Far From Family, Alone, Homeless And Still Just 18

The New York Times

February 26, 2012 Sunday, National Edition

Section: Section A; Column 0; National Desk; Chicago ; Pg. 23A; CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE CAST AWAY

Length: 1546 words

Byline: By MERIBAH KNIGHT; Idalmy Carrera contributed reporting.

mknight@chicagonewscoop.org

Body

One said goodbye, embracing his anxious parents. One left without a word, indignant and angry.

After traveling thousands of miles by bus, train and on foot, the two young men met in a ***homeless*** shelter on Chicago's Northwest Side.

Oscar was a shy 15-year-old when his parents hired a local "coyote" in July 2008 to help him leave Veracruz, Mexico, and cross the border to seek work in the United States. Jorge, gregarious, bright-eyed and also 15, gathered up his 6-year-old cousin six months later and left Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in the middle of the night, to escape abuse that he said had escalated into fistfights with his father. He also planned to work and send money back to his mother.

Without knowing it, both were headed toward homelessness. In that, they joined thousands of other immigrant children who have left their native country -- for work, ***family*** reunification or refuge -- crossed into the United States and wound up ***alone***.

Last year, the Office of Refugee Resettlement reported that 8,244 children entered the United States unaccompanied and without immigration documents and eventually ended up in its custody. Illinois received 627 of them.

One of a dozen states with federal centers for unaccompanied immigrant youths taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security, Illinois is home to 4 of the nation's 53 facilities.

The state offers 147 beds to unaccompanied immigrant youths.

When young people turn ***18***, they are released from the facilities, some into adult detention centers, others to ***family*** members. In some cases, ***homeless*** shelters become their only refuge as they apply for asylum or special visas.

Today, Jorge and Oscar are both ***18***, with no ***family*** to house them and no criminal histories that would warrant a transfer to a detention facility.

They arrived in June at Solid Ground, a nonprofit youth ***homeless*** shelter in Humboldt Park, where they will most likely remain until a decision is made on their applications for immigration relief. The process can take years.

With the help of local advocates and lawyers working pro bono, Jorge is seeking asylum, citing ***family*** abuse and the pressure and influence of gang recruitment in Honduras. Oscar applied for a visa for victims of human trafficking, claiming eligibility because he was exploited as a migrant farm worker.

While they wait, Oscar and Jorge must stay close for court-ordered interviews and proceedings that they hope will allow them to remain in this country. Both asked to be identified only by their first names for fear of jeopardizing their cases.

The handful of people in Chicago who work with young ***homeless*** immigrants -- who come mainly from Central America, Mexico, Africa, India and China -- say such young people are often neglected.

"It's been very challenging to find spaces for these kids," said Jennifer Nagda, the associate director of Chicago's Young Center for Immigrant Children's Rights. "There is not exactly a wealth of beds to begin with for the domestic population, let ***alone*** unaccompanied youth."

Sol Flores, executive director of La Casa Norte, the nonprofit organization that operates Solid Ground, said she was surprised by the increasing number of undocumented youths at the shelter. "We never thought we would have a young person who was brought to this country from Sudan and abandoned by his caretaker," she said.

Advocates say young, ***homeless*** immigrants typically come to the United States to seek work, reconnect with ***family*** or flee persecution, abuse or violence.

Susan Trudeau, the executive director of child welfare programs at Heartland Human Care Services, operator of the four Illinois facilities for unaccompanied immigrant youths, said she had seen an increase in the number of young people fleeing Central American gangs.

"They are being recruited; their ***families*** are being threatened," she said. "They are being threatened. So it is ***just*** easier to run away."

Fleeing such gangs one night in the winter of 2009, Jorge took along his 6-year-old cousin, Eric, who longed to reunite with his mother, who was working in the United States. The cousins began a monthlong, nearly 4,000-mile journey from Honduras -- first by bus, then by freight train and finally on foot.

When Jorge left, his backpack held a change of clothes for him and his cousin and enough money for bus fare and some food, he said. After taking the bus to Guatemala, they began the most treacherous part of the trek: illegally riding on the tops and sides of freight trains that snaked through Guatemala and into Mexico.

For five days they walked along the tracks, following them to the station where the train originated. When it finally came, he and hundreds of other would-be migrants sprang from the tall grass that hid them and clambered aboard. To keep Eric safe, Jorge carried his cousin on his back and placed his backpack over the boy, effectively strapping him in as they jumped on and off the moving trains, he said.

After two weeks, they arrived in Mexico and found a man willing to take them across the border into the United States.

They walked for seven days, barely sleeping and sharing food among the other migrants.

"We would stop to rest," Jorge said. "But not for too long because it was so cold out and we knew we had to keep moving to stay warm. When we did stop and sit for a while, no one slept. We ***just*** sat quietly near each other."

