

It's July. It's an ugly, sticky, 104 degrees. I was at the South Texas Family Residential Center, which is a bureaucratic euphemism for an immigration detention facility one hour north of the border in Dilley, Texas.

My purpose was to help people there seeking asylum in the U.S., but this year, my purpose was special. Making a permanent stain on American history, the Attorney General had ordered that children who entered the U.S. with their parents, but without permission to enter, should be separated from their parents as a deterrent to crossing the border.

The Dilley Pro Bono project is the collaborative effort of multiple nonprofits. The project recruits volunteer attorneys and others to provide legal services to the asylum seekers. The volunteers come for a week at a time, then hand off to the next group of volunteers. I was one of them. I should say: I AM one of them.

Right before I went to Texas, a court ordered the families reunified. We knew that many of the parents had already been given a negative decision, but the children had not had their cases heard yet.

I met with a mom and her seven-year-old son. Seven. He was seven, and he had been forcibly separated from his mom for two months. To protect them, I'll call them Norma and Ernesto, and tell you that they were from Central America.

Yes, Norma had had two asylum hearings, and both were "negativos." Her asylum had been denied because, instead of answering the asylum officer's questions, she kept asking for her son. Norma's first statement to me was this: *I might be deported tonight. We have to take care of my son, now.*

One day in her town, a local gang member had come to Norma's house demanding protection money. She told him she didn't have the money. He came back the next day, and the next. On the last day, Ernesto was clinging to her when she opened the door. The gang member pointed his gun at Ernesto and said "Mañana." Tomorrow. At 4:00 a.m., she put Ernesto in her car and drove north.

After they crossed the US border, they were picked up by Customs and Border Protection, known as CBP. Ernesto was taken away.

As Norma told me their story, I knew that I needed to talk to Ernesto directly. But he's seven. He was sprawled out on the chair with his head fallen back. He was exhausted. I explained that we needed to get Ernesto to write his name down. She woke him up, and he started to wail, as only a child in distress can do. "I just want to leave," he said in Spanish.

*Knock on the door, from one of the staff members.* "Maybe you should let them take a break so he can calm down." I said okay.

*Knock on the door from one of the ICE staff.* "Ma'am, you know you're not allowed to be in these rooms without a client." "Yes, but they've just stepped out for a moment, and they'll be right back." "Then you should wait out here."

I looked out the door, and gestured to Norma to come back in. Ernesto was anything but settled down.

"Mi hijo," Norma said to him in that firm voice that mommies use. *Just do this for the señora and we can go.* I quickly handed her a pen and the paper, even as Ernesto continued to wail. *He doesn't know how to use a pen yet.* We had brought in crayons and paper for him

earlier, and so she reached for the crayon. She handed it to him and said “El naranja.” (The orange one.) *It’s your favorite.*

I looked down at my notes to fight back the tears. Why was I pushing this kid? And then, my attorney antenna went up. Even though my compassion was exploding in response to Ernesto, I could see the typeface on some unknown, future, negative court opinion: “The declaration was signed in crayon.”

I looked at her, and said, “Por favor. El lapicero, por favor.” (Please. The pen, please.) She nodded and gave him the pen.

Ernesto was wailing full volume now. There could be no doubt that everyone in the trailer could hear him. “Quiero dejar con mi mama.” (I just want to leave with my mother.) He wrote his name and ran out of the room.

I am not a trained psychologist. I also don’t know how to diagnose PTSD. But an exhausted seven-year-old, finally reunited with his mom after two months, was in bad shape. I asked the staff to ask for psychological assistance. And I turned in the paperwork.

And then I went to the bathroom, and I cried. I thought, “*Welcome to America.*”

The family’s asylum issues are still pending today. They may or may not win their cases. I don’t know who will repair the real damage to the thousands of Ernesto’s and Norma’s.