

Fearing for Their Lives— Why They Come

BY PATRICIA LONGFELLOW

Honduran *maras* (gangs) first tried to recruit Veronica's little brother when he was 12. Three years later, the *maras* called again and received a refusal again. This time they beat him so severely he required a three-month hospital stay. Their homeland no longer safe, 20-year-old Veronica—like her mother 18 years before—left her job and headed north with her brother in search of safety. Leaving the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa, they joined 17 others who paid \$7,000 each for a bus to Guatemala. In Mexico, they were given a backpack with food for the four-night trek across the desert.

Veronica and her brother lived with relatives in California the first year. She stayed inside, caring for an infant nephew, and every night cried for her 3½-year-old son still in Honduras. For months he'd ask his paternal grandmother, "When's mama picking me up?"

While safer than Honduras, California too had many gangs, so Veronica moved to be with family in Louisville, Kentucky. A week after arriving, she landed a factory job and began learning English at a local community center. She now works at a restaurant downtown and recently married a local man.

It's been 16 years since Veronica has seen her son. He is 18 and in his last year of school. She'd like to attend his high school graduation, but she's afraid that she or a loved one will be killed. Gangs have already hit her family: A cousin who owned a store refused to pay extortion money for "protection," so they killed him, then threatened to kill any family members who attended his funeral. His wife died with 15 gunshots to the face.

The gangs' presence is felt everywhere, even the police departments. As more Hondurans are returned, the number of gang members increases. Her son has avoided them, doing well in school and is now a Mormon. They keep in touch by video phone apps. As to when she'll get to hug him again, no one knows. It is enough that her family is safe.

Patricia Longfellow is senior administrative assistant for PW.



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