

A Fractured Version of the American Dream: a reflection on the lives of children at a shelter for unaccompanied alien minors in the Texas-Mexico border – April 2017

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In this borderland zone at the Rio Grande Valley, the various shelters for unaccompanied minors, stand invisible among the surrounding communities. Many don't know they even exist, or their purpose but the truth is that they harbor thousands of children who yearn for a brighter future. These are not ordinary kids, for the record, these are battered children, long term victims of injustice, sick in their spirit and sick in their bodies, with faces of desolation, profound sadness, fear, and despair. Nevertheless, they seem full of hope for a new life where they can finally hug their blood, so long ago taken away from them, their parents, their siblings, torn apart by inhumane lives they have been forced to live. Here they can breathe, they can sleep, they can eat, and they can shower. That seems to be more than enough, at least for the moment, even when their future is uncertain. The childhood most of them already lost it, being forced to work since early age, terribly used to the abuses and the viciousness that reigns their neighborhoods back home, or what used to be home. They are adults enclosed in children's bodies, most of the time real small bodies due to chronic malnutrition, eyes that are so deep that themselves tell a story of confusion and anguish. But at the same time, those are eyes of love, of resilience, and endurance.

When I asked some of them about their personal experiences, they think they have nothing to say, they underestimate the dreadfully harsh conditions that they have been through. Violence is so common where they come from that they think their stories are not worth saying. During the limited 1-hour recreation time that they are allowed daily at the shelter, I ask one of them, a tall and strong adolescent that have arrived the previous day, why he wasn't playing? And he responded that he had an ankle injury. As a pediatrician, I asked him to show me. I was shocked by what I saw: his feet were full of blisters and the right ankle was swollen from a long 4-day walk across the desert with little food and water. He wanted to get directly to Houston where his family was before being caught by the Border Patrol but he failed in his effort and there he was, sad but at the same time relieved because at least he was able to cross the border, not like the 1st time he tried when he was held in a Mexican detention center and deported back to Honduras. One of the girls was telling me that she crossed the river with her

two younger siblings, their parents abandoned them about 8 years ago and they grew up with her grandmother. When she died recently they were left alone, so she decided to travel north, became head of the family at only 13 years old, and try to find their parents. She thinks they're are in Florida, at least that was the last thing she heard. When they arrived to the US side, she was hoping to be caught by the Border Patrol because she was so hungry and thirsty, and her younger sister was almost fainting, but they took almost a long day to find them. After they took them, they were transported to 'La perrera'. "They wouldn't let us sleep in there, they kicked us like dogs whenever we were falling asleep." She was laughing when she said this. "In 'La hielera' it was freezing and all they gave us was what looked like an aluminum blanket to cover up, we couldn't talk unless we were told to do so, I couldn't find my younger sister, they took her away and until now I don't know where she's at." I remembered what I was told in the orientation about kids being divided by age: rules are rules, it doesn't matter if they're family or the only person you know in this insensitive new world. When I asked one of the other kids how was his journey north, he said that it was uneventful until one of his new friends reminded him the truck where he came. "Oh right, I came standing in my feet for 3 days and 2 nights with dozens of people, we couldn't move, we couldn't sit because we didn't fit, we couldn't go to the bathroom so all of us had to do it right there, standing, pouring in daylight, cold in the night, all of us standing quiet in that truck." He didn't remember what was for me a terribly traumatic situation, but they laughed and joke, as if it was completely normal. They asked me about my country and I said that it was very beautiful, that the beaches were amazing and then one of them yelled from the back, as if finally being able to raise his voice: "My country is beautiful as well, if it were not for the savages that wake us up with their daily shoot-outs in the middle of the night and threaten us and our families. They wouldn't let us live in our homes, they banished us from our own paradise. So, my country is beautiful and will also be livable again in the near future, I know that for sure." These words were so tough and powerful that I had to hold my tears, because if they were being so strong, who was I to cry? These types of stories continued coming and going and all I could think to myself was how brave these kids were; they are prepared for anything the future might bring...after all that they've been through, things cannot get any worse, or can they?

One day we were in the classroom and one of the staff came to announce that it was recreation time. So, they began to assemble the kids in groups and aligning them in rows. I was talking in that moment with 2 boys and suddenly and

completely naturally, they get separated and I ask why one of the boys wasn't coming outside. The staff tells me that he's 'RA status'. I didn't know what that meant so I waited until I could be alone with the staff and asked him in English, so the kids wouldn't understand. He tells me that those with 'RA status' are the runaways and he shows me the list. I was shocked because there were a lot of names in that list and then the staff member said it was about 10% of the total population of the shelter. Not all of them tried to escape, he explained, but merely if they showed an desire of running away, they were immediately placed in that list. And what were the consequences? They were completely prohibited to be outside at any moment, they were bound to complete confinement just for saying that they wished they could be free. I mean...who wouldn't want to? These are young kids and adolescents destined to play unrestrictedly, to run, to sunbathe, at last in peace where no one could hurt them, and now they were being forced to stay between those walls without windows, in that dark, cold place. It was completely heartbreaking.

