

From reunion to reality: Honduran family navigates new life after a decade of separation

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By LAURA WIDES-MUNOZ, Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The mother arrived early at Miami International Airport, pacing the baggage claim hall until, at last, she spotted her.

Denia Zelaya had last seen her eldest daughter nearly 10 years earlier. On an early morning in 2004, she kissed Anita's head as the girl slept, then slipped out of her family's house.

"I didn't tell her goodbye," the mother recalls. "I knew if she awoke, I couldn't leave."

Anita was just 6, her younger sister, Nicole, not yet 3. But Zelaya had made a choice: to flee the violent gangs in her native Honduras and come to the U.S. to find work. The plan was to save enough for a smuggler and then send for her children when they were old enough to endure the journey.

This past April, Nicole, now 12, made it safely across the Texas border and on to Miami. That inspired 16-year-old Anita to attempt the trip with her own child, 3-year-old Emily, the granddaughter Zelaya had never met.

At the airport on July 18, Zelaya glanced at a picture of Anita on her cellphone, worried she might not recognize her. Then her eyes locked on a distant figure, hauling a toddler on her hip. As the girl approached, Zelaya saw her mirror image: large hazel eyes, corkscrew curls and a tentative smile.

For a moment it seemed like the distance would never close. Then Zelaya pulled daughter and granddaughter into her small frame. Anita buried her face into her mother's hair. A lone cry burst from her throat.

They are just one family — in some ways, one of the luckiest. As thousands of Central American children have come across the Southwest border these past months — fleeing violence, searching for loved ones and looking to start anew in the U.S. — this family found each other again. But now another journey has begun.

There's a complex legal system to navigate, new economic burdens and an unfamiliar home, along with the delicate task of learning to become a family again. In the background looms the

knowledge that their reunion in the U.S. could be temporary — more likely to end with deportation orders than asylum.

Zelaya herself lives here illegally. She spent the last decade working in restaurants and, more recently, busing tables at an airport hotel.

When she fled La Ceiba, Honduras, after witnessing the gang-killing of a nephew, Zelaya left Anita and Nicole first with her sister and then their great-grandmother. But without their mother, the children struggled.

When their great-grandmother died, the girls were shuttled between relatives, frequently changing schools, often unable to go at all. Nicole says she got as far as the second grade. Anita, who never made it past fifth, was hired out by a cousin to wash clothes because the money Zelaya sent never lasted long.

"There were so many Christmases I couldn't celebrate, because when I saw so many people hug each other I would just go cry and go to bed," Anita recalls. "Maybe I had some things I needed, but I didn't have a mother, and that is the most important, I think."

In Miami, Zelaya did her best to start a new life, even as she decorated her bedroom walls with pictures of her children. She met someone, and had two American-born children, Elise, now 5, and David, 4.

She spoke frequently by phone with Nicole and Anita, but often the calls left Zelaya in tears. She dreamed of visiting them but says she feared the gangs, and the journey back to the United States was too risky.

"I just focused on working so one day I could bring them here," she says.

The first smuggling attempt came four years ago. The girls made it as far as Guatemala, but then news spread of the massacre by a Mexican drug cartel of dozens of Central American migrants. Zelaya pleaded with the smuggler to take her daughters back home.

A few months later, gang violence struck their family again.

According to Anita and Zelaya, Anita, then 13, was raped by a member of the Mara 18 gang. The gang continued to harass her after Emily was born 9 months later. Anita says she went to the police but doesn't believe they filed any official report.

Zelaya was devastated. Having had Anita at 15, she knew the difficult road her daughter faced and offered to help however she could. But Anita refused to make the journey to the U.S. again, terrified for herself and her child. She rented rooms or stayed with friends, at times working seven days a week as a cook.

Then this spring, a cousin decided to make the trip north with her two children and invited Nicole along. When Anita learned her sister had arrived safely, she agreed to try again with Emily, old enough now to walk some of the way.

