

A DEFENDER FOR IMMIGRANT CHILDREN

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Highlight: Gulfcoast Legal Services, a nonprofit advocacy group, helps those in need.

Body

By the time Xiomara Medrano broke down in design class that day at Leto High School, she had been living on her own for years.

She'd bounced from one stranger's home to the next - about a dozen in 18 months, working as a waitress to pay rent. Then the restaurant fired her, fearing repercussions over her illegal immigration status.

She worried that if she told adults her problems - that her mother couldn't support her - they'd both be deported to El Salvador.

But that day this past fall, when the high school senior started weeping and couldn't stop, everything began to change.

A school counselor made phone calls and eventually found Gulfcoast Legal Services in St. Petersburg.

The nonprofit legal advocacy group took Xiomara's case, adding it to about 70 other cases of **immigrant children** in a five-county area. Many are neglected, abused and abandoned, alone without legal status.

"Some kids are traveling here by themselves, some did come here to be reunified with their families, and others were abandoned once they got here," said Mariam Ahmedani, a Gulfcoast attorney who was instrumental in formalizing the agency's new pro bono program for **immigrant children**, called GLS **Child**. The program was unveiled during a reception Thursday at Fowler White Boggs law offices in Tampa.

Experts say about 8,000 to 9,000 **children** a year come to the United States alone or unaccompanied by an adult. Often abused or victims of rape, many are put in detention centers without access to an attorney.

"They all have terrible stories," attorney Adriana Dinis said.

Two of the clients were brothers, ages 3 and 1, found walking along U.S. 19 in New Port Richey. The older boy was carrying his baby brother. Officials placed them in foster care and eventually they were adopted, Ahmedani said.

GLS **Child** provides specialized legal services for **immigrant children**, many of whom are eligible for legal status. For instance, a **child** victim of abuse, neglect or abandonment could qualify for special **immigrant** juvenile status. Others might qualify for asylum or a U-visa, which the government created for victims - **children** or adults - of certain violent crimes.

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Once Gulfcoast received Xiomara's case, its attorneys filed for the juvenile status visa in November. Meanwhile, they found a place for her to live in a homeless shelter for young women in Tampa.

By April, Xiomara, then 18, had her green card, or permanent residency. She never abandoned her studies, graduating from Leto High in June.

Xiomara thought her only prospects after high school would be to return to her former home in El Salvador, now overrun by violent gangs. Instead, she will start classes in August at Hillsborough Community College. She wants to be an obstetrician.

School counselor Kathy Wiggins watched the young woman transform in a few short months, escaping from the edge of homelessness to a life where she can now focus on her education.

"Her smile came back," Wiggins said.

At the reception Thursday, Xiomara stood next to Wiggins in a smart brown pantsuit before a room full of attorneys.

"I have no words to express how thankful I am," she said. "They changed my entire life. I can go to college now."

She stopped, choked up, as the attorneys broke into applause.

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Graphic

PHOTO - KATHLEEN FLYNN - Times: Adriana Dinis, left, of Gulfcoast Legal Services applauds as Leto High School counselor Kathy Wiggins, middle, hugs Xiomara Medrano, 18, a recent graduate. Xiomara came from El Salvador and had no legal status.

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