

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### NEW YORKERS WELCOME MIGRANTS: WHAT'S IT TAKE TO MAKE SANCTUARY REAL?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** One of the most dramatic stories of the last couple of years has been the migration crisis, which Republican governor Greg Abbott made a whole lot more chaotic last year. In April 2022, Abbott started a program of busing migrants from his state of Texas to Democratic-led cities, including Denver, Washington, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Abbott's busing program created havoc both for city officials and immigration lawyers, as well as for the Biden-Harris Administration. It kicked off all sorts of tensions over its immigration policies and fights among Democratic mayors, governors, and the White House over who would pay already strapped cities for the migrant's care. That story of cities in chaos, quarrels, and political feuding has largely dominated the media coverage of the issue since. But what about the migrants themselves? Many are seeking asylum, parents with children and even unaccompanied minors, people who have been forced by violence or desperation to flee their homes. While the press is focused on the squabbles among the politicians, a largely unpaid army of lawyers, social workers, and civilian helpers has turned out in city after city to greet and help those migrants. It's those people and the migrants themselves who are the subject of today's episode, which was produced in collaboration with reporters working with the School of Labor and Urban Studies at the City University of New York.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** His name is Eswin. He asked that we not share his last name. He fled his home for fear of violence and persecution, arriving in the US at age 17 completely on his own. Like so many, his trek North was grueling, traveling through many countries, some by foot. He crossed the Rio Grande into Texas and claimed political asylum.

**[REPORTER]** Driven by bus and fueled by politics, another wave of migrants arrived in New York City today. The governor slammed President Biden Friday for refusing to do his job and called New York a sanctuary city, the ideal destination for migrants.

**[REPORTER]** They came from around the world, making often dangerous journeys to a city they hoped would offer them better lives. What they found is a city whose migrant crisis is at a breaking point.

**[MAYOR ADAMS]** I don't see an ending to this. This issue will destroy New York City, destroy New York City.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** A sanctuary city is a place that welcomes migrants and protects them from deportation. New York City, this place, declared itself a sanctuary city by passing a law

back in 1989. Ever since, migrants have come here, largely from Latin America, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, and this year, Venezuelans and Ecuadorians have been making the long 30-hour bus trip from Texas to New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal.

**POWER MALU:** When I first board the bus, the first thing that I do see is fear. I feel anxiety, that's why I have to break the ice. And right away, I let them know before anything, I want to welcome you to New York City. A lot of them come with stories of being separated from their families, and that fear and anxiety, I want to be able to be that little glimpse of hope and represent New York City that way because I also know that they're going to be faced with a lot of rejection and pushback. Migrants have been coming to the city for generations, and they have contributed to the fabric of this city. The first thing that they ask, it's not water, food, its, "Where can I find work?" They don't want handouts. They want to be able to provide for themselves.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** As of the end of October, over 100,000 migrants have come to New York City in 2023, of them, some 15,000 are unaccompanied minors, teens and kids who crossed the border alone. They find themselves now in an unimaginable situation, having to find their way in a city where shelters are overcrowded, work papers take months, and asylum cases, years. How to make money, that's perhaps their most pressing need, into this situation has stepped an army of volunteers.

**TERRI GERSTEIN:** Unaccompanied minors and immigrant children who are working, whether they're accompanied or not, are particularly vulnerable. There's sort of vulnerability on top of vulnerability. If you think about it, immigrants are often at higher risk for a range of reasons. They don't speak the language. They may not know their rights. They may not know what kinds of agencies to go to or where they can get help.

**POWER MALU:** We get a lot of unaccompanied minors since August, and that's what we pride ourselves in. We pride ourselves in listening, asking questions, and finding out who the people are with, if they're alone. We try our best to get them into the situation that's going to be most suitable to their needs. Fortunately, we've forged a great relationship with Jamie Powlovich and the team at Coalition for the Homeless Youth that we're actually able to call and let her know and her team know that we've come across some unaccompanied minors that need assistance.

**JAMIE POWLOVICH:** The work that we're doing, the way that it's primarily being facilitated is when young people are arriving in New York City in all the ways they're coming, on the buses and the planes and the trains, then we're getting a call directly from the volunteers and the staff from the nonprofit organizations that are working with the young people. And then we contact all of the individual runaway and homeless youth shelters across the city to see where there's beds available that the young person's eligible for, mainly based on gender identity. And then once we

confirm that a bed is available, we directly connect the referring individual to the organization and gets the basic, you know, identifying information and the young person moves in that day.

