



RESTORATION IMMIGRATION LEGAL AID
ANNUAL REPORT 2023

Deeper Still

When fear is replaced with the gift of grace, security and safety, there is freedom to grow, to give and to dream.

WE WANT TO GROW

Over the past year, we have worked with asylum-seekers and immigrant children from many different countries—women from Iran, families from Afghanistan that have been tragically separated from each other, young Uyghur men from China, families from Venezuela and Nicaragua, and many men, women and children from Central America. Each week we open our doors, we offer a seat, and we listen. We assess eligibility for legal status and asylum, provide legal counsel, and explain immigration processes. But we do more than these things.

We create space for light and hope, and for beautiful things to grow.

We understand that our work is more than gathering evidence, writing briefs, and completing immigration forms, though we are committed to rigorous excellence in our legal work. As we meet with clients and speak to judges at court hearings, we carry the deep conviction that our work is building and creating. We are pushing back against the walls of injustice and building an organization and—ultimately, relationships that run deep.

Seven years ago, RILA put down roots with the hope of establishing a place that welcomes, a space that heals, and a trust that grows. Our hope is for our work to grow deeper still. Through my time at RILA, I have experienced the faith and compassion in my own heart deepen in

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extraordinary ways. This is simply what happens when we share in joy and suffering with others, especially those who are different from us, and do for them what we very much hope would be done for us in similar circumstances.

With each conversation held, partnership built, and meal shared, RILA's presence in the community deepens. Our immigrant neighbors know that we are here, we see them, and we are for them. Over time, those immigrant families that we are privileged to know put down roots of their own and rebuild their lives. They are opening their own businesses, attending college, learning English, and volunteering with us at RILA. When fear is replaced with the gift of grace, security and safety, there is freedom to grow, to give and to dream.

I am so excited to share with you these stories of courage and beauty, and all of the ways RILA and our work is growing deeper still.



Natalie Foote
President/CEO

Emely*

As a single mother, Emely admired the way her teenage son, Carlos, wanted to get a part-time job at a mechanic shop after school: **“He wanted to earn a little spending money. Carlos was a young man that wanted to help his family. He felt that he needed to be responsible and take care of his mom and little sister because he was the only man in the home.”**

A few months into his job, the gangs in Emely’s home country began to harass Carlos, demanding that he join them to sell drugs. When he resisted, several gang members severely beat him, kicking him repeatedly once he fell to the ground. After this attack, Emely went to the police for help and filed a report. The gang was quick to retaliate. Soon after the police report was filed, gang members confronted Emely and threatened to take her life and to hurt Carlos’s 12-year-old sister, Kimberly. Emely knew her family had to escape somehow, but she only had enough money for Kimberly

and herself to flee. In 2019, they came to the U.S. seeking asylum, with the hopes that Emely could earn enough money for 18-year-old Carlos to later join them.

But a little more than a year after Emely and Kimberly fled to the U.S., the gang found Carlos and murdered him. When Emely learned of her son’s death, she was devastated.

RILA helped Emely and Kimberly file their application for asylum and attended hearings at Immigration Court with them. Our legal advocates also applied for a work permit for Emely, so she could support herself and Kimberly while they waited for their final court hearing. And, as with all our clients, RILA did this work at no cost to Emely.

Several RILA staff members worked on Emely’s case, including Michele Islas, a RILA Legal Advocate, who walked closely with Emely by helping her prepare to tell her story to the judge: “Emely is a mother,

and like all mothers she only wants to care for and protect her children. She suffered the most unimaginable terror, the death of her only son. Like many of our clients, Emely continued to believe that God’s plan was at work and that the death of her son would not be in vain. She is a mother deserving of justice.”

In May, an immigration judge granted Emely and Kimberly asylum. That morning, Emely left the courtroom with mixed emotions—happy and thankful, but still carrying the deep heartbreak of losing her son, Carlos.

“I am always first thankful to God, and then to RILA. The whole RILA team is part of us, it’s like a family that took me by the hand and helped me,” said Emely. **“Today, I no longer fear that I will be returned to my country. When I entered the U.S., I feared something would happen to me or my daughter. Now that I have been granted asylum it’s been a blessing. I sleep calmly at night.”**



"Emely" with Staff Attorney Julia Ovando and Legal Advocate Michele Islas immediately following Emely and Kimberly being granted asylum.

**“NOW THAT I HAVE BEEN GRANTED ASYLUM,
IT’S BEEN A BLESSING. I SLEEP CALMLY AT NIGHT.”**

**Name changed for safety*

A photograph of two women standing outdoors in front of a brick building. The woman on the left has long blonde hair, wears glasses, a white blazer, and a floral patterned top. She has a yellow lanyard with a circular logo that says 'RUC' around her neck. The woman on the right has dark hair, wears glasses, and a red and black plaid shirt. She has a red lanyard with a name tag. The word 'Tabasum' is written in large white serif font across the center of the image. In the background, there is a brick wall, a set of stairs with a black railing, and a white door with a glass panel.

Tabasum

Tabasum is a RILA client and volunteer sharing her story in her own words—

When the regime changed in Afghanistan, like many other women, my mother, my sisters and I were extremely frightened about the situation and had fears about our lives and our future. The control of the government was now in the hands of those who do not believe in fundamental human rights and are actively against women's rights to education, work, and participation in the society.

Our situation, being three women alone depending on each other without any male guardian, left us particularly vulnerable to violence. The NGO where two of my sisters worked had been threatened by the Taliban even before they took over the government, preventing my sisters from working. We were afraid that as the situation got worse, my mother and I would also not be allowed to continue our work or to live peacefully.

