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TEXAS HOSPITALITY: PRO-REFUGEE ACTIVISM,  
VOLUNTEERISM, AND COALITION-BUILDING  
IN XENOPHOBIC TIMES

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TEXAS HOSPITALITY: PRO-REFUGEE ACTIVISM,  
VOLUNTEERISM, AND COALITION-BUILDING  
IN XENOPHOBIC TIMES

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Anthropology

by

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December 18, 2021

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Texas Hospitality: Pro-Refugee Activism,  
Volunteerism, and Coalition-Building  
in Xenophobic Times

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This project employs ethnographic methods to explore the experiences of forty ordinary Texans of different social and religious backgrounds who were active in pro-refugee volunteer and advocacy work during the four chaotic years of the Trump administration. The goal of this research is to better understand people's reasons for volunteering and advocating on behalf of refugees during a time of political upheaval, when prominent public figures in positions of leadership around the country have repeatedly framed refugees as a threat to American security and cultural identity. Despite the crucial roles that local volunteers typically play in the process of refugee resettlement and integration, relatively little academic work has been done to understand how and why people become involved in this work, especially if they themselves do not have a recent family immigration background. These questions are particularly important during a time of rising xenophobia and political polarization.

This study explores the interconnections between personal ethics, social identity, and civic engagement, and illuminates the unexpected social connections that can form across religious and other social boundaries when people unite in pursuit of a common goal. It

contributes to the “anthropology of the good” by adding a new moral / ethical dimension to theoretical concepts of citizenship and civic engagement. Finally, it lays out some general conclusions with regards to refugee supporters’ ideas about what it means to do (and be) “good”; the role of faith-based organizations mobilizing (and sometimes suppressing) support for displaced people; common narratives about refugee / immigrant “deservingness”; and the relationship between volunteerism and activism.

Key words: immigration, refugees, activism, volunteerism, ethics / morality, civic engagement

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Appendix 2.2 shows when visas for people from various countries were at least partially blocked, after taking into account various injunctions, appeals, and other court decisions.

*This work is dedicated to displaced people everywhere, and to those who welcome them.*

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*First they came for the socialists—and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.  
Then they came for the trade unionists—and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews—and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

(Martin Niemöller, as quoted by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012)

This quote, made famous in various forms by Martin Niemöller in the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust (Marcuse 2016), was repeated over and over by pro-refugee activists in Dallas, Texas throughout the four years of the Trump presidency, in response to changes in immigration policy that they saw as an assault on human rights and civil liberties. It served as a rallying cry to bring together people of diverse social backgrounds in support of refugees, immigrants, Muslims, and others whose civil rights were under threat. I lost track of the number of times that I heard it at rallies, demonstrations, and candlelight vigils. I saw it handwritten on protest signs. In interviews, people quoted it earnestly to explain why they devoted so much of their time, energy, and resources to causes whose outcomes did not necessarily have any direct effect on their own lives or families.

All over the city, I watched new coalitions forming between people of disparate backgrounds in order to push back against anti-refugee, anti-Muslim, white supremacist sentiments that they saw taking root and becoming more mainstream. Around the city, new

volunteers of all colors and creeds flocked to support immigrant and refugee service organizations in ways that they never had before. Jewish rabbis spoke publicly about the need to provide a safe haven for Syrian Muslim refugees. African Americans who remembered their own lives under segregation advocated policies that respected the dignity of displaced people. Palestinian-Americans called for the free movement of people across the Mexican border. LGBTQ people called for an end to discrimination against immigrants. Muslim imams traveled to the southern border to protest the separation of Central American families while Latinx immigration activists rallied against Muslim travel bans. “It’s all the same fight,” said a young Latino activist onstage at a rally that I attended, where we were protesting the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the latest version of a ban on travel from several Muslim-majority countries. An Anglo-American speaker repeated the same sentiment for the cameras. “What we’ve learned is, when we get together, the coalition that we have of people of all races, religions, backgrounds, walks of life cannot be defeated unless we give up” (Fox 4 News 6/26/2018; Stelloh and Abdelkader 6/24/2018).

Over the course of my fieldwork, I watched similar scenes unfold over and over. The refugee resettlement program, which had trundled along for decades relatively unnoticed by lawmakers or by the general public, suddenly became a hot-button issue at the center of a major public debate about which categories of people could and could not be made welcome in the United States. Even as public figures and lawmakers at the federal and state level attempted to frame refugees as an existential threat to the security and cultural identity of the United States, a determined cadre of local citizens, activists, and volunteers worked to prove the opposite (AP 12/12/2015; Solis 2017; Selk 12/13/2015a; Selk 12/13/2015b; Selk and Houston 12/13/2015). Political tensions since the 2016 presidential election seemed to be motivating people from

different backgrounds to unite in pursuit of common goals related to their ideas about social justice. For anthropologists such as myself, this raised several key theoretical questions. Who became involved in such work, and why? Was it possible to predict or explain what factors made some people take action, while others stayed home? What might the practical and cultural effects of such resistance be? And how durable would these new intersectional coalitions prove to be over time?

### **Pro-Refugee Volunteerism and Activism in North Texas**

This project explored cooperation and conflict between refugee advocates of different social and religious backgrounds as they established working relationships with one another and negotiated priorities in a charged political atmosphere during the years of the Trump administration. The project served dual purposes. The first goal of this research was to better understand people's reasons for volunteering and advocating on behalf of refugees during a time of political upheaval, when prominent public figures in positions of leadership around the country repeatedly framed refugees as a threat to American security and cultural identity. The second goal was simply to document key events as I and my participants lived through them. I shared with my research participants a strong sense that the events of 2015-2020 would become historically important in some way that we could not yet predict. The election of Donald Trump to the White House signaled a massive shift in the American political zeitgeist, with immigration and refugee issues at the center of a growing ideological rift between different segments of an increasingly polarized American public. On one level, this dissertation is an attempt to document the events of this period, as a pseudo-historian employing ethnographic methods to document what happened as it unfolded in real time.

Despite the crucial roles that local volunteers typically played in the process of refugee resettlement and integration, relatively little academic work had been done to understand how and why people became involved in this work. And still less work had been done to understand the motivations of people who advocated publicly on behalf of refugees and other immigrants, especially if they themselves did not have a recent family immigration background. Conventional reasons for volunteering (such as religious belief or desire to be seen as a “good” person)—while important—were not sufficient to fully explain participation in pro-refugee projects, especially for newer or younger refugee advocates who had only recently become active in this work, and who represented a broad spectrum of social and religious identities. Why this issue? Why these people? Why now? These questions seemed especially important at places and times when collective anxiety about refugees was running high.

I set out to explore these questions through participant observation and in-depth interviews with pro-refugee advocates and volunteers located primarily in Dallas, Texas. As a blue city in a deep red state, Dallas offered an ideal site to explore questions about local attitudes toward refugees. The city of Dallas itself was diverse and cosmopolitan, with a long history of successful resettlement of refugees from all over the world. But local attitudes about refugees ran the gamut between welcome and active antipathy. Although Texas had historically hosted more new refugees than almost any other state, not all Texans supported the resettlement of refugees in their communities and some had become very outspoken in their objections. Dallas had made national news several times for public protests on both sides of the refugee issue—some of them involving openly armed anti-refugee demonstrators gathered outside local mosques (AP 12/12/2015; Selk 11/28/2015; Selk 12/13/2015). In 2016 the state of Texas unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw from the US refugee resettlement program in response to growing public

fears that refugees—especially those from Syria—might have connections to terrorists (Ura 9/30/16). But even as the continuation of the refugee program came under threat on both the state and federal level, steady support from a determined cadre of local Dallas volunteers of all colors and creeds continued to provide the conditions for successful resettlement of refugees from all over the world. Pro-refugee advocates in Dallas represented a broad spectrum of the population—white, black, Latinx, young, old, LGBTQ, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and those with no religious affiliation at all. Their determination to dedicate their own time and resources in order to work together in pursuit of a common goal deserved careful explanation—as did the challenges and tensions inherent in building a grassroots intersectional coalition around the issue of refugee resettlement.

Although a large literature on humanitarianism exists, it does not adequately address what motivates people to use their own time and resources to engage in community projects that facilitate refugee resettlement, particularly when the media and political rhetoric encourage a perception of refugees and other immigrants as dangerous outsiders. This study centers on the interconnections between personal ethics, social identity, and civic engagement, and explores the motivations behind private individuals' decisions to participate in pro-refugee activities as advocates and/or volunteers. Through case studies of volunteerism and activism spearheaded by several refugee and immigrant service organizations, this project illuminates the unexpected social connections that form across religious and other social boundaries when people unite in pursuit of a common goal.

## **Refugee Resettlement in the United States**

In order to be officially recognized as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), people fleeing violence and persecution in their home countries must meet the criteria outlined in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This document defines a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR 2014). This definition is actually fairly narrow in scope. People who leave their countries for any reason other than a “well-founded fear of being persecuted” (such as poverty, disease, or natural disaster) are not considered refugees under this definition, and are therefore not eligible for protection, resettlement, or any other services provided by UNHCR.

Whenever possible, UNHCR tries to negotiate for people to return to their home countries or settle permanently in the country of first asylum. When all other options have failed, it attempts to place those people who are at the highest risk in a third country such as the United States. From the perspective of UNHCR, resettlement in a third country is the least desirable permanent solution for refugees because it is the most expensive and also the most difficult to accomplish. Despite UNHCR’s constant efforts to negotiate with United Nations member states to take in more refugees, there are usually only enough spots available to accommodate a tiny fraction of the refugees that want them. UNHCR only recommends permanent resettlement as a solution of last resort for those who have no other options (Loescher 2008, Martin 2005). The process of choosing refugees for permanent resettlement is complicated, highly political, and somewhat arbitrary. The United States only accepts a small percentage of those who apply to

UNHCR for help, and its refugee resettlement decisions are heavily dependent on current foreign policy priorities (Simmelinck 2011: 328). Refugees undergo a lengthy process of interviews, health assessments, and security checks and often do not know whether, when, or where they will be resettled until the last possible moment before departure. For most, the process takes years. By the time refugees arrive in the United States, they have usually been living in some sort of temporary situation for years or even decades (Martin 2005: 67-76).

Since the beginning of the current refugee program in 1980, the United States has admitted more than three million refugees (State Dept. 2021). Each year, the US government selects a limited number of refugees from all over the world for acceptance into its refugee resettlement program, and sends about ten percent of these individuals to Texas for permanent resettlement. Each September, the President consults with Congress to set the number of refugees who will be admitted to the United States in the coming fiscal year. Due to its humanitarian focus on aiding victims of violence and persecution, the refugee resettlement program has not usually been particularly controversial and has historically enjoyed broad bipartisan political support. In most years since the beginning of the current refugee program in 1980, the Presidential Determination has been set somewhere between 70,000 and 110,000 per year, regardless of which party was in power. This pattern changed dramatically with the election of Donald Trump, who took drastic steps to curtail refugee arrivals during every year that he was in office (Refugee Processing Center 2021).

When a family or individual finally receives approval to enter the United States with refugee status, they are assigned a destination based on balancing their particular needs against available resources in different US locations. Their case is then assigned to one of ten officially designated resettlement agencies (also known as VOLAGs), who contract with the federal

government to provide all the necessary services to ensure the smoothest possible transition to life in the United States. Prior to clients' arrival, staff from the agency secure an apartment for them and furnish it with basic necessities such as furniture and kitchen supplies. In their first few months after arrival, refugees receive a substantial amount of assistance from resettlement agencies with their transition to life in the United States, including cash assistance, English language classes, food stamps, medical services, and job placement assistance. Unless there are extenuating circumstances such as old age or chronic health problems requiring clients to receive long-term help, most clients are eligible for services through their resettlement agency for a period of four to eight months after arrival. After this time, they are expected to become financially self-sufficient.

Organizations that provide services to refugees and asylees face significant challenges because of the limited amount of funding and resources that are available to them in their effort to provide effective services to an increasingly diverse refugee population. In the early days of the refugee resettlement program, most refugees came from the Soviet Union, and were more culturally and linguistically homogenous than they are today. Today's refugees and asylees represent an incredible variety of different countries, languages, and cultural and educational backgrounds (Haines 2010: 4-8, 29-36). Yet all refugees and asylees must access the same few services available from the same few organizations. The combination of limited resources, limited time, and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity among clients make it challenging for agencies to provide programs and services that fill clients' needs.

