

Dear Dan Ruben,

The ocean breeze that winds down the cracked one-way streets of Harlingen, Texas, rattles the palm trees that cast their long shadows across the asphalt. The streets lined with boot repair shops, wedding dress tailors, and breakfast diners remind me that I'm not far from home. I, too, am from a small, rural town with a central main street lined with shops and their shopkeepers who will greet you by your first name and ask about your mother if you enter more than three times. Everyone is a friend from church or from your cousin's church.

There is a world, though, behind this quaint small rural town. Behind the breeze, behind the palm trees that cast their forgiving shadows against the hot Rio Grande Valley sun, behind the shopkeeper that knows you'll have your six al pastor tacos, "sin queso," when you walk in, looms the dark realities of America's unforgiving immigration policy.

Although the common Harlingen resident might not know it, Harlingen and its surrounding cities are home to 19 shelters for unaccompanied minors. Hundreds of youth from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala cycle through these shelters each week. Although these kids often arrive to America indebted to coyotes, with no network, and with only the weathered clothes on their back, our immigration system grants them only a small window of time to find a sponsor with whom they can live while in removal proceedings. Those who cannot find a sponsor remain in these shelters, which despite their name, are hotbeds of violence. Many minors fleeing MS13 or MS18 travel arduous journeys across borders only to arrive at a shelter and see "18th Street Gang" sketched into the cafeteria table.

This summer allowed me to peer past the façade that exists not only in Harlingen but across America. I first saw this as I discussed a client's Adjustment of Status application with him to consider potential bars to amnesty. In his home country, our client faced rampant domestic abuse at home and pressure from the gang in his community. To protect himself he joined a soccer fan club that had gang affiliation. His role in the gang was minor, and was limited to extorting soccer fans, and throwing rocks at opposing gangs. As the gang put more pressure on him to sell narcotics and kill rivals, and as the abuse worsened at home, he fled to America. As we walked through his Adjustment of Status application though, it became clear that America did not want him. His fist quivered, turning pale as his bone pressed against his skin, as he answered "Yes" to ten of the bars to Adjustment of Status. Two tears, which he had concealed when he discussed his father beating him with cable cords, now escaped his eyes. All he had wanted was safety, and yet America deemed him unsafe.

Our current asylum law believes that gang violence exists in a world of choices—meaning it accepts and rejects asylum seekers with the presumption that they could have opted out of violence. But these kids are not growing up in quaint Harlingens in Honduras or El Salvador. They're growing up in cities where gangs will force you to kill your mother before you join, and if you refuse to join they will kill you. They're growing up in cities where gang leaders can order hits in Maryland from a Salvadoran prison. They're growing up in cities without choices.

This happened to another client I worked with in preparing his declaration for his asylum officer meeting. I spoke with both him and his mother as he prepared to plead his case. His mother told me that it was only a miracle that he made it here from his home country. While he was still living in his home country, she moved him between cities trying to avoid the gangs. When her son continued to receive threats, and was beaten by a gang and threatened with his life, she moved him to the States. Even here though, gang members continue to inquire as to his

whereabouts. Although there is no place for her son to run, his plea might be rejected under current asylum law if only for the ironic reason that he did not fully jeopardize his life in his home country. In order to receive asylum, you must prove that the violence you suffered was state sanctioned; however, with gangs killing people who they *think could* talk to police, no one will dare to actually talk to the police and make themselves a target. “Anda con su boca cerada,” his mother told me. Walk with your mouth closed. Today, they wait with their mouths closed in nervous anticipation of the asylum officer’s decision in November.

Despite working in this environment, where the stakes are so stacked against my clients, I believed my efforts were not in vain. After explaining to my first client that we could not represent him given his various bars, we nonetheless assisted him with securing pro se assistance; and in filling out his application, he was more aware of potential challenges to receiving asylum. Regarding the second client, we submitted both declarations I transcribed to the asylum officer. I pray that the officer can see what the law cannot—namely, the dearth of choices my client faced.

As I left Harlingen, its ocean breeze, its quaint streets, and its friendly citizens, I left pondering visibility. I left considering how powerful it would be to remove the veil, not only in Harlingen but across the United States. As judges sit on benches, telling respondents that their trauma does not amount to particularized persecution, or as asylum officers reject applications because violence is not state sanctioned, or as voters head to the polls concerned about an ambiguous monolith of dangerous immigrants, I wonder if they truly see *people*. I wonder if they truly see the suffering, the lack of choices, and the insecurity these immigrants face. I do not think they do.

I am an optimist; in part, I don’t believe I could establish a life-long career in public interest law if I weren’t. In being an optimist, I hope that the solution to having asylum law address the realities of asylum seekers is visibility. It’s looking beyond the nominally innocuous political rhetoric, the quaintness of America’s presumed world of choices, and the assumed reasonableness of the law, and looking at what these migrants are fleeing, and what we condemn them to if we send them back. It’s looking at their stories. Thank you for your support in allowing me to serve this community this summer and gather bits and pieces of their stories. I hope that as I pursue a career in public interest law, and specifically in immigration, I do justice to their stories, and paint a compelling picture of the people who need the protection of the law the most.

Best,
Lincoln Mitchell
Stanford Law School
JD Candidate 2019

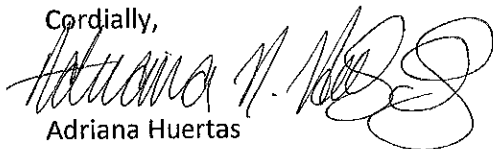
Tuesday, August 29, 2017

Dear Katie Toman,

My name is Adriana Huertas and I am a Senior Attorney at ProBAR Children's Project in Harlingen, Texas. ProBAR services unaccompanied minors in South Texas by providing pro bono representation before the Immigration Court and some government agencies. We also provide Know Your Rights Presentations and Legal Referrals, especially for minors that will be reuniting with sponsors in other parts of the United States. During this summer, I had the pleasure of supervising Lincoln Mitchell's work with ProBAR. In his time in ProBAR, Lincoln was able to prepare clients for court hearings and conduct initial interviews to determine potential legal reliefs. He had the opportunity to work in an asylum merits hearing before the Immigration Court. As part of this task, he prepped witnesses, assisted with motions and researched relevant country conditions. In addition, Lincoln assisted attorneys on preparation for asylum interviews, by helping with declarations and legal briefs. I was impressed with Lincoln's impeccable research on complicated immigration matters and his ability to apply these principles and regulations in masterful ways. Even with a busy schedule and multiple tasks, he never missed a deadline. Lincoln showed passion for every single case he assisted, and portrayed a deep sense of empathy and responsibility in his tasks. He was able to communicate effectively with clients and detained children, getting them to open up and share their stories. This line of work is not for everyone, it takes someone committed to face the mountains we face on a day-to-day basis. Thankfully, Lincoln was that someone.

If you have further questions about Lincoln Mitchell's work this summer at ProBAR, feel free to reach out to me at (956)365-3775 or through my email at adriana.huertasortiz@abaprobar.org

Cordially,



Adriana Huertas
Senior Attorney
ProBAR Children's Project
202 S. 1st Street, Suite 300
Harlingen, Texas, 78550