

# Seeking Refuge

## Profiles by Nicole Tufts

ref· u· gee : a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution because of war or for religious or political reasons.<sup>1</sup>

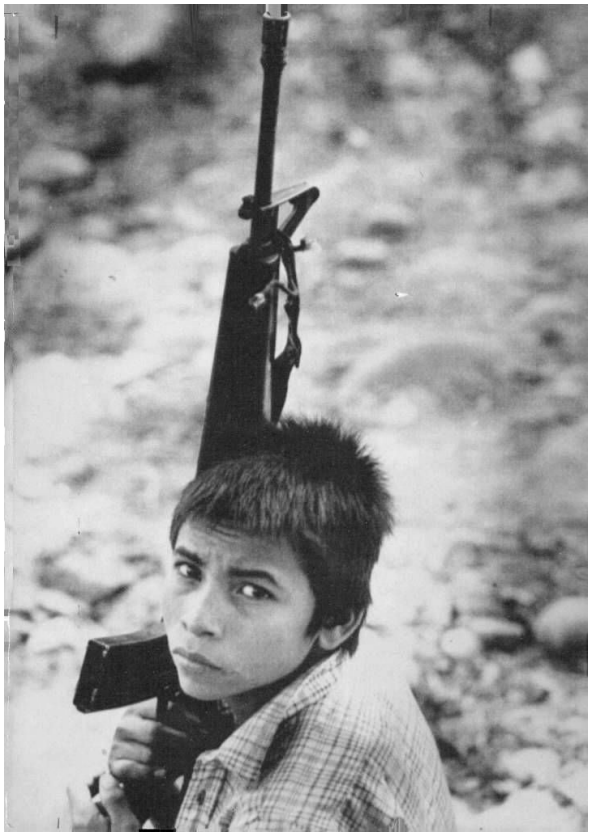
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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster definition.

## El Salvador 1979-1992



The War in El Salvador was a conflict between the military government and an alliance made up of five guerrilla groups who called themselves the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. The war hit its climax on October 15, 1979 and raged through the country for twelve years, wreaking havoc and violence. Before the war, President Humberto Romero had taken power after intimidating voters to win the elections. Once in office he suspended civil liberties and declared El Salvador in a state of siege. This led to the coup in 1979 where the successful attempt by the Revolutionary Government Junta to overthrow President Humberto resulted in the deaths of many and officially began the war. It resulted in battle between the extreme leftist military and a revolutionary group made up of guerrilla leaders. Extreme violence would then define the country for the next twelve years. The population lived in fear, mass murders, kidnappings and bombings flooded the nation. Curfews were placed at 6pm and at times students could not even leave their homes to attend school. If you had the money to pay for armed guards you were better off, but for those who could not life was dangerous as the possibility of death was always around the corner. At the end of the conflict there were 80,000 left dead, and 500,000 refugees.





The following profiles are the life stories of women who escaped the turmoil in their home country in search of greater opportunities in the United States. Through their captivating stories of enchanting childhoods, and the dangers of illegally crossing over to the US, these women show the determination they held as mothers to provide a better life for their children and establish a new home in America. The interviews were conducted at Sarah Lawrence College.



## **Rosalina Ramos**

Rosalina's smile permeates through the cloudy day as we sit under the shadow of a willow tree. Her dark eyes find the ground every few seconds, and I can immediately tell that Rosalina is nervous about re-telling her story. Seated on a grey stone, wearing her light blue uniform, she tucks a strand of her dark curly hair behind her ear and her smile takes on a different tone, one that is more reserved, one that belongs to the memories of her past.

Born and raised in El Salvador, Rosalina has experienced more struggle than that of picking up after messy college students. Rosalina experienced poverty firsthand in the pueblo of Canton al Canal.

"My pueblo was beautiful, well at least that's the way I saw it," she says with smile that starts to reflect the one I am used to seeing.

"My house was tiny. It was made of lamina and pasto (sheets of grass) nothing was made of wood or adobe. But we keep the house so clean! It was always well maintained. The house only had one room, with a small division separating the space where my parents slept. My siblings and I all slept together on the floor. The kitchen and where we slept was all the same space."

