

A gift of God



D Her name, Dorotea, means “a gift of God,” but she never thought of herself as gift to anyone. Her father abandoned her mother upon learning that she was pregnant, and when she was four months old her mother brought her to the United States through the mountains of Tecate. It was the summer of 1994.

That summer her mother married Marco. Marco terrified the child, shouting and thundering about, physically abusing her mother. It was impossible to know when nightmares began or ended. Finally, when she was five, she and her mother moved to a tiny apartment in the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego. Alone with her mother, for the first time Dorotea felt safe, but soon her mother began going out every night, drinking and taking drugs. The nightmares resumed.

When she was eight they moved in with Jorge. Life seemed better, but soon changed when her mother and Jorge began drinking and partying. Every night there would be fighting that continued until early morning hours. Dorotea rarely slept. In time, she became the focus of her mother's anger. Her mother began shouting at her without provocation and was physically abusive, sometimes in public. By the time Dorotea was ten, they were total strangers.

As an only child, Dorotea ached for her mother's affection; she loved her mother. Sometimes, when they were alone, she would beg her mother to stop drinking or at least to try to drink less. At age fifteen she confronted her mother about her drug use. Her mother would make false promises, generating only disappointment, anger and loneliness. When Jorge was deported, her mother followed him to Mexico, leaving Dorotea in the care of her sister and her husband. Dorotea sobs when speaking of these things.

Although she had been estranged from her mother for some time, Dorotea grieved her abandonment. At sixteen, she simply could not comprehend her mother's rejection. It was the loving and caring support of her sister and brother-in-law—along with aunts, uncles and cousin—that enabled the healing process to begin. Her caretakers were aware that Dorotea's immigration status needed to be addressed immediately. Current law states that undocumented minors can be immediately deported if detected, even if the child had been in this country his/her entire life, did not know his/her native language and was without family in his/her country of birth. Without a Social Security number, Dorotea would not be able to work, receive assistance for post secondary education or even join the military. Without documentation, she would have no future.

A case worker directed her guardians to Casa Cornelia's Children's Program. As an abandoned and neglected child, she was eligible for a special visa, but it was only available if a visa application was filed before her eighteenth birthday. The clock was ticking and an appointment made.

Dorotea's case was a typical "cliffhanger," a term reserved when CCLC attorneys or volunteer attorneys race against time to secure all the required documentation to file the visa petition. Volunteer Attorney Scott Morris of Latham & Watkins, secured the necessary court order in May 2010, and thanks in large part to her attorney's generous *pro bono* assistance and diligence, Dorotea became a Permanent Legal Resident in April 2011. The entire process took seventeen months. As noted by Scott, "It was a thrill to see it through to completion." Reflecting on the case and on the person Dorotea had become, Andrea Santos, Director of the Children's Program observed, "It is a truly wonderful thing to see a child blossom from a scared and shy child into a teenage girl full of hope and plans for a bright future."

Dorotea and her volunteer attorney, Scott Morris of Latham & Watkins, are both excited to show off her new green card. CCLC relies on the generosity of our volunteer attorneys and their firms to serve hundreds of clients like Dorotea each year.