Resettlement agencies play a crucial role in assisting refugees and asylees with their transition to life in the United States. However, the academic literature on refugee resettlement is largely critical and focuses on the failures and disappointments of the resettlement program

rather than its successes. American scholars have tended to focus on the failures and inadequacies of the US resettlement program, the complex politics that govern it, and the role of the media in shaping public awareness of refugee issues. In the literature on refugee resettlement in the US, the same few themes surface over and over, including: the role of international and domestic politics; the limited time and resources devoted to resettlement programs; the emphasis on rapid economic self-sufficiency over long-term wellbeing; and the limitations of a one-size-fits-all resettlement program that lacks the flexibility and resources to adapt to fit the needs of different refugee groups.

### The Role of International and Domestic Politics

Refugees find themselves at the mercy of politics to a far greater degree than other people—first, in their home countries, where the political situation has forced them to flee their homes, and again during the months- or years-long period of limbo while they wait for governmental powers to decide whether and where they will be allowed to rebuild their lives (Loescher 2008). Once they arrive in the United States, domestic American politics and come into play. In the United States, refugees exist at the nexus of two political currents. As shown in studies of refugee issues in the media (Haines 2010; Steimel 2010), refugees occupy a particular place in public opinion. Americans frequently find meaning in helping the victims of oppression and persecution start new lives because it resonates with deeply ingrained ideas of what it means to be American. Refugee resettlement programs are symbolically and politically important because they provide a vehicle for re-enacting the quintessential American story of persecution, flight, freedom, and material success through hard work (Haines 2010: 57-83).

But after arrival in the United States refugees also find themselves pulled into another vortex of domestic politics: the heated ongoing debate about public assistance and the welfare state. Refugees receive a number of government-funded services that are not available either to the public at large or to other categories of immigrants, such as English classes and assistance with paperwork and job searches. They also receive direct financial support from the government for the first several months after arrival, placing them in a political category that is uncomfortably similar to “welfare moms” and others who are seen as a financial burden on the taxpaying public (Haines 2010: 153-157). Financial and political pressure means that direct monetary support to refugees is limited both in amount and in duration. The limited nature of funding for the resettlement program has consequences for the quality and quantity of services available to help refugees adjust to life in the United States.

#### Practical Problems and Limitations of the US Refugee Resettlement Program

Terms stated in the Refugee Act of 1980 stipulated a heavy emphasis on ensuring that refugees become financially self-sufficient as quickly as possible. This policy emphasis on self-sufficiency often comes at a high cost in terms of refugees’ long-term welfare (Mamgain 2003; Keles 2008; Haines 2010; Kerwin 2011; Smith 2012). In order to meet the expectation of rapid self-sufficiency, they often have to sacrifice long-term goals in the interests of securing immediate low-wage employment. Refugees who lack formal education or English language skills are placed into low-skill, low-wage jobs such as dishwashing or meatpacking, where language skills are less important. They often work long hours for little money and no health insurance, leaving them with few resources to improve their situation by furthering their education or engaging in specialized training. Those refugees who do have formal education or

professional work experience also find themselves in low-skill jobs because they lack the language skills to re-qualify for their professions in English, or because of the difficulty of transferring their credentials from home countries that are in chaos. In addition, refugees arrive in the United States already in debt for the cost of their families' transportation, which can represent a considerable financial burden for a low-income family with several children (Keles 2008; Nsonwu 2013; CMS / RCUSA 2020).

Rapid economic self-sufficiency is not a realistic goal for many refugees, who are often dealing with vast differences in culture at the same time they are learning English, keeping up with paperwork, enrolling their children in school, forming new relationships, and dealing with ongoing medical issues as well as grief and psychological trauma. It is also important to note that refugees are chosen for resettlement based on greatest need (and alignment with US foreign policy goals), not based on the greatest likelihood of being able to adapt to life in the US. In this context, the expectation of economic self-sufficiency is not always realistic and can be seen as an example of "structural negligence" (Keles 2008).

A problem that has long plagued the refugee resettlement program is its reliance on a "one-size-fits-all" approach that lacks the flexibility to adapt to the widely differing needs of refugees who come from different circumstances and different cultural backgrounds. The increasing racial and cultural diversity among refugees poses a serious challenge to resettlement agencies, which are not funded or equipped to tailor their services to the needs of different groups (Chrostowsky 2010; Kerwin 2011; Smith 2012). An increasing number of refugees come to the United States from Africa and Asia and represent a stunning variety of backgrounds and circumstances. Some are well-educated, with college degrees and English-language skills, and are accustomed to the modern conveniences of cosmopolitan urban life. Others cannot read or

write in any language, or have never had a bank account, or are unaccustomed to keeping the kind of strict schedule necessary to hold down a job in a factory (Shoeb et al. 2007; Cannedy 2011). The same few underfunded agencies must serve the needs of all. This creates a challenging situation for resettlement agencies, which often lack the time, resources, and personnel to effectively tailor their services for so many different groups.

Another recurrent theme in the literature focuses on neoliberalism, limited resources, and consequences for the US resettlement program. Neoliberal economic policies have shifted the responsibility for many social welfare programs away from the government. In the world of refugee resettlement, this has meant a heavy reliance on private organizations (Eby et al. 2011; CMS / RCUSA 2020). States are encouraged to develop partnerships with private resettlement organizations and can receive extra federal funding for doing so. Even so, funding for refugee resettlement remains limited, with a variety of consequences both for refugees and for the resettlement agencies that manage their cases. Even before the Trump administration slashed the resettlement budget, agencies were often chronically understaffed and underfunded, and frequently lacked the resources to provide the services they believe are necessary. Although staff are usually highly motivated to do this kind of work, they often find it difficult to remain engaged and compassionate while trying to solve problems without adequate resources (Getrich 2013). As a result, resettlement agencies rely heavily on unpaid volunteers. Sometimes the difference between success and failure for a refugee family is not their assigned caseworker, but a dedicated volunteer who devotes time each week to helping a family navigate the everyday complexities of American life. Despite their importance, volunteers typically receive very little training, which can lead to vast differences in quality between the help that one refugee receives vs. another.

The US program's reliance on volunteer labor would seem to make it vulnerable to political whims and changing community attitudes. But despite increased politicization of the refugee program, resettlement agencies in Texas and across the country have reported no shortage in people interested in volunteering (RCUSA 2019). Instead, organizations serving refugees have reported a surge in volunteer interest since the 2016 Presidential election. This may be attributable to widespread desire among more politically liberal Americans to work against the Trump administration's anti-immigrant, anti-refugee policies. In-depth interviews with volunteers and refugee supporters in Texas seem to bear this out. If so, then a determined surge in popular support for refugees and asylum seekers may be an unintended consequence of draconian policies intended to target vulnerable immigrants and prevent them from entering the country or from accessing benefits once they arrive. This theme will be explored in more depth in the coming chapters.

### **Refugee Politics in Texas**

Like everything else in Texas, refugee resettlement is big. Prior to the election of Donald Trump, Texas typically resettled about 10% of the nation's refugees in any given year, with an annual budget of almost \$100,000,000 in federal money allocated for programs supporting refugees. In seven of the last ten years, Texas has resettled more refugees than any other state, rivaled only by California with New York close behind (Refugee Processing Center; RCUSA 2017). Refugees in Texas come from a huge variety of different circumstances and backgrounds. Between 2011 and 2020, 51,353 refugees from 66 countries were resettled in Texas. The largest numbers came from Burma (30%), Iraq (20%), Democratic Republic of Congo (14%), and Bhutan (10%). Despite the devastating scale of the humanitarian crisis generated by the civil war

in Syria, Syrian refugees made up only 3% of the total number of refugees resettled in Texas during this time period (Refugee Processing Center).

Home to more than seven million people, the Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex has long been a major hub of refugee resettlement. Administered by three major resettlement agencies, a strong interfaith network of religious organizations, and a host of willing volunteers, the refugee resettlement program has hummed along successfully in North Texas for many years. Between them, they handle thousands of new refugee arrivals each year, as well as providing ongoing employment and immigration / legal services for people resettled in previous years. The success of the program in North Texas can partly be attributed to a relatively low (though rapidly rising) cost of living compared to other major metropolitan areas, as well as a robust business community with plentiful entry-level jobs. Over the course of many years, Dallas-area VOLAGs have nurtured strong and productive relationships with local government officials, religious organizations, schools, and potential employers. These partnerships and semi-official networks are critical to providing the core services that refugees need in order to flourish.

The city of Dallas itself is incredibly diverse. About a quarter of the city's population is made up of immigrants (City of Dallas 2018). The cultural and linguistic diversity in neighborhoods like Vickery Meadow make it possible for refugees from all over the world to establish new lives in Texas without entirely losing access to familiar foods, languages, and religious traditions. But the city is also quite segregated and struggles with vast levels of income inequality. Low-income people of color are concentrated in shabbier areas on the south side of the city, while whiter, more professional people cluster in higher-income neighborhoods in the north, where they enjoy every kind of luxury and opportunity and often remain blind to the struggles of others only a few miles away. Vickery Meadow itself is caught in the middle, a

super-diverse neighborhood of crumbling low-income apartment buildings just blocks away from a complex of brand-new high-end shopping centers which people who live in the neighborhood cannot afford to patronize. Rents in the area are rising so rapidly that VOLAGs have begun seeding new refugee neighborhoods in south Dallas, where rent is still affordable even if access to services is limited. This tension—between pride in racial and ethnic diversity on the one hand and steep levels of stubborn inequity on the other—has in recent years played out in stirrings of unrest and protests against racially motivated police violence, as in the 2016 Black Lives Matter rally where five police officers were shot and killed (Grigsby 2020).

Politically speaking, Dallas—like most large Texas cities—is a blue island in a vast sea of red. Texas is in the midst of demographic change. Dallas itself prides itself on its status as a thriving hub of business activity, supported by low tax rates and a major international airport. Job opportunities attract a constant influx of new people moving in from all over the United States. These newcomers bring not just their money and their professional expertise but also their political ideas, which are not necessarily in step with the priorities of Texans born and raised in the vast rural areas of the western and southern parts of the state. Most of the state routinely votes Republican, but the growing urban population centers swing Democratic. As a result of all this population growth, Texas is slowly turning more urban, more diverse, and less politically conservative. This has given rise to concerns that the state may be changing faster than some people are ready to accept. In response to a growing sense that for the first time in many years, Republicans' ironclad control of the state may be slipping, many Republican state leaders have doubled down on conservative priorities in order to hold onto and galvanize their base. This trend has manifested itself in many areas, chief among them a general crackdown on immigration, with serious consequences for the refugee program.

During the run-up to the 2016 Presidential election, tensions about demographic and cultural change came to a head in North Texas. Local tensions had already been brewing for some time over rumors that local mosques were funneling money to terrorists overseas and attempting to impose sharia law in the suburbs of Dallas, even though the mosques in question categorically denied any such activities (Izadi & Bever 2015). In May of 2015, two radical Muslims, both American citizens from Louisiana, were killed by police after staging an armed attack on a Mohammad cartoon contest in a northern suburb of Dallas. After the attack, fears of religious extremism became entangled in deeply-held local feelings about gun ownership and the right of self-defense (Yan 2015a, b). A few months later, the family of a fourteen-year-old boy threatened to sue the city of Irving over accusations of Islamophobia and racial profiling after he was detained and questioned by the police for bringing to school a homemade clock that teachers mistook for a bomb (Izadi & Bever 2015). Taken together, these events were part of a backdrop of heightened suspicion and unease that led a series of armed anti-refugee, anti-Islam protests outside Dallas mosques in November and December 2015. These demonstrations—conducted by men dressed in ski masks and military-style camouflage and openly carrying automatic weapons—quickly attracted attention from major news outlets and from counter-protesters, who staged their own peaceful pro-refugee demonstrations (AP 12/12/2015; Selk 11/28/2015, 12/12/2015).

