

## THE COUNSELOR

*Now forty-eight years old, Alejandra first entered the US with her husband at the age of twenty-one. After periods of time in New York and back in El Salvador, she now lives and works in Washington DC as a school counselor. The week we meet, Immigration is raiding buses and workplaces in the area. Our interview in her office is constantly interrupted by calls from scared students, afraid to leave their homes and asking Alejandra's advice. After her own brushes with both US immigration and the 1980s Salvadoran junta, Alejandra knows what these kids are going through.*

The adolescents I counsel are teen mothers, or kids that have got into problems with the court—because of gangs or stealing cars. I would say sixty percent of my caseload, at least, is undocumented. I know first hand what they're facing because I was undocumented myself when I came here, twenty-one years old, from Usulután, a city on the south-east side of El Salvador, through Guatemala and then Mexico.

I can tell these young moms and dads that having a baby when you are a teenager does not have to be the end of the world. I was one of those teenagers—I was seventeen when I had my son. And then I separated from my kids, I left them at home. When I left her, my daughter was only four months old. She was a baby. And my son was three years. My purpose with my husband was to make a few dollars and go back, buy a house, and live a happy life in El Salvador. But the war was already starting at home.

### NEW YORK

My husband's cousin was living in New York and he provided the money for him to come. I was depressed about being in a country that was not my country, separated from my mother, my siblings, my friends, leaving everything. But I had one friend in New York who was going to help me to get a job through her contacts, cleaning for some family. One day, she said "Oh, there is this lady that needs you to clean her house." I went.

It was this old lady living by herself in this beautiful apartment on Central Park, very, very old. (Well, I was twenty-one so I would see as people old if they were fifty!) But this lady, she was maybe seventy-five years old. I didn't speak any English. My friend had already trained me, "This is Windex, look for the picture. Don't put Windex on the wood because you will mess it up." Who uses these products? Water and paper - that's what we used to clean glass! I had to learn to compare the pictures, or call my friend. "You know, I have to clean this. What do I use?"

A weird thing used to happen there but at the time I couldn't understand if it was normal: wherever I was cleaning or dusting, this lady would come naked, naked, completely naked to talk to me. I thought maybe it was normal in the US culture, the gringos' culture. There are some things you don't know about other cultures. In El Salvador, we heard that people are free here in the US to do whatever they want. So maybe that's part of her freedom—walking naked in her house in front of a stranger. Me, I wouldn't even undress in front of my own mother. After you're nine years old, you know, you're for only you. But this old lady, all wrinkled, came into every single room where I was working, naked. I told my friend and she said "That's weird, I haven't had that experience." I said, "I don't what's wrong with this lady but she comes everywhere I go." Sometimes I would be cleaning the sink and then the toilet and then she would appear, all naked. To be honest I was afraid of this lady.

One day she gave me a clock to throw away. I didn't understand. When I first came, I got this little book called *Basic English*. So 'put' I knew, but 'garbage' I didn't. I associated 'garbage' with 'drawer'—in Spanish, a drawer is *gaveta*. So I put it in the drawer. "No!" She was so mad at me, "Put it in the garbage!" So I put it in another drawer, another *gaveta*. So funny. Afterwards, I could laugh, but not at the time. She kept screaming

at me and at some point she said “Stupid!” *Estúpida* in Spanish and ‘stupid’ sound all too similar to me. I said “Wait a minute. I’m not stupid just because I don’t understand her.” I said, “You stupid!” I grabbed my jacket. I said “Bye bye” and I left.

After that, I worked as a housekeeper or doing catering or babysitting. I was a babysitter for a long time in a house where I was cleaning, cooking, running errands, whatever they needed. The lady opened a travel agency in her home. She organized groups of people to go to Africa—Kenya and all those nice places. And I started to help her with files, collecting passports and stuff for her agency—all during the cleaning hours, so I was paid as a maid. But I always wanted to learn something new.

The lady who sponsored me was a lot nicer. I worked for her three days a week. I would just come in the morning, clean up, do whatever I had to do and then around two o’clock I was able to go home. I was catering on weekends, cooking for another family that lived in South Hampton, in a beautiful mansion in front of the ocean. That’s the kind of job I did in New York.

