

Maria and Miguel

By Maggie Johnson

What would drive you to leave your home? A new job, perhaps? Nosey, annoying neighbors? A new development that ruins your view of the mountains? Now, those things are annoying, but may not cause someone to pack up and leave in a hurry. Even if those things kept us up at night, it would take a lot more to make us leave our homes. Even then we would most likely stay in the United States and may not even leave the state we were in.

However, what if your family simply wasn't safe? What if your family struggled to find people you could trust? What if your family lived in constant fear of being killed or kidnapped? Would those things drive you to leave your home, your state, your country? Would the smallest possibility of safety for your children drive you to a faraway place, where you didn't speak the language? Those questions are what hundreds of people face every day in Latin American countries like Honduras, Mexico, Brazil and Guatemala.

Many refugees are being sent to Tobin Park United Methodist Church from the detention centers. Volunteers are working to unite the refugees with family members and sponsors. They are also helping to fill in the gaps with basic necessities like food, clothing, a place to take a shower, and a pillow. People from all over the city have come to help in various capacities. I wanted to be one of them, but I couldn't figure out a way to help. My pastor, Scott Meador, at Trinity-First United Methodist Church spoke about Tobin Park during a sermon on Sunday. That is when I figured it out. I decided that I was going to get to know the children of God that were knocking at our door and in turn, tell their stories. I want to show they are children of God just like you or me.

I went to Tobin Park United Methodist Church Tuesday night to see if anyone would be willing to talk to me.

Dr. Eddie Rivera, the El Paso District Superintendent, took me to the dining room where women from

Western Hills UMC, were serving food to volunteers and refugees. At first, I couldn't tell the difference between the volunteers and the refugees aside from the name badges Kathy Jewell had passed out to volunteers. I got a small helping of food and sat down. I met a young woman from Transmountain/Del Sol Baptist church who had volunteered to call sponsors and family members for the refugees. She introduced me to her uncle, Pastor Alfonso, who then offered to translate for me.

He brought me to a mother, I'll call her Maria, who sat with two of her children as they happily ate oranges and pastries. Their stomachs were full for the first time in a while. They had been fed well. Not only did they have oranges and pastries, they had brisket, cream corn, coleslaw, and whole wheat bread. Maria and her children were quiet as they ate. Actually, most of the refugees were quiet, unless they were speaking to a volunteer.

Occasionally, she would reach down to her ankle to scratch the ankle monitor ICE had given her. The ankle monitor made it clear that even though she had been brave enough to come to the land of the free, she was not free at all.

Before she came to El Paso, Maria was a worker in a maquiladora (factory) where she made seat-belts. She and her three children were surrounded with family, her mother, husband, sister and brother. A typical family, really.

Everything in her life changed July 14 when her brother was killed. Then, things became worse. The men that had killed her brother were still looking to kill more members of her family. Maria and her family were threatened so much that instead of having her brother's funeral at home, which is tradition in Mexico, the family had to find another home in another area of the city to have his service.

Could you imagine not being able to have your brother's funeral where you wanted because people were trying to murder you?

Maria decided to leave her home in Juárez because she could not risk her or her family's lives any longer. They had to leave...quickly. The south, further into Mexico, was not much safer, but to the north, right across the border in the United States, was one of the safest cities, El Paso, Texas.

Maria's father had been trying to help her and her family immigrate for some time, but now they were in an emergency. There was no time to wait for Immigration Services to approve visas. Maria knew the move would mean uprooting her whole family. Her mother is a diabetic and was very ill before Maria's brother died. She told me they could not show any emotion during the service because that would upset her mother further. Maria knew that the best chance for her family was in the United States despite the risks.

Her husband was against the whole idea, but she is a mother, her children come before her husband. So she left him behind.

Maria was separated from her family as soon as they came to the border. She has since been reunited with her children, but the rest of the family is still in other facilities and shelters. She said that she doesn't believe she will ever return to Juárez, although she would like to have the opportunity to go see her brother's grave again.

Toward the end of our interview, her son came to the table and sat beside her. He had the sweetest, most mischievous grin on his face. He held an orange with both hands and took a bite out of it, smiling as he chewed. Maria knows her children miss their father, but they seem happy to be at Tobin Park. She also said that she is not a very religious person, but she feels the weight of her burdens lift whenever someone prays for her. Her prayer now is that her fallen brother finds peace and rest.

There is a large gym at Tobin Park where everyone sleeps. There are cots lined up in rows throughout the hall. There is a space near the basketball hoop where children run around and play. While I was there, the little ones were giggling as they played with hula hoops and bouncy balls. In the front of the room is a small stage where donations are gathered. Pillows, clothes, toys, hygiene products, and food have come flooding in since Dr. Eddie Rivera sent out a call-to-action.

People trickle in with wet hair and fresh clothes. For some, this is the first chance they have had to

shower in days. Pastor Alfonso led me to a man, I will call him Miguel, who sat at the back of the room with his 13-year-old daughter. He was relieved to have finally gotten a shower after four days in the detention center. This man and his daughter have spent the past few days traveling on buses through Central America and into the United States. He expected to be arrested and detained when he arrived, but he didn't care, the journey was worth it. He said, "When I set foot in the [US] I felt good."

His focus is on his family. He was not interested in speaking about himself so much as his daughters and wife. He was driven to come to the United States because he wanted his eldest daughter to be safe. She walked about three miles to school every day in Honduras. Each day she would receive threats from people who wanted to kidnap or kill her on her way to school. While the father did not give more details, he began to weep as he spoke.

He knew he had to protect his family, but he did not have enough money to bring everyone with him. In fact, he had to sell most of his belongings just to get enough money for him and his eldest daughter to leave. He misses his wife and the five-year-old daughter he had to leave behind, but he believes it was the best thing he could have done for his family.

He is very thankful for the volunteers at Tobin Park because they have been so kind and loving to him during his stay.

Miguel and his daughter don't have much with them: some clothes and deodorant. They didn't bring cell phones or any other electronics because that would make them targets for theft on the road. Who would have thought that walking around with your phone out would be such a luxury?

While he didn't bring much, he did bring a small memento from Honduras, a lempira, which is sort of like a dollar bill in the United States and would be about enough to buy a lollipop in Honduras.



Miguel did not bring much with him, but he treasures this 1 Lempira, he brought over from Honduras

Miguel and his daughter are planning to meet his brother in Virginia, when they leave Tobin Park. Hopefully, once they are settled, he will be able to work to bring the rest of his family to the United States. Miguel asks that we pray for his wife and five-year-old daughter. They have moved further south into Honduras in order to get away from the violence.

Maria and Miguel look like average, everyday people. However, they are braver than I could ever hope to be. They have left everything they know to go on journeys they knew would be difficult. They knew they would face people who would not be kind to them, and they know there is no guarantee that they will find comfort and safety once they reach their sponsors and family. All they have to go on is the hope that their families will be safe in the United States.

They are children of God, just like anyone else in the world. They want what any of us want: a safe, comfortable place where they can rest their heads at night. Tobin Park UMC in El Paso, Texas, is that place.