

# Finding Refuge

Refugees make McLean home

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**“The moment I crossed the border...with two other people that were not my family, they quickly got us in the canoe and took us across the river,” Marcos said. “And then they told us to walk.”**

**M**arcos\*, a 17-year-old student at McLean, grew up in El Salvador, working to help pay for his education. He left behind his home, his family and all of his possessions—except for a hat—to search for a better life.

Although many refugees attempt to enter the U.S. for a chance at a better life, few are able to complete the journey. During fiscal year 2016, more than 100,000 families were apprehended at the border, according to U.S. Customs & Border Patrol. The majority of them were from Central America. Refugees who are accepted by the U.S. often assimilate into American culture, hoping to learn, work and eventually raise children.

#### **REFUGEES AT MCLEAN**

Marcos is not alone in the journey he has taken. Luis\*, another student at McLean, arrived in the U.S. on Aug. 9, 2015, from El Salvador. He still remembers the violence in El Salvador and the hardships that forced him to leave his home behind.

Although many immigrant students are not legally considered refugees, many cite violence as a reason for leaving their home countries. Under the United Nations’s definition, a refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.”

“[El Salvador is] very dangerous. There are a lot of gangs, and even if you work really hard you don’t get paid very well,” Luis said.

Marcos confronted similar hardships in El Salvador, which *The Guardian* calls the “homicide capital of the world.” Gang members sometimes came to his workplace asking for money. When gang members began pressuring him to join them, Marcos made the decision to leave for America and live with his uncle, a U.S. citizen who lives in the McLean area.

Miguel\*, another student at McLean, decided to leave Honduras, his home country. In Honduras, Miguel was living alone, without his parents or siblings.

“Many people died because the gangsters, they think people have money, and they take the money from the people. There are some places that don’t have enough food, water, energy, things like that,” Miguel said.

For people like Marcos, Luis and Miguel, the journey to the U.S. can involve weeks of traveling with no guarantee that they will be able to cross the border.

“I was on a truck on my way here with a bunch of other people, and then something happened... the truck flipped over, and several people died,” Luis said.

After the incident, those who survived continued on foot, making it to Mexico and then finally across the border. Before he had made it far, Luis was intercepted by immigration officials and put in a detention center in Miami. After about a month, he was allowed to come to McLean.

Marcos was also put in a detention center when he arrived, where he stayed for two months before being released.

“When we got [across the border], immigration grabbed me,” Marcos said. “But they let me stay...they called my parents and asked for my papers. I called my uncle and he came...but they kept me in a detention center for two months.”

At the detention center, Marcos spent time with eight other people and was allowed to take classes in English and math.

“At first, [the center] did feel like a prison. But I eventually got used to it,” Marcos said.

Miguel also faced harrowing conditions during his journey into the U.S.

“A person almost killed me in Monterrey, [Mexico]...there were gangsters shooting each other. I was...sleeping in a little house...we had to spend the night there,” Miguel said. “When it was like nine o’clock, people started shooting, and I heard that. I went out and I said, ‘Oh my gosh.’ I was alone, in that moment, and that was all.” ▶

**\*These names have been changed to protect these students’ anonymity due to the sensitive nature of their stories. Some quotes have been translated from Spanish by senior Laura Cintrón García.**

## BUILDING A NEW LIFE

After surviving the journey across the border, Marcos, Luis and Miguel now face new challenges assimilating. The English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program helps them transition and learn English as they begin their new lives.

Zamira Seyfulla, the ESOL Department Chair, works with many students in the program, teaching them English and helping them adjust to life at a new school. Many of the students with whom she works are refugees who have recently moved to the U.S. in search of a better life.

family in El Salvador every day.

“When [the refugee students] come here, they are 16, 17, and it’s very difficult for them to adapt not only to the country, [but] to the language, new school—everything is new. Some of the kids have their parents still in their country but they come here,” Seyfulla said. “It happens—they don’t have friends, they don’t have family.”

