

What We Know About Unaccompanied Children Arriving at Southern Border

Virginia Allen May 08, 2023



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A 10-year-old girl from Honduras arrived at the southern border unaccompanied by adults. She told Sheena Rodriguez that she hoped to stay in America, and wanted to "color and get to know my father."

The Honduras girl is like so many other unaccompanied alien children, says Rodriguez, founder and president of Alliance for a Safe Texas.

These kids arrive at the border with "pieces of paper with handwritten numbers on it," she says, "and these children are going to people that they have never even spoken to."

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About 85,000 migrant children have entered the U.S. and been placed with a sponsor, but the federal U.S. government now doesn't know the children's location or status. Through her work at Alliance for a Safe Texas, Rodriguez seeks to raise awareness

about how the border crisis has led to the exploitation of children, and to offer solutions to lawmakers who are trying to fix policies that led to the current situation.

Rodriguez's desire to find out what was really going on at the southern border began about three years ago. She says she needed to see the situation for herself, so she planned a trip. Rodriguez left her home in North Texas and arrived around midnight in Laredo, about 160 miles south of San Antonio on the Mexican border.

"We encountered about 60 different men, all young men, to the one Border Patrol agent," Rodriguez says, adding: "And he looked at me, didn't know me from anywhere, and said, 'I need help. We're being invaded.'"

At that moment, Rodriguez says she committed to doing something to address the border crisis.

Since that first trip, Rodriguez says, she has taken nearly three dozen trips to the border and spoken with many illegal aliens, including unaccompanied migrant children.

Rodriguez joins "The Daily Signal Podcast" to share stories of these unaccompanied children and explain what we know about how minors are arriving alone at the border.

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Virginia Allen: We are joined today by Sheena Rodriguez. Sheena is the founder and president of Alliance for a Safe Texas. Welcome to the show.

Sheena Rodriguez: Thank you so much for having me.

Allen: Well, Sheena, your organization, your mission is really all about raising awareness about what is going on with our southern border and how the situation at the border is impacting individuals' lives, whether that's American lives or the migrants themselves who are coming across and coming to America. But this is not always the work that you've been doing. How did you come into this kind of work?

Rodriguez: Yeah, so, thank you for asking that question because I get asked that a lot and I think people are a little bit surprised. I'm just a homeschooling mom. That's it. My education is actually in developmental psychology. I used to work, was a former educator, used to teach fourth grade and preschool children. But really, my heart and my advocacy has always been in the pro-life movement.

And so, actually, for a number of years in North Texas, where I live, I was a volunteer counselor for a pro-life center out there. And ... in Irving, Texas, at the time when we still had that location out there, saw kind of some different elements that people did not—this was years ago when my children were little—may not have been aware of, particularly with immigration of forced arranged marriages.

And my family being Puerto Rican, my husband is a first-generation Mexican American, we've always been kind of cognizant of immigration and some of the issues and the different ways that it impacts the communities and individual lives that, like you said, that people may not always connect those dots.

... Fast-forward to about three years ago, I was never really in the political realm, if you will. I voted in general elections, thought I was well-informed, thought I was doing the right thing. And always kind of voted what I believed to be my pro-life agenda, my pro-life values.

And unfortunately, found out very quickly that if I wanted to try and save the great state of Texas and our sovereign nation, that really, unfortunately, politics was where I needed to be. So then I was already advocating in the state of Texas, in our capital, for all things conservative.

And when I started going down to the border in Texas and seeing for myself what was happening, I began to see very quickly the exploitation of human beings on all levels and the devastation that was being inflicted, like you had said, on the lives of Texans and American citizens and the migrants themselves coming over.

So then I started trying to apply because the thing is that when people begin to understand kind of what's going on, they get overwhelmed. That's part of our human nature. And it's like, "Well, what can I do? What can I do?" So I started researching and finding ways and getting connected.

I've been very blessed to get connected with experts and larger think tanks and trying to find ways that we can try to address these issues on the local, city, county, and, of course, on the state level. So that's been our major focus.

And fast-forward, here I am, been a wild ride, and like I said, just yesterday I was out here in Austin fighting for our first bill with regards to the facilities. So it's been kind of crazy. But I'm very, very thankful to have the opportunity to try and be at least a singular voice, an everyday regular American trying to do something.

Allen: Well, it's neat to hear a little bit of you backstory. In April, that journey of saying "yes" to entering this political space actually brought you to Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., and you testified before the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration integrity, security, and enforcement.

And that hearing was specifically looking at what is happening at the border in relation to kids and children and how policies are affecting minors who are

You said during your testimony that you have been to the border almost three dozen times within a span of two years. Why did you start taking so many trips to our southern border?

Rodriguez: Because prior to that—again, I live in North Texas, in the DFW area between Dallas and Fort Worth. So prior to that, I had never really been further south than San Antonio, which, if you understand how big Texas is, that's not that inconceivable.

And so the very first time that I had visited the border, I know it might sound a little strange, but I really felt a calling to go and I couldn't understand why. And I remember then my husband going, "Oh, but it's just one time," and it was to Laredo. And I'm like, "Yeah, babe, this is totally, I'm just going to go see for myself because I don't believe."