In response to early—and incorrect—reports that Syrian refugees were responsible for the Paris terror attack in 2015, Texas Governor Greg Abbott led a coalition of 31 governors signing a letter petitioning the federal government to stop the resettlement of refugees from Syria in their states (Fantz and Brumfield 2015; Healy and Bosman 2015). Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), a leading 2016 presidential candidate, immediately introduced the Terrorist Refugee Infiltration

Prevention Act, which proposed to bar resettlement by refugees from countries such as Iraq and Syria. Cruz' language frames Syrian refugees as potential terrorists who might easily slip through border security and wreak murderous havoc in American cities (Cruz 2015). A few weeks later, the state of Texas launched a lawsuit against the federal government, announcing its intention to withdraw completely from the federal refugee resettlement program (Abbott 2016; Ura 2016). In actuality, the state had no legal grounds to refuse participation in a federally-mandated program, so the refugee resettlement program continued to function as before, but without an official refugee coordinator to manage it at the state level. This made no practical difference in terms of the number of refugees resettled in Texas, but it did allow the governor to score political points with conservatives who wanted to take a hard line on immigration.

The refugee program became a political lightning rod in Texas in particular because Texas is already at the center of so many immigration-related debates. Texas resettles 10% of the nation's refugees. It is also the state with the longest border with Mexico, and has a large population of undocumented immigrants. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that Texas is home to somewhere in the neighborhood of 1.75 million undocumented immigrants, the majority of them from Mexico (MPI Data Hub 2021). Many of these people have lived in the United States for decades and are parents of US citizen children (Castañeda 2019). Trump's infamous border wall is an everyday reality in South Texas, where much of the local economy is built on federal contracts related to immigration enforcement. In addition, Texas bears the brunt of responsibility for dealing with the human consequences of escalating conflict and gang violence in Central America. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of people have fled Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to seek asylum in the United States, and many of them are minors traveling alone or with people other than their parents. Though the federal government provides

funding for detention centers and youth shelters to house these people, Texas bears a disproportionate amount of responsibility for managing such crises (Burnett 2021; Licon & Coronado 2021). Though Dallas itself is a long drive from the Texas-Mexico border, the humanitarian consequences of recent border crises continue to resonate throughout the state, as will be seen in chapter 6.

All of this means that in Texas—perhaps more than in any other state—it is easy for the categories of “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, and “undocumented immigrant” to become conflated in political discourse. On many occasions, Texas Governor Greg Abbott has argued that Texas cannot afford to accept refugees because too many of the state’s resources are directed toward managing various crises at the southern border—an argument that echoes one made at the national level by the Trump administration (Aguilar 2020; US State Dept. 2020c). More recently, Abbott has referred to the wave of Central American asylum seekers as an “invasion”, implying that these people are dangerous criminals crossing the border illegally, when in fact the majority of them are fleeing violence in their home countries and presenting themselves to apply for asylum as specifically allowed by US law (Pérez-Moreno & Barragan 2021). The growing political disconnect between urban and rural residents, the polarization between pro- and anti-refugee activists, and the mix of competing immigration-related issues make Texas a particularly interesting place to study the complex politics of refugee resettlement.

## **Literature Review**

The relationships between religious and social identity, personal ethics, volunteerism, and civic engagement are central to the current research project. In the United States, the process of refugee resettlement and integration is largely dependent on the motivations of local volunteers,

many of whom are recruited from faith-based organizations. Over the past several years events have shown these motivations to be inherently volatile and susceptible to political influence. One of the key goals of this project is to show *how* and *why* volunteerism and civic engagement are intertwined, and what this means for the future of public projects that rely on the active participation of unpaid volunteers. In addition, the recent volatility of public opinion surrounding refugee resettlement lends a special urgency to questions about how and why ordinary people decide to take action on issues of public importance, and under what circumstances they will be motivated to cross social and religious lines in support of a common goal.

This project advances anthropological understanding of critical questions about pro-refugee activism and volunteerism during a time of general xenophobia. It attempts to reveal the motivations that propel people to engage in helping behavior, even when it comes at a cost in terms of money and time. This research fits within a theoretical stream that Joel Robbins (2013) has referred to as “the anthropology of the good”, which moves beyond an anthropological focus on human suffering to explore the ways that people try to create a good beyond what is currently present in their lives. One way to do this is by exercising the responsibilities of “good” citizenship. The anthropology of the good asks such question as: What does it mean to be a “good” person? What does a “good” city, a “good” society, or a “good” government look like? What actions might ordinary people take to try to bring these ideas about “the good” into reality?

Drawing on Robbins’ theory of “the good”, I hypothesized that both religious and non-religious pro-refugee activist-volunteers might be acting upon motivations connected with their desire to bring into being a social world that aligns with their internal values. Volunteerism and activism are generally treated in the literature as separate but overlapping categories; the first is focused on ameliorating individual problems and the second is about enacting social change

(Wilson 2000). But preliminary research in Dallas hinted that this categorization might be too simplistic to describe what was happening among refugees, activists, volunteers, and career refugee service staff, whose roles frequently seemed to intersect and overlap. The same person might interact with refugee issues in one or all of these categories simultaneously. When ordinary people in North Texas set out to work on behalf of refugees, what did they believe it meant to be a “good” person, a “good” volunteer, or a “good” advocate? How did they come to understand “helping refugees” as a “good” and important thing to do? In the context of this project, I set out to explore the intertwined ways that people involved in this work might operationalize their ideas about “the good”: civic engagement and citizenship, personal agency, and religious belief in action.

### Citizenship, Civic Engagement, and Activism

For those whose sense of purpose includes a desire to have an impact on society at large, individual volunteerism often bleeds into broader activities of civic engagement. Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012) define civic engagement as “the process by which individuals enter into and act within civic spaces to address issues of public concern” (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012:2). Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012) note that citizenship is not only about rights granted by the state, but is also a matter of participatory action intentionally taken by immigrants in order to establish belonging in the host society. Pro-refugee advocacy efforts taken by former refugees clearly fall into this category of participatory citizenship as a form of claimsmaking. For some refugees, volunteerism and advocacy work seemed to be important means of exercising agency and establishing cultural citizenship within the host society, as well as a way to enact meaningful social change (Rosaldo 1994; Ong 1996). In this respect, former refugees’ advocacy efforts were

not dissimilar to those of native-born people. Both sets of people acted out of two sorts of motivations: both social change and personal belonging. Muehlebach (2012) notes that in Italy, neoliberalism is contributing to the creation of a new kind of “ethical citizenship” that distinguishes between self-interested work performed in exchange for money, and unremunerated work done out of unselfish compassion or social solidarity. Both Catholics and atheists alike participate in this new culture of “citizenship lived from the heart” (Muehlebach 2012:110). This form of citizenship allowed disenfranchised people to “purchase” social belonging through the performance of unselfish good deeds that benefitted the community. In these works, civic engagement and citizenship are conceived as having two components: one that benefits the community, and one that benefits the self.

On the other hand, some scholars studying volunteerism have noted a reluctance among many volunteers to go beyond the immediate requirements of the service project of the day to address the systemic causes of social problems, out of discomfort with the idea of doing work that might be perceived as uncomfortably “political”. For example, a volunteer might be perfectly happy to pick up trash on the beach while remaining uninterested in stopping trash from being deposited on the beach in the first place; or a volunteer tutor might feel highly motivated to help a student learn to read, without asking too many questions about the systemic reasons why that student’s elementary school education fell short compared to their peers (Musick and Wilson 2008). Frequently, people involved in volunteer activities make use of a kind of discourse that attempts to depoliticize their work by framing it as “charity” or “service” work, emphasizing nonthreatening ideas like compassion, virtue, and care while deemphasizing potentially uncomfortable ideas like activism and change (Ellis and Noyes 1990; Music and Wilson 2008). Framing volunteer work as “apolitical” can defuse potential objections to the

work because “compassion” is a difficult idea to oppose. But it also has the effect of stripping the work of the kind of political meaning that might be necessary in order to effect real change. A similar dilemma has been noted with regard to humanitarian organizations—for example, Doctors Without Borders. In the interest of maintaining access to humanitarian crises in conflict zones, Doctors Without Borders strives to present itself as politically neutral—a choice which critics argue is a silent vote in favor of a dangerous status quo in corners of the world where political leaders are enabling inhuman situations that make humanitarian disasters worse (Redfield 2013). In the United States, refugee resettlement organizations have generally also framed their work as apolitical and neutrally humanitarian—a position which became increasingly difficult to maintain under the Trump administration, which treated the refugee program as a political football.

This raises key questions about what pro-refugee volunteers believe they are doing when they work on behalf of refugees. Are they working for the individual benefit of refugees? Are they attempting to establish social belonging for themselves? Or do they see their work as acting upon society as a whole? These questions are of particular interest during the current time of heightened political polarization, particularly given the Trump administration’s very public attitude of antipathy toward the refugee resettlement program. Under these conditions, volunteer activities which previously seemed apolitical might take on new meanings.

If pro-refugee volunteers are trying to influence society as a whole rather than simply providing aid to individuals in need, then their projects might bleed into *activism* rather than simple *volunteerism*. Here, it is appropriate to note some key issues with regard to the anthropological study of activism, which is quite complex due to engaged anthropologists’ twin commitments to rigorous standards of research and also to the political and material welfare of

the people living in the communities where they work (Speed 2006; Hale 2006, 2008; Smith-Nonini 2009; Low 2010; Glick Schiller 2011; Kline 2013; Stuesse 2016). *Engaged anthropology* is a slippery concept; in essence, it means that the anthropologist has chosen to make a conscious effort to grapple with important social issues in some way that can have an impact beyond academia. This can take any number of different forms, including applied work, social critique, collaborative research, advocacy, activism, writing for a public audience, or even simply teaching about important social issues in the classroom (Low 2010; Stuesse 2016). This project is more specifically concerned with activist research. The anthropological literature distinguishes between the *anthropology of activism* and *activist anthropology*. Anthropology of activism refers to projects in which the researcher employs traditional anthropological methods to study activism as a research topic, but remains as neutral as possible and maintains full control of the research process. True activist anthropology, by contrast, moves beyond cultural critique to “affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (Hale 2006: 97). This runs counter to a long anthropological tradition in which the researcher alone takes responsibility for determining the goals and methods of the project and managing the dissemination of the results. True activist anthropology, therefore, generally requires long-term institutional and financial commitment of the sort that is not usually possible in a short-term dissertation project (Stuesse 2016).

Activism is an important but methodologically difficult topic to study because the political nature of the subject matter creates a seemingly paradoxical situation for the researcher, particularly as regards participant observation. A researcher is supposed to be objective and politically neutral lest they jeopardize the perceived legitimacy of their research findings; but an

activist must be involved and politically engaged. Among activists, claims of political neutrality are likely to be viewed as suspect. Challenges relating to these sorts of competing priorities are unavoidable, if the goal is to gain a nuanced understanding of the social world of people engaged in political activism. But it is also important to recognize that researchers can and do have personal, ethical, and political commitments that they must live up to, and that these commitments need not detract from the quality of their work. Often, these commitments motivate and shape the choice of research topic. So in addition to its primary research goals vis-à-vis pro-refugee volunteerism, this dissertation is also an experiment in the anthropology of activism. In methodological and theoretical terms, what is the appropriate role of the anthropologist when working on a topic that is inherently political, with people who are engaged in projects of social change? Might a more activist approach grant insights that a more traditional approach cannot? If so, what? What can a project about pro-refugee civic engagement teach us about the potential strengths and weaknesses of activist anthropology?

### Agency, Volunteerism, and Activism

Laura Ahearn (2011) defines *agency* as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”. Agency is not synonymous with “free will”, because agency is inherently both social and cultural; that is, people’s ideas about what kinds of actions to engage in and what kinds of projects it makes sense to undertake will always be heavily influenced by the realities of the social world they inhabit and by the material and social resources available to them (Ahearn 2001; Ortner 2006). The concept of agency—closely connected to the practice theory of Bourdieu and Giddens—first arose in anthropological scholarship in the 1970s as a response to the failure of structuralism to acknowledge the importance of the actions and decisions of

individuals (Ahearn 2000; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979, 1984). A central concern here is understanding and theorizing the relationship between structure and agency; that is, how is it possible for people's actions to be shaped by the structure in which they live, while those same actions also serve to recreate, reinforce, or reconfigure that structure? Put simply, individual actions can serve to reproduce culture—but can also transform it (see Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979, 1984; Sahlins 1981; Ortner 1989; Ahearn 2001). Agency is simultaneously universal and culturally constructed. All humans have a capacity for agency, but the forms it takes will vary in different times and places (Ortner 2006).

