

Mission for Two Suburban Shelters for Young Asylum-Seekers: ‘I am safe’
from The Daily Herald, April 2019

Flags from 18 nations hang in the stairwell of the suburban Viator House of Hospitality as a colorful reminder of the 48 men who have lived here after coming to the U.S. as unaccompanied teens seeking asylum in the United States.

A simple sign reading, “I am safe,” reminds them they are welcome.

“That’s our No. 1 goal,” says the Rev. Corey Brost, a Catholic priest who, with Viatorian Brother Michael Gosch, founded Viator House, which opened in January 2017 in the Northwest suburbs and now is home to 24 men from 10 nations. Their immediate success impressed Sister Patricia Crowley, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago, who brought together women from 30 religious organizations to establish a sister suburban home called Bethany House of Hospitality, which opened in October 2017. It is home to a dozen young women seeking asylum, including an 18-year-old from Guatemala who shares a room with her 4-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son she brought on the trip.

“We all belong here. We will defend each other,” reads a poster in the living room.

That message can be hard to convey in our volatile political climate. Even as Brost was explaining the mission to a suburban church congregation, one person shouted, “Deport them all!”

Brost has witnessed anger directed toward the asylum-seekers. For that reason, the Daily Herald is not revealing the exact locations of the two houses.

Both houses follow U.S. law to the letter and rely on donations for the bulk of their funding. The men and women who live in the houses arrived at the border as unaccompanied minors and were sent to juvenile detention centers, including ones in Chicago and the suburbs. As soon as these immigrants turn 18, those who have nowhere to live generally are sent to adult detention centers, often local jails like the McHenry County Jail that have contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Viator House and Bethany House provide an alternative for those waiting judgments on whether they will be granted asylum and allowed to stay in the U.S. indefinitely.

“It’s really a critical service,” says Ashley Huebner, associate director of legal services for the National Immigrant Justice Center in Chicago. Instead of being housed, clothed and fed at taxpayers’ expense in jails, the residents are cooking meals, cleaning, and going to high school or college. Those who obtained work permits are getting jobs to send money home or buy extras beyond the food and clothing provided, says Brost, a lawyer, priest and former president of St. Viator High School in Arlington Heights.

The path from trauma in their homelands to the U.S. border is treacherous for asylum-seekers.

Fleeing his West African homeland after a beating by government security forces that caused a compound fracture of his left leg, a Viator House resident who goes by the alias Ahmad went to Brazil and underwent a treacherous six-month overland journey to the U.S. border. The Daily Herald is not using his real name to shield his parents from reprisals in his home country.

Another teen who fled Eritrea to avoid being a child soldier carried his Bible for his entire trip, laying it in the sun to dry every time it got wet. At 17, he was moved from a juvenile facility to the Kankakee County Jail as an adult because an MRI of his jaw estimated his age at 18.

“What carried him through was that Bible,” Brost says.

Women who make the trek often are sexually abused along the way. “We have some who have been trafficked,” says Darlene Gramigna, executive director of Bethany House. Not all immediately tell their stories.

“We don’t ask them to share if they don’t want to,” says Sister Peggy Geraghty, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a Bethany House board member. One asylum-seeker was on a shopping trip when she suddenly broke down and told about all the horrors she had endured. “We’re hearing her life story at the makeup counter in Target,” Gramigna says.

The number of immigrants seeking asylum has exploded in recent years, creating a backlog of cases. Those with stories that immigration officials at the border found credible historically were allowed to stay in the U.S. until an immigration judge could make a final determination whether to grant asylum. Now, that wait often is years, and a recent administration policy will require that wait be done in Mexico. Those asylum-seekers living and often working legally in the U.S. can be deported if they miss a court date, and that can happen because of poor communication or a change of address.

Both Viator House and Bethany House are full and have turned away requests. Offering utilitarian but comfortable apartments and common areas, the houses qualify as huge upgrades from detention camps, where even requesting a shower time could be an ordeal. Many of the asylum-seekers were surprised by the spartan conditions of detention camps because they had been told the streets were paved with gold in America. “That’s what my grandparents came here thinking, too,” Gramigna says of her ancestors who emigrated from Italy.

While they wait for their cases to be heard, residents of both houses take care of their homes and their fellow asylum-seekers. On a grocery list hanging in the Bethany House kitchen, residents write food requests such as chicken feet, foo foo kasava (a dough made from plantain and cassava), and Halal meats to adhere to the Muslim faith of many of the residents.

A woman wearing a hijab walks past a poster featuring quotations from a variety of faiths asking that people treat others the way they would like to be treated. Asylum-seekers typically lose belongings along the way, and a communal closet allows women to pick out clothes and accessories.

Bethany House has a staff of four, with someone there 24 hours a day. Double the size, Viator House has two full-time residents among its staff of nine.

“If it was only our staff of nine, this would only be a boardinghouse,” says Brost, crediting 70 volunteers, from teenagers to senior citizens, from churches, mosques, synagogues and other faiths, for tutoring the men in English and school subjects, driving them to jobs and worship services, and helping them find their ways. Three graduated high school and are in college, and three more are about to graduate from high school. “They never would have had that success without volunteers,” Brost says. Some of the asylum-seekers need mental health care or treatment for substance abuse, says Sister Rayo Cuaya-Castillo, case manager for Viator House and a member of Society of Helpers. Some, unable to attend school in their homeland, might not know how to read or write in their native language, let alone English.

“Every youth is different, but all of them are respected. They work and they study,” Cuaya-Castillo says. “Here we don’t have parents, so we are the parents.”

The young people needed a lot of hard work, integrity, perseverance and talent just to make it this far, Brost says. “They are really gifts to our nation. They remind me that we are a strong nation only because of the gifts and strengths of our immigrants.”

Realizing the help given to them, many of the asylum-seekers look for ways to make life easier for others. “We see guys sharing remarkable tenderness and remarkable concern for each other. So many of our guys want to help other people,” says Brost, explaining how many grew a garden last summer to feed hungry kids through Catholic Charities. “That’s the kind of person I want in this country.”