Unfortunately, we're in a place in our society currently where we cannot necessarily trust what we're seeing in the news and in the media. And me being kind of, I've always liked trust but verify. I felt driven to go down and see for myself.

Most of what I had seen is actually grown adult males. And that's actually the very first encounter that I had down there in Laredo. We got there probably close to about midnight. It was very dark. And there was one Border Patrol agent, two pods. We encountered about 60 different men, all young men, to the one Border Patrol agent. And he looked at me, didn't know me from anywhere, and said, "I need help. We're being invaded."

And from that moment on, I'm like, I started praying. I'm like, "Lord, what do I do?" I felt called to go down and I'm going now. And just different situations kept on coming up where it kept on driving me to different areas.

And so now I have been everywhere from the RGV, the Rio Grande Valley; McAllen; Roma; La Joya, a few times where I encountered a lot of these younger unaccompanied minors that I testified about; Laredo.

I spent a lot of time concentrating in the Del Rio Sector because we're trying, again, there were several people like Brent Smith, which is a Kinney County attorney, trying to find ways of how we can try to combat this on the state and local levels up to El Paso and also out there in Yuma, [Arizona].

And then trying to fill in those gaps from what was happening, what I'm seeing even with Operation Lone Star in Texas, what am I seeing and encountering, and getting information from the locals that live there to the law enforcement that are boots on the ground, and how do I fill in that gap between that and what's actually happening in Austin where policies are being driven?

So trying to bring that different, unique, if you will—because a lot of it is like top brass, which is great, but it's also important to hear from the boots on the ground.

And then also having—we just saw in the news the travesty that happened in Cleveland, Texas. I had been there. I'd been there on an assignment. So that's hundreds of miles away from the border. And then also seeing how it's impacted my respective area, it kind of brings together a different, unique perspective of connecting the dots, if you will.

Allen: When we talk about unaccompanied minors arriving at the border, obviously, I think everyone can agree this isn't OK. And you start asking the question of, why are these kids showing up at the border without a parent, without some sort of adult? Did they walk there by themselves? What's going on? In all of your trips down there, what have you learned as to why minors are showing up unaccompanied at the border? Who is sending them? How did they get there?

Rodriguez: I really appreciate that question. Unaccompanied minors, you'll kind of experience all along the border in different areas. But one of the reasons why I was also attracted to the Roma and La Joya areas is because that's where you generally see some of the younger children coming over because most of the unaccompanied minors are teenagers, older teens.

And I started asking those questions, "How does a 10-year-old girl come from Honduras by herself?", for example. And several of these children had similar stories. They were just told that they were coming to the United States. This is coming from their mouths. Now, I can't verify any of their stories, the validity of it, but this is coming from them. And kind of correlating with what we were seeing. And that's why in the congressional hearing it I felt like gave the whole picture where I had encountered the stories of what they were saying.

And Tara Rodas, who was the whistleblower ... from inside [the Department of Health and Human Services], where what happens to the children afterwards. And it was kind of this full circle moment.

So what I began seeing was a lot of these children saying, "I was just told I'm coming." People within [nongovernmental organizations], they said women inside these bodegas, which are warehouses, were telling them, "This is who your sponsor's going to be when you get there. This is to your mother. This is to your father. This is to your tio, your aunt, your uncle that are already here in the United States."

And so I would ask them, like, "Well, have you spoken to them? Are they excited that you're coming?" Things like that. And they had no idea. "I've never spoken to them. My mother, my father, I've never spoken to them."

One girl, the 10-year-old from Honduras, "I'm hoping to go and color and get to know my father." And it's devastating because these pieces of paper with handwritten numbers on it, and these children are going to people that they have never even spoken to, that strangers are telling them who to ask for when they arrive.

When I asked, "Well, how did you pay to come?" "Well, the people paid. They said as long as I was going to the United States that I would be OK to come." Shoved into these warehouses, shoved into the back of eighteen-wheelers, raped along the way. A good number of them, unfortunately, encountered a lot of violence along the way.

Now, some of them, some of the olders, I've also encountered some older teenagers around 16 to 17, was what they had claimed, for example, in the Del Rio Sector, that were not turning themselves in, that were hiding in the brush. And that's even more concerning because it's like, why are you trying to hide?

And then, of course, we also have the other individuals where we've seen men, grown men coming over with these young children, claiming that they're adopted daughters, they're adopted sons, and yet they don't even know their names. They don't even know their date of birth. And there's no way because of the policies to really verify and vet.

So there's a wide scope of things that are occurring. And then simultaneously, these types of facilities holding these unaccompanied minors are exploding exponentially, growing all over Texas and the United States. According to [the Office of Refugee Resettlement], they're up to now 27 states with nearly 300 facilities. And I expect with Title 42 lifting, that number will grow up higher.

So this is literally bringing the issues of these unaccompanied minors being trafficked potentially in your viewers' backyard without them even being aware of it.

