

Op-ed: Where young asylum-seekers find safe refuge

By Mary Wisniewski

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House Coordinator Stella Akello, an immigrant from Uganda, right, organizes the kitchen at the Bethany House of Hospitality on May 17, 2021, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

The young people at Viator House and Bethany House, two Chicago-area group homes for immigrants seeking political asylum, seem like typical college-age kids — full of fun, ambition and energy.

They're taking classes, working fast-food jobs and sometimes staying up too late listening to music or playing video games. They tease each other, talk about dreams for the future, play soccer, ride bikes and study.

But the personal stories told by the 22 young men at Viator House, and the 10 young women at Bethany House are often terrifying, filled with unimaginable trauma.

The young adults in these “houses of hospitality” are seeking political asylum in the United States after escaping what they say are deadly situations in their home countries in Asia, Africa and Central America. They fled while they were still children, often alone.

Some report being beaten and imprisoned by agents of their governments. Others say they were attacked and left for dead by gangs. Some say they fled sexual trafficking. One teen told of returning from school and seeing his mother being assaulted by soldiers because his parents were in the wrong political party. When he intervened, they broke his leg and he had to go into hiding.

“His parents decided they had to get him out of the country,” said the Rev. Corey Brost, a Viatorian priest who runs Viator House with Brother Michael Gosch, both whom I know through my church.

The families of these children were desperate to get them out of danger, and scraped together money to buy them plane tickets to Brazil or Peru, where visa restrictions are looser, said Gosch, who learned about the unaccompanied minor issue from work with the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants.



Rosette, an immigrant from Congo, pulls weeds outside at the Bethany House of Hospitality on May 17, 2021, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

From there, many immigrants travel thousands of miles north to the U.S.-Mexico border. The trip often includes a journey by foot through the Darién Gap, a 60-mile-long mountainous, wild, jungle region on the border between Colombia and Panama. Travelers are often beset by robbers. One former Bethany resident saw her father get swept away trying to cross a river, said Sister Patricia Crowley, who founded Bethany along with other Catholic sisters.

Coming to the border, these minors ask for asylum, and hope to become U.S. citizens. After interviews, U.S. authorities determined they have a “credible fear” of returning home and were accepted for the asylum process, Crowley explained.

But with immigration courts packed, and many asylum-seekers lacking attorneys, it’s a process than can take more than four years. While waiting, minors without family sponsors may be housed in facilities run by child care agencies funded by the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement. From there they can be released to family members, but not everyone has relatives willing or able to submit to the vetting process to accept them. Facility staff can be caring, but the facilities are not like homes. A Bethany resident who’s a devout Muslim told me that when she was at a juvenile facility, the headscarf she used for daily prayers was thrown into the trash.

On their 18th birthdays, if they haven’t yet found anyone to take them in, these young people “age out” of youth facilities and are taken in handcuffs to adult detention centers, often county jails, Brost said. They might wait for years for their cases to be resolved.

Started in 2017, Bethany House and Viator House offer a “rare” opportunity for young asylum-seekers, said Raia Stoicheva, staff attorney in the Chicago office of the Young Center for Immigrant Rights. Instead of going to jail after they turn 18, they can share a home with other young people hoping to live the American Dream.



Ifra, an immigrant from Pakistan, makes bread at the Bethany House of Hospitality on May 17, 2021, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

Bethany House, on Chicago’s South Side, has hosted 54 women and 11 children; Viator, in the northwest suburbs, has hosted 71 young men. While waiting for their cases to be resolved, they go to high school and college. They get English lessons (taught by an army of volunteers), freedom to practice their own religions, access to legal help, counseling and medical care. They get to be free.

“I got a new life,” laughed the young woman who had lost her headscarf, and is now at Bethany House with her three sisters and going to college. She hopes to be a social worker, but dreams of being a doctor. She and her sisters get to talk with their mom back home, assuring her that they are safe.

The number of unaccompanied immigrant children referred to ORR has grown dramatically in recent years. As of March, there were nearly 15,000 in the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, according to HHS. More than a third were 17 or older.

With so many young asylum-seekers, there’s a need for more nurturing, safe places like Viator and Bethany. Viator House wants to expand. There’s also a need for a more compassionate asylum process, the right to an attorney for asylum-seekers and a fair, consistent way to get work permits, said Brost. Young immigrants are eager to send money home.

Gosch and Brost say the young people they see are smart, brave, resourceful, compassionate and hardworking — the kind of new citizens this country needs. Brost sees their presence not as a “border crisis,” as some see it, but an “opportunity for the country to live its best values.”

The children’s parents are like the Jewish parents in Nazi Germany, sending their kids off, knowing they might never see them again, Brost said. Given the choice, they’d rather send their children into the unknown than see them killed.

“Who in their right mind as a 16-year-old would leave everyone and everything they know to go to another country?” said Gosch. “Who would do it, unless they had to?”

Mary Wisniewski is a Chicago writer and the author of “Algren: A Life.”