

“Reina” – Ayuda Client Story: Defensive Asylum Grant

Reina* is a 29-year-old transgender woman from Honduras. In her home country, it was impossible for her to express her gender identity safely. Her defensive asylum case was based on a near-death beating inflicted on her by military and police as punishment for publicly presenting as a trans woman. She sought refuge in the U.S. and eventually, the D.C. metropolitan area. Ayuda is a nonprofit based in the D.C. area that provides legal, social, and language access services to help low-income immigrants access justice. Ayuda attorneys represented Reina in her defensive asylum case and prepared an over 700-page filing with extensive country conditions on the treatment of transgender individual in Honduras. Reina was able to overcome significant trauma to prepare a detailed declaration and give brief but compelling testimony. The government agreed to a grant of asylum.

Reina would have certainly been killed if returned to her home country. We are privileged to have her as a member of our community. She has given so much of her time and energy to caring for others around D.C. and has grown into an incredible advocate for transgender rights.

Today, Reina continues receiving gender-affirming medical care that would have been impossible in her home country. She has a blooming career in fashion and television. A telenovela she is acting in just premiered this summer. Reina is overjoyed to be able to pursue her dreams without fear of deportation to a country where her safety and life were at risk. Reina’s newfound safety and stability, thanks in large part to the work of the Ayuda attorneys who represented her in her asylum case, demonstrate the critical importance of supportive services for asylum seekers. Her life-changing journey and her positive contributions to our community demonstrate the critical importance of this nation remaining a welcoming place for those seeking safety at our border.

**Name has been changed to protect the client’s identity.*

Selena's Story: Celebrating U Visa Success After 6 Years

June 6, 2023

Everyone has their own reason for immigrating. When former Ayuda client Selena* fled her home country in Central America after surviving domestic violence, her reason for coming to the United States was simple: Safety – for herself and her children.

Shortly after arriving in the U.S., Selena entered a romantic relationship with a man named Patrick*. But once he began to abuse her both emotionally and physically, Selena was done. She made the courageous decision to end the relationship.

Patrick, however, had other plans. He began stalking Selena, posting intimate photos of her online, and generally making her feel unsafe. Selena kept her composure and reported his crimes to law enforcement. With Ayuda's assistance, in 2016 she began the process of applying for a U Visa, which allows victims of certain severe crimes and their family members to legally remain in the U.S.

Although the U Visa is one of the strongest legal protections available for immigrant survivors of sexual assault or domestic violence, it comes with built-in roadblocks. For one thing, U Visas are only granted if the survivor complies with "reasonable requests" from law enforcement. In Selena's case, she was called on to testify at her abuser's trial. Despite the intense, combative questions that Patrick's counsel threw Selena's way, she ultimately prevailed. Her abuser has been convicted.

But the best part: Selena has been granted her U Visa after a long six years of waiting and can safely continue her path to recovery. Today, Selena is happily living with her two children after getting remarried last year.

**Names have been changed and some details omitted to protect our client's privacy.*

A 20-Year Journey to Citizenship: Tanya's Story

Tanya* was a young adult when she experienced political persecution in her home country. In search of freedom, she accepted a job as a domestic worker in a foreign country. Unfortunately, Tanya's escape was short-lived, as her new employers subjected her to human trafficking.

After the traffickers brought her to the U.S., Tanya once again escaped – only to be failed by the immigration bureaucracy. Her asylum application was denied in immigration court. It wasn't until several years later, working with an immigration attorney who recognized her as a survivor of human trafficking, that Tanya was granted a T Visa in 2008.

But T Visas are temporary and only allow survivors of trafficking to stay in the U.S. for up to 4 years. In 2011, Tanya began working with Ayuda to ensure her long-term safety by seeking lawful permanent residency. A year later, her case was a success. On top of her residency victory, Ayuda also helped Tanya reopen and terminate her previous immigration case – a necessary step to one day apply for citizenship.

In 2022, Tanya was ready to become a citizen. With Ayuda's representation, she applied for naturalization. Tanya's hard work and studying paid off last month, when she passed her English and civics tests on the first try.

This week, over 10 years after becoming a permanent resident and over 20 years after she escaped her traffickers, Tanya will take the Oath of Allegiance and become a U.S. Citizen.

All of us at Ayuda are celebrating Tanya's success and wishing her the best as she starts this next chapter.

**Name has been changed and some details omitted to protect the client's privacy and safety.*

Teen Trafficking Survivor Finds Safety with Ayuda: Elias' Story

July 19, 2023

Elias* was 16 when he arrived in the U.S. from Guatemala as an unaccompanied minor. He'd taken the risky journey hoping to reconnect with his mother stateside, whom he hadn't seen since birth. Upon arriving in the D.C. area, Elias connected with Ayuda for a helping hand with his goals: enrolling in school, getting health insurance, and securing his legal status.