**POWER MALU:** If it wasn't for that, they basically would be in this shelter system lost not around a crowd that they should be around, perhaps not going to school, not having any type of information, and pretty much can be led in the wrong direction easier.

**JAMIE POWLOVICH:** In our experience since this began, it's the volunteers that are on the ground that they're receiving people in a respectful and a human-centered way. And then they're coordinating access to services for them on a case by case basis, which I think is also important.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** But what if you don't have a parent or a guardian? What if you don't have a sponsor or a foster home to go to? In that situation, unaccompanied minors find themselves in one of two detention centers just north of the city. And between them, they hold some 200 migrants often for as long as a year.

**MARIE-CASSANDRE WAVRE:** They suffer from detention fatigue, oftentimes, because they don't really see a way out. And going to foster care is an option that is deemed better for a child because they have the opportunity to live a life that's almost normal because they can go to school, they can have friends, they can go out which they cannot do in detention. There's not enough spots in foster care for immigrant children right now.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Migrants are required to go through a shelter registration process at the Roosevelt Hotel on Manhattan's East side. This September, the scene was one of desperation when migrants outnumbered shelter beds and protestors showed up to confront representatives Nydia Velazquez, Adriano Espaillat, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

**[PROTESTERS]:** Close the border!

**[ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ]:** And ultimately, I think that there are three points of consensus here that are very important in getting a solution to this issue.

**[PROTESTERS]:** Close the border! Close the border!

**[PROTESTERS]:** Close the border! They didn't break the law.

**[PROTESTERS]:** Close the border!

**[ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ]:**The first is that there is consensus here across geography and states on increased federal resources to cities and municipalities dealing with this issue.

**[PROTESTER]:**When you're taking care of illegal immigrants over your own citizen, you're trampling over the Constitution!

**[ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ]:**The second is to allow for work authorizations so that folks in here can get to work and start supporting themselves as soon as possible.

**[PROTESTER]:** They want them to come here to vote! These work authorizations are for them to vote!

**[ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ]:**They are prevented from getting jobs, they are prevented from employment, and that is part of the strain on our public system.

**[PROTESTER]:** Go back to your own country!

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The Metro Baptist Church on West 40th Street opens its doors wide to migrants twice a week. They serve hot food, and volunteer lawyers show up to offer legal help. Migrant kids get English language assistance and a chance to let loose and have fun. For most, this is the first step in a long and uncertain journey to legal residence. The passage to the US of an Ecuadorian woman, Lady Mansilla, is a story of extraordinary hardship and resilience, and the story of a mother doing everything in her power to safeguard her two children.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** La selva, or the jungle, is the name given to the Darién Gap, which connects Columbia with Panama. There is no other way to walk from South America to North America but through this dense tropical forest without any road. It took Lady and her family 3 1/2 days to reach the other side. They were robbed in the jungle and again in Mexico, the second time by the police.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Lady's son Anthony, hearing impaired and autistic, grabbed hold of his stepfather and swam across the river, but Lady and her four-year-old daughter couldn't make it.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** When Lady finally arrived in Texas, she learned that her husband had been deported back to Ecuador and her son sent to a detention facility in Maryland. Lady then reached out to Artists, Athletes, Activists, and Power Malu in New York. He helped navigate the bureaucracy. It took a full three months for mother and son to be reunited.

**POWER MALU:** We're here at LaGuardia Airport, we are awaiting Anthony, with his mom and sister and they're happy, and they're waiting for him to return into his mom's arms to be reunited. We're so happy for this family.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** At a storefront law office in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, an Irish priest and lawyer, Father James Kelly, has been representing immigrants since 1980.

**FATHER JAMES KELLY:** The people that we're getting, right, you know, are all working class families. They're decent people. They're not coming from jails or anything like that. We're not getting those people, right? So we're dealing with the ordinary working class people, and we can help them. And I'm aware of the problems that the immigrants have because I'm an immigrant myself, right? We should welcome everybody, you know? In other words, we need the help. We need the immigrants, okay?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Angela Fernández is executive director of Safe Passage, an organization of 40 immigration lawyers and others from New York City law firms who work pro bono.