Another day we were in the classrooms during art class. I noticed the paints were very limited: just about 1oz of each color provided to each group, composed of 4-6 children. They were sharing normally, without asking for more, so mature, behaving so well that I was amazed. But why such restricted quantities? Some of them couldn't finish what they were doing because the paints were over in a few minutes. Then, the time of the snack came, and each kid was given a box of milk and animal crackers. They received that snack very happy and grateful. But, remembering what we were told in the orientation about the federal funding the shelter receives: it was \$200 per kid per day for the total capacity of the shelter. So, if this shelter has 200 beds, they were paid for 200 kids even if there were only 80 at the moment. I kept wondering where was that money going, certainly not to the children's food or recreation. So much for the 4th biggest non-profit in the country, so much for the 'non-profit' aspect. How can people make a business off of these kids' lives and well-being? I became more confused and distraught as the days passed by.

Something that bothered me somewhat while being at the shelter was the constant noise of the 'walkie talkies'. All the staff communicate between themselves by that mean and they have somewhat like an obsession of counting the children. There's one 'youth care worker' per 8 children and they have to transport them in perfectly aligned rows of 8, always accompanied by a staff member, and they're always counting them and telling their results through their radio. The noise is annoying, always interrupting every conversation and

spontaneous interaction. This day, everyone got panicked momentarily because supposedly a kid was missing. All the kids were ordered to sit still, not make any move, and shut up. They all obeyed in a perfect manner, as if trained to do so. I'm always startled by how respectfully they treat the staff...I think I've never seen such a big group of children altogether behaving so well. Would it be the fear of going back to their countries if they misbehaved? A natural tendency to respect adults? A sense of discipline acquired by the harsh life? I don't know but it was very unusual. About 3 minutes passed and from the radio it came the message that 'the missing kid' was with one of the staff members. Nothing has happened and yet they were so terrified of missing a child in this place where there's really no place to run because every single corridor is safeguarded by a locked door, that only opens with an ID card and there're cameras everywhere. Where does that fear comes from? Is it that the staff is constantly threatened by the administration? Is it that they themselves have gotten use to this prison-like environment where they keep 'unaccompanied alien children' whose only 'crime' have been to run from their countries in search for peace? Too many questions came to my mind...

Speaking of which, all the kids talked about their court date as if it was the redemption day, all of them so hopeful, they long for that day as they long to find a sponsor in the US that can take them out of there and prevent them from going back to where they ran from. The court day is when their permit to stay in this country will finally be granted, or so they think. They have no idea how wrong they are and what is the real thing that awaits them in the court. They know the importance of getting a lawyer but they don't really understand the consequences of not having one. All of them have arrived to the US, so they feel accomplished, nothing can make them worry right now. What they don't know is that there's a long road ahead that they'll have to endure mostly by themselves. As we talk about the court dates, we see one of the adolescents being taken away forcibly by the staff. I don't understand what is happening, it was the same guy whose birthday is today, we were singing happy birthday earlier! What is happening? He's crying now. The other kids tell me that he just turned 18 so they have to take him away. Where? I asked to the staff and they tell me he has to go to an adult detention facility. I was astonished. On the same date of his birthday? Are these people nuts? They do it with such regularity as if nothing was happening! This kid has suddenly become an adult in the face of the law and he's about to be treated as such. How painful and distressing this life can be? I thought things couldn't get any worse, but witnessing this, they certainly can. I see the

fear in the eyes of the rest, some of them will soon turn 18, and so, they begin to worry...they need their lawyers, they need their court days, they need to get reunited with their families before that happens, or else...no bright future awaits them.

In the meantime, it is comforting to hear Javier (fake name) singing and preaching. He's the leader here, the real spiritual leader. Forget the clinicians, forget the teachers, forget the doctor or the lawyers, Javier is who help them withstand the hassles of the everydayness. He's been here a long time, almost 4 months, and he still continues standing strong and tall. His remedy? The bible, which he reads ever since he was a 5-year old child. Soon I learn that he knows how to play the piano and the violin and that he's a great singer. He fled his country after his cousin was killed and he was threatened to be next if refusing to join the gang that claimed him. His mother sell their house and sent him north, being left out of options. She couldn't go with him, of course, because she had a little kid to take care at home. He doesn't really have a sponsor at the US, nor does he have a lawyer, but he hopes every day that his fate can be like his older brother's, who came a few years earlier and was adopted by an American couple. Or he hopes that his brother can turn 21 before he's deported back, so he can become his sponsor. So, Javier signs to all of them, and they listen carefully to his words of hope, optimism, and confidence. I see their faces and I realize that the long-standing abuse and misfortune have not been able to break their spirit, it has only made them stronger and ready to face this very different type of cruel world called America.