

Lisandro's Arduous Trip Crossing the Border into the USA

Lisandro is a 22 year old Guatemalan man who came to US 3 years ago. This year he was referred to a social worker in the health clinic by his primary care physician who noted on the referral form that the patient was overweight, having headaches and nightmares, and appeared depressed. The doctor quoted the patient, he said he did “not feel like a normal person.” “I had a difficult trip to the US.”

Lisandro was raised by parents in poor barrio in Guatemala City. He is the oldest of three children. His parents are poor; he began to work at age 8 in construction and garbage collecting jobs. He says he was able to finish high school. His routine during the week was to work 6 hours a day and study 6 hours a day. Weekends he and some friends like to play soccer. He and friends later created a more formal soccer team. The members of the team that had jobs pooled a money and were able to buy their team uniforms and soccer shoes for all the team members.

Lisandro decided to come to the US and work when he was 18 years old. The decision was made suddenly and for 2 reasons. He wanted to work and help his family financially, and also gang members were pursuing him and there had been an incident one Sunday night in which shots had been fired into his house from the street. The next day he decided to leave Guatemala and try to make it to the US to find work. On Monday he left Guatemala with a friend. He had a \$100 in his pocket. Once in the US he agreed to pay the coyote another \$4,000.

He says, “I had been told that we would be taking a train from the Guatemalan border through Mexico. I knew we would have to walk through the desert of northern Mexico. But I never anticipated what this trip would be like. We were on the train for two days and two nights. I think I had thought we would be on a train, with seats. There were over a hundred of us. We were crammed into a cargo container. We couldn't all fit in the container, so many of us found a place to stand outside the container, holding on to the railings of train. We had to stand there holding on; we could not allow ourselves to get sleepy or fall asleep. After a few hours someone might give us a chance to rest and stand inside the container and then they would stand outside. Some people would try to sit down in the container but there was only enough space to stand.

“People who had to go to the bathroom had to go outside the container, holding on to a railing and make their way to the small platform between the two train cars. There was only standing room only even on the platform. There was no food; if the train stopped we tried to buy something from the vendors at train stations. After a long time people started to get very tired holding on to the railings and try to get inside the container. Sometimes people got so tired that they fell asleep, or slipped and fell off the train. Some people fell under the train and the wheels crushed their skulls. I still wake up in the night and hear that sound of a head being crushed by the train wheels. It was so horrible; I wanted to go home, get away from there. But

you can't just get off a moving train...

“Later when we got to northern Mexico we had to walk through the desert. It took three days and three nights. We had to walk all night until 10AM. We rested until late afternoon sometimes under a tree. One day we had to walk the entire 24 hours. One of the women fainted; she may have been pregnant. The men took turns carrying her. Some people would get very weak; they would throw up. The coyotes would stay in a house during the day; they had shelter. Sometimes they would offer the women to join them; they would tell them to come inside, that it was more comfortable inside from the sun.

“When asked how did he think he had survived such an experience, he said, “I think it was because we decided to stick together from the very beginning. The coyotes had divided people into groups of twenty five. Our group was called the red raccoons. We made a pact among ourselves, from the beginning, that we would stick together. No one would be left behind. We would stick together. We had heard the stories of people being left behind to die in the desert. We decided from the very minute we started out that we were going to take care of each other. Everybody watched out for everybody else. We shared our water; we helped each other holding on to the railings. When someone was too tired to hold on, we helped them into the container to rest. We organized ourselves; we decided we must concentrate, remember our goal is to reach the border alive, all of us together. We never knew one another before but we made this pact together from the beginning.

“No one died; we did not lose anyone under the train wheels. In the desert we would not allow the coyotes to take the women into the shelter. They could be raped by the coyotes if they were separated from the group. We said It was all of us or none of us. We were all clear about that. We all made it across the border alive, alive.”

How did you learn to concentrate like this; keep such a clear goal.

“I think that together we can do a lot of things. In the soccer team in Guatemala, if we wanted a team we had to help each other. Those of us who could chip in, did so. We did this so we could all benefit. I think about the goal.

“When I got to Boston I started to have awful nightmares; I kept seeing that train in my head. I kept telling myself that I had to ‘concentrate’. I was OK as long as I was working during the day and evening. In the middle of the night I could not sleep. So I started a journal. And I wrote about the life of all my family members at home. I wrote about the life of my dear grandfather, cousins, my parents. I wrote about everyone I loved. This helped me a lot. But in January (this year) there was a problem at work and someone accused me of stealing something. This upset me so much that I started having the nightmares again.