

## **FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH**

### **RIVER FALLS**

#### **RESETTLEMENT OF A GUATEMALAN FAMILY**

**2016**

During the summer of 2014, tens of thousands of undocumented children were crossing our southern borders to escape corruption, gang violence, and abject poverty in their home countries. UCC Reverend Barbara de Souza, a missionary who had recently retired to North Carolina after spending 40 years in the favelas of Brazil, contacted an old acquaintance, Bobbie Kuhn, her husband's ESL teacher from the early 1980's. Kindred spirits, both women were appalled by the horrendous treatment of the children detained at our borders. Barb asked Bobbie a life-changing question, "If I move back to Wisconsin, will you help me bring some of these children there?" Bobbie didn't have to think twice and agreed to begin the research on just how to accomplish such a daunting task.

Before long, Bobbie had gathered interested parties including UCC Pastors Chris Myers and David Ostendorf, Father Jerry Harris from St. Bridget Catholic Church, and several local women to assist in the project. It was decided that the only way this would work financially would be to include more churches in the process; duties were divided up and the research began. Many organizations were contacted including Health and Human Services, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, the UCC and Methodist churches in the southern states, and offices of Wisconsin senators to name a few. A year went by and we were no closer to our goals of finding children who needed sponsors than we were at the onset. Then Barbara de Souza moved to town and our prayers were answered.

Barb speaks fluent English and Portuguese, but she thought she should learn Spanish in order to be of help to the adolescents we were hoping to sponsor. So, in the fall of 2015, Barb enrolled in a Community Education Beginning Spanish class. During one of the class sessions, a lawyer from the Twin Cities was the guest

speaker. After the class, Barb approached him and asked if he knew any immigration lawyers in Minneapolis or St. Paul. He told her about the Kim Hunter Law Firm and the rest is history!

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Kim told Barb that no adolescents were being released from detention, but that there were many women and children who needed sponsors. We didn't give it a second thought. On November 6<sup>th</sup>, Kim gave Barb the name of a contact in San Antonio who was a volunteer for RaisesTexas, an organization that helps asylum seekers at the border. Bobbie took it from there and contacted a man by the name of Mohammad who confirmed what Kim had told us and asked for detailed information about the sponsoring group since he hadn't sent asylum seekers that far north before. He confirmed that there would be no problem finding a family to sponsor.

By December 11<sup>th</sup>, all of the churches in River Falls had been contacted and seven agreed to assist in the support of a family in one way or another. The Ecumenical Asylum Committee (EAC) was formed. First Congregational agreed to keep track of donations and the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC assisted with a large donation. And we waited.

On January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, Bobbie received an email from Mohammad along with a picture of a beautiful family of five who had just arrived at a Jesuit shelter in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. It was forwarded to the committee. By January 8<sup>th</sup>, Barb and Gus de Souza, Dave Ostendorf, and Bobbie and Jim Kuhn were communicating with a volunteer, Marla, at the Nazareth shelter. We met the family—mother Lupe and her four children—and answered their questions: Who would be the sponsor? Would her children be taken away from her? How would we keep her dangerous spouse from finding them? We agreed to keep them together and safe, and Marla began working on an asylum application with Kim Hunter. The family wanted to cross the border on January 18<sup>th</sup>.

Panic ensued! The EAC had “boots on the ground” who scurried to find an apartment, furnishings, etc. It didn't happen quickly enough, and the date of crossing is changed to February 1<sup>st</sup> at 5 PM. Bobbie, now the sponsor, waited patiently for a call from a border guard at the Nogales, Ariz., Port of Entry. After

many anxious hours at nearly midnight, the border guard called, quizzed Bobbie on her relationship with the family and then allowed them leave with the volunteers waiting to put them on a bus to Wisconsin.

