

2018 Summer Fellowship Reflection
By Alejandra Lopez



This past summer I was a legal intern at the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project (FIRRP) in Arizona. They have three offices based in Florence, Phoenix, and Tucson. I was based in the Tucson office on the children's team. The first week of the internship was all training and I had the opportunity to visit all three offices. They also took us to visit the immigration detention center located in Florence. During the training, I observed an intake of a four-year-old little boy and I was shocked. He was so young, and I felt terrible that he was alone in a shelter. I was unsure if I would be able to handle an entire summer of those emotions, but I knew that I had to do my part to help these children through the difficult time in their lives.

During my internship I would visit a children's shelter that housed children who are undocumented. These children present themselves at the border asking for asylum or are found by border patrol inside the United States. They are placed in these shelters and are assigned a case manager who attempts to find them a suitable guardian in the United States. Children typically spend a few weeks in the shelter, the process of approving the guardian takes long as they need to get fingerprinted in order to get approved. Once the guardian is approved, the child is sent to live with them. This does not mean the child is allowed to stay in the country, they still need to go to immigration court to determine their future in this country. Some children are unable to find a guardian and are sent back to their home country. In some rare instances, if the child has a good immigration case, they are placed in foster care.

I would visit the children's shelter twice a week and give the children who had recently arrived in the shelter a presentation called Know Your Rights. This presentation informed the children of all the rights that had while they were inside the shelter, such as calls twice a week, three meals, time to play, among others. The presentation also informed them of how the immigration system works in the United States so that they know what to expect when they leave the shelter. After the presentation, we would conduct an intake with all the new children. We would ask the children questions about why they came to the United States and what their home life was in their country of origin. The information they provided in their intake would allow us to make a preliminary determination about what kind of immigration relief they might be eligible for.

Unfortunately, FIRRP is unable to take the case of all the children in the shelter given that there are about 300 of them at the shelter at any given time. However, once the child is released from the shelter, FIRRP calls the guardian of the child to inquire about where they live and gives them a referral to an attorney in their area who may be able to provide assistance and sends that attorney the intake that was taken of the child in the shelter. The children who are placed in foster care and stay in Arizona are represented by FIRRP. At the start of the summer, I was assigned to work on the case of three young men who were in foster care. I assisted the three of them with their immigration cases. The three clients that I was assigned were all eligible for a Special Immigration Juvenile Visa and I prepared their applications for them. These three young men had faced terrible situations in their home countries. They had gone through moments of hunger, had worked since as young as 8 years old, had worked with dangerous instruments on the job that lead to injury, and had survived the journey from their country to the United States. I was inspired by their perseverance and by the fact that despite all they had been through they were happy young men who were excited to start their new lives here.

This summer was an unforgettable experience. It was difficult to hear some of the terrible experiences that some of the children had endured. However, these kids were so kind, and were an absolute pleasure to work with. They were all so grateful for our help and it truly made the hard days worth it. I am beyond thankful for the fellowship I reviewed from the Civil and Human Rights. Without the fellowship, I would have had to obtain a paying job on top of the internship and I would not have been able to dedicate myself completely to the internship. The work done by FIRRP is so important and I am proud to have contributed to the cause. The opportunity to work at FIRRP as a legal intern has affirmed my desire to work in this field. I appreciate the opportunity to play my part in attempting to make a difference in the lives of these children.