## EL SALVADOR

Once we had been here four years, we couldn’t wait any longer. My son was now seven and a half and my daughter was four and a half and it was getting closer to another Christmas, the fourth Christmas without them. I was working for the family in New York that was sponsoring me for my green card. But my husband and I were desperate. I asked the lawyer, “How long is it going to take?” He said, “It could be six months, it could be two years.” I said forget it. I told my husband that I can’t wait any longer. The war was already on, it was really bad in El Salvador. And my kids were living in Usulután still, which was a city with a lot of conflict.

Every penny we made went for the children and for the house we were buying in El Salvador. My husband and me, we wore used clothes that other people had tossed out. We lived in this tiny, tiny apartment, both of us in one twin bed. I said, “You know what? We’ve saved some money. I’ve got to go back and see if I can bring them here. If I cannot buy a visa for them, I will bring them through Mexico. I already came through Mexico and I know how it is.” In fact, going through Mexico was very dangerous, but that’s how desperate I was.

So I went back and bought a visa for myself and then diplomatic visas, with different names, for the children. Of course, with the Salvadoran government at that time, the diplomats were all right wing. My brother was coming too because I could get a visa for him with the same name as my kids, so the three of them could travel together, as a big brother with two younger siblings. And the name on the passport I bought for myself was different. I couldn’t get one with the same name as the children. So, they were officially not my kids when we were on the plane.

Once we arrived in New Orleans, I made it through but they didn’t. They started questioning my brother because he didn’t have a letter from the children’s parents authorizing their coming here, so they were stuck. I didn’t take the next plane to New York, I went back to customs. They kept asking me, “Are they your kids?” I said, “No, I know them. They come from the same hometown and I just feel bad that they couldn’t make it.” But they put me in jail in New Orleans, in the women’s jail. And they took my brother and the kids to a hotel because they were still the responsibility of the airline, that’s what they said. I wouldn’t let them take pictures or fingerprints of myself and I didn’t let them do it to the kids either. “They’re going back, so why do you need fingerprints?” I think it was a crazy busy day or otherwise they would have done it. I argued with them that I was not a criminal. “You stamped my passport and my passport says I have a right to come in. So what are you charging me with?” But they put me in jail anyway.

They searched me. They made me undress and take a shower with this lady right in front of me, which made

me feel so uncomfortable. And they put me in a jail with another woman. She was Latino, but I don't remember talking to her about why she was there. I was so scared, so, so scared. She was on the one side and I was on the other side. We didn't communicate. Most of the day, I was in court. I didn't know where they were taking me. All that day and the next, I was being questioned.

I asked where they were going to send my children and they told me they were going to a hotel because they 'belonged' to the airline while I was part of the US. The next morning when I saw them, my brother said, "Oh, we're doing just great. We're in a nice hotel with three meals a day." And my kids were happy because the officer was really kind. It was getting close to Christmas when we came and he bought a doll for my daughter and a police car for my son—not something I would buy, but it was kind of him, to make them feel like kids, you know. They were scared, too. My brother kept saying, "Tell them we've got to go back. I don't want to stay here."

If they were going to go back, I would have to go back with them. So I signed my own deportation back to El Salvador. In two days, we went back. But it was a nightmare over there because the war was going on. The police were waiting for us, the guard, we call them.

When we arrived, somebody said, "Immigrants are here," loud. This guy came to us and said, "Oh, so you are the ones—you came from New Orleans?" "Yes we did." He said, "Okay, follow me." It was the two of us, me and my brother, and the kids. The guard asked me, "Do you have anybody to take your kids?" I said no, thinking that would be a good excuse for them not to keep us any longer at the airport. He said "Oh, well. You can leave with your kids and we'll take him"—my brother. I said "Where?" I knew about all the killing, I knew about all the torturing, I knew everything that was going on in El Salvador. "We're going to take him to jail." I said, "If I find somebody to take my kids can I go with him?" "Yeah, you're supposed to come with us." I didn't feel safe to let my brother go by himself. He was eighteen. He was so nervous—crying.

I said, "Let me see if I can find somebody here at the airport." My mother was there and the man who sold us the passports was there, too. But I didn't want to tell the authorities, "Here is the one who sold us the passports." I went to my mom and I said "Mom, take the kids, we're going to jail." She said "What?" I said, "Just follow us, because we're going in this van." They put us in the van. They put handcuffs on my brother. The guard told me, "I'm not going to put handcuffs on you but you're not allowed to talk. Just keep your head down."