Despite these challenges, students plan for their futures.

“What I want in this country is to get my diploma from high school and then go into the army,” Miguel said.

Like many other first-generation Americans, Gyatso is committed to his life in the U.S. while still maintaining a connection to Tibet.

“As a new generation, I’m very heavily invested in my life as an American,” Gyatso said. “[There’s] this sort of dichotomy of our identity when we simultaneously want to support and work to help the people in our country but we don’t necessarily feel as strongly an association to it as we might have a few decades ago.”

Sophomore and first-generation American Inaya Huric’s mother came to the U.S. as a

“If we stop accepting people who are in need of a safe haven, then we’ve stopped standing for what America stands for.”

-Temple Rodef Shalom Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

They work toward being fluent in English, eventually taking regular high school courses.

“It’s not very easy to be a refugee. You really have to put in the effort to learn English and surround yourself with people who speak English,” Luis said.

One of the most difficult things for these McLean students is fitting into their English-based classes.

“It’s a challenge for them when they are in biology classes or world history, and they sometimes feel shy together with the native speakers because their language is not good. They don’t understand what is written in the textbooks,” Seyfulla said.

On top of the language barrier, refugees face obstacles outside of the school environment. In order to afford their lives in the U.S., most student refugees must work, taking jobs in addition to their schoolwork.

“They have to work—one of the students [wrote in a class assignment that] his mother doesn’t make enough money to provide for the whole week, so he has to work,” Seyfulla said.

High school refugees must also deal with the emotional trauma of being so far away from their families.

Marcos left his parents behind in El Salvador and now lives with his uncle, aunt and cousin, all U.S. citizens. He calls his

## FIRST-GENERATION AMERICANS

Although adjusting to life in the U.S. can be difficult, many refugees assimilate and build new relationships. Their children may preserve parts of the cultures that they left behind.

Senior Tashi Gyatso’s parents are both refugees from Tibet, which has been under Chinese occupation since 1950. Gyatso’s father escaped the country at the age of four in 1957. Gyatso’s mother was born in exile in Dharamsala, India—a city that is home to many Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama. Gyatso’s parents came to the U.S. in the 1980s, where he was born and raised.

Even after years of living in a new country and adopting American culture, Gyatso’s parents are connected to their Tibetan origins. Gyatso’s father works for Voice of America, a broadcasting corporation that spreads news to areas with limited press freedom.

“In Tibet it’s actually illegal to view some of these programs, but it’s...one of the few sources of media...that they have that’s truly uncensored by and unfiltered by the Chinese government,” Gyatso said.

Gyatso’s mother works for a non-governmental organization called the International Campaign for Tibet, which lobbies and raises awareness for the Tibetan independence cause.

refugee from Bosnia, escaping the siege of Sarajevo in 1994. Her father remained in Sarajevo throughout the Bosnian War and came to the U.S. in 2001. Huric’s mother experienced many of the struggles that high school refugees experience today.

“For my mom, [assimilation] was difficult because she was a teenager,” Huric said. “It was a new country, a new environment...and the cultural differences were huge so she was very isolated. She spent a lot of time alone...in general, high school is a tough time for everyone, but [it was] especially for her.”

Eventually, though, after building a new life in a new country, these refugees become accustomed to their new society. Even while refugees’ deep cultural roots help preserve some ethnic values, as first-generation Americans begin to assimilate, aspects of their parents’ culture are often left behind.