The concept of agency remains relevant today, particularly as a counterbalance to analyses that emphasize the abjectivity of disempowered people surviving at the mercy of overwhelming structural forces like racism, colonialism, poverty, and exploitation (for examples, see Farmer 1996, 2004; Bourgois and Schonfeld 2009; Biehl and Eskerod 2013). Starting in the 1980s, the global expansion of neoliberalism brought about a “dark” turn in the field of anthropology, as ethnographers sought to document the brutal human consequences of injustice, inequity, and structural violence (Ortner 2016). The resulting emphasis on human suffering is valuable but incomplete (Robbins 2013). It tends to frame individuals as passive, powerless victims of sinister structural forces beyond their control. But, as Sherry Ortner points out, “subordinated actors are never wholly drained of agency except perhaps in fairy tales (2006: 149). In the last few years, a number of anthropologists have sought to rebalance the field's overwhelming focus on suffering by paying closer attention to the ways that disenfranchised people make the best of limited options by engaging in choice, action, and resistance (Allen 2008; McDonald 2013; Gabiam 2016; Ortner 2016; Castañeda 2019). This trend brings issues of structure and agency back to the fore.

The concept of “agency” arose simultaneously with social and political movements of the 1970s, so some scholars argue that it was rooted in questions of power and resistance from the beginning (Ahearn 2000; Ortner 2006). In any given society, people have different menus of possible actions available to them, since they have different levels of access to power and resources (Ortner 1997, 2006). Agency rests on individual choices, but those choices are structured through larger political and economic processes (Fischer 2014). Agency may or may not entail resistance to domination, since oppositional agency is only one of many forms (Ahearn 2001). Many studies explore the context-dependent ways that agency can take a multiplicity of different forms depending on the social status and the type of resources available to that person in that particular social and political situation (Scott 1985; Desjarlais 1996; Ortner 1997; Jean-Klein 2001; Allen 2008; Cabot 2013; Myers 2015).

Other studies have noted strong connections between agency and meaning or wellbeing. Across cultures, it appears that the ability to make meaningful choices about one’s life contributes to wellbeing, as long as the subjective ability to choose is accompanied by sufficient resources and opportunity structures to make those choices real (Fischer 2014; Oka 2014). This has important implications for the anthropology of activism, as demonstrated by an emerging literature exploring protest and other forms of collective action as a way for historically disenfranchised people—including immigrants—to claim a sense of enhanced meaning and purpose in life through engagement in struggle for full legal and social rights (Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Seif 2016; Bejarano et al. 2019). In part, both civic action and volunteerism may be ways of coping with feelings of individual powerlessness in the face of events that seem too big for ordinary individuals to control. In that sense, they may serve as a means of reclaiming a lost sense of agency and purpose.

Theorists interested in agency have noted that there is a complex and unpredictable relationship between intentions and outcomes. “Intended” outcomes are not always “real” outcomes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Ortner 2016). On the other hand, intentions matter because there is a difference between routine acts performed with little thought or reflection and “agentive acts that intervene in the world with something in mind (or in heart)” (Ortner 2006: 136). Social change is often unpredictable and uneven. Actors cannot completely control outcomes, particularly when they are working in opposition to more powerful forces. So in this project, it matters not just what North Texas refugee supporters actually accomplished by their actions, but also what they *intended*, or what they believed they were doing. In order to understand pro-refugee work as an ethical or moral project, it is necessary to understand what kinds of meanings volunteers and advocates attached to their choices. In the words of Liisa Malkki, we have to take seriously the “imaginative politics” that shape people’s humanitarian actions (2015: 205). Here is where the literature on agency, civic engagement, activism, and volunteerism connect with the anthropology of the good, because this is all about people taking intentional action based on their ideas about what it means to be a “good” person or a “good” world.

During their first few months in the United States, newly arrived refugees are assigned to one of several resettlement agencies under contract with the federal government to provide assistance with practical necessities such as apartment leases, English classes, job-hunting services, cultural orientation, and help filling out paperwork and enrolling children in school. Though refugee resettlement agencies do have some paid staff, many of the core functions of these organizations are carried out by volunteers and unpaid interns. Despite the fact that neoliberal policy has left much of the work of refugee resettlement in the hands of volunteers,

relatively few studies have attempted to systematically examine people's motivations for helping with this kind of work. People who choose to assist with refugee resettlement and integration projects may act from a variety of different motivations including the desire to build a resume, to practice a new language, to put political or religious principles into action, or simply to be seen as a good person. Volunteering has the potential to be mutually beneficial to volunteers as well as the people they help. There is a general consensus in the literature that people who volunteer on a regular basis often gain something from the experience—social status, career enhancement, an enhanced sense of self-worth, or even simple relief from loneliness (Wilson 2000, Musick and Wilson 2008; Muehlebach 2011, Malkki 2015). Malkki (2015) notes that volunteers often act out of a deep personal need for fulfillment, social connection, or relief from tedium and loneliness. A desire to reestablish a sense of agency and personal worth in the world may be a common motivation for many people who decide to engage in volunteer activities. Many of the people in Malkki's study were retirees, who felt marginalized from society and sought in their volunteer projects new ways to show themselves as vital people whose contributions still mattered. Likewise, Muehlebach (2011) found that unemployed people in Italy volunteered in order to maintain their social status in a society that measured personal worth in terms of labor. The desire to reclaim a sense of agency and purpose may be an important component of activism and volunteerism for people who feel marginalized for a variety of different reasons, including age, ethnicity, religion, and employment as well as refugee status.

Volunteerism has often been encouraged among refugees as a way to develop career credentials and build social capital. But refugees may also engage in this work in order to exercise their power in a world that has relegated them to second-class status (Yap 2010). Refugees are commonly portrayed in the media as helpless victims, as problems to be solved, or

as humble objects of charity (Malkki 1992, Malkki 1996, Chavez 2001, Zarowsky 2006, Haines 2010, Steimel 2010, Ticktin 2011). Much of the literature on refugees focuses on what should be done *for* or *about* refugees rather on the choices that they make for themselves (Malkki 1996, Milner 2014, Zarowsky 2000). But a growing body of literature indicates that programs that acknowledge and encourage refugees' ability to act on their own behalf may be more effective than ones that treat their beneficiaries as objects to be acted upon by well-meaning others (Malkki 1996, Oka 2014, Zarowski 2000). It is difficult to overestimate the importance of agency and choice in rebuilding refugees' sense of personhood in the midst of displacement and loss. For former refugees, active participation in volunteer and civic engagement projects might serve as a way to reestablish a sense of active control over their circumstances.

Importantly, the volunteers involved in this current study—many of whom were white, well-educated, and established in professional careers—were by and large *not* particularly disenfranchised compared to others in the city. But agency remains an important issue of concern. Even those who have greater power or privilege can feel powerless in certain contexts. In this project, I hoped to find out what purpose pro-refugee work served in the lives of volunteers and advocates, in terms of meaning and agency. Did it give them a sense of purpose? Did it help them establish a sense of agency and control over their circumstances? Did it replace other forms of social identity and belonging?

### Religious Belief, Politics, and Pro-Refugee Work

At the beginning of this project, I hypothesized that many people might find motivation for their pro-refugee volunteer activities in religious beliefs about the importance of welcome and generosity. Different religions formulate different expectations for giving, but most place

significant value on acts of generosity toward others. Recent scholarship in anthropology explores differences and similarities between approaches to generosity and aid across different religions—for example, the Islamic concept of zakat vs the Hindu idea of dan (Bornstein & Redfield 2010; Bornstein 2012; Ticktin 2014). Such comparative studies of ethics and morality can be seen as connected with the new theoretical trend mentioned above; that is, toward studying the “anthropology of the good” (Robbins 2013; Ticktin 2014).

The role of religion in refugee resettlement is complex and multi-faceted. The importance of religious organizations in facilitating new immigrants’ adjustment to life in the United States is well established in the research literature. Religious organizations have always been important to the US refugee resettlement program, which relies heavily on them for volunteer recruitment and in-kind donations (Eby 2011). The social connections that immigrants make at their place of worship are often crucial in helping them find jobs, navigate the challenges of life in a new country, and maintain a sense of social and cultural continuity (Warner and Wittner 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Foley and Hoge 2007; Kniss and Numrich 2007; Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). They may also help new immigrants figure out how to build the skills and the social capital necessary to advocate for themselves and their fellow immigrants in the larger public sphere (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). On the other hand, some observers have noted that at times, religion may take on a more coercive and paternalistic aspect since evangelism is often an important component of social programs run by religious organizations and some volunteers may attempt to use their position of relative authority to try to influence refugees’ religious beliefs (Ong 2003; Erickson 2012).

There is general consensus in the academic literature that religious involvement and civic engagement are frequently connected. Religious Americans tend to be more civically engaged

than Americans with no religious affiliation. Strong evidence exists that religious social networks play an important role in fostering forms of civic engagement such as voting, volunteering, or making charitable donations (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam 2013). In addition to providing relatively dense social networks, churches, temples, and mosques may serve as important training grounds for their members to develop leadership and organizing skills that they may put to use the broader civil society later on (Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). This project adds ethnographic depth to previous studies of religion and civic engagement, which have often relied heavily on large-scale surveys for their data. A more anthropological approach is useful here because it can flesh out and add nuance to the conclusions drawn by sociologists and political scientists (Smidt 1999, Putnam and Campbell 2010).

In the United States, religious organizations have a long history of involvement with pro-immigrant social movements. The literature on immigration activism includes specific examples of times when religious belief and activism became intertwined, as when church members in Arizona formed an underground railroad system of safehouses for Salvadorans and Guatemalans fleeing state violence in the 1980s (Coutin 1993; Cunningham 1999). Many law-abiding members of the Sanctuary movement identified as social conservatives and lifelong Republicans until tensions between their religious beliefs and anti-immigrant government policies compelled them to rethink what it meant to be good citizens (Cunningham 1999). This implies that religious belief sometimes shapes volunteer activities in an ethically nuanced way—charity vs. solidarity, evangelism vs. a desire for social justice.

From preliminary observations in Dallas, the role of religion in pro-refugee work initially seemed muddy and unclear. As in other places, faith-based organizations frequently supplied

volunteers to refugee resettlement programs, and sometimes faith leaders took center stage at pro-refugee advocacy events. But at other times, religion seemed to be part of the justification for turning refugees away, particularly if they were Muslim. In this project, I hoped to gain a better understanding of what role religion played in the public furor over refugees. During a time when Islamophobia permeated the rhetoric of so many prominent political leaders, would religion motivate North Texans to welcome refugees or keep them out? Would the nascent pro-refugee interfaith coalitions that I saw forming in Dallas prove durable over time? And what would happen if individuals' personal beliefs and ethical commitments came into conflict with their social identity as members of a religious group?

### Refugee Politics and Deservingness

Much of the current political furor over refugee resettlement in the United States is connected to highly polarized narratives about *deservingness*—that is, ideas about which categories of immigrants “deserve” to be granted aid and legal status, and why. There is a large and well-developed anthropological literature about deservingness and claimsmaking with regard to refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants (Horton 2004; Ngai 2004; Coutin 2007; Feldman 2007; Haines 2010 a, b; Ticktin 2011; Willen 2012; Fassin 2009, 2012; Fox 2012; Cabot 2013, 2014; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Castañeda 2019). Ideas about deservingness have real practical consequences, since politicians and others in positions of power frequently deploy narratives of deservingness to justify granting or withholding access to legal status and other public resources. For example, the French government’s use of a humanitarian “illness clause” granted some undocumented immigrants with serious health issues the legal right to remain in the country. But in order to access this right, people who lacked papers had to find a

way to demonstrate “morally legitimate” physical suffering in order to invoke a compassionate response from bureaucrats who applied the rules in an arbitrary way. In this case, immigrants’ deservingness depended on their ability to prove the right kind of suffering (Ticktin 2011). Similarly, people seeking asylum in French courts found that their testimony about harrowing experiences of torture and violence would not be considered legitimate unless they were corroborated in exactly the right way by sympathetic French doctors. Here, deservingness depended on the ability to prove a history of torture by showing the physical scars left behind (Fassin 2007). Sarah Willen (2012, 2019) has written about deservingness in the context of undocumented immigrants in Israel, where the lack of papers renders people “undeserving” not only of medical care but also of the right to be physically present.