We were whispering all the way to the police station in San Salvador. I told my brother, "Do not say anything. You don't know who sold us the passports. You don't know anything, period. Leave it to me because then we won't be telling two stories." I wasn't going to tell them because my goal was to come back here to the US. The guy who sold me the passports was my hope for getting out of El Salvador again.

So my brother kept saying, "I don't know anything. She did everything." And they started pushing me, "Who sold you the passport?" I said, "I only know his first name." I made up some name. They said, "How do you not know the last name?" The story that I made up was that this school friend of mine got a passport and came to LA and from LA she gave me the number and the name of the person who could help me come to New York. So I knew the number, but I didn't have it with me. And I told them that I called this guy, the first time, told him that I wanted to leave with my kids and my brother and he met me at the park in San Salvador, I just made up a park. We met, we talked and then next time, we met and I gave him half the money. The last time I met him again at the same park, he gave me the passports and I gave him the rest of the money. That was my story. They kept asking me, "Why don't you tell us who is he? What does he look like?" I described some man. "Because if you tell us, you're going to get your money back, that's a lot of money." I said, "Of course. I'm not stupid, if I knew it, I would give it to you so you could get him and get my money back."

It was getting late, it was dark already by then. This guard took me to a small room, with cork all over the walls, soundproof, no windows. As soon as you walk into this room, you expect something bad to happen. He

starts questioning, questioning, questioning. He keeps repeating the same story all over again and over and over and over. He says, "Okay, I'm going to send you to jail because you don't know so we can't help you."

I say, "I'm sorry, I appreciate that you really want to help me but that's all I know."

"Well, before I take you back to your cell, I have to search you—you have to take off your clothes."

"I just came from jail in the United States and they searched me. And from jail they put me on the plane and I was guarded by police. I wasn't alone for one minute—I had no chance to get drugs or anything, so I don't see why you have to search me."

"Well it's the law, we've got to do it. I'm going to step out, you get undressed and I'll come back."

I said, "Okay," and he stepped out. It felt like a long wait—I didn't have a watch. Then he came back and I was still dressed. He said, in an aggressive and demanding voice, "Didn't I tell you to get undressed?" I said, "Yes, you did. But I don't have anything, what are you looking for?" "We don't know if you have weapons." "You can still search me with my clothes on. If I had anything you could see. I can take off my shoes and socks if you want to but I'm not going to take off the rest of my clothes." He said, "Why don't you listen? I have a supervisor expecting me to give a report." I said, "You tell your supervisor that I got undressed and that you searched me and you did not find anything. And I will appreciate it. I will let you touch me through the clothes and see if I have something." He said, "But I can't do that." I said "Yes you can, because you're such a nice man that you're going to do this for me." He said, "You know I can get into trouble." I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to get undressed." He patted me through my clothes.

I'm a weak woman. I do not consider myself strong. But when I'm in a situation, I don't know what changes me—you know, completely—into another person. I'm sorry to say this, but I don't have respect for those guards because they had no respect for my people at all. That guy wasn't one of the bad ones—maybe not—but I have a brother who was killed, I have teachers who were killed during the war, I have friends from my school who were killed during the war in very bad ways—couldn't be worse, being dismembered—and the guards were doing all this.

And you know, if it wasn't for Ronald Reagan, so many people in El Salvador would not have died in that war. Because of his support for the Salvadoran government at that time, the war lasted as many years as it did. Seventy-five thousand people died. I have no hatred towards the American people, but the government... !

I spent four days in a cell by myself, with big roaches running all over. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat. They would bring me tortillas with rice and beans but I couldn't eat. They would not let my mom see me. They wouldn't let anybody visit. But I knew that the guy who sold us the passports was the one who must do something. He had his connections. If he lent us those passports, he was supposed to send them back because other clients were waiting to use them come to the States. Those diplomats did not want to get into trouble either, so they would figure out how to get me out of there. They did. They were the ones who got us out of jail in four days.

When you talk to people, they all have all different stories, different stories just like snowflakes. We are not the same, we go through a lot, but it's not the same story for everybody.

