

A Transwoman’s Journey to Safety

by Kitty Weiss Krupat and Karen del Aguilla

Over 6.2 million asylum-seekers crossed the U.S. southern border between 2020 and 2023. Though they came from every part of the world, the largest number were from Latin America. For most, the journey from their home countries to the United States had been arduous, sometimes terrifying. Once on U.S. soil, they faced strict regulations: To be eligible for asylum, they had to prove a “credible fear” of persecution back in their home countries—persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or identification with a particular social group. Maya L., a transgender woman from Nicaragua, was one of them. (We use a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.)

Maya reached the Texas border on December 18, 2022. Nearly a year later, she filed her application for asylum, with help from the Asylum Support Clinic (ASC) at Rutgers Presbyterian Church. Though her application is still pending, she’s ready to tell her story. On March 5, 2024, she talked with ASC clinic volunteer Kitty Krupat and Program Coordinator Karen del Aguilla. What follows is an edited excerpt from that conversation.

Despite the pain of leaving loved ones behind; fears about surviving a perilous journey; and uncertainties about starting a new life in the United States, Maya felt she had no choice but to leave her home country.

I transitioned from male to female in 2003. My mother was supportive, but my father became psychologically abusive and physically violent, once pointing a gun at my head and threatening to kill me. When I was forced to call the police on him, they brushed me off. They said it was a domestic dispute that should be settled within the family.

Human rights violations in Nicaragua—documented by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, among other NGOs—are widespread, including persecution of the LGBTQ+ community. Transgender women are particularly vulnerable. Maya had good reason to fear for her life.

Out in public, people would point at me and hurl insults; threaten to hurt me. The police routinely discriminated against me. Once, I was in a bad car accident and called the police. When they realized I was transgender, they just laughed at me—didn't check me for injuries or call an ambulance. They wouldn't provide documentation for insurance.

I have a degree in Business Administration from the Universidad Americana. After graduation, I operated a farm and a grocery store. But, as a transwoman, I was denied necessary work permits; employees felt free to vandalize my farm. The police did nothing about it. Ultimately my businesses failed. I felt like all the doors were closing on me. I tried to end my life. With the help of a friend, I survived. But I knew I couldn't stay in Nicaragua any longer.

Maya left Managua, the city of her birth, on December 4, 2022. She was accompanied by a 20-year-old nephew. “*He didn't want me to travel alone,*” Maya tells us. “*He's very tall,*” she adds. Their route took them through Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico.

In the news you would hear about all the dangers people face when they attempt to cross the border. They would say you will be harmed and raped. Once I reached Mexico, I saw those things for myself.

We were on a bus and they—I'm not sure if they were the mafia or the cartels—stopped the bus. They told us to get out. I thought they would just check our documents, but they selected the women and told us we needed to pay a certain amount. If you don't pay now, they said, we will prostitute you and take the money you owe us. After that, it was seven grueling days for me.

They put us in a store. Four of the girls were raped in front of me. I was so scared. I thought I would rather kill myself than have that happen to me. They gave us an opportunity to call our families. I begged my family to send the money. They ended up selling everything they had and paid within six days for my release. On the seventh day, they let me out. My nephew had gone ahead, so I took off on my own. I ran as fast as I could without looking back.

I got onto a highway—I'll never forget it. I saw a little sign, pointing toward the Rio Bravo [on the U.S. side, it's the Rio Grande]. I went in that direction, through a mountainous area. I kept walking, and then I saw a sign that said Federal Preserve—I knew it was English. I screamed for joy because I knew I was headed in the right direction. But there were some people following me. I was so traumatized by what had already happened to me, I started to run away from them. Suddenly I saw a patrol car—a U. S. Patrol car—and I went towards it. They picked me up and took me to an immigration center in Harlingen, Texas. I crossed into the U.S. exactly 15 days after leaving Nicaragua.

Maya says she was treated well by the border patrol. After she completed her credible fear interview, they told her she could move on to her destination of choice. She chose New York. With money from family, she booked a flight. In New York, she connected with her nephew on Facebook. They now share an apartment in Queens.

Once I got to New York, I started looking for an organization that could help me. It was hard. Then I met a transwoman who was active in a Jewish organization in Manhattan. Through her organization, I found Rutgers Church and the Asylum Support Clinic.

Maya connected with Rutgers Church in the fall of 2023—at the time, the Clinic had been operating for about a year. With the help of a volunteer team, she completed her asylum application within a few weeks. We asked her to tell us something about the ASC experience. “*It was excellent,*” she said, “*way beyond my expectations. I have no words for it.*”

Maya’s application is one of thousands, idling in a back-logged court system. It could take years before a final ruling. In the meantime, Maya will file for a work permit with help from ASC. She is well aware that transgender people in the U.S. also face discrimination—especially in hard-right states like Texas and Florida. But still, she feels safer now.

I have a voice here. My voice is heard. I’m not just waiting on God to change things for me. There are many of us transpeople here, and I am thankful there are people like you and the ASC who are behind us and taking on our cause.