Allen: Sheena, it's such a layered issue and there's so many moving parts. And of course, everyone's story is different. For every illegal alien, for every child, they're coming from a different situation.

But let's take, for example, the little girl who said she's coming to meet her father and just wants to color. How does that journey begin? Has she been left with an aunt in South America who's now sending her to America in hopes of a better life and her parents have already come to America? Have her parents sent her alone in hopes of her having a better life, but they're still in South America? Is it both?

intentions for their kids. They want to see their child have a better life. So is that what's playing out here, that parents are being lied to and they're being told, "Your child, if they come with me, they can have more opportunities?" What do we really know?

Rodriguez: I greatly appreciate that question for so many reasons. Yes, every situation is a little bit different and a little bit unique. And again, we cannot necessarily verify the validity of their claims. We can only go by what they're saying and what we're experiencing.

But I've seen everything from, I encountered one woman in a larger group in the RGV, in the Rio Grande Valley, that I watched cross over at the hands of the "coyotes" on a raft and had brought her very tiny baby with her. It turned out that she said that the baby was born prematurely, a day shy of a month old. And I'm saying this for a reason.

When they came up and I started asking questions, "Why? What would motivate you?" Because like you said, I'm a mom. It's very difficult, I think, for Americans and for mothers and for fathers especially, we can't conceive trying, putting our children in the hands of strangers. And there's very different reasons as to why. And not all of them well-intentioned, unfortunately.

So in the case of this woman, when I had asked her, "What motivated you to come now, such a perilous journey?", she had stated that she was shoved into the back of eighteen-wheelers using Facebook to guide them. The group collectively said Facebook helped to guide them on the route along. All of this is documented.

They had seen the news reports on Telemundo saying that children, that individuals and adults with young children under a certain age were being accepted into the United States. And that children being sent by themselves were being accepted into the United States.

So they saw that as their way. That as long as they were coming, crossing with children, that they would be accepted in. And I feel like that gives us an insight into what is really the root causes that is driving the use of children.

Allen: Well, in your organization, Alliance for a Safe Texas, that's one of your core missions, is to get that state involvement at a policy level. And that's something that you mentioned earlier. You-all have just taken on, you've introduced and are advocating for a bill in Texas. Talk a little bit about that and what that bill would do.

Rodriguez: Thank you so much. Yes. So, our bill was HB 5000. [State Rep.] Stan Kitzman, a freshman, he's one to definitely keep an eye on for all things conservative moving forward. So thankful for that relationship with him and him working on this with us.

HB 5000, it's actually very simple. All it states is that if it were passed, that these HHS-contracted facilities are licensed by the state of Texas. Why is that important? Because that would give us an opportunity to have much-needed oversight.

And [that] at least gives us the chance to get a foot in the door because there's so many issues that even the local cities, a lot of them are rural areas already strapped for

the same mandates and requirements, if you will, as our state foster care system. Which seems simple. It seems like common sense. Why aren't we doing this?

Florida and South Carolina, especially Florida, have already put in many regulations. Since 2013, they strengthened them in 2019 and they're strengthening them even further as far as these facilities. And next, I believe that they're going to start cracking down on the sponsors because they have done an investigation on the state level of finding out what is happening with the children in their state.

And that's also Stan Kitzman, once again, has also come up to the plate and he also has sponsored our letter asking for the same exact type of state-level investigation in the state of Texas.

I'm thankful, so thankful to announce that we have bipartisan support from state legislators. Both Democrats and Republicans have signed on to it. And we will be sending that letter shortly here to our [attorney general's] office here.

And again, hopefully, if a federal level investigation is done, then hopefully these investigations on the state level will help with those types of investigations moving forward as well.

So I want to encourage, if people are overwhelmed, I was like, what can I do? They can try and take what we're trying to do here in Texas and implement it in their respective areas.

Allen: Well, and for anyone who is listening, who wants to hear more about the

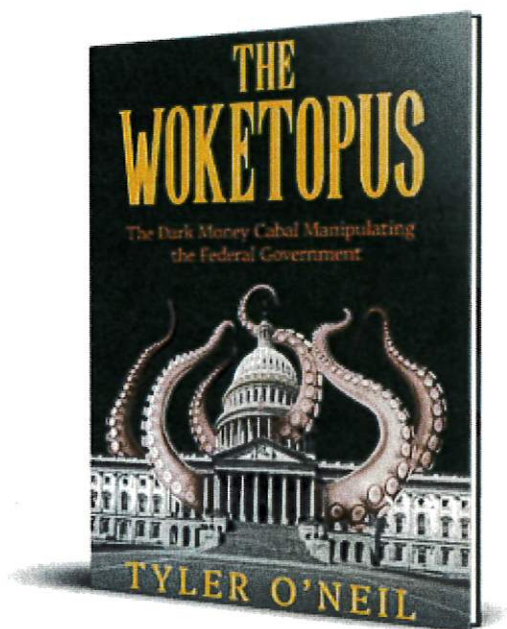
thank you for your time and for breaking down ... a really overwhelming issue, and one that is very multifaceted but is so pressing right now.

Rodriguez: Thank you so much. Thank you.

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