

My words from last night's Lights for Liberty vigil

by Juliana Ramos Crespo

When I was a baby, I lived in the *favelas* with my mother - the *favelas* were the 'hood' in Rio. There wasn't much to the tiny space we lived in - it had just enough room for my mother's bed and my crib, which consisted of two chairs she put together. The door was rotten, offered little privacy because of the holes. We didn't have water, electricity – that was for the privileged. The bathroom was a good half-mile away. My mother would have to carry me all that distance so she could relieve herself. Yep, a seventeen-year-old girl did this, not knowing whether my father would return to help support us. Well, he didn't, and this was perhaps for the best, because my mother began to dream then, wish for a life that didn't mean hunger, constant desperation, and wondering whether she'd die or get raped again in the middle of the night. Now, dreams don't always come true, but my mother's did, kind of. It's a much longer story than I have time to tell, but let me say that my mother would find her way to America, and eventually, she'd bring me here. Her hope gave her wings, incredible wings.

I still remember when I first moved here at six. I flew alone, which was terrifying because I was convinced the plane would fall from the sky and leave us all dead. I also had to leave my grandmother behind, my only best friend. When I arrived, I couldn't understand anyone besides my mother. At school, the teachers didn't know how to teach me, and so I sat for hours, alone. What was even worse at my age, television cartoons and shows were entirely in English.

My mother had a different set of challenges. You see, moving here didn't guarantee that her dream would be realized 100 percent. She still encountered poverty and domestic abuse and discrimination. But she fought to survive. It's like voyaging out at sea, except it never ends when you're an immigrant, a migrant, or a refugee. You still get your storms.

Here's the thing though — my mother and anyone else who's trying to make it to America for a better life, they're warriors. They have the courage not only to dream of a better world but also to try and actualize their dreams. Their dreams are often small too — a little more food on the table, money to send back home, nice clothes for their children, a world without violence, without drug wars. They're trying to get beyond surviving day by day, something many of us don't and can't understand because we are financially comfortable and we live in safe communities.

So the fact that our government is determined to dehumanize these warrior spirits breaks my heart. Our current governmental policies are anything but humanitarian. As we stand here today, migrant children and adults are living in squalid conditions. You already know what they're enduring – you've seen the news. Even animals in American pet shelters receive more humane treatment than the migrants that have been detained in this country.

But today, we are the lighthouses sending out a spark of promise to these migrant voyagers. It's not enough though. Their waters are filled with sharks, and they need our help out there too. May we reach them in time because they are weary. Some of them are already broken. Some of them have died.

It's time to end the madness, the insanity of our government's current policies. The use of fear to control and manipulate will only lead to more devastation. As Ricardo Salinas said in a New York Times opinion piece, "We need to restore politics of humanity."

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July 12, 2019