

"Tell the judge he wasn't lying"

After Moises was killed, his brother asked us to write to the American official who denied his asylum claim.

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(RNS) In the final weeks of 2016, while we frantically prepared to celebrate the holidays, our friend Moises was found murdered on a neighborhood street in San Salvador. Twenty-two bullet holes perforated his young body. When his older brother called from El Salvador to share the devastating news, he made one request.

"Tell the judge he wasn't lying. Tell the judge he told the truth."

And so, on behalf of El Refugio, the small Georgia ministry of hospitality and visitation that I chair, I composed the most difficult letter I have ever written. This is a redacted version (with personal details removed, to protect his brother):

Dear Judge:

For six years, our ministry has been conducting weekly humanitarian visits with men detained at the Stewart Detention Center. Our purpose is to respond to our Judeo-Christian tradition's consistent call to welcome the foreigner who resides in our land (Leviticus 19: 33-34) and to heed Jesus' great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31). We believe that when we welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner, we welcome and visit Jesus himself (Matthew 25:37-40).

Moises fled El Salvador because his mother, a neighborhood food vendor, was being extorted by gang members. When she was unable to pay, the gang began harassing Moises on his way to and from school and, eventually, threatened his life. After

consulting with his older brother, Moises made the difficult decision to leave his home and family, and to undertake the harrowing journey to the United States, seeking our nation's protection.

During the Summer of 2013, our ministry spent considerable effort assisting Moises as he sought humanitarian parole from the Department of Homeland Security and in support of his application for asylum. Despite offering evidence of a credible fear for his life, his asylum claim was denied by the court. Moises was deported to El Salvador in September, 2013.

In July 2014, four volunteers from El Refugio traveled to San Salvador. We spoke with him, while he remained in hiding in his family's home, and we heard the terror in his voice.

It appears that after more than three years as a recluse, Moises made the decision, on the night of Nov. 26, to go out for dinner with his best friend. Moises was abducted on that night and, according to news reports, gang members stood the two friends in front of a brick wall and murdered them both. Moises was found dead on the street the following morning. He was 24 years old.

His brother contacted us immediately to make one simple request: He asked us to write a letter to you, so that you would know that the claims Moises made when he stood before you in court were true. Moises had a credible fear for his life.

On behalf of Moises and his brother, we implore you: please hear these young people with an open heart. Please consider their claims, as warranted by law, and do not instinctively dismiss them as illegitimate when they are shown to be credible. Please use your power to continue our nation's great tradition as a beacon of hope and a place of refuge and opportunity for those who seek it.

The story that I tell in this letter is not unique.

As a recent New York Times article makes clear, El Salvador is the "murder capital of the world." Being killed by gang members after resisting extortion has become almost commonplace in neighborhoods like Moises'.

In the United States, detention of asylum seekers fleeing that violence increased nearly threefold from 2010 to 2014, while parole grants declined precipitously.

The court at Stewart Detention Center has the lowest rates of granting relief from deportation of any court in the country (1 percent) and, in 2015, granted asylum to only 5 percent of those who sought it.

A recent study released by the Southern Poverty Law Center reveals that the Stewart Detention Center, where Moises was held for six months, deports immigrants at a substantially higher rate than the national average (87 percent vs. national average of 60 percent), is far less likely to offer bond and offers bond at much higher cost.

Despite federal regulations that allow the Department of Homeland Security to grant humanitarian parole to asylum seekers like Moises, in 2015, not a single detained asylum seeker at Stewart was granted parole.

We might be tempted, then, to describe Moises' story as typical. But there was nothing typical about Moises. He was an artist, he was our friend, and his life could have been spared.

We feel called to bear witness.

At El Refugio, we remain steadfast in our mission of hospitality, knowing that — like the biblical figure that his mother named him for — Moises will guide us, as we faithfully accompany asylum-seekers through the barren desert of the Stewart Detention Center.