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Safe in Baton Rouge

Reilly donation to Catholic Charities is saving children from violence and murder

By David Jacobs

In a Central American town, a little girl named “Carmen” was raped again and again by members of a drug gang. Not unexpected, she was pregnant at 14. Worried that an even worse fate would befall her, Carmen’s parents sent her to a safe haven; the home of an uncle is better than dangerous streets. They were mistaken, for the uncle only continued the pattern of abuse.

At 17, Carmen decided to take control of her fate. Packing up her 3-year-old son, she traveled hundreds of miles toward the promise of America. She surrendered to border authorities, and made her way to her mother in the United States.

The abuse she suffered at home, and the inability of her own government to protect her, makes Carmen a good candidate to become a resident of the U.S., says David Aguillard, the executive director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

On March 9, Carmen had her first immigration hearing in New Orleans. Standing with her was a lawyer arranged by Catholic Charities. “She wasn’t there on her own, unable to speak the language, not knowing what this process is all about, or being fearful of engaging in an official process,” Aguillard says.

Catholic Charities found Carmen a place to live and arranged for mental health counseling, all funded through a U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops grant. “Here’s a woman who came here, and saw salvation when she crossed our border,” Aguillard says.

Catholic Charities was assisting many refugees from Latin and South American countries last year.

With her husband, Kevin Reilly Jr., Winifred Reilly helped kick off the Louisiana Esperanza Project with a pledge of \$310,000 over four years. The project will provide legal services in an attempt to protect immigrant children and assure their sanctuary in the U.S. remains documented.

When the nonprofit discovered that it didn't have enough money to meet the need, it started the Louisiana Esperanza Project. The first substantial gifts to the project were from Winifred and Kevin Reilly Jr.

They donated \$310,000 to Esperanza—"hope" in Spanish—through a fund managed by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. The Reillys wish others would donate as well, enabling Catholic Charities to care for more children who are running away from grim circumstances.

The plight of unaccompanied minors showing up for sanctuary at the border became a big news story last summer. To most Americans, the crisis seemed sudden and surprising. Not so to Aguillard.

"The number of refugees has steadily been climbing," he says.

"In looking for opportunities, I knew that Catholic Charities had both the legal expertise and a compassionate heart to help."

—Winifred Reilly, on the Louisiana Esperanza Project

"Years ago, Congress was warned that this is going to be a catastrophe if we didn't move to do something."

Many refugees are facing violence that their governments are unable to prevent. In some places, even government officials are to be feared. Honduran officials, for instance, arrested and tortured a boy because they were trying to get information about the whereabouts of his father, who was accused of a crime. The boy fled to the United States and voluntarily surrendered to authorities.

There's always an ebb and flow to the number of refugees apprehended at the border, says Virginia Fitchett, who is the Safe Release Support Program Coordinator with the national Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. But the recent influx was a bit of a surprise, she says.

"No one was quite prepared for the sheer magnitude of the violence that's happening in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala," she says. "You always hear from the children and youth who are crossing that, 'If we couldn't leave, we wouldn't be alive.'"

Aguillard laments that children are caught in the crossfire of a partisan political battle. Many Republicans blamed the influx

on President Obama, while Democrats were seen as pandering for Hispanic votes. The politicized narrative often portrayed the refugees as "illegal immigrants," which in many cases is misleading.

"These children are here legally," Aguillard says.

That's because Congress passed the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act in 2008, both easily and without controversy. President George W. Bush signed the bill into law just two weeks after it was introduced.

Under the law, unaccompanied children who are detained by border authorities have the right to be protected by our legal system. The law protects children from countries that don't share a border with the U.S., particularly those from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, where the need is greatest. Prior to a final decision regarding deportation, each case is supposed to be evaluated to determine if the child is likely to be harmed if sent back home.

From the perspective of Catholic Charities, the politics distract from the moral responsibilities driven by faith. Aguillard cites Jesus' reminder that "our response to the least among us is the same as our response to Him: 'I was a stranger, and you welcomed me.'"

The Louisiana Esperanza Project follows the long tradition of the U.S. Catholic Church

helping immigrants fully integrate into our nation's melting pot, Catholic Charities says.

"Catholics particularly should help these children," Aguillard says. "Immigrant Catholics were at one time unwelcome in our nation and considered a threat to our way of life. Such intolerance is just as wrong today as it was last century."

Like many Americans, Winifred Reilly learned of the plight of unaccompanied minors from Central America through the media. As a mother, she says, she wanted to protect them.

