



The Journey to Laredo

Students provide legal aid at a Texas immigration detention center

Students from Maine Law are providing volunteer legal help to immigrant and refugee women held at a federal detention center in Texas in response to a sharp increase in immigration arrests over the past year.

A total of 13 students enrolled in Maine Law's Refugee and Human Rights Clinic are participating. Several have already made the trip to Laredo, and others are scheduled to go within the coming months.

The students spend a week to two weeks volunteering with attorneys and staff of the Laredo Project, a collaboration between Jones Day, the nation's largest law firm, and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid.

At the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility in Laredo, Maine Law students perform a range of duties, including intake interviews, case reviews, and filing motions for relief, such as emergency stays of deportation orders.

The students are well prepared for these tasks because of their experience as student attorneys in the Refugee & Human Rights Clinic. Students in the clinic receive training in all facets of immigration law and lawyering, and they represent real clients in asylum and other humanitarian-based petitions, under the guidance of Anna Welch, Sam L. Cohen Refugee & Human Rights Clinical Professor.

The Maine Law students (some of

whom have since graduated) involved in this project are Emily Arvizu '20, Joann Bautista '18, Eric Benson '18, Nora Bosworth '18 (two trips), Katie Bressler '18, Sara Cressey '18 (two trips), Becca LaPierre '18, Barrett Littlefield '18, Greta Lozada '19 (two trips), Hanni Pastinen '18, Christiana Rein '19, Noel Sidorek '18, and Jeremy Williams '18.

"Working with the Laredo Project, Maine Law students deploy the skills they've learned in the classroom and through their casework in Maine to those cases in which they represent women detained in Texas," Welch said. "The effort reflects the Clinic's dual mission of training future lawyers while engaging in public service."

"The majority of these women fled to the U.S. to escape violence, rape, gang activity, forced labor, extreme poverty, and other horrific circumstances. We want to help do what we can to ensure they are treated fairly, and their due process rights are upheld."

Some of the women being detained in Laredo crossed the border recently, particularly from crime-ravaged countries including Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. But there is another, growing category of detainees causing great concern within the civil justice and legal aid communities: Women who have lived in the U.S. for years without incident and

who are now being targeted by tougher enforcement guidelines.

"These are people who have been working, paying taxes, and raising children who are U.S. citizens. They were not a priority under the Bush or Obama administrations. But that has changed under President Trump," Welch said. "Now they are being detained after traffic stops or other routine contact with law enforcement, and they face the very real threat of deportation and separation from their families."

Arrests of undocumented immigrants and immigrants whose legal status is unclear have soared under the Trump administration. In 2017, ICE made 143,470 arrests, the highest number of arrests over the past three fiscal years.

"The women's stories varied widely, from harrowing stories of trauma and persecution, to more routine accounts of mothers who had been living and working in the U.S. for years and were apprehended by ICE," said Nora Bosworth '18, who traveled to Laredo as a student in July 2017 and again in January 2018.

Welch hopes to continue the collaboration with the Laredo Project for as long as student volunteers are needed.

"The opportunity to help represent these women and to hear their stories firsthand was an invaluable experience," Bosworth said. **ML**

Our Laredo Experience

By Nora Bosworth '18 and Greta Lozada '19

Over the summer, we both spent time in Laredo, Texas, a border town with a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility. Laredo is one of nearly 200 immigration detention facilities located in the U.S. In coordination with Maine Law's Refugee & Human Rights Clinic, we joined forces with the Laredo Project—a collaboration between the law firm Jones Day and Texas RioGrande Legal Aid. The opportunity to see an immigration detention facility up close, to help provide immigrant women with direct legal representation, and to hear first-hand immigrant accounts was an invaluable experience.

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Those from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico were frequently escaping gang violence. Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, two international crime syndicates, have enormous influence throughout Central America, while the Los Zetas cartel dominates much of Mexico. These gangs had targeted many of the women we interviewed, and many shared traumatic stories involving rape, the brutalization of loved ones, and forced flight from their homes in the face of credible threats against their lives.

Nearly all the women we interviewed had swum across the Rio Grande, the river separating Mexico and the U.S., to arrive in this country. Some women we encountered were also scared because they had unwittingly signed orders of voluntary deportation from the U.S., not realizing what they were agreeing to.

Others we interviewed had been holding jobs in the U.S. and paying taxes for years, had no criminal history, and were mothers of U.S. citizen children. These women had been detained during routine traffic stops.

Since taking office, President Trump has widely expanded the priorities list for those the U.S. is actively seeking to deport to include people who have committed any acts for which they could be charged, e.g., entering the country illegally. While in the waiting room of the facility, a young attorney who works for a local immigration firm in Laredo stated that while former Pres-

ident Obama deported more immigrants than any prior president in U.S. history, since the enforcement priorities have changed, immigration arrests have risen sharply under President Trump.

The women we interviewed seemed particularly shocked to be inside a place that for all intents and purposes resembled a jail. Like a jail, the facility consists of barred cells and armed guards, the food resembled prison food, and immigrant men and women must wear the typical uniforms/jumpsuits of the incarcerated.

There are only two rooms in the building for legal visits, and one of the most notable obstacles we encountered in our work at Laredo was access to the immigrant women. Per the detention center's policy, if lawyers were seeing a male detainee in one room, we could not see a female in the other.

Similarly, if a "high-security" inmate was in one of the two rooms, a "low-security" inmate could not be in the other. The outcome was that on one of our days at Laredo, the legal team waited in the lobby of the facility for six hours before we could start interviewing potential clients. The fact that the infrastructure of the facility was obstructing access to counsel was frustrating.

We both speak Spanish fluently, so when we were inside

the facility we spearheaded the interviews. Our job was to assist intakes for asylum and other forms of relief, with the goal of placing cases with *pro bono* attorneys all over the country. The most common forms of relief for the potential clients we saw were asylum and cancellation-of-removal.

A faster, short-term solution was for a woman to seek bond, so that she could reunite with her family while awaiting her removal proceeding. After the interviews we would write memos detailing the women's stories, explaining whether or not we thought they had any potential claims for relief from deportation, what those were, and how strong we thought their cases were, including credibility assessments, when relevant.

Our time in Laredo was deeply educational, with the vividness that only hands-on work can bring. We are both so grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Laredo Project, which is the only *pro bono* legal project dedicated to the Laredo Detention Center. Without the help of the Laredo Project and its volunteers, many of the women would face nearly automatic deportation back to the countries they fled.

Nora and Greta wrote this piece following their trip to Laredo, Texas in the summer of 2017.



Nora Bosworth '18 (left) and Greta Lozada '19.

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