I ask Rosalina about a typical day in El Canton.

"We would have family over! Cook all day, eat tamales, and maybe go down to the river for a swim."

Her simple life continues into her education, where Rosalina made the best of her situation.

"I worked and I studied in my small school. It was very poor, like everything else. But we felt safe, we were taken care of and we learned. I studied until my parents couldn't afford to keep me in school anymore. I stopped attending after sixth grade. Then, at twelve years old I began to work full time to help my family make ends meet."

Work is what described Rosalina's life. To support her family and her younger sister she took jobs as a maid and nanny all over town and the city.

"I wanted to study to be a nurse. But it just wasn't possible. So I worked as a babysitter in the city. I cleaned, I cooked... it wasn't great, but it was work. Then I would come home and divide my earnings with my mom and my sister."

At the mention of a sibling, I press for more detail.

"My niece and I were always together, I considered her my sister. We're only a year and a half apart so we grew up together. I would always help her get ready in the mornings. Because poverty in my is so extensive, most days we would divide two eggs into four pieces and that was our dinner. It was hard because we all knew the circumstances, and we all worked hard to help each other, and throughout it all we tried to stay happy."

Her cheeks turn a light shade of pink, when I ask her about her husband.

"I met my husband when he went to school together as kids. We were great friends. After school I worked for some time for a few family friends of his. We fell in love. But, because his family had the potential for more possibilities in their future than my own, his parents did not want us to marry. One day, he took me and we eloped."

However, soon after marrying, staying happy became difficult once tumultuous war hit the country.

"I think it was 85' when I really started to realize the war was a real thing. The effects were visible now, and the entire country lived in fear. There were times when we were given very short notice that the guerrilleros were on their way to our pueblo. We had to hurry out and flee to the mountains, or rush to find some family or friends to live with in the city. Everyone went to bed early, people were afraid to be out late. There were robbers and rebels everywhere. Life was difficult then."



But things would soon change, as Rosalina's husband headed for the United States and she followed suit a year and a half later.

"I left for California. We wanted to find new opportunities, escape the peril in El Salvador and make a better life for my family. Unfortunately, I had to leave my first born son behind in El Salvador. I was travelling illegally, 'por tierra', and the journey would be too dangerous and hard for him. He was only three years old, such a small and delicate child. He had such a bad stomach too, I always had to make him specific meals, and that was not going to be possible on our journey. It was sad and so hard because he was so young, but I knew it was something that had to be done so that I could work to improve our lives for the future. I left El Salvador on August 5, 1990. I was traveling with a group of 40 other people. We passed through Guatemala and all of Mexico. The first city we arrived to in Mexico was Tecun. To reach Tacun we had to cross a river. The people taking us across put us on large tires where they fit five people per tire. Once we crossed the river we were caught by Mexican immigration. They sent us to Talisman in Guatemala. However, there those who were in charge of our group just had to pay ten quepsales per person to get us back into Mexico. It worked, we crossed the river again and traveled to a pueblo in Mexico where we were caught again. Once that was quickly sorted we traveled through the frontera that divides Mexico from the US. We went through Tijuana and in San Diego, on our journey we walked for twelve hours through the desert. I was so scared! My biggest fear was running into snakes -- I hate snakes. Finally we arrived. A group was waiting for us they were waiting for us to take us to Los Angeles. It took me eight days to arrive in the United States."

Throughout Rosalina's long journey, the one thing that scared her was leaving her son behind.

"When you leave for the US you have to drop everything and leave all your belongings. No clothes, no papers, no passport. But leaving my son and worrying about how he was going to grow up without me was the most difficult thing I ever had to deal with."

Her journey from El Salvador eventually brought her to New York.

“As we went through San Diego and then traveled to Los Angeles I remember we were on a train in a closed car. We were suffocating, we felt trapped. Once the doors opened we had to go through caves. We found bones of human bodies. It was terrifying. I could hear the sound of the bones crunching beneath my feet as we walked through. I thought then, if we get caught one more time, I won’t ever try to return again. Finally, in Los Angeles I showed up to my brother’s home, who has been living there for a while, with a swollen hand after having fractured it along the way. I remained there with my brothers for about two weeks. After that, I went to New York and have been here ever since.”