"In looking for opportunities, I knew that Catholic Charities had both the legal expertise and a compassionate heart to help," says Reilly, who is not religious.

And much like Aguillard, she is frustrated by seeing vulnerable children treated as political footballs. "It's surprising that some people wanted to make the children's escape from danger into a political issue about borders rather than reaching out to help them and being faithful to their values," she says. "Why? It's the right thing to do. It's about loving kindness and about basic human and legal rights."

With her husband, Kevin Reilly Jr., she helped kick off the Esperanza Project by pledging \$310,000 over four years. The



David Aguillard of Catholic Charities

project will provide legal services in an attempt to protect the children's lives and assure their sanctuary in the U.S. remains documented.

Aguillard says research shows that one of two things happen to children who lack representation: they miss their court dates and disappear unsafely into our country as undocumented immigrants, or they are deported back to the dangerous environments that led them to flee in the first place.

Catholic Charities says children without an attorney are 1.5 times more likely to be deported than those with one.

Some cities offer public defender services in immigration court. Louisiana does not, although it has received a disproportionate share of refugee children relative to its population.

At last count, Catholic Charities was working on about 20 open cases in Baton Rouge with help from the Reillys' donation, with hopes of getting that number up to 50 within the next few months. Two Department of Justice fellows also are joining the local effort, Aguillard says.

Catholic Charities is looking for not only immigration attorneys but also those with expertise in family law. They need inter-

preters and tutors, as well as mental health counselors and social workers to help the children deal with the trauma that many faced in their home countries and on the journey here.

The 2,000 or so children who have been released into Louisiana during the most recent surge have identified sponsors, usually family members, who have been approved by the federal government. Of the 500 or 600 applicants Catholic Charities has screened, roughly 75% have a strong case to make for their continued presence in the U.S., while the other 25% likely would be sent home, Aguillard estimates.

He says most children in the first group fall into one of two categories.

The first category, asylum, generally means that the person has suffered persecution and is likely to face imprisonment, injury or death because of their race, religion, nationality, political views or inclusion or exclusion from a certain group.

The other category is Special Immigrant Juveniles Status, which means a child has been abandoned, abused or neglected and that it is unsafe for that child to return home. SIJ status is revoked upon reaching adulthood, although children can get

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—Virginia Fitchett, Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service

a green card through the program that allows them to live and work permanently in the U.S.

“We should, by the end of this year, be able to take on around 200 cases,” Aguillard says. “But there’s still hundreds of kids that are in need.”

The Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service, through an agreement with the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, operates the Safe Release Support Program. Since 2006, it has served about 75% of those who present themselves as potential caregivers for unaccompanied refugee children, LIRS says. Thanks to LIRS’s partnership with Catholic Charities, Baton Rouge is one of only 20 Safe Release support locations, and the only one on the Gulf Coast between Texas and Atlanta.

The need is only growing, says Fitchett with LIRS. “This summer we had an unprecedented number of children who were apprehended crossing the border,” she says, “which means an unprecedented number of potential caregivers were coming forward.”

Building on that partnership with Catholic Charities, LIRS piloted a program here to educate those caregivers about how to advocate for the children in their care; how to enroll them in school, for example.

LIRS and Catholic Charities also partner with the federal Office of Legal Access Programs, which facilitates access to information about the process and creates incentives for attorneys and law students to accept pro bono cases.

But none provides legal representation, which brings us back to Louisiana Esperanza. The funds from Esperanza will be used to expand Catholic Charities’ legal team and to recruit and train pro bono attorneys who can handle Louisiana custody and federal immigration law issues. Additionally, Catholic Charities will seek to hire more advocates to become accredited for immigration court.

Only about 20% of the refugee children in Louisiana have

a legal representative, which is about half the national average. “We know from the data that the children who don’t have representation, we don’t really know what happens to them,” Aguillard says. “They disappear. The judge can stamp a case closed and order them for deportation, but the child’s not there to hear that. The case is closed without the child ever having had their day in court.”

That’s why the initial pledge from the Reillys has been described as a challenge grant. It’s enough to begin Louisiana Esperanza, but Aguillard estimates that about \$2 million more is needed to build a sustainable program.

“We hope people realize that the Reillys kind of got it started, but it’s not enough to take care of all the needs,” he says.

Winifred Reilly is hoping others take up the challenge. “There are hundreds of kids still in need,” she says. “I hope that others will be faithful to Christian values and contribute so that more children who have turned to us for safety and protection can take advantage of our laws.” •

GIVING OPPORTUNITY

For more information about the Louisiana Esperanza Project, visit Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge at ccdiobr.org.