

15-year-old waiting months in shelter to join mother in California

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Vladi walks down the driveway near the shelter in Mexico. Vladi successfully crossed the border and submitted an asylum claim. After that, he was moved to a shelter in Florida. He's only been able to talk to his mother twice a week from the Florida shelter. Photo by: Erin Siegal McIntyre/The World

Vladi is a teenager from El Salvador. He arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, in the fall. Vladi and his grandmother had joined a large group of migrants traveling from Central America through Mexico.

By late November, Vladi was alone. He is 15 years old. His grandmother needed to return to El Salvador, and he stayed at a youth shelter for migrants like him who were hoping to seek asylum in the United States. People can seek asylum if they fear for their lives in their home country. If they are granted asylum, they are allowed to stay in the U.S.

Seeking Asylum At The Border

Vladi's mom, Verónica Aguilar, was waiting for him in the U.S. She left El Salvador, in 2017, because gangs were threatening her. She went to the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum. After

months of being held in California, Aguilar followed her plan to send for Vladi and have him join her in a safer life in the United States.

It is not against the law to come to the U.S. to seek asylum. However, people can be held in detention centers while the government decides on the case. That is what happened to Vladi's mom.

After arriving in Tijuana, Vladi stayed at a shelter for migrant youths near the border. Children and teens at the shelter must follow certain rules. They have to come in before a set time, because this part of Mexico can be unsafe.

Tijuana can be dangerous, but El Salvador wasn't safe, either. Vladi said he felt pressured to join gangs.

The Threats In El Salvador

As he waited to try to enter the U.S. with the help of lawyers, he spent time at the shelter on his cellphone. He loves to play video games. When asked how he imagines life in the United States, Vladi said he wants to go to high school and study.

"I have to get good grades, or my mom will take away my cell," he said.

Aguilar said that Vladi's dad was a main reason she left El Salvador. He was in a gang and is now in prison. When she tried to break ties with him, he told her she was keeping his son from him. Her life was threatened.

In California, Aguilar earned money working at a supermarket and sewing tights in a factory.

Life is different now, especially without Vladi. Aguilar said that she always planned to send for him once she'd found a place for them to live. She worried about him as he traveled to the border, talking to him four or five times a day.

As she waits for Vladi, Aguilar said she can "get so worried, there's a pain in my chest wondering where he's been, how he's been, whether he's eaten." However, she added, "I have faith in God it'll all be fine. I just have to wait."

A Cake For His 15th Birthday

Aguilar said she feels bad that she missed Vladi's 15th birthday.

Vladi approached the U.S.-Mexico border December 1 to ask for asylum. He went with U.S. lawyers.

When they got to the border, the lawyers told the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers they were with asylum-seekers. A CBP leader said they didn't have room to hold anyone.

The lawyers tried to persuade the CBP officers to let Vladi in.

Then, a member of Congress from Washington state showed up. Pramila Jayapal was in Tijuana touring the shelters.

Jayapal told CBP officials she was a member of Congress. She said she pushed them to accept Vladi and another young person, and they agreed to let them in.

After being held in California, Vladi was moved to a large shelter in Florida, near Miami. He was allowed to make two 10-minute calls a week.

An estimated 10,000-some young migrants are being held as the government decides what to do with them. These young migrants arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border alone.

Aguilar doesn't understand why her son has been in the shelter so long. She has proved he's her son, she said.

During a call, Aguilar asks Vladi if he'd like a soccer ball once he's out. Yes, he says, and Aguilar tells him about some soccer fields nearby. She wants him to have something to look forward to.

On another call, Aguilar says, "When you're back, I'll get your 15th birthday cake."