

FIRSTHAND Homeless

THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE



DISCUSSION
GUIDE

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Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience

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Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience

Alba Gomez

An Indigenous woman running out of time to find housing

“It’s not easy to come to a new place without a thing to your name and wonder how can I ever obtain so many things? Right now my children are my priority. They have their needs.”

– Alba Gomez

Episode Overview

A proud daughter of Colombia’s Indigenous Wayuu people, Alba Gomez hopes she made the right decision for her family. Arriving here to Chicago’s unwelcoming February temperatures, Alba seeks out every available resource to clothe and feed her family of five. At the shelter on Ogden Avenue, Alba learns that she does not qualify for any housing assistance. The Department of Health and Human Services informs her that she does not qualify for food assistance, either. The city can only offer her family 60 days of shelter, which means that the clock is ticking for her to find their own apartment.

General Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help deepen your understanding of Alba’s important story.

- How would you describe Alba’s experience of migration to Chicago?
- What are the most urgent challenges faced by her and her family in this episode?
- How does Alba and her family’s experience reflect broader displacement, migration, and resettlement issues?



Photo: Abel Aciniega

Alba Gomez

- What new insights about migration did you discover from her story?
- What lessons can be learned from Alba's story?

In Her Own Words

Alba's story has many powerful moments that deserve greater attention. We have selected several quotations from the episode to help foster a deeper conversation at your *Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience* gathering.

"In Colombia, my ethnic group is Wayuu. I was a social leader and a community organizer. I organized cultural events to strengthen the Wayuu culture, to keep Wayuu culture from extinction. I worked in politics. I worked with different government representatives. I got involved little by little to mobilize people because, in La Guajira, there is really a lot of poverty. Children are dying of starvation and malnutrition. I always wanted to take those projects forward, but sadly, my dreams were killed. Unfortunately, I was threatened by certain people. They didn't want me trying to get my people ahead."

- How does Alba's identity as a Wayuu woman shape her experiences and perspectives?
- How do you think Alba's advocacy work in Colombia has helped prepare her to navigate the many challenges she faces to resettle her family in Chicago?

"The people of Chicago have welcomed me in an extraordinary way. They give us absolutely everything for my children. Chicago is a sanctuary city, and I feel that people here are very charitable. My ancestors have instilled in us to believe a lot in dreams. From the time I came here, I've always felt it. I know it's going to go very well. The Word has a lot of power. We really believe that faith moves mountains. Faith is seeing beyond the present moment. I think the most important thing that we should have is patience, because not everything comes easily. So patience is the key. Little by little."

- What hopes and dreams is Alba affirming for her future?
- What word or phrase stands out to you? Why?



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Emili Rincón

An entrepreneur finding her way in Chicago

Episode Overview

Outside Chicago’s Ogden Avenue shelter, Emili Rincón dishes out homemade chicken soup and other Venezuelan specialties. It’s a cash-only food business with a limited customer base, but it helps the family make ends meet while they anxiously wait to apply for a work permit. Emili came to the United States after her husband was murdered in Venezuela. Upon arriving in Chicago, she was determined to avoid living in a shelter. Luckily, a friend offered her a place to stay, and then she saved enough money in three months to rent an apartment in Little Village. Her family of four now shares their apartment with a sister, two cousins, their spouses, and children. Everyone pitches in to pay the bills, look after the kids, and settle into their new home.

General Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help deepen your understanding of Emili’s important story.

- How would you describe Emili’s character? What life experiences contributed to her values and attributes?
- What new insights about migration and seeking asylum did you learn from her story?
- What life lessons does Emili share that offer you a new perspective on migration?
- How does Emili’s story reflect the complexities of the myth of the American dream and the immigrant experience?



Emili Rincón

- Share your thoughts and experiences related to family separation, migration, or the pursuit of a better life. What in Emili’s story resonated with you?
- What actions can we take to create a more just and equitable world where families can thrive and stay together?

In Her Own Words

Emili’s story has many powerful moments that deserve greater attention. We have selected several quotations from the episode to help foster a deeper conversation at your *Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience* gathering.