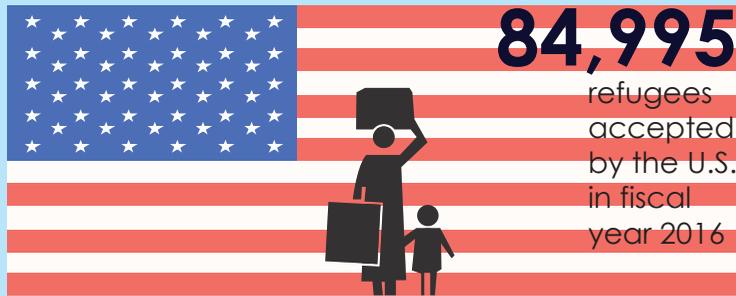
“What sort of surprised me and saddened me actually is a lot of Tibetans in [Boston, California and New York]—not only do they not speak the language very well, but they were almost sort of surprised that I could,” Gyatso said.

## AID EFFORTS

In addition to large organizations like those Gyatso’s parents work for, many local groups work to help refugees and individuals



Number of  
refugees  
from Syria at  
the end of  
2015



most refugees arriving in  
the Northern Virginia area  
are from Afghanistan and  
Iraq



**455** refugees admitted  
into Virginia from  
Oct. 1, 2016 through  
Dec. 31, 2016

still in difficult situations abroad.

“When I heard about [local refugees], I thought, ‘Do we have refugees in our area? I don’t know where they are, how do I help them?’” said Donna Doll, president of the McLean Virginia Stake Relief Society.

Doll worked with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to organize a refugee volunteer fair last summer. Volunteers at the fair prepared 100 kits full of hygiene, cleaning and baby supplies to give to refugees who are settling into the area.

Similarly, volunteers from Temple Rodef Shalom have sponsored a refugee family from the Middle East. The family—a single mother and two boys—came to the McLean area this summer. The temple has been helping them adjust to their new environment by subsidizing apartment costs, getting each family member enrolled in school and applying for help from government assistance programs. Temple Rodef Shalom Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe played an instrumental role in establishing this refugee aid.

“I think that it’s eye-opening for the individuals that are [volunteering],” Saxe said. “It’s incredibly educational, and I think it’s fulfilling in a real way. Hopefully they’re inspiring other people to...find some way to help refugees or be a part of what we call in our faith Tikkun Olam, which is Hebrew for

‘repairing the world.’”

Dr. Mohammed Naji, president of the local chapter of the Syrian American Medical Society, worked with the McLean Islamic Center in their refugee aid efforts.

“We created a committee...to coordinate and communicate with the different people who work with the refugees,” Naji said.

In addition to the committee, the McLean Islamic Center has been working to help refugees who struggle to adjust to life in the U.S.

“One family ran out of money, and they were going to be evicted...so the Islamic Center paid the rent for them so they can still stay in their apartment,” Naji said.

Organizations like these are essential to helping refugees get started in their new lives.

“Besides the language barrier and overcoming the trauma of what they’ve been through—the loneliness, perhaps, of being away from family and outside of their culture—there is an incredible amount of paperwork,” Saxe said. “And for somebody without any English language skills and perhaps any experience in working with the system in that way...it’s very hard.”

Refugees arrive in the U.S. from all corners of the world and need varying amounts of aid. In fiscal year 2016, the U.S. accepted nearly 85,000 refugees, according to the Refugee Processing Center.

In this way, America is a safe haven for refugees like Marcos, Luis and Miguel. But still, these students face many challenges not only during their journey but also during their assimilation process.

“This country [has a] different culture... [you] don’t have real friends. In this country, you have to study and work. That’s it,” Miguel said.

Student refugees do everything they can to learn English and overcome adversity.

“I didn’t know any English except for a couple words, but I went to Falls Church High School [before McLean] and the ESOL teachers there are very good and I managed to learn a lot very quickly,” Luis said.

For students like Luis, the voyage to the U.S. is only the beginning of a longer journey to find a home in this country. Cultural assimilation and adapting to a new lifestyle are components of a more lasting struggle they must face. American history is full of stories of immigrants who have found a place here.

“America is a country of immigrants, and we need to remember that that’s who we are,” Saxe said. “If we stop accepting people who are in need of a safe haven, then we’ve stopped standing for what America stands for.” ■

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