In the United States, political leaders, policymakers, and journalists deploy common narratives that characterize various categories of immigrants as more deserving or less deserving based on their legal status, their assumed motivations for migrating, and various personal characteristics such as honesty, hardworkingness, skill level, and eagerness to adopt American cultural values (Chavez 2001, 2008; Newton 2008; Haines 2010). According to the logic of deservingness, undocumented immigrants might be characterized as undeserving lawbreakers because they crossed the border without official authorization. By contrast, people with official refugee status are frequently framed as more deserving than “economic migrants” because refugees come to the United States legally, not in search of higher-paying jobs but in order to escape political persecution—a narrative that many Americans find appealing because it reinforces ideas about America as a haven for persecuted people seeking freedom. Immigrants who work hard at low-paying jobs might also be framed as deserving because of their independence and willingness to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”. Under the Trump

administration, competing narratives about immigrant deservingness became particularly polarized, as high-level politicians began characterizing Muslim refugees as especially undeserving because of fears that they might somehow be associated with terrorism. In addition to the other research questions, this project seeks to understand how refugee supporters in North Texas conceptualize deservingness. How do pro-refugee volunteer advocates decide who—among all the various categories of people in need—is most deserving of their help? And what does this illuminate in terms of larger questions of refugee and immigration politics in the United States?

Ruben Andersson (2014) touches on the problematic tendency for politicians, journalists, and academics to fetishize refugees. Many of the migrants he encountered on their journey between North Africa and Spain were fully aware of the ways the multiple ways that their life stories were being manipulated by others for their own purposes, and sick to death of being at the center of a political and media spectacle. The literature about refugees mostly assumes that *refugee* experiences are the ones that most need to be explained. This is not wrong. But it leaves the motivations, experiences, and internalized assumptions of the people who choose to involve themselves in *doing* refugee aid work invisible and unexplored. This dissertation shifts the focus to the people on the other side of the equation—the helpers. It brings their experiences, assumptions, uncertainties, and frustrations to the fore. This topic is particularly appropriate given the global rise of authoritarianism and the politically charged nature of refugee resettlement in much of the world at this moment in time.

It seems clear that for most individuals, a multiplicity of different motivations exist for their engagement in pro-refugee advocacy and volunteer work. But the question remains: why *this* kind of work at *this* particular time, when other equally viable avenues to social approval

and fulfillment of religious and social ideals are available? Why choose to donate time and energy to a refugee service organization rather than a hospital, a youth club, or homeless shelter? Despite the crucial roles that volunteers play in refugee resettlement under neoliberalism, relatively little academic work has been done to understand why and how people come to make this choice. This is a particularly important question at places and times when collective anxiety about refugees is running high. This study adds to existing knowledge because it systematically addresses refugees' and native-born people's activist and volunteer activities in the same frame. In addition, it seeks to understand the interconnections between religious belief, social identity, claimsmaking, and striving toward personal visions of "the good." Additionally, since people are unlikely to engage in this kind of volunteer work unless they have a generally positive perception of refugees, this work will provide a useful contrast to a multiplicity of studies that examine the roots of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment (Haubert 2006, Wilkes 2008, O'Neil 2010, Sabia 2010, Said 1981, Shryock 2002, Shryock 2010).

## **Methodology**

Methods for this research included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and analysis of media stories and court records. This project was based on hundreds of informal conversations and interactions that occurred in the course of participant observation at refugee service and advocacy events, as well as 40 semi-structured interviews with committed pro-refugee volunteers, activists, and staff at immigrant service agencies. I recruited interview participants representing a cross-section of different refugee advocacy and service organizations in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. Early on in the project, it became clear that if I wanted a full picture of the refugee advocacy network in Dallas, I could not focus all my efforts

on just one organization. The key players collaborated intensely across organizations and across religious congregations. The same people turned up over and over again in different contexts around the city, and I came to recognize that my participants saw one another as members of the same refugee support and advocacy community. They invited each other to events, drew on one another for resources and support, and referenced one another other in all their stories about their mutual challenges and accomplishments. Since one of my goals was to explore this social network, I started by interviewing “the usual suspects”—people I had already seen and interacted with at refugee advocacy events over the course of several years. I relied heavily on a technique known as “snowball sampling” to recruit new participants. At the end of each interview, I concluded by asking the person who else I should talk to. This usually resulted in another list of names and contact information, which I drew upon as I scheduled the next batch of interviews. This technique accomplished more than one purpose: it usually resulted in friendly introductions to people I hadn’t met before; it helped me to map out the social network; and it often revealed social and instrumental connections that I would not have been able to uncover otherwise.

This project focused on the individual experiences, motivations, and perceptions of committed pro-refugee volunteers and activists. It was not intended to address questions about volunteer effectiveness. Moreover, I structured the project to focus on the experiences of committed volunteers—that is, people who made the work a regular part of their lives, rather than those who showed up only once or twice. Since I relied heavily on personal referrals to make connections with new potential interview participants, I was much more likely to connect with people who were perceived by others as “good” volunteers. This was useful, because the person making the referral would usually explain why they thought I should speak with this person, and that explanation usually gave me clues about what qualities or experiences they

perceived as important in a fellow volunteer or activist. But it also meant that people were unlikely to refer me to someone who they perceived as doing a bad job. In interviews, participants usually tried to avoid criticizing others by name. They spoke specifically about others who they perceived as doing something good, but only obliquely referred to people who had done something wrong. Therefore, the results of the project speak more to questions about individual experience than ones about effectiveness. Volunteer effectiveness would also have been a worthwhile thing to investigate, but would have required a different kind of methodology to measure.

One weakness of snowball sampling is that people have a tendency to refer the researcher to others who are like themselves. Therefore, it was important to make a conscious effort to seek out connections with people who could offer different perspectives. I kept track of demographic data such as race, religion, and education level in order to avoid the trap of interviewing too many people who were fundamentally similar. Periodically, I strategically planted new seeds in places that I recognized were still underrepresented in my data. In most cases, the key players were able to connect me to others within their congregations and other social networks, so that I was able to get a reasonable amount of diversity in responses.

Still, some patterns emerged. I interviewed more women than men. This was not an intentional part of the research strategy. Several of my participants commented on gender differences that they had already noticed. More women than men were involved in pro-refugee advocacy and volunteerism. This was not a factor of differences in employment or retirement status. Among people of retirement age, more women than men remained involved in refugee work. Among people of working age, most male and female participants did their refugee advocacy work in addition to working full-time jobs. Most of my participants were highly

educated with at least a college education, and most had professional careers. They tended to be relatively affluent compared to the Dallas average. Most of them lived and worked in North Dallas rather than in the under-resourced neighborhoods in South Dallas. Although I made an intentional effort to ensure that there was a reasonable level of diversity in my sample, more than half of the people who participated were white. Several were immigrants or former refugees themselves, and many of the native-born Americans had some sort of direct personal experience living, working, or studying in some country other than the United States. This kind of background contributed to a cosmopolitan, globally-oriented mindset that helped people understand the practical challenges that refugees faced as they adapted to life in the United States.

As the project continued, it became clear that I could not fully address pro-refugee activism without also considering my participants' efforts on behalf of asylum seekers at the southern border. For many of my participants, these two issues were inextricably intertwined. Though they recognized a legal difference between refugees and asylum seekers, they did not see a moral difference between the two. The same sense of moral outrage that led them to advocate on behalf of refugees also made it impossible for them to ignore the human rights abuses at the southern border, especially as regarded family separations, unaccompanied minors, and the widely reviled Remain in Mexico policy. These issues will be the focus of chapter 6.

### Participant Observation

Like any anthropologist, I formed many of my research questions and gained much of my understanding of the subject through participant observation. Over the course of several years between 2015 and 2020 I attended many community meetings, rallies, protests, demonstrations,

and candlelight vigils. Alongside my participants, I made signs, signed petitions, filled out postcards, and organized benefit events. I called my senators. I joined pro-refugee activists at sit-down meetings at the offices of elected representatives at the state capitol in Austin. I attended events at mosques, churches, synagogues, community centers, and movie theaters. Along the way I served as a volunteer, in any capacity I could. I cleaned bathrooms, sorted clothing donations, worked in food pantries, and babysat children while their parents learned strategies to protect their families against deportation. I served rice and beans to Central American asylum seekers at a tent city on the Mexican-American border. I made new friends, learned to dance dabke, and ate delicious meals of home-cooked Syrian food.

I participated in these activities fully as an activist and volunteer, not as an uninterested observer. I argue that this is a strength and not a liability of my research approach, since it adds a level of experiential nuance that would not be possible for a researcher who attempted to remain impartial. I take the position that all research with humans is inherently political in some way, because it is impossible to separate the positionality of the researcher or the source of the funding from the choice of topic or the formulation of the research questions. But following Charles Hale (2008), I argue that this does not mean that activist research is any less rigorous; rather the reverse, since its results are visible to and subject to debate by participants and to the wider public.

It was occasionally challenging to balance my dual roles as participant and researcher, but following other activist anthropologists I believe that this was a productive kind of tension that lends depth and vitality to my work (Singer 1990; Merry 2005; Hale 2008). My ethical commitment to advocacy on behalf of displaced people began long before the beginning of this dissertation project and will remain an important priority long after this particular project ends.

From the beginning, it was important to me to design a project that was compatible with these values, and I made many of my research decisions accordingly. This project does not claim to give equal voice to both sides of the refugee question because I made the decision early on that I would not attend any event as a researcher that I could not wholeheartedly support as a person. This means that I cannot report firsthand about anti-refugee, anti-Islam, or white supremacist events that occurred during the research period, other than what I read in the news or what I learned from participation in counter-protests (which sometimes happened within sight across the street).

Sustained and active presence at a wide variety of volunteer and activist activities over the course of several years gave me a reserve of shared experience that I could draw on in order to establish rapport and shared experience with my participants. In most cases, it was relatively easy to establish trust with my participants because they knew we were working toward a common goal. Here, I should state that my dual roles as a participant and as a researcher imposed what I believe is a higher standard of responsibility to be conscientious about what kinds of information I could report. My dual commitments as a volunteer-advocate and researcher also meant that I participated as a person in some events and activities that never became part of the dissertation because the people there did not know me first as an anthropologist and I did not wish to do “undercover” research. Since I did not start this project until several years after moving to Dallas, some people knew me first as a person and as a fellow volunteer-advocate and only later accepted an additional role as “research participant”. This meant that in many cases, I had knowledge of personal information beyond what is included in this dissertation. That information remains private, as does anything that I learned about a person in a context that was not specifically and clearly labeled “research”.

## Interviews

During the course of this project, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with pro-refugee volunteers and activists. Each person who participated in an interview was offered a \$25-dollar gift card (Amazon, Target, Walmart, or similar) in appreciation of their time. Many of the participants said they intended to donate the gift card to their volunteer organization or use it to purchase supplies to support their volunteer and advocacy projects. The first half of the interviews took place in person, mostly over hot drinks at local coffee shops. I found that this kind of neutral, informal setting was most conducive to the kind of conversational, open-ended storytelling that was most useful for my purpose. A few interviews took place at participants' offices or places of worship, if that setting was more convenient for the participant. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced statewide shutdowns and stay-at-home orders in the spring of 2020, in-person interviews became unethical due to the risk of viral spread. After that, the remaining interviews took place over the phone or via videoconference. In the interest of accuracy, I recorded most interviews with the consent of the participants and transcribed them afterward. A few participants expressed discomfort with having their voices recorded. On those occasions, I transcribed interviews from handwritten notes instead.

In interviews, I asked everyone five basic, open-ended questions:

- 1) Tell me the story of how you got involved in the work you do on behalf of refugees.
- 2) What's one of the most challenging aspects of this work?
- 3) What's one of the most satisfying aspects of this work? What keeps you coming back?
- 4) If you had to give one piece of advice to a new person who was just starting out in the work you do, what would you tell them? (Or, if you think back to yourself when you were just starting to do this work, what do you wish you had known?)

5) Who else should I talk to?

