

A Simple Request . . .

There was nothing unusual about the request. “*Puedo dejar mi carro aquí por la noche, Ricardo?*” Ricardo replied, “*Esta bien. No hay problema.*” The battered red Toyota was pulled into the driveway and the man gave Ricardo a wave, “*Gracias, adios.*” It was as simple as that. A simple request to park a car for the night.

None of the children remember the details of what happened that night. It was dark, there was loud banging at the door and they were frightened. There was shouting when the door crashed open and men with guns stormed into the house. Rosario remembers someone saying, “Not the children,” but it wasn’t her mother, Cecilia. They were hustled together, thrown into a dark bedroom and the door was locked. There was more shouting, their mother crying, begging for her life. Then gunfire, lots of gunfire, then silence.

When the Tijuana police came they took pictures of Cecilia and Ricardo, hands bound behind them, shot execution style. They took pictures of the red Toyota riddled with gunshots. The children were taken to their grandparents. No one knew which of the feuding cartels was responsible and nobody knew why Cecilia and Ricardo had been targeted. Days later, they found the body of the owner of the red Toyota on the beach in Tijuana and the police concluded that the murders had been a mistake, a tragic mistake. The police advised the grandparents to get the children out of Tijuana.

The grandparents had no time to grieve for their Cecilia as the situation in Tijuana became more violent. They had to find a way to get the children to their older daughter who lived across the border. Frantic, they presented the children to immigration authorities at the San Ysidro border where they were taken into custody and placed in the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Southwest Key shelter in east San Diego.

When the children were first screened by the staff attorney at Casa Cornelia Law Center, they were still in shock. The first order of business was to get these children released into the care of their aunt and uncle who were living in Southern California with their five children. This would require the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to grant the children humanitarian parole. Once they were safe with family, Casa Cornelia would have time to assess the legal options available to the children. A grant of humanitarian parole would preclude placing the children into deportation proceedings, a traumatic experience in and of itself.

With humanitarian parole granted, and the children with their aunt and uncle, Casa Cornelia began legal analysis to gain a more permanent solution



for Cecilia's children. Despite the circumstances that brought these children to the United States, they needed to secure visas and provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act determined the availability of visas. Andrea Santos, Director of the Children's Program at Casa Cornelia, determined that the most expeditious route to immigrating these children was through the Special Immigration Juvenile Status (SIJS) visa available to abused and abandoned children.



Family with Andrea Santos (third from right), Director of the Children Program.

Just before Christmas 2011, the children's visas were approved, allowing them to remain legally in the United States with their family and start the process of healing after losing their mother and stepfather. The three children are currently living with their aunt, uncle and cousins in the United States.

In a thank you note from the children's new permanent family, they write:

"Our family would like to thank you for all the help that you gave us. After consulting with many attorneys, we started to feel hopeless because there was no way we could come up with the money that they were asking for to help us, and letters sent to our local and federal representatives were being returned to us with the bad news that there was nothing they could do for us. Just as we were losing all hope, we were contacted by Casa Cornelia and they started to give us hope. Casa Cornelia not only helped us bring our nieces and nephew to their new home with us, they did it always showing that they truly loved and cared for our family. Every day when we look at our new children and see that they feel loved and safe in their new home with us, we can't help but thank God for all the staff of Casa Cornelia Law Center that made this possible."