Initially, the two were detained in McAllen, Texas, and placed in a Department of Homeland Security facility with other apprehended minors. Soon they were flown to a nonprofit shelter in New York and, after two more weeks, they were on a plane to Miami — and to Zelaya.

On the ride home from the airport, as Elise offered Emily her toys and David peppered his mother with questions about their "new" sister, Anita gazed out the window at the mostly Dominican neighborhood where Zelaya lives.

The auto-mechanic shops, beauty salons and vendors selling mango slices weren't so different from back home. But here the streets were paved and, her mother assured her, gangs did not rule them.

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The first few nights after Anita arrived, the girls and their mom cooked their meals side by side with quiet precision, as if they'd been doing it all their lives. Nicole and Anita convinced their mother to sleep with them in the small bedroom all five children now shared.

After two weeks, Anita, craving privacy, commandeered the bedroom. Nicole and Elise wound up in a back room used for storage. Zelaya returned to her own room with David. The three started taking turns cooking.

With few places to go and school not yet in session, the euphoria of reunion began to fade. To save money, Zelaya ran the air conditioner only at night, making the cramped concrete house at times unbearable. Someone was always hungry. And old resentments remained.

Ever since Elise and David were born, Anita had accused Zelaya of replacing her and Nicole with the new American children.

"I try to explain to the older ones that the younger ones need protection because they are still little," Zelaya said one day. "We do too," Anita cut in, only half in jest.

In Honduras, Anita had hoped one day to open a beauty salon or a cafeteria. Now she looks forward to school. "I liked science and reading, and I was OK at math," she says. "I want to make up for all the years I didn't go. Then, I want to work and help my mother."

But she worries about catching up with her peers, embarrassed that her life is so different from theirs.

Zelaya tries not to burden her children with her own worries. Unemployed since getting laid off from the hotel in December, she relies on help from her boyfriend while she looks for new work.

And though she relishes the time with her children, Zelaya frets about the thousands of dollars she owes to her mother and boyfriend for the smugglers. She now has four sets of school shoes to buy, and Nicole still needs vaccinations before school starts.

She also knows that the legal path for her children will be far from easy.

Jorge Rivera, a Miami immigration attorney, has agreed to take Anita's case pro bono, but he's warned the family there are no guarantees. A local Honduran nonprofit is helping Nicole.

Immigration judges don't necessarily recognize flight from gangs or sexual assault as a basis for granting asylum. Both children — and by proxy, Emily — might be eligible for a specialized visa for youth who were neglected or abused, but that would require gathering a significant amount of documentation from back home.

"If she doesn't have anything from her country to prove she was harassed by the gangs, all you have is her word — and then it could easily be deemed insufficient," Rivera says.

Anita is awaiting a date for her immigration hearing; Nicole's is set for January.

Zelaya also remains fearful that at any minute, at the doctor's or the supermarket, immigration officials might detain her.

"If they deport me, I will be back the next day," she vows. "I will not risk my little ones' lives back in Honduras and, even less, my daughters who just arrived."

On a rainy Monday afternoon, tired of being cooped up in the house, the family headed to the grocery store. Men stared as they walked by, their gaze lingering on Anita and Nicole.

"So many children. All yours?" one joked. "Come on, give me two of them."

Zelaya stiffened. She worries about Anita, who has shared her story with reporters, social workers and the lawyer. After each encounter, the girl seems to withdraw into herself.

As the group crossed a puddle, little David offered a welcomed distraction.

"Swing me, Mami," he clamored. "Us too," chimed in Elise and baby Emily.

Zelaya, Anita and Nicole clasped their hands and began to swing the little ones as they walked. The children squealed, and soon Zelaya and the older girls laughed too, attached in one familial chain — oblivious for a moment to the falling rain.

<http://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2014/08/11/honduran-teens-mom-navigate-life-after-us-reunion>