

A separated family's long road to reunification

A Guatemalan asylum seeker has an attorney and a team of supporters. It was still hard to get her children back.

by [Terra Brockman](#) in the [August 15, 2018](#) issue



Yeni González (center) leaves Cayuga Centers in New York with her children (from left) Lester, 11, Deyuin, 6, and Jamelin, 9, after they were released to her on July 13. AP Photo / Mary Altaffer.

A few months ago, Yeni Garcia González and her three children stepped over a low fence in the Arizona desert and entered the United States. It was the last step of a 2,000-mile journey from their village in Guatemala and their first step into the Kafkaesque world of U.S. immigration policies.

Since that day in May, González and her children—Deyuin, 6, Jamelin, 9, and Lester, 11—have experienced the best and the worst of the United States. González’s children were taken away from her and she suffered inhumane treatment at detention centers, but she also encountered the generosity and kindness of strangers who helped her fight for her freedom and her right to be with her children.

Like many who enter the U.S. at the southern border, González and her children were fleeing poverty and violence. Guatemala is part of the Northern Triangle of Central America, which was ravaged by civil wars in the 1980s that left behind a legacy of corruption, drug trafficking, and gang violence. Gangs forcibly recruit boys as young as ten, and so Lester was at terrible risk of suffering violence or death if he refused to join a gang—and at similar risk if he did join. He and the family were also threatened by the random violence and extortion that plagues the region.

So González left her home in the hope of providing her children with a safer life. Like many who make the dangerous trek north, González has relatives in the United States, and she made sure that by the time the family reached the U.S. border, each child had memorized the phone number of their aunt and uncle in North Carolina.

Shortly after crossing the border, González turned herself and her family in to Border Patrol agents with the intent to request asylum, and they were taken to a processing center in Yuma. Two days later, at 5 a.m., agents came and woke the children.

“They didn’t say anything. They just called them and the children came, and then they closed the door. And I could see them pass by the window, and that was the last time I saw them,” González told Beth Fertig, a reporter at WNYC radio in New York.

In that moment, Deyuin, Jamelin, and Lester joined the more than 2,000 children forcibly separated from their parents under the Trump administration’s policy of zero tolerance for those entering the country without legal documents. These children have been transported to one of more than 100 foster care centers located in 27 states across the country. Once separated from their parents, the children are redefined by the government as unaccompanied minors and placed in the hands of the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Adults remain under the auspices of the Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These two large bureaucracies do not share databases and seldom interact, which adds to the difficulty of reunifying families.

González's children were sent to Cayuga Centers, a facility in East Harlem, New York. The goal of this and other foster care centers set up for unaccompanied minors is to look after children until they are either matched with an approved sponsor or deported. Reuniting children with a parent or relative is not a goal of these facilities, nor is it part of their contract with the federal government.

The day after her children were taken away, González was transferred to another processing center in Arizona and held there for two weeks. These centers are meant to process people within a day or two, so they are not set up to meet basic needs for the long term. According to a social media post by Janey Pearl Starks, an immigration activist and one of the first people to speak with González, "she was detained with her children for two days before being separated. During that time they gave them no food."

During the two weeks she was in the second processing center, González and other detainees were fed only noodles—instant ramen—and were not allowed to change clothes, shower, brush their teeth, or touch one another.

Although she asked repeatedly for information about her children, González was not given any, nor was she allowed to make any phone calls. According to Fertig, one officer responded to González's request for information about her children by saying: "You want to know something? You're going to be deported to Guatemala, and your children will remain in the hands of the government."

When the children reached New York, they provided a case worker with the phone number that their mother had insisted they memorize. When the case worker reached the children's aunt and uncle in North Carolina, the relatives were astonished to learn that the children were in a foster care center in New York. Not knowing where their mother was, and unsure how to help, the aunt and uncle Googled "immigration lawyer, New York." That led them to José Xavier Orochena, an attorney who agreed to take the case pro bono.

Orochena contacted Cayuga Centers and requested a visit with his young clients. His request was denied for two weeks, during which time González was moved from the processing center to a detention center in Eloy, Arizona. When she was finally allowed to make her first phone call, she called the children's aunt and uncle in North Carolina. Only then did she learn that her children were in New York, 2,500 miles away. She had no idea why they were there or how to get them back.

This is where González's story takes a different turn from that of many other migrants. Her relatives in North Carolina were able to tell Orochena where the children's mother was, and the puzzle pieces began to come together. Orochena was finally allowed to visit the children at Cayuga Centers, and he began telling the media about how the González family had been separated and his effort to reunite them.

One person who heard Orochena on the radio was Julie Schwietert Collazo, a writer, former social worker, and mother of three. On June 25 she posted on her Facebook page:

Last Friday, I heard an interview on WNYC with an immigration lawyer. He represents a mom who's detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Arizona. Her three children are here in NYC. Something he said flipped a switch for me: Reunification IS possible. We just have to help his client get here and support her here until her case is resolved in immigration court in NYC.

That evening Julie spoke with her husband, Francisco, and with a group of friends and neighbors. They pledged not only to help reunite the family but to support it during the long and expensive process of applying for asylum. Collazo contacted Orochena and told him that a group of people was ready to support his client. She reported the news on Facebook:

He's headed out to Arizona this week for [González's] bond hearing. Once we know the bond amount, we'll post it and get her here and take it all from there.

This is it, y'all . . . We can help this one family reunite and have a semblance of a life while they go through this difficult time. And then we'll take what we learned and replicate it and provide the template for other people to do it.

Collazo and her group, which informally called itself Team Yeni, created a [Yeni González Support Team page](#) on GoFundMe. Before the first day of the campaign had ended, it had raised the \$7,500 needed to free her, mainly in small donations.

