose, Ana's lawyer, who volunteers through the legal program of Catholic Charities of Baltimore's Esperanza Center. "But a lot of people live in that and don't leave. Particularly a kid is not going to leave their family and friends no matter how bleak the circumstances. They're not going to take this terrible trip alone...unless the pain of staying is bigger than the pain in leaving." And for Ana, that pain was punctuated by not only witnessing a horrific crime against a family member, but the risk to her own life. She knew she had no other choice than to leave or be murdered herself.

"People often feel like these kids are leaving the U.S. to feel the slice of the American dream," Rose continues. "But they're running away from trauma."

The Lucky One

Still, Ana is one of the lucky ones. Not only did she make it to her aunt's home in Maryland, but she also qualifies for Special Immigrant Juveniles (SIJ) Status granted specifically to young immigrants under 21 who can prove they have been abused, abandoned, or neglected. Because Ana was abandoned at birth and she is unable to reunify with either one of her parents, she is eligible.

Ana's was among the 11,500 SIJ petitions filed in 2015 and one of the 8,739 approved that year. Even though the number of petitions had a 100 percent increase from the 5,776 in 2014 to 2015, they still represent a fraction of the young people fleeing trauma in their home countries.

Within about a year-and-a-half of arriving in Frederick, she'll have her green card—which she's set to receive any day now—that will allow her to both live and work in the U.S.

In fiscal year 2014, during the peak of migration, 68,541 unaccompanied minors were apprehended according to the Customs and Border Protection agency. In 2015, the number decreased to 39,970,

however, the numbers are beginning to rise again. As of March 31 2016, the numbers for fiscal year 2016 have already reached 27,754.

These detention numbers don't include the young people who never complete the dangerous journey or the ones who make it across the border evading border control. Even though U.S. detentions of unaccompanied minors dropped from 2014 to 2015, this doesn't mean fewer kids are attempting the journey. Many are being captured in Mexico before they reach the U.S. thanks to money the U.S. gave the country to beef up enforcement.

"Initially after Mexico stepped up its efforts, we did see a decrease," says Adonia Simpson, Managing Attorney at Esperanza Center, referring to Mexico's launch of its Southern Border Program in 2014. This is when Mexico beefed up security on the southern border with Guatemala and Belize, intercepting a number of migrants from Central America, specifically Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. And indeed, detentions of Central American migrants in Mexico increased from 119,714 in 2014 to 171,934 in 2015 (23,096 being unaccompanied minors in 2014 and 35,704 in 2015). Clearly, people are still leaving their home countries; fewer are making it here.

"There have been many studies that said that the number of people leaving Central America actually stayed the same," says Simpson. "It was just the numbers that were making it here have decreased. In the last six months, I think the enforcement has lagged quite a bit, so the numbers have been trending back upwards." Statistics from the Mexican Interior Ministry do show a downward trend of detentions with over 10,000 Central American immigrants detained in January 2016 compared to over 13,000 in January 2015.

What these numbers don't tell us, though, are why people are leaving, especially young people. The Special Juvenile Immigrant (SJI) petitions—11,500 filed in 2015 alone—might give us a clue as to some of the reasons young people come: violence in the home, neglect, or abandonment. Yet it's only a glimpse of the circumstances. While Ana was most certainly living in extreme poverty in El Salvador, it wasn't until she feared for her life that she left.

Why They Leave

A 2014 United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) study called "Children on the Run" looks at why young people are taking such huge risks to leave Central America. Researchers found two overarching patterns: kids fleeing violence from gangs and organized crime or fleeing violence at home. Forty-eight percent of the young people interviewed had been affected by the increase of violence in their communities and 21 percent survived abuse at home.

"I've had teenagers show me scars from machete accidents from working in the fields. Or they're working around hazardous chemicals," says Simpson. "One of the things we do [when we do an intake interview with a kid], we ask them to describe everything. What your living situation was like, six to 10 people living in a one-room house, no running water, no electricity, skipping meals because they didn't have enough to eat."

Ana elaborates on what it's like to be a young person in El Salvador.

"Around the time a young boy turns 12, they're brought into the gangs or bad things could happen to them," she says. "They start with robbery, dealing drugs, or murder. They can't go to school and they don't have options to go to school because of that." Even school isn't a safe place, she adds.

The Journey to the U.S.

Ana tells her story in a matter-of-fact way. It's a narrative she's established over her year of working with her lawyer, not only to build her case, but also to share her story with others so they can understand what she and others have gone through. But when pressed about the specifics of her cousin's death, she says, "It's a part of my life that I try not to think about because it causes pain. So I don't talk about it."

"It's a delicate balance," says her lawyer Scott Rose. "I'm in the mental health field. I know that, years ago, we thought that it was cathartic to relive the details of their past trauma. We now know it's not cathartic, it's re-traumatizing. I struggle with [this] as an attorney demonstrating in the court that this child was abandoned, abused, and neglected. I need to present the case of that trauma and yet, I try to do it in a way that isn't re-traumatizing for the kid."

And for many immigrants, the traumas multiply as they make the trek north. They risk kidnapping, extortion from the coyote they or their families paid to get them across the border, and, of course, getting caught by border control and sent back.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) report states "Children...in principle [should] not be detained at all." U.S. laws follow child welfare standards and within 72 hours the kids are supposed to be taken into the care of U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS). Because Ana had recently turned 18, she wasn't considered a minor, so instead of being transferred quickly to a refugee resettlement shelter run by HHS, she was detained with other immigrant adults and families.

One of the first questions case workers ask both unaccompanied minors and adults detained at the border is whether they have any family member or sponsor in the United States. In Ana's case, she had her aunt in Frederick to whom she was released on bail after two months of detention.

After reuniting with her aunt, Ana wasn't in the clear immediately, as anyone detained at the border still must go through a lengthy legal process to establish residency. Ana, though, had connected with Rose through Esperanza Center and he advocated for her SIJ status, giving her a quick path to legal residency in the U.S. She is now a legal resident.

What the Future Holds

It's been an adjustment for Ana, not only learning a new language, but also living with a family member that she hadn't seen since early childhood. But it's clear she's started thinking about her future.

"I want to work in a bank. I knew a woman who worked in a bank [in El Salvador] and I always admired her," Ana says. Her tone changes—from what seems to be rote repetition of the events that brought her to Maryland, to genuine excitement about her plans once she gets her green card. "I want to wear the uniform and be like her."