This had an enormous impact on our physical and psychological well-being as

the Taliban had already imposed strict conditions on people's freedoms and lives. They imposed compliance with their cruel rules in the territory they captured, including brutal social and gender-related restrictions on women: mandatory burqa covering and prohibiting women from appearing in public spaces without a male chaperone. More fundamentally, they restricted women's access to jobs and forced marriage on young girls and widows.

My mother, one of my sisters, and I left the country and came to the U.S. We were highly exposed to stress and trauma in the first year. We knew we needed to seek support to find a legal pathway for permanent residence.

I didn't know where to start to help my family and myself, but luckily, I started my first job with a refugee resettlement agency as a case aid and later got involved in their Pro Se Asylum workshops, assisting Afghan refugees with interpreting, writing their stories, compiling documents, and more.

During that time, it was a miracle to learn about RILA, which supports those who are vulnerable and need legal pathways in the U.S., and because my family and I were one of those, they accepted our case. In the first meeting, I found the RILA staff very professional and extremely kind and supportive. I also felt we were at home. This made the process easier to begin rebuilding our lives in a place where people can live with respect and dignity.

When I met our representative, Michelle Swearingen, I felt closer to the RILA family because she is a kind and wonderful person who helped so many Afghans in applying for asylum. I like the way she is helping others, and I committed myself to being a volunteer with RILA to find ways to contribute and help other immigrants to rebuild their lives.

We are thankful to the RILA family and remarkably to Michelle for all her wonderful support. She is an amazing role model, and I hope to follow her pathway to becoming a legal advocate in the future.

“RILA MADE THE PROCESS EASIER TO BEGIN REBUILDING OUR LIVES IN A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE CAN LIVE WITH RESPECT AND DIGNITY.”

Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)

HARRY & EDDY

Harry and Eddy were only 14 and 10 when they were orphaned while living in their home country. Since there was no one who could take care of them, they came to the United States by themselves to be with their oldest brother, Osmin. Before their father died, he was physically abusive toward Harry and Eddy, and their mother—along with two of their siblings—died suddenly in a mudslide while working in the fields. Even though Osmin and his wife have three young children of their own and busy jobs installing carpet and cleaning homes, they didn't think twice about taking in Harry and Eddy.

RILA represented Osmin in Fairfax Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court in order to gain custody of Harry and Eddy. Having custody enables Osmin to protect and care for his younger brothers, and he is now able to seek medical care for both of them. As their legal guardian, he can now make critical decisions on their behalf to ensure all of their needs are met. Significantly, the court's determination that the boys were abused by their father makes them eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), a pathway to legal permanent residency in the United States.

"It's everything for our family . . . so the boys can grow up here, get an education and have a future," Osmin said.

The judge echoed Osmin's sentiment. During the hearing, the judge noted that even though Harry and Eddy had been through many hard things, this did not define them or their futures. The judge asked the boys to come back to see her when they achieved their dreams. When the judge asked Eddy what he wants to be when he grows up, he said, "**Un abogado**"—a lawyer—because he wants to help people.





**89 active
volunteers**



Julia, Staff Attorney

ADVOCATE DEEPER

I do this work because God calls us to love immigrants as ourselves and to protect them from injustice and oppression. The clients of RILA have fled from persecution, abuse, neglect, and abandonment in their home country, and the U.S. offers them refuge through asylum. But when they get here, they face our broken immigration system, and injustice and oppression continue. Alone, I am not enough to tackle the system and fight for immigrants, but God has assembled and built up the team at RILA to wrap around clients, build a strong case, and advocate for them.



I am a litigator, and I get to show up and contribute in my area of expertise and strength by preparing my clients and taking them to trial. Sometimes we get to celebrate their wins, and sometimes we mourn with them when the decisions are not in their favor. Along the way, I get to know them by listening to their stories. I am honored to be called part of the RILA family as we walk alongside our clients through this stage of their immigration journey.

RILA Client

GABRIELLA*

Gabriella worked as an attorney in her home country before arriving in the U.S. four years ago. Since obtaining her work permit, she has found a cleaning job that offers her the availability to care for her young son.

“On my long journey through the United States, God placed me in Virginia, where the RILA family opened the doors of their home to me. I refer to RILA as my family because that is how I consider them. They have fought with me and celebrated my legal successes. We were able to successfully secure my work permit despite the adversity to obtain it. I believe in the RILA organization because it has guided and led me by the hand of God. THANK YOU RILA!”



78 clients protected from removal



281 approved work permits

**Name changed for safety*



IT ALL ADDS UP

833 CLIENTS

787 CASES

433
ASYLUM

182
SIJS

60
LEGAL PERMANENT
RESIDENCE

24
U VISAS

88
OTHER
HUMANITARIAN-
BASED

11%
\$47,167
FUNDRAISING

11%
\$48,094
ADMINISTRATION

\$435,115
FY22-23
EXPENSES

27%
\$135,836
CHURCHES

23%
\$114,700
FOUNDATIONS

3%
\$16,254
CORPORATE
DONATIONS
& OTHER

\$495,341
FY22-23
FUNDING

78%
\$339,854
PROGRAM

47%
\$228,551
INDIVIDUALS

THIS YEAR, RILA RECEIVED 10 ASYLUM DECISIONS— 8 WERE IN FAVOR OF OUR CLIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES. WE CELEBRATE THAT 13 INDIVIDUALS WERE GRANTED ASYLUM.

EACH ASYLUM HEARING TAKES:

- 3-5 years
- 10-20 hours to prepare the application
- 30-40 hours to write a legal brief
- 30 hours of language translation
- 20-30 hours to gather evidence
- 10-12 hours to prepare testimony
- 5 hours for each additional family member seeking asylum
- 5 hours in court



**RESTORATION
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