Early on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, Mohammad called to say he was scrapping the bus ride because he found cheap airfare instead. Later that day, Dave grabbed the church van and Barb, Bobbie, and Bobbie's friend, Aracely, now our interpreter, travel to Bloomington, Minn., to the International Airport to pick them up at 8:30 PM. Not long after we arrived, we heard that the plane had to turn back to Phoenix due to a mechanical problem. They would be arriving at midnight instead. After taking a long break at the local IHOP, we greeted our new friends shortly after midnight. The children grabbed our hands and chatted happily in Spanish. We dressed them in their new winter duds, headed to the van, and traveled through the cold, winter night to their bright new home.

What now? The real work began, and the duties are divided. Bobbie notified the schools, ESL is set up for the children, and the school with the best accommodations was chosen. A schedule to gradually assimilate them into the schools is established. Barb takes over the medical issues including contacting the free clinic, finding a dentist, and setting up inoculations. She also contacted the food pantry, took Lupe shopping, found a trauma counselor, and kept lists of volunteer drivers and babysitters. Monthly EAC meetings were scheduled and fundraisers were planned which included tamale dinners arranged by committee members who assisted Lupe in making and cooking her Guatemalan specialties.

A member of the committee offered to teach Lupe English in her home while the children are in school. Lupe had two check-ins with Homeland Security at Fort Snelling. She was fingerprinted in St. Paul and her asylum papers were filed with Immigration and Customs on May 23<sup>rd</sup> which meant she can get her work permit in 150 days. The family was adjusting to the extremes in Wisconsin weather, the strange food and customs, school, church, and the English language.

It didn't take long for Lupe to begin to walk around the town of 15,000 on her own. Her home is a block from Main Street where everything she needs is located. The laundromat is two blocks from her house with the Dollar General

across the street from that. Every other store is a few blocks away as well as a large playground, the city park, swimming pool, and soccer fields. Lupe has attended most of the churches that have sponsored her. Her children have been to many vacation bible schools and chose where they wanted to go for Wednesday school themselves. Lupe has met with Father Harris to discuss First Communion for the children. Our new friends enjoyed a wonderful summer with parades, carnivals, ball games, birthday parties, picnics, and fireworks.

Lupe has been here for nine months, and she is almost completely autonomous. She walks everywhere, shops for bargains, calls us if she needs something such as a ride somewhere or something from the pharmacy. There have been a couple of trips to the emergency room, but she and her children live on \$1200 a month...\$800 of which is rent and utilities...all paid for by generous donations from the local churches and their congregations. River Falls has wonderful resources including a backpack program where the children bring food home every weekend of the school year. There are drivers and babysitters who are still interested in helping as needed, and teachers who keep Bobbie informed on what is necessary at school. The children speak wonderful English already and are translating for us. Our interpreter, her husband, and cousins are Latino and have become the aunts and uncles the children miss so much. They have been called on for their interpreting services over and over again...we wouldn't have been able to do so well without them.

Our group may be more hands-on than others involved in the resettlement of families. Lupe was a child bride who traveled 2,300 miles across Mexico with her four children and the clothes on their backs. Since there was not a male in the family who could work and a child of two who needed to be cared for, Lupe needed a bit more hands-on help. And, it has paid off in spades. Because her attorney is in St. Paul, 30 minutes away, she needed drivers to take her to her practice sessions in preparation for her deportation hearing and then wait two hours to take her home. She needed a babysitter during this time as well as emotional support. We do not know how she would have done this on her own.

The good news is that hard work and prayers help miracles happen! On Monday, October 17<sup>th</sup>, an immigration judge, with the approval of Homeland Security's prosecuting attorney, granted immediate asylum for Lupe and her children. This, after four hours of testimony and cross examination, was unprecedented. We had been told that the process and accompanying paperwork could take up to two months to complete and that we wouldn't know of the judge's decision until then. You can imagine our relief as well as the weight lifted from Lupe's shoulders. She put all the energy she could muster into that interrogation...so much so that she fell asleep as soon as she hit the backseat of the car. Our collective prayers were heard and perhaps softened the hearts of two human beings who held the fate of a young family in their hands. We celebrated the next evening when the River Falls Community Foundation held a reception and gave our committee \$500.00 to pay for medical bills.

By Bobbie Kuhn, member, First Congregational Church, River Falls