

LEARNING FROM EL SALVADOR



A Saint Mark's parishioner explores the roots of the refugee crisis in Central America

by Elizabeth Hawkins

AFTER being warmly sent off with a blessing from Saint Mark's Cathedral after the service on Pentecost, I arrived in San Salvador on June 15. For the next two years, I will serve as a fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs. ICWA is a unique fellowship for young professionals, providing "the rare gift of time and freedom to explore regions, research topics, and expand their ideas at formative times in their lives." During my fellowship, I will be studying the

reasons that so many people leave El Salvador to seek asylum in the United States, as well as the impact of changing U.S. immigration policy on the lives of Salvadorans. I'm also looking forward to connecting with human rights advocates and others who are working to improve conditions for women and their families.

My first trip to El Salvador was in 2015, when I participated in Fundación Cristosal's Global School of Human Rights. Fundación Cristosal, which began as a collaboration between

Episcopal clergy in the United States and El Salvador, has grown into an independent human rights nonprofit with offices in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Bishop of Olympia Greg Rickel serves on Cristosal's Board of Directors, and generously supported my participation in a Global School seminar on Forced Migration and Human Trafficking. At that point, I had been an immigration attorney for five years. I learned so much that week, and I brought what I had learned back to my practice and

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my professional community. I hope to do the same with what I learn over the next two years during my fellowship.

Since my arrival, I have already worshiped at the local Anglican church, San Juan Evangelista; marched in the lively Pride parade; visited a youth center in a high-risk neighborhood outside of San Salvador; and met with a group of community leaders from throughout Central America. I also watched as news broke of the tragic deaths of Oscar and Valeria Martinez, a father and daughter who drowned while trying to cross the Rio Grande into the United States. News continues to break nearly every day about the deaths of Central Americans in immigration detention at the border, and about the horrific conditions in which asylum-seekers are being held. Yet despite the dangers of the journey, many people continue to believe that traveling to the United States is their best and safest option.

Practicing immigration law was always hard, but it was also incredibly rewarding to help my clients navigate the complicated immigration process. I built my practice defending the rights of people who had experienced domestic or gender-based violence. During the last two years, many of

Board of Immigration Appeals' prior recognition of domestic violence as a possible ground for asylum and made it much more difficult for countless women trying to seek safety in the United States.

As my colleagues and I fight to defend our clients in the United States, we need to understand where they are coming from and why they are unable to find safety and stability at home. I'm grateful for the opportunity to contribute to that understanding. ♦

Elizabeth Hawkins is a Critchfield Fellow with the Institute of Current World Affairs, based in El Salvador. After graduating from the University of Washington School of Law in 2010, Elizabeth founded a humanitarian immigration law practice in Seattle. She has represented hundreds of individuals and families as they navigate the U.S. legal system, with an emphasis on advocating for those who have been subjected to abuse. She has been a member of Saint Mark's Cathedral since 2006.

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the protections my clients had counted on were stripped away one by one. I applied for the ICWA fellowship just days after then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions issued a decision denying the appeal of a woman who was seeking asylum based on domestic violence she suffered in El Salvador. This case, *Matter of A—B—*, overturned the



The author, second from right, with friends from San Juan Evangelista Anglican Church in San Salvador. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Hawkins.