These questions were designed to be as open-ended as possible, in order to give participants enough room to decide for themselves what they thought was important to communicate and which kinds of stories they wanted to tell. I asked clarifying follow-up questions to encourage participants to elaborate and explain their answers further, but I did not attempt to control the direction of the conversation. In most of the interviews, I did not need to say much at all. In response to the question about how they got involved in the work, most people launched into long stories that communicated a great deal about their values, experiences, and motivations. The second and third questions encouraged people to think about practical challenges and difficulties, as well as those aspects of the work that they found the most satisfying. The fourth question gave people an opportunity to reflect on what the work meant to them and what they had learned over time. In some interviews, I also asked a few more specific questions relating to the details of the person's work, if I did not already know.

The last question served two purposes: I wanted introductions to new people who might be willing to do interviews, and I also wanted to know who the interviewees thought were the key players in the Dallas-area network of refugee supporters. From this question, I learned that the same few individuals were at the center of most people's networks. This gave me a way to gauge the relative importance of potential participants as understood by others in the network. It also gave me some insight into what kinds of connections and partnerships were forming between people who entered the work from different directions.

Religion was an important theme in this project, but it was not equally important to everyone. Most interviewees talked about religion without being asked. Since I did not want to prejudice people's answers, I did not bring up religion myself unless we made it to the end of the

interview without religion making an appearance in the person's story. By that point, the person usually felt free to explain whether and how religion mattered to their work without feeling that I expected a certain kind of answer.

I transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word. Then I uploaded the interview documents and performed qualitative analysis in NVivo. I used NVivo to code the text of the interviews and identify key themes, which became the basis of the upcoming chapters.

### Research Ethics

Research for this project was conducted according to the guidelines of the Institutional Research Board at Southern Methodist University. All participants in this project were over the age of 18. All interview participants provided informed consent. Interview participants are quoted freely in the chapters that follow, but the names and initials have been changed so as to protect people's identities to the extent that it is possible. In this dissertation, the only people identified by their real names are public figures whose identities would be impossible to disguise (such as the mayor) and a few others who are directly quoted from statements that they gave under their own names to the media. The vast majority of my participants were not shy about their activities. In many cases, the decision to protect participants' identities by using pseudonyms imposed a level of caution beyond what they had already chosen for themselves, since many of them had already made the choice to advocate publicly under their own names. Nevertheless, in this dissertation they remain anonymous.

## The Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed some unexpected complications and limitations on this project. As schools and businesses closed down and cities imposed stay-at-home orders, in-person research became impossible. Organizations serving refugees and asylum seekers closed their offices, canceled in-person advocacy events, and put volunteer operations on hold indefinitely. By March 2020, participant observation and in-person interviews were no longer an option. Here, my previous experience volunteering and advocating on refugee-related projects in Dallas over the course of the last five years became crucial to the project's success. I already had extensive field notes from five years' worth of protests, community meetings, and other public events, which I could draw on without violating anyone's privacy since they were already public. Some of my pre-COVID volunteer activities were out-of-bounds because I had not originally approached them as "research" activities, and I did not have informed consent from the other people who were present. For obvious reasons, I did not include these activities in the dissertation. I did, however, get in touch with some of the people who I met while working on those projects, and some of them agreed to participate in interviews about their work. Some of them also introduced me to others via email. Shifting to Zoom interviews made it possible to continue the project without further in-person contact, but it also had unavoidable consequences because it made recruitment more difficult among sets of people where I did not already know anyone personally. Also, this unexpected reliance on technology had the regrettable but unavoidable effect of skewing project participation toward people with professional jobs and reliable internet connections, who were already comfortable interacting via videoconference.

## On Definitions

People who participated in this project were deeply concerned with questions about how to live lives that were congruent with their own internal sense of right and wrong. But in general, they were much more concerned about right *action* than they were about right definitions—except when those definitions had potential consequences in people’s lives. During fieldwork, I frequently heard people debating, contesting, and actively attempting to redefine categories like “refugee”, “migrant”, “asylum seeker”, “illegal”, “undocumented”, and “unaccompanied minor”. These words mattered deeply to people because they carried political implications. Research participants noticed how politicians deployed these words in different combinations to sway public opinion. These words had the power to grant or deny rights and benefits to the people they described. Interview participants used these words carefully and intentionally, with thoughtful awareness of all their political connotations, and in this dissertation I have done the same.

The same thing is not necessarily true for words like “ethical”, “moral”, “good”, and “right”. While interview participants did use these words, I am not convinced that they distinguished carefully between them in the same way that they intentionally chose words that carried more practical or political weight. In fieldwork, I never heard anyone argue about the difference between “good” and “right”, or between “moral” and “ethical”. “Good” and “right” are multivalent terms; they have so many meanings and so many connotations in different contexts according to the idiosyncratic usage of the speaker and the equally idiosyncratic associations of the listener that I do not find it useful to attempt to define them. In this project, it is not necessary to assume that everyone meant the same thing when they used these words; nor is it necessary to assume that they meant something different.

Likewise, although a philosopher would argue that the words “moral” and “ethical” have separate meanings in academic discourse, in everyday reality those meanings frequently overlap. In casual speech, the two words are often used interchangeably. And depending on the speaker’s background, the two words sometimes have extra connotations that are not recognized in official definitions (such as the common association of the word “morality” with misogynistic rules about sex and female modesty). In this project, interview participants did not use the terms in a consistent way, so in this dissertation I have not attempted to impose a distinction in meaning that interview participants did not necessarily intend.

Finally, English does not have an established gender-neutral personal pronoun. Rather than writing “he or she” or “s/he”, I have followed the increasingly common practice of using “they” when a person’s gender is unknown or unspecified.

## **Major Themes and Chapter Topics**

In today’s hyper-polarized political climate, identity politics have often received blame for dividing people—but the results of this project hint that media commentators may be ignoring the ways that the contentious political atmosphere has also pushed people to unite across religious and other social lines in pursuit of common goals related to social justice. Since the 2016 election, formerly complacent people have been organizing, protesting, and running for office in ways that they never did before. Commentators frequently lament the social divisions that have been exacerbated by the new politics—but have largely ignored that ways in which the same political situation motivated people of different social backgrounds to unite in pursuit of common goals. My research with refugee supporters in Dallas revealed several important themes which will be explored in detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 explores court records and news sources to analyze the arguments used for and against Trump's executive orders banning travel from several Muslim-majority countries, as well as their most immediate practical consequences. It will illustrate how the Trump administration's core argument—security—fell flat with opponents of the ban, as well as why liberals' core argument—religious discrimination—failed to carry the day in court. When asked why they became involved in pro-refugee work, many interview participants referred back to the announcement of the travel ban as a catalyzing event that motivated them to take action. This chapter is crucial to the overall argument of the dissertation because it helps to explain why so many people became so deeply committed to pro-refugee work almost overnight.

Chapter 3 explains how a spontaneous mass protest at DFW International Airport expressed powerful local resistance to the Muslim travel ban and laid the groundwork for a broad-based grassroots coalition of immigrant and refugee supporters among ordinary people and city government.

Chapter 4 attempts to answer the question of *who* gets involved in pro-refugee activities in North Texas and *why* they choose this particular type of volunteer project over a host of other social problems and concerns. It explores interview participants' personal stories about how they got involved in pro-refugee work in order to understand how ordinary people living and working in North Texas came to understand “helping refugees” as a powerful moral imperative that they could not ignore.

Chapter 5 gives an account of the local effects of federal and state changes in refugee policy during the Trump years, focusing on the gradual dismantling of the federal refugee resettlement program. It documents some of the challenges facing refugee service organizations that attempted to continue operating in under conditions of constant policy chaos.

Chapter 6 explores the experiences of activist-volunteers from North Texas as they attempted to navigate chaos, bear witness to human suffering, and find meaningful ways to respond to the escalating humanitarian crisis unfolding on the US-Mexico border as a result of the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" and Remain in Mexico (MPP) policies. It also documents the efforts and failures of a city-wide project to provide aid and support to Central American asylum seekers.

Chapter 7 takes as its subject the advice given by interview participants as they reflected on what they had learned from their experiences as refugee supporters. Themes include self-care, active listening, resisting the "white savior" complex, and the ongoing personal challenges associated with learning to be an effective ally for people engaged in struggle.

Chapter 8 reviews the themes and major issues addressed in the rest of the dissertation and lays out some general conclusions with regards to refugee supporters' ideas about what it means to do (and be) "good". It attempts to answer the key question at hand: What makes people take action? The chapter goes on to explain a few limitations of the current study and proposes directions for future research. Finally, it speculates on the possible future of the refugee and asylum systems in the United States.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Contesting the Muslim Travel Ban: Security, Religious Freedom, and the Questionable Limits of Presidential Power**

In May 2018, a ten-year-old girl named Shaima made international headlines when she and her family finally boarded a plane from Djibouti to California after a years-long battle with immigration officials. Shaima's father, a naturalized US citizen, had filed paperwork for his wife and daughters to join him in the United States after civil war made everyday life in their home country of Yemen increasingly dangerous and untenable. Bombs had partially destroyed their neighborhood, and the family could no longer get reliable medical care for Shaima, who suffered from cerebral palsy and could not get medical treatment because so many doctors had fled the country. With the US embassy in Sanaa closed because of the fighting, the family made a harrowing ten-hour drive through multiple military checkpoints only to discover that a missile attack had closed the airport. It took weeks for the family to make their way through Sudan and Ethiopia in order to finally in their visa paperwork at the US embassy in Djibouti. The family waited there for two years in mingled hope and desperation as Shaima's medical condition gradually deteriorated without access to the medications she needed to survive. But within days of the long-awaited visa interview, their hopes were dashed when the Trump administration announced an immediate ban on visas for travelers from several majority-Muslim countries, including Yemen.

A lawyer told Shaima's father to apply for an "undue hardship" waiver based on Shaima's medical condition, which had already deteriorated to the point that she could no longer eat. But the US government had not provided instructions about how to apply for the waiver, nor any way to file documentation to support the request. The decision would be left entirely up to the discretion of whichever immigration officer signed off on their case. The interview took a total of five minutes. Shaima's father later described it to reporters: "As soon as I walked through the door of the interview room with Shaima in my arms, the embassy worker returned my papers and informed me the application had been rejected. He didn't even take a glance at us. I felt no mercy in him."

Even under the terms of Trump's travel ban, the al-Omari family's case should have been straightforward. As children of a naturalized citizen, Shaima and her sisters were legally entitled to automatic US citizenship once their residency permits were approved. But in order for that to happen, they had to be physically present in the United States. The family posed no security risk. Under the terms of the travel ban, Shaima's increasingly dire medical situation should have qualified them for a waiver under a provision for people facing "undue hardship". But their request for a waiver was denied without explanation. No appeal was possible.

In desperation, Shaima's father took her story to the media. That decision saved her life. Shaima's story was included in an amicus brief filed before the US Supreme Court, where it drew the appalled attention of Justices Stephen Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Breyer demanded to know how the government could possibly argue that the travel ban was primarily about security concerns, if it excluded disabled children like Shaima who ought to have qualified for waivers under the proclamation's own terms (*Hawaii vs. Trump* 4/25/2018, 6/26/2018). But this argument ultimately failed to gain traction with the Court's more conservative justices, who

ultimately ruled by a slim majority to uphold the travel ban over the vehement moral objections of the more liberal members of the Court. The waivers that should have provided some measure of protection for people in situations like the al-Omari family were applied arbitrarily or else not at all, leaving people with no recourse.

With the eyes of the world on the impending Supreme Court decision, everything miraculously changed for the al-Omari family. Abruptly and without explanation, the al-Omari family received their visas and were hustled onto a plane to California within days (McEvers 8/9/2018; Ibrahim 4/27/2018, 5/27/2018).

Shaima al-Omari is only one of thousands of people whose lives were disrupted by the Trump administration's travel bans, which disproportionately affected people from majority-Muslim countries and became the basis of a bitter years-long social and legal struggle over immigration, religious freedom, and the limits of Presidential power. This chapter explores court records and news sources to analyze the arguments used for and against Trump's travel bans, as well as their most immediate consequences. It will illustrate how the Trump administration's core argument—security—fell flat with opponents of the ban, as well as why liberals' core argument—religious discrimination—failed to carry the day in court. The legal struggle over the travel ban is emblematic of unresolved divisions within American society over who can claim rights as an American, and who can be left out. These struggles were not just political but also struck a moral chord that resonated deeply with people who saw the world in terms of social justice and human rights rather than nationalist power and security. These arguments were ultimately unsuccessful in overturning the travel ban. But they served to galvanize supporters. In interviews with pro-refugee activists and volunteers conducted several years later, the Muslim travel bans emerged as a recurring theme that participants repeatedly returned to when they

told the stories of how—and why—they decided that it was morally necessary for them to rearrange their lives to work on behalf of refugees, a category of people they perceived as unfairly targeted under the Trump administration. They saw the Trump administration’s travel bans as a signal of government support and encouragement for a resurgence of racism and xenophobia that they already saw spreading in the world around them.