**ANGELA FERNÁNDEZ:** We provide free legal representation to unaccompanied minors. The majority of these young people are coming from the Northern Triangle in Central America. The statistics show that when a young person is facing the immigration courts alone, their chances of being able to stay in the United States is about 13 to 17%. If this young person is matched with an immigration, a skilled immigration attorney, their chances of winning their case increases by over 90%, and that statistic is staggering. What it also communicates is that the majority of these young people have a right to stay. But without an attorney, they're not able to exercise that right. We work with young people who have been raped, who have been tortured, who have been kidnapped, many times on the way from their country to the United States, who've been abandoned, who've been starved. They are coming to this country with the continued desire to thrive in this country despite the trauma that they've endured. The majority of the young people we serve are adolescents. Many of them come walking from, let's say, El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras, and they ride on La Bestia, which you may be familiar with this train where people are riding on top, it's very, very dangerous, and then they come to the border. Typically then at the border, they are processed by customs from the United States. They are detained and placed in a detention center and they cannot be for more than 72 hours. Within 72 hours, they get transferred to another agency of the federal government, and there they are placed with either a foster home or a group home while they wait for, hopefully, a sponsor that can vouch for them and say that they will take care of them. You know, while they're going through this process of being placed in a place where they can live, they still have to confront their deportation proceedings. They are automatically placed in deportation proceedings, and that is exactly where we step in.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Marie Wavre, Eswin's lawyer, is optimistic about winning his claim of political asylum.

**MARIE-CASSANDRE WAVRE:** Eswin came to the United States as an unaccompanied minor. He came through Texas and was put in a detention center. After some time, he was moved to a different detention center in New York where he stayed about a month before being sponsored out by his sister. The US has very strict laws about who can be a sponsor and in what situation a kid can be sponsored out. That depends mostly on the relationship with the sponsor, if it's an immediate family member or not, and the age of the child. So his case is based on persecution he suffered because of his LGBT identity.

**ANGELA FERNÁNDEZ:** If this young person can show that if they are deported back to a country that has a track record of incarcerating members of LGBTQ community, of people being killed where the government doesn't step in to protect them, if we can show those things and prove it, they will likely win their asylum case.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** It's one thing to declare yourself a sanctuary city or a sanctuary state, but making it true, it goes well beyond passing a law. In this case, has New York been challenged by the test of migration? Absolutely. But beneath the headlines and all the debate, hundreds of people have risen to the challenge. The city's been tested, but it's been enriched too. So to Greg Abbott's contention that New York is the ideal destination for migrants, it's not there yet, but it could be.

**MARIE-CASSANDRE WAVRE:** They all go through very difficult experiences. They make a choice to come to this country and they have goals and dreams like everyone, and they're just trying to make it work in this country.

**POWER MALU:** When I was a child, about seven years old, I remember going with my mom to the HRA offices and she was trying to get help. I remember family members did the same and they would bring me along to help them translate, and I would see how they were treated because they didn't speak the language. A lot of times they would be cut short, they would be shooed away, sent around in circles, and I didn't really understand it. And as I got older, I saw that nothing has really changed. And so I made it my duty to be able to step up in this role and commit in that direction of helping people that really don't have someone in this country that can have their back or speak up for them.

**POWER MALU:** What keeps me going is acknowledging that I have some sort of privilege that I need to use. I have a platform that I need to use to help those people that are coming here with practically nothing, no shoes on their feet. No one here in this country to help guide them, and I see how they're being treated.

**ANGELA FERNÁNDEZ:** If New York were not a sanctuary city, the economy would ground to a halt. The cultural capital that exists in this city would cease to exist. The dynamism that we feel in communities and in neighborhoods that derive from people coming from all over the world to negotiate their existence together, that would be gone and then New York City would no longer be New York City.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Sanctuary, the very word makes you feel kind of relaxed and safe, right? And that's the whole idea, a place where you might be free from persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, deportation, where you would be safe. Imagine what would our history be like if we had offered one another sanctuary over the years. Many thousands came here from Western Europe seeking sanctuary. The story has it that the early most Indigenous people here offered sanctuary to those newcomers on their shores. That's not how history proceeded. Instead of sanctuary, generation after generation tried to keep those behind them, those different from them out. But what if we'd welcomed the Irish, the Italians, the Germans? What if we'd welcomed the Chinese, the Japanese, the Jews? What if we'd welcome populations that would've enriched this country as those populations have but under duress? How many languages would we speak, how many cultures would we appreciate, and how much stronger would our working class be? And how much smarter too perhaps. We might have a whole different array of politicians. We might live more comfortably on planet Earth. It's worth thinking about. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious. Many thanks to the School of Labor and Urban Studies for their collaboration in this episode. Till the next time for "The Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining me.

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