When he arrived in the United States, Eric went to live with his mother nearby in Arizona. Jorge, with limited English, no visa and no ***family***, said he began supporting himself by dealing drugs -- cocaine and heroin.

He was eventually arrested in Colorado, taken into federal custody and sent to the Illinois Children's Center, one of the four Illinois detention facilities for immigrant youths. Jorge remained at the low-security center for seven months. When he turned ***18***, he was required to wear a GPS monitoring anklet as a condition of his release to Solid Ground.

Oscar's sojourn began on the evening of July 28, 2008. After hugging his ***family*** goodbye, he left alongside his 16-year-old cousin, Victor.

The coyote his ***family*** enlisted to enable his journey cost them ***18***,000 pesos, roughly $1,700 at the time, money his father borrowed from a ***family*** friend, Oscar said.

''Take care of yourself and call us when you get to the border,'' he recalled his mother saying apprehensively as he left, with a few hundred pesos in his pocket, to board a bus bound for Sonora, Mexico, a border state. From there, he walked for seven days and six nights through Mexico toward Arizona.

By the third day in the desert under the August sun, Oscar's backpack, once heavy with canned vegetables, water, Gatorade and fresh tortillas, was empty except for water. His iPod, filled with music by Intocable, a popular Norteno band, had no charge for its battery. He walked three more days with no food before crossing, penniless, into Arizona.

Oscar soon found migrant farm work, traveling with two friends to wherever the crops were: watermelons in Delaware and Georgia, apples in Pennsylvania, oranges in Florida.

But the conditions were exploitative, he said. According to an affidavit filed with his relief application, Oscar was not paid regularly and not allowed to leave the work camps. His employers said immigration authorities would find him if he fled. Oscar was not fed adequately and was forced to sleep on the floor without blankets, his social worker said.

''When I came here, my only objective was to work,'' Oscar said. ''I wasn't thinking about finishing school or learning English. I came to work.''

In May 2010, after an altercation with an employer over unpaid wages, Oscar said, he was arrested and taken into federal custody in Georgia. After detention at a youth facility in Miami, he was released that fall to an uncle in Champaign, Ill. But soon after Oscar arrived, his uncle returned to Mexico because he feared that Oscar's presence might draw attention to his illegal status, Oscar said.

Last May the Office of Refugee Resettlement confirmed Oscar's eligibility as a victim of labor trafficking. This status should help Oscar obtain his visa, his lawyer said. According to the department's annual report, 91 youths received such letters in 2010, up from 50 the previous year.

Since arriving at La Casa Norte, Oscar and Jorge fill their days with G.E.D. and English classes.

Over the winter Oscar received a work visa and is employed part time at a Mexican restaurant on Chicago's Northwest Side.

Jorge, ***still*** awaiting work papers, spends his time drawing, painting murals and playing soccer. But if the ball hits his ankle, it sets off the monitoring device, forcing him report to immigration officials.

Despite his arrest, detention and homelessness, Jorge said he would make the journey to the United States again. The country has fewer gangs and less violence than his homeland.

Oscar, though, said he regretted coming to the United States He is thankful for the opportunities, but if he knew then what he knows now, he said, he would ***still*** call Mexico home.

They phone home every few weeks. Yet neither Oscar nor Jorge has seen his ***family*** since walking away.

Cast Away: The last of a series of articles on the rising number of ***homeless*** youths and ***families*** in Chicago, often living beyond the reach of helping hands.

Graphic

PHOTOS: Oscar, right, an illegal immigrant living in Chicago, in his room at La Casa Norte Solid Ground housing in Humboldt Park.

Jorge, left, taking an online test. He came to the United States when he was 15 and helped create the mural in the computer room at La Casa Norte Solid Ground, a nonprofit shelter for youths. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN KONSTANTARAS/CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: News; Series

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); TEMPORARY SHELTERS (90%); ***HOMELESS*** SHELTERS (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); IMMIGRATION OF MINORS (89%); GANGS (89%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (89%); HOMELESSNESS (89%); ***FAMILY*** (78%); DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (77%); CHILD TRAFFICKING (77%); REFUGEES (76%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (75%); IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS (73%); NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS (72%); NATIONAL SECURITY (71%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (71%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (71%); RESETTLEMENT & REPATRIATION (68%); MIGRANT WORKERS (68%); LITIGATION (67%); FARM LABOR (63%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (60%); PRO BONO LAW (50%); HUMAN TRAFFICKING (50%)

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (54%)

Industry: FARM LABOR (63%); PRO BONO LAW (50%)

Geographic: CHICAGO, IL, USA (88%); TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS (77%); ILLINOIS, USA (92%); UNITED STATES (94%); HONDURAS (92%); MEXICO (92%); INDIA (79%); CHINA (79%); CENTRAL AMERICA (77%)

Load-Date: February 26, 2012