This chapter traces various iterations of the travel ban that came out of the Trump White House as the new administration learned from trial and error what they could and could not do legally, and how to restructure and reword their executive orders so as to pass oversight in the courts. The administration’s repeated efforts to ban travel from Muslim countries despite the lack of a real and present security threat represent a consistent program of promoting Islamophobia and increasing restrictions on refugees and other immigrants—an endeavor which was part of a larger white supremacist agenda carried forward throughout the four years of the Trump administration. As will be seen in the next chapter, the travel ban was a catalyst that set the conditions for lasting resistance against Trump-era immigration restrictions of all kinds.

### **Travel Ban Version 1**

During his time as a Presidential candidate, Donald Trump was well known for incendiary campaign rhetoric that repeatedly demonized immigrants, especially non-white immigrants, and most especially Muslims. While on the campaign trail, he famously promised crowds that if he were elected President, he would order a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our nation’s representatives can figure out what is going on” (Taylor 12/7/2015). So it came as no surprise when Trump made restrictions on travel from several Muslim-majority countries one of his very first real-life policy initiatives. Within a week

of entering the White House, Trump made his anti-Muslim campaign rhetoric a reality with an executive order titled “Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” (White House 2017a). The order suspended both immigrant and non-immigrant visas for people from seven majority-Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It suspended the entire refugee resettlement program for 120 days, ordered a thorough review of procedures used to vet the backgrounds of refugee applicants, and banned the entry of all Syrian refugees “until such time as I have determined that sufficient changes have been made to the USRAP to ensure that admission of Syrian refugees is consistent with the national interest” (White House 2017a). At the end of 120 days, the refugee program would be allowed to resume, but with several important changes. The total number of refugees to be admitted in fiscal year 2017 would be reduced from 110,000 to 50,000—a reduction of 55% from the refugee admissions ceiling set for that year by President Obama. Syrian refugees were to be entirely excluded until further notice. And the program would be refocused on prioritizing applicants who had been persecuted based on their membership in religious minority groups (see Appendices 2.1 and 2.2 for a summary of the provisions of each version of the travel ban).

#### Travel Ban Version 1: Justification

The stated intent of the order was to prevent immigrants and other travelers from these countries from committing acts of terrorism on US soil and from exploiting US immigration laws for “malevolent purposes”. As justification, the order referred in general terms to “numerous” but unspecified terrorism-related crimes committed by foreign-born individuals in the United States since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But it did not cite any specific examples or provide any statistics or other data

supporting this claim. Rather, it stated that “deteriorating conditions in certain countries due to war, strife, disaster, and civil unrest increase the likelihood that terrorists will use any means possible to enter the United States” (White House 2017a). In other words, the text of the ban started with the assumption that travelers from these countries were a threat, and assumed it was unnecessary to specify exactly why. It argued that:

In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles. The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who do not support the Constitution, or those who would place violent ideologies over American law. In addition, the United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including “honor” killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation (White House 2017a).

The text of the order, taken together with Trump’s often-repeated campaign promise to ban all travel from Muslim countries, sparked outrage and widespread accusations of anti-Muslim bias. The order itself did not use the word “Islam” or “Muslim”. But the text made references to “honor killings”, “subjugation of women”, “religious persecution”, and the 9/11 terror attacks, all of which were widely understood as thinly veiled references to a negative view of Islam as an inherently violent and misogynistic religion. Though the order did not ban Muslim immigrants directly, all seven of the countries listed in the travel ban had majority Muslim populations. The Trump administration attempted to argue that the ban was motivated by concerns about terrorism and public safety, not religion per se, and that the proof of this was in the fact that not all majority-Muslim countries were banned (Newman 1/29/2017; Baker 1/29/2017). But this argument failed to gain traction with critics, who pointed out that some of the countries most frequently associated with Islamist terrorism—such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—had been left off the list (Neier 1/30/2017).

Trump himself weakened his argument when he explicitly stated that the directive to prioritize refugee applicants who were victims of religious persecution was specifically intended to aid Christians who were being persecuted in Muslim countries (Baker 1/29/2017). This argument may have been intended to rally support among the Evangelical Christians who made up a significant portion of his base, but it came off as spectacularly tone-deaf among people who understood that the vast majority of refugees escaping persecution in the countries in question were in fact Muslim, not Christian (Neier 1/30/2017).

#### Travel Ban Version 1: Immediate Consequences

The executive order went into effect immediately after the announcement, and its implementation was the new Trump administration's first major blunder. No guidance had been provided ahead of time about how to implement the order, and the language of the order itself failed to address key questions about which specific categories of visa holders should be included or excluded. It made no provision for the reentry of dual citizens or for green card holders who were traveling outside the country. And although the order allowed for case-by-case exceptions for refugees who were already in transit, it was not immediately clear how or when these "case-by-case" exceptions would be applied and whose entry would be deemed "in the national interest".

The result was immediate mass confusion and chaos at airports and consulates worldwide as unprepared travelers, airport security staff, and embassy officials tried to parse its meaning. The order effectively stranded thousands of travelers who were already in the air at the moment of the announcement. Travelers who had obtained legal visas were blocked from entering the United States. When they landed and tried to pass through Customs, they were informed that

their visas had unexpectedly been revoked. Some were immediately sent back to their countries of origin. Others were caught in limbo at airport security offices for hours or days (Baker 1/29/17; Newman 1/29/17). Meanwhile, refugees who had previously been scheduled for travel had their papers revoked at the last minute (ACLU NorCal 2018). In all, somewhere between 60,000 and 100,000 visas were unexpectedly revoked (IRAP v. Trump 3/16/2017).

The Trump administration was quickly forced to acknowledge and resolve some of the most obvious practical problems with the executive order, since the original version of the order made no provision for dual citizens or legal permanent residents. Within 48 hours, the Trump administration had recalibrated the order to make legal permanent residents exempt (Baker 1/29/2017).

In the days following the order, tens of thousands of people flocked to at least forty spontaneous demonstrations at airports across the country to protest the travel ban, which was widely perceived as a discriminatory attack on basic religious liberties (Newman 1/29/2017). The executive order proved deeply controversial even within Trump's own administration. Attorney General Sally Yates expressed grave concerns about the motivations behind the travel ban, in light of Trump's well-documented intentions to ban Muslim immigrants on the basis of religion (Woodruff 4/25/2018). In defiance of Trump, Yates directed the Justice Department not to enforce the travel ban. Trump immediately fired Yates and replaced her with a new acting attorney general whose first act was to rescind Yates' order and direct the Justice Department to enforce the travel ban after all (Zapotosky, Horwitz, and Berman 1/30/2017).

## Travel Ban Version 1: Legal Challenges

The executive order embroiled the new administration in constitutional conflict, as legal challenges were immediately logged on behalf of travelers who had been detained or otherwise unexpectedly stranded. Over the coming days and weeks, eight federal courts issued injunctions or temporarily restrained parts of the travel ban, preventing various categories of people with valid visas from being deported or being denied entry. In short order, the executive order faced more than 40 legal challenges in federal courts (Chishti and Bolter 2019). Two of them, *Washington vs. Trump* and *IRAP v. Trump*, are particularly important to understanding the fundamental issues at the heart of the legal fight over the travel ban.

On January 30, Washington became the first state to sue the Trump administration over the executive order, arguing that the travel ban was unconstitutional and that it separated Washington families, harmed Washington-based companies, and undermined the state's sovereignty in welcoming immigrants and refugees (Washington AG 2/3/2017). Unlike several earlier court challenges, which were more limited in scope, *Washington vs. Trump* resulted in a temporary restraining order which blocked enforcement of the travel ban nationwide. The federal government appealed the case, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously affirmed the lower court's ruling, which permanently invalidated Trump's travel ban and halted enforcement nationwide (Washington AG 1/3/2017, 2/9/2017). By February 9<sup>th</sup>—just two weeks after the announcement of the new executive order—the travel ban was essentially stalled in the courts and could no longer legally be enforced. Following the decision of the appeals court, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) began allowing refugees, green card holders, and people with valid visas to board planes to the United States once more. Refugee resettlement resumed, and many

people whose visas had been revoked were eventually able to have those decisions reversed (ACLU NorCal 2018; Chishti and Bolter 2019).

## **Travel Ban Version 2**

But the Trump administration—having learned from its first deeply flawed attempt—did not give up on its determination to enact an enforceable travel ban. Rather than continuing to litigate after the outcome of *Washington v. Trump*, the federal government simply replaced the January 27 version of the travel ban with a new, more robust version that attempted to avoid some of the legal and practical pitfalls of the first one. The new travel ban was somewhat narrower than the original. The second version of the travel ban (White House 2017b), issued March 6 2017, once again banned travel for 90 days from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, but reinstated visas for people from Iraq. It outlined several important exceptions for dual citizens, legal permanent residents, and refugees who had already been officially accepted and scheduled for travel. It also allowed for the possibility of case-by-case waivers in situations that would cause undue hardship, such as for people who had previously been working or studying legally in the United States and sought to reenter the country in order to resume their previous work or study; for people who had significant business or professional obligations in the US; for people seeking to be reunited with family in the United States; people who had been employed by or provided services to the US government; for infants, children, overseas adoptees, and people seeking medical care. Unlike the first version, it did not take effect immediately but allowed ten days' grace period for news to travel. And unlike the first version of the ban, it did not revoke existing visas, but only banned travel for foreign nationals who were outside the country and did not yet have a visa as of March 16, 2017 and who did not have a visa on January

27, 2017 (see Appendices 2.1 and 2.2 for a summary of the provisions of each version of the travel ban).

With regard to refugees, travel ban 2.0 once again suspended refugee admissions for 120 days, except for those who had already been formally scheduled for travel. It limited the refugee program to 50,000 (instead of 110,000) in fiscal year 2017, but allowed for case-by-case exceptions in situations of undue hardship. Unlike the previous order, travel ban 2.0 did not include a special ban for Syrian refugees. Also omitted was the clause prioritizing refugees who were victims of religious persecution, since that clause had been viewed as evidence of religious bias (White House 2017b).

#### Travel Ban Version 2: Justification

Version 2 of the travel ban attempted to shore up the weaknesses of the first ban by making stronger and more specific security-based arguments for the necessity of banning travel from each of the remaining six countries. The text of the executive order cited a 2016 State Department report on terrorism to argue that each of the six countries was either a state sponsor of terrorism, had a significant presence of terrorist organizations, or was located in a conflict zone. It argued in some detail that despite ongoing conflict in some regions of Iraq, Iraq could be considered a special case and deserved to be removed from the list based on its government's willingness to increase cooperation with the United States on anti-terrorism projects (White House 2017b).

Unlike the January 27 executive order, the second version cited specific examples of immigrants to the United States who later committed terrorist acts. The executive order stated that "terrorist groups have sought to infiltrate several nations through refugee programs", and

that “the Attorney General has reported to me [Trump] that more than 300 persons who entered the country as refugees are currently the subjects of counterterrorism investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation” (White House 2017b).

Unlike the first executive order, the second one offered two specific examples of people who originally entered the country as refugees and later went on to commit terrorism-related offenses. Real-life examples made the text of the order more rhetorically convincing. However, on closer examination the inclusion of these particular examples is somewhat puzzling, since neither example built a particularly strong case for blocking the refugee program in order to stop terrorist attacks within the United States. None of the events referred to could have been prevented with the measures detailed in the travel ban. None of the individuals referred to in the text of the executive order succeeded in carrying out an attack on American soil, and none of them were actually working with real terrorist organizations; in fact, all three of these individuals were arrested as part of undercover sting operations conducted by the FBI.

