

A Conversation with Ana-Tello Duran: Her Journey from being an Unaccompanied Child to now serving Unaccompanied Children



Policy Analyst Jenny Rodriguez interviewed Ana Tello-Duran as part of USCRI's and The Children's Village's "Where We Stand: A 20-Year Retrospective of the Unaccompanied Children's Program in the United States." Ana left Mexico in 2011 as an unaccompanied child with her older sister in search of a better life. After gaining asylum, she obtained a bachelor's degree in social work from Virginia Commonwealth University and a Master of Social Work. Ana worked in the social work field for more than four years, serving various communities in Virginia. Ana lives in Illinois, where she is currently a Family Support Specialist with the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). In this conversation, we discuss her journey from being a former unaccompanied child to now serving unaccompanied children.

Jenny: Ana, could you tell us a little bit about your background and what ultimately made you decide to migrate to the U.S.?

Ana: I was born in Mexico in a community with scarce resources and violence. My parents decided to migrate to the U.S. when I was younger. However, after two attempts to make the American dream a reality, they decided to move back to Mexico. Throughout my childhood, I was exposed to traumatic experiences, from within my household to the outskirts of my community. I refused to continue to be stuck in a lifestyle that was focused on surviving every day. The desire to reach the American dream was imprinted in my heart after being exposed to it as a young child. My dream to escape the cycle of abuse was bigger than my fear of risking my life to come to the U.S.

Jenny: I understand you came here unaccompanied by your parents but with your older sister; do you think you would've had a different experience had she not been there?

Ana: My older sister, Jessica, was 23 at that time. Once we were apprehended by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), we spent two nights together until they separated us. Neither of us knew it would be the last time we would see each other for years. I felt protected with her by my side until she left my side. I did not know where she was for weeks and could only think of the worse. I am grateful she did everything she could to keep me safe.



Jenny: When you were taken into custody in Arizona, your older sister was deported because she wasn't a minor, and because you were a minor, you were able to stay. How did you feel at that time?

Ana: After I was transferred to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) shelter without my sister, my heart raced, tears filled my eyes, and I was terrified. I was unaware of the purpose of the shelter, and my first thought was, "I'm getting trafficked; they are selling me." My head was spinning with thoughts of failure. I felt guilty for wanting a better life in a country that didn't want me and made me feel like the most wanted criminal. I kept thinking if it was worth risking my life and being separated from my sister.

Jenny: How was life for you when you started at Meadowbrook High School? What obstacles or barriers did you face?



Ana: Unsuccessful with sponsorship while in ORR care, I was placed in Virginia's foster care system. I attended Meadowbrook High School as a senior with a couple of junior courses to be able to graduate that year and continue my education in college. Adapting to my new environment was very difficult—the language barrier and navigating the school system after high school was very challenging.

Jenny: Despite facing so many obstacles, what motivated you to push forward in life?

Ana: Throughout my years in Virginia, I was connected with amazing mentors and programs focused on the success of foster youth and unaccompanied minors. These mentors invested in me and provided me with tools to keep me afloat.

Jenny: You obtained a bachelor's and master's degree in social work. What made you pursue this career and specialize in child welfare?

Ana: After years of trying to show this country that I belonged here and deserved the opportunity to create a healthy life just like anyone else, I realized my potential. I could help other youth in the same circumstances I was in once. This story did not start with me; I knew it did not end with me. The role models I encountered throughout this journey helped me become resilient, and I want to be able to do that for other children.

Jenny: How does it make you feel as a former unaccompanied child who is now serving unaccompanied children? Do you see yourself in the children that you serve?

Ana: I am honored to work with unaccompanied minors as a Family Support Specialist with the U.S. Committee of Refugees and Immigrants. When I started my career in social work, I always knew I wanted to work with children and had promised to find a way to reconnect in another capacity where I started this journey. When I share part of my journey with the unaccompanied minors I work with, I see their faces light up with the hope of having an opportunity to accomplish more than they could imagine.



Jenny: What does it mean for you to be a former unaccompanied child?

Ana: My young self, sitting on a cold metal bench, with scratches on my body, heart filled with failure, in that cold room of the ICE facility would be so PROUD on me. I made it. I accomplished more than I thought I could ever imagine.

