

Raise-a-Reader: Canada delivers a much-wanted education, as well as refuge

Learning to read, write helps refugee women cope with trauma of separation

By Tara Carman, Vancouver Sun September 14, 2012



Margarita and Carlos Hernandez with baby Eleny. The couple came to Vancouver after fleeing El Salvador.

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, Steve Bosch

Margarita Hernandez and her husband, Carlos Diaz, know well the pain of leaving a child behind. They were forced to do so in 2007 when life in El Salvador became too dangerous for them to stay. Their son Mariano was three at the time and could never have endured the long and dangerous walk through El Salvador, Guatemala and into Mexico without food or water, Hernandez explained, so she left him with her mother and went to join Diaz in the U.S.

The couple had relatives in Vancouver and arrived five years ago, applying to stay in Canada as refugees when they arrived. Their application was initially rejected, but then approved under the Canadian government's pre-removal risk assessment program, under which certain people subject to a removal order

can apply to have immigration authorities take a closer look at the risk of returning to their country of origin. They became permanent residents in June of last year.

But the decision to leave Mariano behind weighed heavily on Hernandez. She spoke no English when she arrived, had difficulty finding work and became particularly depressed after experiencing a miscarriage. She began studies at Canucks Family Education Centre in 2009 as a way to get out of the house and improve her English.

“When I went to school, I feel like it’s my family. I talk with another person and they help me to learn many things,” said Hernandez, 31.

Hernandez, like Jawara, found night work as a cleaner and went to school during the day. Her English has improved, she said, and she is now more confident doing everyday tasks such as grocery shopping and using public transit.

“When I go to the doctor, I can speak a little bit more,” she said. “It’s a big difference.”

Hernandez is working to complete her high school diploma and would like to work as a hairdresser until she can complete the necessary schooling to become a medical assistant.

But she, like Jawara, must also take some time away from her studies to take care of a new arrival. The couple welcomed a daughter, Eleny, at the end of July.

She may soon get a chance to meet her big brother. Canadian authorities have approved the couple’s application to sponsor Mariano, now eight. The family will finally be together, they hope, in time for Christmas.