Her heartbreaking exodus into the United States brought her sadness but also new possibilities. With Rosalina, it’s always about looking at the bright side, and that is exactly how she has lived her life. Every disheartening moment she faces, she find a way to find the good in it, or to turn it around and try to make it a little better.

“Life in New York was good and bad. I was still depressed about leaving my son behind and that really hurt for a long time. Soon I found work and I figured it was a time to keep me preoccupied and I knew I could soon be able to send money back home and help my family.”

While she worked to get her residential papers, she found a job opportunity as a babysitter during the day and janitorial during the night at Sarah Lawrence College.

“My husband had been working at the school for a year before I arrived. He had just found a new job, so he spoke to his boss and asked if I could take his spot. At the time, the company was okay with hiring people without legal documents. We were even more lucky because the manager was from the same pueblo in El Salvador. Since then, I have been working at Sarah Lawrence for 25 years.”

Rosalina’s past was one of hardship and pain, and her journey has been centered on work, work that has helped her continue to find happiness and focus on the joys in life.

“When I finally got my papers I began to file papers for my son, so we could finally bring him back with us. We left him when he was only three years old, by the time we were able to get his papers

sorted, he was nineteen! It's been a bit difficult because we got him back at nineteen, but we lost him again at 21. After he came to the United States, I discovered he had a girlfriend back home. She soon moved to Arizona and became pregnant with his child. They married and now have two kids together. I didn't want him to go, but he had to take responsibility. The irony is, that although we have spent such a short time together, we are so close! My eldest son considers me his mother and his best friend. He confides in me more than any of my daughters whom I have always been with. Looking back, thinking of our roots and all we have left behind, I still have lots to be happy and proud of. I have my son back and we have the best relationship, regardless of the time we spent apart. All of my work has paid off, I always wanted to provide my own children with everything I was never able to have. My kids are all in school. My daughter is in her third year at university, my other daughter is in high school, and my youngest son is in second grade. I want them to pursue their dreams."

Even though Rosalina has found a better life in the United States, she still fears for her family back home, and the rest of the country's population who are constantly suffering from poverty and political unrest.

"Hard work and sacrifice is what has gotten me to where I am now. I always tell my children to be grateful for what they have, to remember our roots. Even if they don't have as much as the other kids, I want them to know we've come a long way and while we were able to get out, there are many more who are still suffering. My country is so poor. The government got rid of the national currency, the colon, and now adopted the US dollar. Everything is sold in US prices so all the goods and services are much more expensive. People in the country work hard labor all day long and only get paid three or five dollars. Women work all day washing clothes and ironing and get paid three dollars, while the people who hire them are definitely getting paid more. No one can live off of that. They can't even afford food. How can someone support a family making that? I constantly call my cousin and remind her that she needs to keep working and she has to take care of herself because it's a difficult life. It leaves me so heartbroken that so

much of my family is still living there in those conditions. I try to help them as much as I can, even if I can only send twenty or thirty dollars, at least it's something that can help. I wish I could give them more.”

As we end our interview Rosalina looks around at her surroundings.

“You know, I love New York this time of year. The weather reminds me of winters in El Salvador.”

Humility and modesty, ambition and perseverance are the focal themes in Rosalina's life. They are virtues that she has learned, adopted, and continued to pass on. They will dictate her life forever and she will never stop working to give her family the life she never grew up with, because that will bring her the ultimate happiness.

## **Martha Vasquez**

I finally catch Martha after weeks of bumping into each other and never really pinpointing an exact time and place for our interview. As I walked down the hall, passing offices, I find her in the bathroom, mop in hand and hair as red as ever. At first glance she puts the mop aside and I follow her into the hall. “I’m ready,” she says, “To tell you my story.”

“I’m from El Salvador. We weren’t dirt poor, but you know, my parents gave me the life they could afford. I had a nice childhood. It was very family oriented. My parents never fought. Not once.”

