

Missionary in McAllen ministers to new arrivals seeking asylum

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McALLEN—An influx of asylum-seeking immigrants from Central America who began arriving in McAllen four years ago gained brief national attention. But for one Texas Baptist border-area missionary, it launched an ongoing ministry.

Vanessa Quintanilla-Lerma, who serves with River Ministry, has met and helped hundreds of immigrants every month for the past four years.

With the rise of violence in the Northern Triangle of Central America—Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador—many border entry points in Texas saw a rise of ‘Unaccompanied Alien Children’ in 2014 compared to the previous year. The border in the Rio Grande saw [apprehensions increase 132 percent](#), the biggest rise of all the southwest borders.

But there also was a rise of parents arriving in the United States with their children.

Quintanilla, working alongside other Christian groups, helps those newly arrived families figure out where to go next.

If children arrive without an adult, they are placed under the care of Health and Human Services to determine whether they need to be sent back to their country of origin or need [protection](#).

Parents who arrive with children only can count on the assistance they receive from people like Quintanilla, who in 2014 noticed U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers were leaving people at bus stations without any help or guidance.

Dropped off at a bus station

“When it all started, we were seeing 200 people being dropped at the bus station (every day in McAllen), but nobody knew what was going on,” Quintanilla said.

Immigrant families would stay at the bus station until they boarded a bus to their next stop. Bus stations became overcrowded, and many of the people had no food, clean clothes or toiletries, Quintanilla said.

Because they did not speak English or understand how some things work in the United States, she added, they became easy prey for people who took advantage of them.

Catholic Charities formed a group in June 2014 to help immigrant families before they left McAllen to meet with family members. Within a month, Quintanilla was volunteering to help families.

“We all thought this was not going to be permanent,” Quintanilla recalled.

But four years later, people keep showing up at the border after having left the violence or the threats of violence in their homelands.

Hopeful stop on a difficult journey



Eli Fernandez directs the Humanitarian Respite Center. (Photo / Isa Torres)

When a group of families has been cleared at the immigration offices, Eli Fernandez, the coordinator of Catholic Charities' Respite Center, goes to pick families up at the bus station.

Depending on the weather and the number of people, Fernandez either walks or drives the van a few blocks down to the bus station and brings the families to the Respite Center.

With the help of volunteers and donations, newly arrived families get a chance to eat a hot meal, take a shower, wash whatever clothes they still carry with them after the trip and receive medical assistance.

It's a small but hopeful stop in the long journey they have had, and in the long journey that awaits them, Fernandez notes.

At the center, volunteers help people who just arrived in the United States to contact family members who live here already. They try to coordinate travel plans so once the immigrants arrive at their final destination, their family will be there ready to pick them up.

‘Restores human dignity’

Many families are surprised to see the Respite Center offer them help without asking for anything in return. At every other stop along their journey, people demanded something in return, even for minimal help.



Volunteers at the Humanitarian Respite Center in the Rio Grande Valley sort clothing donated to immigrant families. (Photo / Isa Torres)

Perhaps that is why this short stop on their journey “restores their human dignity,” Fernandez said.

“It is not an ‘American Dream’ they are seeking,” Quintanilla said. “They are seeking assistance. They have had family members killed.”

A Christian’s duty is to show those traumatized families the love of God, Quintanilla said.

“We can think people come here to take our jobs, but the truth is they come without knowing the language and without any resources,” she added.

She noted the United States carefully checks the backgrounds of immigrants, and those with a criminal background are not allowed to enter the country.

Escaping violence in their homelands

Often a mother or father who arrives with children has left a spouse back home with their other children because gangs have threatened them. Gang members tell families they will protect them in exchange for money. If families do not pay a certain quota to these gangs, the gangs will hurt them and often kill them.

But while the goal of these families is “to reunite with the rest of the family here or there,” Quintanilla said many of them come here knowing they never will be able to go back.

She recalled one of the mothers who arrived from Central America with one of her sons.

“They decided not to pay the quota, so for her son’s safety she came here with him,” Quintanilla said.

The mother chose to leave the rest of her children with family to keep them safe, while she ran away with the one who was under death threat, she said.

Changing public policy landscape

Public policy regarding Central Americans seeking asylum is changing rapidly.

Two years ago, asylum seekers just had a [47 percent chance](#) to be granted asylum in the United States.

On March 5, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, [cancelled](#) the ability for asylum seekers to have a judge hear their plea. The intent is for immigration judges to move quicker through cases since there is an

immigration court backlog.

Furthermore, President Trump announced [Temporary Protected Status](#) will end for immigrants from El Salvador and Nicaragua in 2019.

Even though the solutions to these problems may be beyond her control, Quintanilla believes she is responsible for what she can do, which is to care for families in the few hours they pass through McAllen.

Fernandez and Quintanilla have no idea how many families will show up every week. That makes it difficult for them to coordinate the help of volunteers.

Need love and hope

While Fernandez is the coordinator, Quintanilla has recruited Baptist churches and groups to volunteer their time and donate items for the center to give to the families.

The bond between the Respite Center and Quintanilla is strong, and she is one of its key volunteers. The staff and volunteers at the center also are pleased with the groups she has brought in to help, she added.

For many who felt the call to do mission work in other countries, Quintanilla encourages them to serve people from other countries here in the United States.

“Each one has a different story,” Quintanilla said. “Each one will tell you they feel blessed because they are here.”

Because of all they have suffered already, Quintanilla said many of these parents with young children have lost hope.

“They are human beings,” Quintanilla said. “They need to be loved, and

they need to have hope.”

Quintanilla insists she has received more than she has given. Whether by being with immigrant parents and their children, or by collaborating with other Christian churches, she knows her desire to share the love of God has grown,

“This has made me more aware of who I am in Christ,” she said. “If everything I do is to worship God, then this is to worship him.”

But worshipping God has a lot to do with the interactions she has with people who have suffered so much already, she said.

“Perhaps this is just planting a seed,” she said. “Perhaps this is helping them see how much God loves them.”