Emili shares, “I don’t have a work permit, I don’t have a Social Security number. I want to work. I want to get my papers. I want to help because nothing is cheap here...One day a friend says, ‘You cook well. Look where I am staying at the shelter: they sell arepas, they sell lunch, they sell this and that...’ The shelter is a refuge where migrants who have nowhere to go stay. Many go to work, many go out to beg on the street, and others receive aid. ‘And they always have money,’ he said. And it sparked the idea in me. I wake up around 6:30 a.m., I turn on the stove... Our idea is to cook healthy food because, listening to the people we sell food to, they are bored [with] eating McDonald’s, Burger King, pizza, and Chinese rice. So we try to sell them our food, as home-cooked as possible. What we eat in Venezuela every day.”

- Discuss Emili’s entrepreneurial spirit and her efforts to establish a small business.
- What specific challenges does she face as an immigrant entrepreneur?
- How can we support immigrant entrepreneurs and promote economic empowerment within marginalized communities?

“In Venezuela, we reached a point where there was such a scarcity of everything. When I look at my kids, I told myself, ‘I don’t want this for my kids.’ I want my children to study, to have a career.”

- What sacrifices did Emili make to build a better future for her children?
- How can we support individuals and families like Emili’s pursuing education, career opportunities, and a brighter future for themselves and their children?

“My kids in Venezuela understood that I didn’t have enough money [to bring them with me], but at times I say no, I should have brought them. I needed to bring them because now that I’m here, it’s been a year already. I ask myself: ‘How can I bring them over now?’ I want to get all my papers done quickly. I want to pay taxes, all of it, because I want them to get here soon and send for them. That’s my wish.”

- How does Emili’s decision to leave two of her children behind in Venezuela reflect the difficult choices that many migrants and refugees face when seeking a better life?
- What do you think are the emotional and psychological impacts of family separation on both parents and children?
- How do bureaucratic processes and legal hurdles impact the lives of families seeking reunification?



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Esteban Garrido

Making sense of his migration journey through art

“On this journey, I learned that one can be happy in spite of being hungry. In spite of bleeding feet, one can still find strength. And now my feet are healed, what do I seek for myself? To be at peace with myself. There are still so many things left to do. Seeking always the good. So...onward.”

– Esteban Garrido

Episode Overview

For Esteban Garrido, drawing his ideas on a clay flower pot or sketchbook brings him one step closer to the freedom he could only imagine seven months ago. As an artist, he seeks a physical and spiritual peace that he could not find in Morona-Santiago, Ecuador. Esteban’s solo journey to the United States was prompted by his inability to make an honest living in his home country. Chicago had always held a special place in his imagination: He recalls seeing the ubiquitous Bulls logo as a young man, and for reasons he can not explain, he was compelled to make Chicago his destination. Aided by a church group in El Paso, Texas, Esteban made his way to [St. Edmund Church](#) in Oak Park. Waiting to begin the asylum process, he spends his time looking for inspiration and enlightenment in his art.

General Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help deepen your understanding of Esteban’s important story.

- What word or phrase would you use to describe Esteban’s journey to Chicago?



Photo: Abel Arciniega

Esteban Garrido

- What role has art played in Esteban’s resettlement in Chicago?
- What new insights did you gain about the migrant crisis in Chicago from Esteban’s story?
- If Esteban were in the room, what questions would you like to ask him?
- After hearing Esteban’s story, how would you characterize his hopes and dreams for a new life in America?

In His Own Words

Esteban’s story has many powerful moments that deserve greater attention. We have selected several quotations from the episode to help foster a deeper conversation at your *Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience*.

In the opening scene, Esteban shares, “I left everything there. It was the only way for me to create a change in my life. I had to do it. My inner spiritual life is the one and only thing I’ve sought out my entire life.”

- What values and character traits are reflected in this quotation?

Esteban began painting again at the Casa Miguel shelter upon arriving in the U.S. “I have had a talent for painting since I was a boy. I use the colors of my country. What one hasn’t been able to do in life, one can capture through painting, what one imagines and wants.”

- How does painting provide an outlet for Esteban? What outlets do you have that provide this solace?

Esteban then describes the significance of painting the flower pot with the ant laden with heavy leaves on his back. “Everything has its process and in this life, nothing is easy, but you have to press on. You have to keep seeking and improving.”

- What is your interpretation of the metaphor of the ant? What is Esteban communicating about his experience through his painting?
- How would you characterize Esteban’s philosophy of life through his artwork?

