

# Piñeda family Continued from page 1

ual Zelaya. Gangsters rule the streets and the police are indifferent. Drugs, mostly cocaine, are rampant. People die on the streets every day and local gangsters frequently targeted the Piñeda's neighborhood for robbery. "All of it is bad, it's all dangerous. There is no justice," said Rosa, speaking through her daughter Celeste as an interpreter.

Rosa wanted to return to the U.S. but was unsure how, when a friend told her of a migrant caravan set to pass through town in a week's time.

This was their opportunity, there was no time to wait. In early October 2018 they joined roughly 2,000 migrants on foot en route to the U.S. border.

They made their way north to Guatemala, moving city to city until they reached the Mexican border, where they waited for two days for Mexican authorities to open the bridge into the country.

When they finally got the Mexican state of Chiapas, they spent some nights sleeping in shelters, some nights sleeping on the street. Though the Mexican government was hostile to migrants, Rosa found the Mexican people to be welcoming.

En route to the Mexican state of Sonora, it came time to cross the Sonoran Desert. Rosa was terrified. She had heard stories of the Mexican drug cartels and didn't want to accidentally stumble upon their territory.

While trekking through the desert heat, they met a reporter from the U.S., who the family now refers to as their "American friend." After several hours the American arrived with a car. "I'm here for you, let's go," Rosa recalls the American telling the family.

The American cut the family's trek through the desert, driving them all the way to the Mexican state of Baja California, which shares a border with California.

They spent 15 days in the border city of Tijuana, trying to navigate their way into the U.S.

It was dangerous. The people of Tijuana were openly hostile towards the migrants. Rosa recalls while trying to find food, locals started throwing rocks at the migrants and telling them to go back to Honduras. Fearing for their lives, they didn't dare leave the shelter.

While in the shelter, two men approached Celeste and her cousin, who was also part of the caravan. They told the girls they had work for them, all they had to do was get in

the car. Every day the men would show up and offer the girls "work," but Rosa forbid it. The men, however, were persistent, and finally talked Celeste's cousin into getting in their car. Celeste grabbed her cousin's hand, pleading with her not to go. The men, simply said "no," and took hold of the girl. Celeste muscled what power she had and yanked her cousin out of the vehicle and the girls ran away.

There was no clear entrance into the U.S., but the family was scared. Their time in Tijuana was done. It was time to cross the border.

The family found an unmanned border wall that was being torn down to build a new wall. In all, it took 15 minutes for the family to make their way onto American soil. Their two-month journey was over.

Once they crossed the border, they were immediately spotted by a helicopter. Border Patrol asked to see their documentation and they were brought to a detention facility.

Border Patrol agents took all of their belongings, including their documentation. The water was bad, so the family had to drink Capri Sun, which was readily available at the facility.

They were not allowed to make phone calls, not even to tell family members to tell them that they made it to the U.S. When the family had a question, Border Patrol agents would shout at them to "shut up." One agent called the family a bunch of rats, for sneaking through the "holes" into the U.S.

Celeste recalls one officer threatening to punch a migrant, while standing near a sign forbidding violence. While in a vehicle with a Border Patrol agent, every time the family would speak the agent would turn the heat up in the vehicle.

Rosa is hesitant to talk about the experience, fearing the U.S. Government will retaliate for talking badly about the facilities. Regardless, Rosa insisted that her family remain respectful of the agents, because they were in their country and this was their job.

The family was relocated to a second detention center. The agents at this detention center were much nicer. They were supplied information and given their paperwork. Once the family was cleared they were driven to a Catholic Church.

The church provided the family with the resources they needed to seek asylum. When asked if the family planned to stay anywhere, Rosa responded "Willmar, Minnesota."



The Piñeda family in Jessica Rohloff's home. Pictured, from left, are: Rosa, Isaac and Celeste.

Submitted photo

The Piñeda family had been to Willmar once before when they first sought Asylum two years ago. The family had to routinely meet with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Minneapolis. With no steady address or stable income, the family missed a crucial appointment because Rosa didn't have the funds to go to Minneapolis, and though Rosa made it the next day, apologizing profusely, it was too late. They were told the children could stay if they were put up for adoption, but Rosa didn't want to separate her family, and they were deported back to Honduras.

The family hopped eight buses in three-day journey from Los Angeles to Minnesota. Not sure where they would stay when they arrived, they reached out to a reporter they knew from Spain, who contacted a human rights organization, and through a game of telephone, the family was eventually put into contact with Willmar Councilmember Alvarado.

### The road to asylum

To seek asylum the Piñeda's needed to provide a steady address, so they took Rohloff up on her offer, and have been residing in her home since January.

They have since formed "kind of little family now," as Rohloff puts it.

They endured the cold, unfamiliar winter playing board games and watching Netflix.

Rohloff worked on getting the family integrated in the community, enrolling the kids in school.

Though Celeste is 18, she doesn't have the credits to graduate high school. Students in Honduras have to pay for a basic education, and when her family was deported, they couldn't afford for both kids to attend school, so Celeste was forced to dropped out so her brother could continue his education.

Celeste is going into her junior year of high school and Isaac is going into the eighth grade.

Both kids are full of Willmar Cardinal school spirit and have become exemplary students, both averaging A's and B's. Isaac sits on the student council, a position earned after building a platform on changes he'd like to see in the school cafeteria.

The family has largely adapted to Willmar culture. Celeste has a newfound love of frozen pizza and Rosa is learning to cook Halal, after becoming acquainted with Rohloff's friends in the Somali community. Rosa insists that if she knew English, she would already be friends with the entire city because, as she puts it, she likes to talk.

Still, the road to now has been rocky.

Due to lack of dental care all three family members were suffering from potentially life-threatening infections when they arrived. Because the family didn't have dental insurance or money, Rohloff paid the bill.

Rohloff, who is borrowing from her retirement to supply the family with basic medical needs, has already put forth \$4,900.

The hostile political climate in the U.S. towards migrants presents another chilling factor for the family. "It is hard when you hear certain things from the White House," said Rohloff, referring to the President Donald Trump's hard-line stance on immigration.

Rohloff has to remain vigilant to censor the media that comes into the house. She can't even listen to Minnesota Public Radio with the family around because stories about the border give the kids nightmares. The fear of being separated from their mother is another very real anxiety for the Piñeda family. "It's really discouraging when you hear it on the news and it's about you, it scares you half to death," said Rohloff.

Though comments from the White House seem to shape the narrative, Rohloff is quick to point out that wherever they go, people are generally very welcoming.

Locals have showered the family with support, providing money, food, rides, check-ins and prayer vigils. A local dentist have been providing discount work, and they even found an attorney to work pro bono for the family as they seek asylum. Celeste claims to have never met so many good people in her entire life.

The family is not allowed to work. They hope to attain work permits in the next nine months, but until then, Rohloff will continue to cover their expenses. Rohloff is currently raising money for the family, through a GoFundMe titled Asylum Seekers Support Team, where she has already raised over \$2,000.

Regardless of threats from the White House, the Piñeda is legally seeking asylum within the U.S. They routinely drive to Minneapolis to meet with ICE officials, and haven't missed a meeting yet. Though life is far from stable, if they miss just one meeting they risk deportation. They have been granted a full hearing in December.

With their future in U.S. uncertain, the family continues to hold-tight and hope for the best. They're teetering between two different realities: American optimism and the fear of being deported to their homeland. Just the thought of returning to Honduras brings Celeste to tears.

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