I take this opportunity to ask about her home. Her parent’s professions, how her family was like.

“Our house was made of tejas. My dad built it for us from wood and tejas. It was a very beautiful house. My father worked as a “maestro de obras,” he was a supervisor. My mother stayed home and cared for the kids. We were nine in total and at that time women rarely worked,” she says.

Martha’s eyes are glued to my own as she confidently retells her life. After sharing details of her family life, she goes on to describing her schooling.

“I went to Parochial school until the sixth grade, after that my parents could no longer afford it. I remember while I was in school one of our jobs as students was to divide into groups and clean!”

When asked if she had been given the opportunity to continue her schooling, Martha tells me she would have wanted to become a teacher.

“After school I stayed home and helped my mother for a while. Until I was fifteen...when I was fifteen I married.”

“I met my husband through one of my dad’s negocios in the city center. He had a job there and well we really got along and the rest is history.”

I ask Martha about her children.

“I have three daughters. They are the most precious gift God has given me. They always protect me. Now they’re in their thirties and have their own families.”

Because family is such an important factor in Martha’s life, I ask her about the holidays in El Salvador, how her family celebrated, and what she remember about them.

“Christmas in El Salvador is *bellisima*. There are fireworks, so many fireworks. You spend the holiday with family and close friends party hopping and participating in processions. You are eating every single second.”

Reminiscing on the happy moments of life in El Salvador prompts me to ask about why she left her country.

“Life was happy and peaceful until the war came. The war brought many problems. Everyone lived in fear. You just quickly did what you needed to, ran your errands, and then returned home. It was not a real way to life. The war also resulted in economic decline. It was time to leave my beloved El Salvador.”

Time to leave meant taking part in a difficult journey. One that would provide many dangers.

“I traveled “por tierra” to find a better future for me and my girls. I was thirty-three years old at the time. It took one month to get to America. We traveled in a group, pretending to be tourists. We passed through Guatemala, Mexico, San Diego, Los Angeles, and then New York.”

For most who cannot afford the comfort of security, fleeing their home “por tierra,” though difficult, is the only way they can find some form of refuge in a new land.

“My brother lived a little better than us. He had many negocios and because of that he had moved to New York before us, and then helped to bring us over. New York has been very kind to me, my entire family is here now.”

Like many immigrants to American, Martha’s primary preoccupation was to find a job so that she could truly make her new life in the States beneficial for her entire family.

“As long as we have work, we’re okay. I have been working at Sarah Lawrence College for twenty two years! It’s hard work, but I like to work. I get so bored if I don’t have work. The week is for work, then the weekend is for shopping.”

While live in New York has provided opportunities for Martha and her family, she still worries about the chaos rampant in her home of El Salvador.

“My country is still problematic. Economic problems prevail and the people are suffering. You see the poverty everywhere. There is no money but very, very high prices. A person can work a full day and only receive seven dollars of pay. Yet, something so simple like a bottle of shampoo costs ten dollars. People can not live like that. It is cruel. The only way a lot of people back in El Salvador get by is because they have family abroad that sends them money. It’s the only way to survive.”

Coming from a country that still struggles with instability is a constant reminder for Martha that leaving everything behind was the best choice. Even then, no one forgets their roots, and as we come to a close of our interview I ask Martha about one of the things she misses most about home.

“I have so much nostalgia for El Salvador. Especially for the food! Hispanic food is just something that is yours, it’s in your blood. Food is just so different over here. Everything back home was fresh. In the market all of the produce, meats, they were brought directly from El Camp that morning. Nothing like all this frozen food here.”

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These women escaped their country, a nation consumed by political and social instability to make a new home in the United States. Their decision to flee remains justified. Today, El Salvador is one of the most dangerous places to live in Latin America. Violence still defines the nation, with gangs threatening and intimidating business owners, and poverty levels continually rising. Life is not secure. While nostalgia always haunts Rosalina and Martha, their choice to find better opportunities and truly live life is one of the bravest decisions they’ve made.