But at home, Elias was not having the happy reunion he'd imagined with his mom. She was forcing him to work in demolition and confiscating all of his earnings. She cycled through threats to kick him out of the house, frequently taking his phone to ensure he couldn't reach his safety net.

After several months, Elias took the challenging step of recognizing his mother's behavior for what it was: Labor trafficking and abuse. He confided to his Ayuda case manager, who immediately reported the treatment to Child Protective Services (CPS) and began working to get him out of his home.

Finding Elias safe shelter, however, was a challenge in itself. He desperately needed refuge from his mother's house, but many emergency housing programs only have beds for women or survivors of sex trafficking. His case manager knocked on dozens of doors, to no avail. Finally, Ayuda was able to pay for Elias' stay at a hotel while coordinating a more long-term solution.

Elias was understandably scared but remained unshakeable throughout the process – never losing his infectious sense of humor. He put Ayuda in touch with his uncle based in the Midwest, who was more than willing to provide his nephew a safe home. After coordinating between CPS, Elias' mom, and his school, our case manager purchased him a bus ticket, a winter coat, and food for the journey. Finally, Elias and the case manager made a safety plan for travelling and future communications with his mother.

Today, Elias has been living with his uncle for over a year. He's attending high school, has a job, and is working with a local immigration attorney. Most importantly, Elias reports feeling happier and much more peaceful in his new home.

**Name and photo have been changed to protect our client's privacy.*

Protection through Pro Bono: Ruka's Story

Ruka* was in the United States on a tourists' visa visiting from her home country in Asia, when she first met Donald*. A restaurant owner, he promised Ruka that she could be included in a visa application that would grant her permanent residency in the U.S. It sounded like a dream, so Ruka leapt at the opportunity.

As the visa application was allegedly processing, Donald required her to work at the restaurant. He also made her pay thousands of dollars in legal fees. Ruka had no way of knowing that, in fact, federal immigration laws obligate the employer to pay these fees. With no other option, she agreed to pay.

But after Ruka had come up with the exorbitant fees, Donald changed her duties in the restaurant and eventually ceased paying her, requiring her to work only for tips as a server. A short time later, Ruka's dilemma became unbearable when Donald demanded another \$10,000 for the visa application. He even threatened to remove her from the application if she did not pay or continue to work.

Ruka stood her ground, refusing to give in to Donald's demands. His retaliation was brutal. Well aware that Ruka was now only paid in tips, Donald placed her to work in the kitchen, where she'd be unable receive gratuity from customers.

Fortunately, Ruka was soon able to flee the trafficking situation and reported Donald's crimes to the authorities. She connected with Ayuda's pro bono program and worked with volunteer attorneys to apply for both a T Visa and a U Visa. ([What's a T Visa?](#))

During every step of the process, Ruka's pro bono attorneys were guided by Ayuda staff attorneys to assist with the unquities of immigration law. In December 2022, Ruka received the good news: her T Visa had been approved, allowing her to safely remain in the U.S. for the near future.

Furthermore, since Ruka's initial police report, Donald has pled guilty to human trafficking – ensuring that no one else will endure what she went through at his hands. Ruka is happy to have won her case and hopes that sharing her story will help someone else in her situation.

**Names and picture are changed, and some details are omitted, to protect our client's privacy.*

Zoila's Story: Social Work Breaks Barriers

March 7, 2023

During March we observe Social Work Month to celebrate the powerful impact of Ayuda's Social Services team. These dedicated individuals work with immigrant clients to identify their unique needs and goals and navigate resources in their communities. Social Work is difficult to describe because it looks so different for everyone. Zoila's story below is just one example of how social services uplifts survivors and those who could use a helping hand.

Thank you, Ayuda Social Services team!

Zoila, an immigrant mother of two, first connected with Ayuda in March of 2022. She had recently survived domestic violence and was experiencing economic hardship, with a baby on the way. Ayuda's Social Services team met her with our helping hand extended.

Senior Case Manager Diana Fitz and her colleagues connected Zoila with financial assistance, so that she could create stability in her life. To prepare for welcoming her little one, Zoila joined Ayuda's Nursery Project, which gave her access to all the newborn essentials. Her family has also been able to count on Ayuda's pantry and diaper bank since the new baby arrived.

In the last year, Zoila has been making progress on her road to recovery. She's participated in therapy through Ayuda's support group, as well as different self-improvement workshops, to help her reach a healthy mental space in life.

With Ayuda's support, Zoila has been able to set goals and thrive. Her dream is to start a food truck business, and she will soon work with the social services team to start applying for the necessary certification. The entire Ayuda team is excited for the day we will get to taste Zoila's cuisine!