## MY OWN KIDS

I spent six months in El Salvador waiting to see if we could come back. It was a terrible time in my country, with the war, no jobs, fear of the guards, friends disappearing. At last, we organized to come back with visas, not a diplomatic passport. But I didn't want to come on the same plane as the kids so I sent them by themselves. Somebody was waiting here with papers—she was supposed to be the godmother. Once the kids were safely

here, they called me. And then I took the next plane, the next day, hoping that everything was going to be ok. Our greencard application was still in process. It took another year.

Once the kids were here, we looked for a bigger apartment. I didn't bring papers for them, so we had to start all over, get vaccinations so they could enroll in school. And that's how we found the clinic. It wasn't too expensive—it was based on your income. But then I had to lie again, say that my husband wasn't around, I was by myself with my kids. Otherwise, I would have had to pay a lot of money. That was the only organization that I found in New York that was helpful. Before my kids came, I never went to the doctor, I never got sick! Even if I was sick, I didn't know where to go and I wasn't going to pay.

My daughter went back to El Salvador when she was fourteen. She said "I like it in El Salvador, I'll stay to finish my high school." I thought she was going to have problems over there, because between her and her brother they only spoke English, growing up in the US. But she did well and now she's working with World Vision. She's doing in El Salvador what I'm doing here in the US, working with kids with drugs and problems.

My son stayed on in the US. He's an artist. He was one of those teenagers that dye his hair different colors. He used to say, "Books are not for me, I hate school." But we told him, even if you don't go to school, you have to work. You're not going to be hanging out on the street doing nothing. He worked as a dishwasher. He said, "Oh my god, it's so hard." I said, okay, I'm glad you know it's hard—nobody has to tell you—you've been there. Now you have an option: continue to work as a dishwasher, forget about school, or go back to school. So he got his GED and was accepted at a great design school in New York. It wasn't easy to get in there—he's really talented. I'll still be paying his student loan for ever, probably. It's a lot of money, but that's the least I can do for him.

## WASHINGTON, DC

When we first moved here to DC, I said "I want to do something else besides cleaning houses or babysitting." But a lady I knew with two kids said, "Great, you're here, come over." Oh, no! Babysitting again!

But I also became a volunteer on Wednesdays at a clinic for pregnant women, girls who work in the daytime. I trained to do the intake and I also did some interpreting. Then I signed up to go to hospital with women who don't have anyone else to accompany them for the birth, so I saw a lot of babies delivered. It was very emotional. Later, I worked as a home visitor, to prevent abuse and neglect of children. There, I saw that I was working with my own people—Latinos, mostly Central Americans, Salvadorans. And I liked it. After two years, I moved on to Social Services and before I left there I was the coordinator for the teen clinic. So you see, a person can start where I did and still move on. You can set your goals and work towards them. That's the reason why I really like the job I have now, where I can encourage young people.

I used to bring adolescents to this school to get their GED. Every time there was a position here, the principal would call to ask me to apply and finally I came to work here. I'm a counselor, that's my title. For crisis intervention, we refer the young people to mental health services, but I connect them with the daycare organizations, vouchers and food stamps, Medicaid, health insurance, all kinds of things.

Right now, we have kids phoning to say they aren't coming in to school because they're afraid. Lately, there've been a lot of raids going on, busses being stopped, lots of deportations and detentions. Some kids were afraid to come to school to pick up their report cards on Friday because they are undocumented. And all of them are afraid to apply for health insurance or other services. There are some services for undocumented, but they are still afraid.

They have a lot of responsibilities too. They have to work and there are no good jobs for them. Like me, I wasn't happy working where I was working to start with, I was so depressed but I knew that I had to do it. I had

no option. I couldn't say, "Mom, I'm going to college. Can you pay?" There was no way. I had two kids to feed.

At work, the kids don't have insurance. They don't have any rights around getting sick. You're sick—you lose your job. Sometimes, we ask them to stay longer for school activities but they have to go to work. Can I call your supervisor? Can I send a letter? "No, They'll fire me. They need me. I have to be there." People don't understand that immigrants do the jobs that others won't do. If I'm a dishwasher and I don't go to work, who is going to do the dishes? It's not like the position I have right now at the school—if I'm not there, my co-worker will do some intervention and the rest I'll do when I come back. But the dishes must be done right now. Who's going to cook if I don't go to work?

Many kids are in gangs, we know which gangs they belong to. We work with a group of police officers know who's in the gangs, their names and everything. In one particular case, I saw a girl talking with a guy I know is in a gang. I said, "What's going on, is he your friend?" and she said "No, I just met him."