Orochena flew to Arizona, paid the \$7,500 bond, and González was released. Before they left the Eloy Detention Center, González insisted that Orochena meet with other mothers whose children had been taken from them. He wrote down what they told him and got the mothers' and children's alien numbers—numbers they receive after they cross the border—so that he could try to put the scattered families back together.

After her release, González stood next to Orochena under the brutal Arizona sun and responded to a reporter's question about how she was feeling by saying that her "heart had been torn into a thousand pieces when my children were ripped from my arms."

Orochena took González to JCPenney to get some clothes and then to get some food. She told him she was afraid to eat solid food, since she had had nothing but soup during her time in the Eloy Detention Center. Later she told Starks that she hadn't had any water for the three days before her release.

Starks volunteered to drive González the first leg of her journey from Arizona to New York. A relay of volunteer drivers had been organized by another member of Team Yeni, Meghan Finn. The drivers were necessary because officials told Orochena he could not buy González an airline ticket since she did not have the requisite identification to board a plane.

On July 2, González arrived in New York City and was greeted at the south end of Central Park, in front of the statue of José Martí, by supporters holding signs in Spanish and English: ¡Bienvenida a Nueva York, Yeni! ¡Te damos la bienvenida con brazos abiertos! We welcome you with open arms! A reporter asked her in Spanish, "How has it been?" She replied, "It was very rough. But it doesn't matter now. I get to be with my children."

Before she returned to the car, she insisted on hugging every child who had come out to greet her. Through tears, she said, "I have suffered as much for the love of my children as they have suffered for me. I love them. But I have to go forward. Look at all these people who are supporting me. Gracias."

The next morning, González was at Cayuga Centers when it opened at 9 a.m. Although she was able to spend most of the day with her children, she was not given custody. Because the children that ICE separates from their parents are defined as unaccompanied minors, González and other mothers or fathers are viewed not as a

child's parent but as a potential sponsor, someone who must be thoroughly vetted before being permitted to take custody. That vetting involves fingerprinting, DNA checks, and proof of sufficient income and housing.

To overcome the bureaucratic hurdles, Team Yeni enlisted the support of government officials, including U.S. Representative Adriano Espaillat, New York State Senator Michael Gianaris, and New York City's Commissioner of Immigrant Affairs Bitta Mostofi. These and other officials began pressuring Cayuga Centers, pointing out that while vetting makes sense for an unrelated person sponsoring a child, such criteria were irrelevant for a parent, especially one whose children were taken away by the federal government.

After nearly two weeks of only being able to see her children during regular business hours, González heard from her attorney that Cayuga Centers would release them into her custody. Early the next morning, while González, Collazo, and other supporters waited outside, Mostofi and Gianaris entered Cayuga Centers. Moments later they reemerged with Deyuin, Jamelin, and Lester, who ran to their mother.

Holding hands with her children in front of the building where more than 300 children separated from their parents are still being held, González's thoughts were with the other mothers in detention whose children had been taken from them. "I want to send a message to all those moms," González said. "Keep fighting, because with the help of all these people and with the help of God you're going to achieve what you want."

While the González family reunification is a positive precedent, it is unlikely that mothers of children held in foster centers in other states with less supportive government officials will gain custody of their children this quickly.

But Team Yeni is far from discouraged. In fact, within days of reuniting González with her children, Collazo and her expanding network of volunteers created [Immigrant Families Together](#), an umbrella organization with a website that has a page called "Moms You Can Help" containing information about mothers who have been released on bond and others requiring assistance. Donors have already raised the funds needed to pay the bonds for six more mothers—women who had been detained with González at the Eloy, Arizona, facility and whose children had been taken from them. "Faith communities have been central to this effort," Collazo said, adding that "our next mom is being sponsored by a synagogue."

Previously bonds for detainees such as González had been close to the mandated minimum of \$1,500. But they are now being set higher and higher, with González's at \$7,500, subsequent detainees' at \$15,000, and the most recent ones at \$30,000—an amount previously unheard of for someone who is neither dangerous nor a flight risk. Such bonds make it nearly impossible for asylum seekers to gain the freedom they need to pursue their cases or to be reunited with their children. But with the support of Immigrant Families Together and many generous donors, these women now have hope.

In a recent update, Collazo commented on the power of hope: “José [Orochena] said that we're public enemy #1 at Eloy. Yeni's release and reunion have given the other women hope. If that's what it means to be a public enemy, I'm OK with that.”

Collazo and her team are now working on a document that shares with others what they have learned about helping to unite families. And they continually update the Immigrant Families Together website and share new information on social media.

Although the Trump administration on June 20 reversed its policy of separating families, that policy and subsequent iterations of it (families are kept together, but detained indefinitely) continue to impact thousands of migrants. The government was under court order to return 102 migrant children under five years old to their parents by July 10 but was unable to fully comply. The prospects for reunification of more than 2,500 separated children by the court-mandated deadline of July 26 is highly uncertain.

Collazo said Immigrant Families Together will continue to identify parents whose children were taken from them, pay their bonds, and help parents travel to wherever their children were taken. The group also continues to raise funds to sustain the parents and children during the long process of seeking asylum. According to Collazo, “once they're bonded out, that's really only the beginning of their journey.”

One of the many supporters who have helped by donating and spreading the word is author and teacher Lavinia Spaulding, who echoed the sentiments of many others when she wrote on Facebook: “One of the worst things about this situation, for me, has been the sense of powerlessness.” She said that Collazo “single-handedly showed me that we are not even remotely powerless.” She urged people to go online to see what Collazo's team of “regular people (read: band of badass grassroots superheroes) is up to today, and give some money to them. This is what

gives me hope, day after day. We can do this.”

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