Esteban sought help at [St. Edmund’s Church](#) when he arrived in Chicago. “I felt serene emotionally and much better spiritually. They made me feel good. It was like being welcomed to a beautiful place, where one feels loved, a spiritual warmth.”

- Belonging is a powerful feeling. How do you think St. Edmund’s helped Esteban feel part of the community?
- What role do religious institutions play in meeting the many needs of migrants?

“With all I’ve learned on my journey, receiving the help that’s been given to me, perhaps, when I have something to give, I can help someone who, like me, needs help. So I may return the help I’ve received.”

- What virtue or emotion describes the sentiment that Esteban is sharing here? For example, gratitude, compassion, empathy, generosity, altruism, kindness, charity, something else?



Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience

Jose Gutierrez

Anxiously awaiting his day in immigration court

“I believe in institutions. I believe in justice. I believe in God, and I believe in myself and in those I love.”

– Jose Gutierrez

Episode Overview

Jose Gutierrez and his family are anxiously awaiting their date in immigration court. Having left Venezuela to seek asylum, the only thing that seems certain to him is that he cannot return to his home country, even if it means starting life over in a minimum-wage job. He makes his rounds six days a week as a maintenance worker for a popular fast-food franchise, which is humbling for this former officer of the Venezuelan Highway Patrol. Jose is excited to see how his kids flourish in America, making the stakes even higher as their court date draws near.

General Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help deepen your understanding of Jose’s important story.

- How would you characterize Jose’s experience of migration to Chicago?
- What is the range of feelings Jose shares as he and his family seek asylum?
- If Jose were in the room, what questions would you like to ask him?
- In this episode, what are the most pressing challenges he and his family face?



Photo: Abel Arciniega

Jose Gutierrez

- What new insights about migration or asylum processes did you learn from Jose’s story?

In His Own Words

Jose’s story has many powerful moments that deserve greater attention. We have selected several quotations from the episode to help foster a deeper conversation at your *Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience* gathering.

Jose recounts, “I left Venezuela on November 7, 2021. We left our home, such a truly beautiful place, to flee for our own safety. There, I worked at the Office of Traffic Accident Investigation. Many people in my division were dismissed for thinking different from those in power. It’s a state that generates persecution, generates fear. It’s a state that manipulates the laws to its advantage.”

- What word or phrase stands out to you from this quotation? Why?

As Jose drives, he shares something very personal. “There is a Roman aphorism, in Latin, that I have always applied to my life. I’ve said it often to my eldest son. ‘Ad altiora semper ad astra per aspera.’ It means always moving higher and better in search of the stars and the altar. Even if that’s the hardest way. So when you struggle, and you have a set goal, when you reach the goal, it’s truly worth it.”

- What can you decipher from this Latin aphorism about Jose’s experience of migration?

Do you agree or disagree with this statement from Jose: “A nationality doesn’t establish what kind of person you are. Your actions, feelings, values, and upbringing in your childhood home over the years establish your place in society.” Please explain your response.

“I’m head of the household. My kids and my wife follow me. If I show fear, they are going to take on that fear. Who are they going to follow if the leader doesn’t move forward? So that’s my responsibility.”

- What is your reaction to Jose’s feelings of responsibility and pressure?

At the end of this episode, Jose shares, “I want my children to be happy. I want my children to grow up, I want my children to study, for them to be people of good character, and for them to do the right thing, even when no one is watching. But my children need to grow up in peace; for them to study well, for them to have a hearty plate of food, for them to sleep peacefully, we need sanctuary.”

- What more can the Chicago community do to preserve these fundamental human rights for all its residents?



Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience

Victoria Infante

A bridge between migrant families and Chicago schools

“I have the moral obligation to help.”

– Victoria Infante

Episode Overview

As a community manager for Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Victoria Infante builds cultural bridges between new migrants and the city’s schools. As Chicago wrestled with an influx of 35,000 new immigrants, Victoria created a welcoming place for the school-age children who settled in the Pilsen neighborhood. On a daily basis, Victoria Infante welcomes parents and students to her after-school programs and to a free store called “La Tiendita,” where families can find toiletries and used clothing. Her motivation for doing this work is deeply personal: Sixteen years ago, Victoria left Colombia for the United States, and she realizes that her education offered her an advantage in life – an advantage she would like to extend to the new arrivals.

General Discussion Questions

Use these questions to help deepen your understanding of Victoria’s important story.