"Then why do you run to the window to talk to him?"

"Cause he was asking me to go to a party." That's how they hook them in: Come to a party.

This girl is under-age, so I said, "I'm going to talk to your mom about your friends because if I was your mom, I would want to know who your friends are." I don't want anything to happen to her and have to say, "Oh I knew it and I didn't tell her mom."

"Oh, no, please don't tell my mom. He's not my friend and I don't want to get into a gang."

"That's good. Just stay away from them." Once she joins a gang, it's hard for her to leave. Members of other gangs know that she belongs to that gang so when she's by herself, they jump on her. They'll beat her.

Families are so broken. If it's only the mom in the house, she has to work double shift—to pay rent and to feed them. There's no communication between kids and mothers. Most of these families were separated by the war. We are coming from a very violent, a very abusive country. Once they're here, they try to find a group of people that will support them or protect them. The gangs call it protection but they're not really there to protect you. You're on your own. And if you're in jail, you're on your own, too. If you're in the hospital, you're on your own. The only person who's going to visit you in the hospital is your family. But I think that all those issues come from not knowing the language, not having hope, because hope is all you have when you come here. When I arrived, I didn't know one word of English and I thought that I would never learn the language. "What are they saying?" I couldn't understand anything—it makes you feel lost. Then these kids find 'friends' who speak the language and they like adventure, like every teenager loves adventure. That's how kids get drawn into gangs.

## EL SALVADOR AND THE US

Right now, with 'free trade,' these kids have been thrown here. In El Salvador, there is Office Depot, Home Depot, Starbucks, Target, Wal-Mart, and all these big, huge companies are taking over. They open up a sweatshop, they hire a lot of people. Victoria's Secret and Gap—they have all these sweatshops over there. Great, good job opportunity. Come and work for one dollar a day. Sewing or whatever. No lunch break, eight hours or nine hours a day. Get paid every month. But when it's getting closer to your next pay, you go to work and where is it? Where is the company? Where is the factory? They're gone, they close overnight and they leave you without pay and without a job. This is what they do in El Salvador. That's 'free trade.'

So then, let's say my brother—he has a little stationery store—he goes to San Salvador to buy paper and books and pencils. But nobody will go to his store instead of going to Office Depot where they get it cheaper. He will have to close his place. So then what can he do? Come to the US. Come here and work.

No, it's not right. That's why the war started in El Salvador. That's how people got so angry and got

armed—it was because they couldn't take it any more. Working in those big cornfields cutting corn every day, burning yourself in the sun, for nothing. Just for a tortilla and beans. No place to live. No clothes to dress your kids. No shoes for your kids. It shouldn't be like that. The country has money.

You go to San Salvador, you see the big city and you feel like you could be here in the US. But you move to the countryside and you go three hundred years behind. No bathrooms in the houses, no toilets, no electricity, no water—you have to walk miles to get some water to drink. But the government says that in El Salvador only six percent are unemployed. Is it Sweden? No, because they count anyone who's selling mangos on the street—that's 'employed.' Even though she just picks mangos from her own tree and puts them in a bowl and then sells them. But she's 'employed.' The other one selling newspapers on the street is 'employed.' You selling gum and cigarettes on a little box? You're 'employed.' If there's a guy putting gas in his mouth, burning his mouth and spitting fire on the street to get some money? He's 'employed.'

In El Salvador today, education is supposed to be provided to everybody but if you don't have a pencil, you can't go to school. If a family doesn't have money for food, they won't spend money on a pencil instead of buying rice and beans. Once you go to high school, they say it's free. You don't pay tuition. But you pay seven dollars to register, and you have to buy your books and you have to wear a uniform. Not everybody can do it; some fifty percent of El Salvador wouldn't be able to do that. I see it with the students in my school right now. Kids who are seventeen and only finished third grade in El Salvador—why? "Because I decided to help my mother with the tortillas," "I decided to help my tio—my uncle—in the fields." "No, I wanted to baby-sit my sisters' children." "I have to go be a maid." They're better off being here in that situation, even going through whatever you have to go through.

It's not fair that the US government supported that war and now they want to build a wall to stop us from crossing over. And who's going to build that wall, anyway? Tell me that.