- What role do you believe community support and culturally responsive education play in fostering social integration for immigrant students and their families?
- Victoria’s conviction that “education is a fundamental human right” is woven throughout her community engagement work with migrant families.



Photo: Abel Aciniega

Victoria Infante

- What unique challenges do immigrant students and their families face in accessing a quality education?
- How does Victoria help address these barriers and mitigate the stress?
- How do your schools foster a culture where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their origin, background, or immigration status?
- What steps can you take in your own life or community to promote inclusivity, support immigrant families, and advocate for educational equity for all children?

In Her Own Words

Victoria’s story has many powerful moments that deserve greater attention. We have selected several quotations from the episode to help foster a deeper conversation at your *Firsthand: Homeless – The Migrant Experience* gathering.

“In 2006, I literally came by myself and left my parents and siblings behind. I was seven or eight years without going back to my home country. Before you move, you think the world stops the day you come. But when you go back, [you see that] everybody moves on. I didn’t realize you get this illusion or dream about how things are going when you go back to your homeland, and that was completely different, so that was shocking.”

- What are the ways to support newcomers and migrants in staying connected to their home country?
- What are ways to support migrant families feeling emotional distance from families and friends in their home country?

Victoria reflects on what motivates her work at CPS. “When you are an immigrant, and you are disconnected from all your family, and you don’t have anyone here, let me bring you programs or services that give you a sense of belonging.”

- How do you define belonging? How did you see Victoria promote a sense of belonging among her many communities?

“My home is here. Here is where I found that I can have a purpose, that I am living through my job or my experiences living a legacy and making the world a little bit better, making a difference.”

- How can we create opportunities for individuals, particularly immigrants and newcomers, to find their place and contribute to society?
- How do you translate your values into your professional work or community involvement?



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Resources

[Albany Park Community Center](#) provides comprehensive services including housing support, education, and job training to immigrants and refugees.

apccchgo.org

[Ascension and St. Edmund Catholic Parish](#) Migrant Ministry runs Tuesday and Thursday mornings and provides breakfast, clothing, coats, shoes, and housing support.

ascensionoakpark.com/apps/news/article/1813448

[Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago](#) provides shelter, food, clothing, and legal assistance to immigrants and refugees.

catholiccharities.net

[Centro Romero](#) offers education, legal services, and housing assistance to immigrants and refugees, particularly from Latin America.

centroromero.org

[Chicago Public Schools Parent University](#) offers parents, guardians, and community members learning experiences and training programs on a broad array of topics at CPS school sites across the city at no cost.

cps.edu/services-and-supports/parent-engagement/parent-university

[Cicero Hispanic Adventist Church](#) offers resources for members to navigate the immigration process.

cicerohispanicil.adventistchurch.org

[Heartland Alliance](#) offers a wide range of services including housing, health care, economic opportunities, and legal assistance to immigrants and refugees.

heartlandalliance.org

[Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights](#) (ICIRR) works on policy advocacy and provides support services to immigrants and refugees across the state, including housing and legal assistance.

icirr.org

[Latino Policy Forum](#) advocates for policies and programs that support the Latino community, including immigrants and refugees, ensuring they have access to housing and essential services.

latinopolicyforum.org

[National Immigrant Justice Center](#) (NIJC) offers legal services, policy advocacy, and public education to protect the rights of immigrants and refugees, ensuring they have access to housing and other essential resources.

immigrantjustice.org

[Refugee Community Connection](#) is a community organization that seeks to ease the transition for newly arrived refugees in Chicago. They provide resources, information, and household necessities.

refugeecommunityconnection.wordpress.com

[RefugeeOne](#) provides comprehensive services to refugees and immigrants, including housing assistance, job training, and legal aid.

refugeeone.org

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Resources, continued

[The Resurrection Project](#) focuses on community development and provides housing, financial assistance, and legal services to immigrants and refugees.

resurrectionproject.org

[ReVive Center for Housing and Healing](#) works with and compassion to end homelessness and restore hope, that all might flourish for a better Chicago.

revivecenter.org

[The St. Christopher Project](#) was started to solve the migrant crisis and pays migrants to clean the neighborhoods of Chicago.

stchrisproject.org

[World Relief Chicago](#) helps immigrants and refugees with resettlement services, legal aid, and community support.

worldrelief.org/Chicagoland/

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