In one instance, two former Iraqi refugees were arrested for trying to funnel money and weapons to al-Qaida in Iraq, but never intended to conduct any attack on American soil (Nowrasteh 2017). Opponents of the ban also pointed out that the refugee program was already the least vulnerable part of US immigration, since refugees were already the most heavily vetted category of immigrants. And new security measures had already gone into place during the Obama administration, which would likely have prevented these two from entering the refugee program (Bier 2017). Opponents of the travel ban also pointed out that it made little sense to cite an example involving Iraqi refugees as substantiation of the necessity for a travel ban that exempted Iraqi nationals (Eakin 3/6/2017).

In the other instance, a young Somali former refugee was arrested for agreeing to help blow up a building in Oregon—but this took place as part of an FBI sting operation, and was never a real terrorist plot (Mora and Hayes 11/15/2015). It was unclear how any sort of heightened security vetting could have prevented this man from entering the US refugee program, since he entered the country when he was only two years old. So in this instance, any radicalization happened many years later, inside the United States. No action on the part of the refugee program could possibly have prevented it (Bier 2017, Mora and Hayes 11/15/2015). It was also unclear whether the 19-year-old would ever have become radicalized to the point of participating in acts of terrorism if undercover FBI agents had not actively recruited, encouraged, and trained him, and then provided him with a fake bomb to detonate (Mora and Hayes 11/15/2015).

So while the text of the executive order did refer to real events, neither example provides any logical justification for the travel ban as written. The travel ban as written would not have prevented either of these events. The fact that the Trump administration could not find any better examples to cite could actually be taken as evidence that the current security measures were already doing their job admirably well—a point that was not lost on federal judges who eventually ruled on the case (*IRAP v. Trump* 5/25/2017).

### Travel Ban Version 2: Legal Challenges

Like its predecessor, travel ban 2.0 faced immediate legal challenges. But unlike its predecessor, travel ban 2.0 had relatively few immediate practical consequences because it was immediately blocked in the courts prior to its original effective date, March 16. Various court challenges were successful in delaying implementation of the order until a Supreme Court ruling

finally allowed a modified version of the travel ban to go into effect in June 2017. Two court cases, *Hawaii vs. Trump* and *IRAP vs. Trump*, were particularly important here. Both were decided the day before the travel ban was meant to go into effect, and each independently blocked the ban nationwide.

The state of Hawaii sued the Trump administration immediately after the announcement of the second executive order, arguing that the travel ban was unconstitutional because it discriminated based on nationality and religion, stigmatizing not only immigrants and refugees, but also American citizens who practiced Islam (Hawaii AG 3/8/2017). The state of Hawaii argued that the executive order would cause harm to the state of Hawaii for two reasons: it would prevent the University of Hawaii from recruiting faculty, students, and visiting scholars from the six affected countries; and it would damage the economy of the state by interfering with business revenues from international tourism. Furthermore, the order would cause harm to American citizens living in Hawaii, based on their religion and country of origin (Hawaii AG 3/8/2017).

The argument for this portion of the case rested on the situation of Dr. Ishmael Elshikh, an American citizen of Egyptian descent who was trying to obtain a visa so that his Syrian mother-in-law could be reunited with her daughter and her young grandchildren, whom she had not been able to visit since 2005. At the time of the original travel ban, Dr. Elshikh's family had already been waiting for two years for their application to be processed. They feared that with the travel ban in place, the grandmother's green card application would be rejected. Elshikh expressed devastation at the idea that the United States government did not consider people like his family to be full members of the political community, even though Elshikh and his children were all citizens and had done nothing wrong. Elshikh stated, "[My children] are deeply affected by the knowledge that the United States—their own country—would discriminate against

individuals who are the same ethnicity as them, including members of their own family, and who hold the same religious beliefs. They do not fully understand why this is happening, but they feel hurt, confused, and sad” (Hawaii AG 3/8/2017). The state of Hawaii argued that the travel ban was

...another attempt by the Administration to enact a discriminatory ban that goes against the fundamental teachings of our Constitution and our immigration laws, even if it is cloaked in ostensibly neutral terms...Nothing of any substance has changed. There is the same blanket ban on entry from Muslim-majority countries (minus one), the same sweeping shutdown of refugee admissions (absent one exception), and the same lawless warren of waivers and exceptions. The courts did not tolerate the Administration’s last attempt to hoodwink the judiciary, and it should not tolerate this one (Hawaii AG 3/8/2017).

A federal district court swiftly decided in Hawaii’s favor, and issued a temporary restraining order blocking the travel ban nationwide the night before it was set to take effect (Hawaii v. Trump 3/15/2017). The court ruled that the executive order violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, which prohibits the United States government from establishing a preference for one religion over another. The ruling stated that “the illogic of the Government’s contentions is palpable. The notion that one can demonstrate animus toward any group of people only by targeting all of them at once is fundamentally flawed...” (Hawaii v. Trump 3/15/2017: 30). The court stated clearly that the relatively neutral language in the text of the executive order could not be separated from its context, which demonstrated “significant and un rebutted evidence of religious animus driving the promulgation of the Executive Order and its related predecessor” (p. 33). And it went on to cite several specific examples of Trump making anti-Muslim statements in interviews and television broadcasts.

The travel ban was thus blocked the night before its effective date. The court issued a temporary restraining order preventing implementation or enforcement of sections 2 and 6 of the executive order nationwide (Hawaii v. Trump 3/15/2017). [Section 2 bans travel from the 6

countries, and section 6 is the one about refugee resettlement]. But this was not by any means the end of the long legal battle over Travel Ban 2.0. In a separate challenge the next day, a federal district court in Maryland issued a second order once again blocking the travel ban nationwide (IRAP v. Trump 3/16/2017).

### *IRAP v. Trump*

In a separate case decided on the same day, a federal district court in Maryland issued a second order blocking the travel ban nationwide. The case, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) v. Trump, argued that the travel ban intentionally discriminated against Muslims and violated the US Constitution's guarantees of religious freedom and equal treatment under the law (ACLU NorCal 2018, ACLU 2/7/2017, IRAP v. Trump 3/16/2017). The case, IRAP vs. Trump, was brought by the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) and the National Immigration Law Center on behalf of three organizations providing services to refugees, as well as six other individuals affected in various ways by the travel ban (IRAP v. Trump 3/16/2017).

Each of the six individual plaintiffs were US citizens or legal permanent residents who were sponsoring relatives who were in the process of applying for visas to the United States. The plaintiffs argued that if the travel ban were to go into effect, it would lengthen family separation without reason and leave many of their relatives living in dangerous conditions for longer than necessary. Two of the organizational plaintiffs, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) and Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) were refugee service providers who argued that the 120-day ban on refugee resettlement would result in lost revenue from the reduction in refugee cases, which in turn would result in a need to lay off staff. In addition, refugees who had already been legally resettled in the United States would be unable to reunite with family members who

were still mired in a years-long application process. A third organizational plaintiff, the Middle East Studies Association, argued that the travel ban made it more difficult for its professional members to travel to the United States, and that this would cripple the annual conference that the association relied on for revenue.

The court ruled that the travel ban violated the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which states that no person should be discriminated against in the immigration process because of their race, sex, nationality, place of birth, or place of residence. The court ruled that the President had overstepped his authority by attempting to use his executive power to ban all entry from these six countries, since this would interfere with the immigrant visa issuance process, which should fall under the purview of Congress. Importantly, the court's decision rested mainly on the issue of immigrant visas—that is, visas for people entering the United States with the intention of staying permanently. It did not find that there was a strong enough case to prevent the President from banning non-immigrant visas. But the ban on entries would by necessity result in banning immigrant visas—and the court believed that was a step too far.

The court also found that the travel ban violated the Establishment Clause by establishing a preference for one religion over another. It ruled that “the history of public statements [by Donald Trump] continues to provide a convincing case that the purpose of the Second Executive Order remains the realization of the long-envisioned Muslim Ban” (*IRAP v. Trump* 3/16/2017: 30). Further, the court found that while there might be valid reasons for security-related concerns about the six countries on the list, a ban on all travel from those countries constituted a disproportionate response that was not justified by the evidence.

The plaintiffs asked for an injunction blocking the executive order in its entirety, but the court's decision was more limited in scope. The court decided that the plaintiffs had not provided

a strong enough argument against the 120-day ban on refugees, so they declined to block that portion of the executive order. The court blocked only the portion of the executive order that banned entry of individuals from the six affected countries, as described in section two of the executive order. But it did not take any action on section six, which is the one specifically addressing refugees (White House 2017b, section 2; IRAP v. Trump 3/16/2017).

Taken together, IRAP vs. Trump resulted in an injunction blocking the portion of the executive order that banned entry from the six listed countries, but the ruling did not address the part dealing with refugees. Hawaii vs. Trump resulted in a temporary restraining order that blocked enforcement of both parts of the order, including the 120-day refugee ban.

The federal government appealed. On May 25, 2017, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision in Maryland, ruling that the executive order "speaks with vague words of security, but in context drips with religious intolerance, animus, and discrimination" (IRAP v. Trump 5/25/2017: 12). The appeals court ruled 10-3. Directly citing a number of explicit and well-documented statements by Trump and other officials in his administration, the court concluded that:

...like EO-1, EO-2's purpose is to effectuate the proposed Muslim ban, and that its changes from EO-1 reflect an effort to help it survive judicial scrutiny, rather than to avoid targeting Muslims for exclusion in the United States. These statements, taken together, provide direct, specific evidence of what motivated EO-1 and EO-2: President Trump's desire to exclude Muslims from the United States. The statements also reveal President Trump's intended means of effectuating the ban: by targeting majority-Muslim nations instead of Muslims explicitly. And after courts enjoined EO-1, statements show how President Trump attempted to preserve its core mission: by issuing EO-2—a "watered down" version with "the same basic policy outcome" (IRAP vs. Trump 5/25/2017: 58).

The appeals court went on to state that the national security argument was no more convincing for EO-2 than it was for EO-1, since the only specific examples cited were two former refugees from Iraq, which was not included in the ban, and a Somali refugee who entered

the US as a child and was radicalized in the United States as an adult (p. 61). So the appeals court upheld IRAP vs. Trump, leaving the injunction in place.

A few weeks later, on June 12, 2017, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously upheld the lower court's decision in *Hawaii vs. Trump*, leaving in place the injunction blocking the ban on both refugees and visa holders and paving the way for the Trump administration to take the case to the Supreme Court.

### *The US Supreme Court on Travel Ban Version 2*

On June 26, 2017, the Supreme Court announced that it would hear legal challenges to the travel ban later in the year. In the meantime, a modified version of travel ban 2.0 would be allowed to go into effect as of June 29, 2017. The Supreme Court pointed out that foreign nationals had no constitutionally protected right to enter the United States, so the US government was under no particular obligation toward them. Rather, the Supreme Court's preliminary decision centered around the extent to which the travel ban might infringe on the rights of Americans. The Supreme Court acknowledged the claims of the plaintiffs in *Hawaii v. Trump*: Dr. Elshikh and his family would indeed be harmed if they were prevented from reuniting with the separated grandmother, and the University of Hawaii would indeed be harmed if they lost tuition money because the government had blocked their students from entering the United States. However, the Supreme Court argued that no American rights would be infringed if people without existing ties in the United States were denied visas. Therefore it was permissible to refuse entry to anyone from the six affected countries, if they could not demonstrate an existing relationship to a person or entity in the United States who would be harmed by their absence. The Supreme Court gave several examples of a "bona fide relationship": someone entering the

United States to live with or visit a close family member; a student admitted to an American university; a worker with an offer of employment at an American company; or a lecturer who had been invited to speak before an American audience (IRAP v. Trump 6/26/2017). Such people should not be prevented from entering the United States so long as their relationships were “formal, documented, and formed in the ordinary course” rather than invented with the aim of manipulating the immigration system (IRAP v. Trump 6/26/2017: 12). But the travel ban would go into effect with an amended start date of June 29 for all others from the six affected countries.

As for refugees, the Supreme Court decided not to disturb the injunction for those with “bona fide relationship” with someone in the United States. But for all others, the travel ban would be allowed to proceed. The Supreme Court allowed the 120-day refugee ban go into effect starting at the end of June. Afterward, refugees would be subject to the same criteria as other immigrants from the affected countries: they could be admitted only so long as they had an existing “bona fide relationship” with someone in the United States. The new annual cap of 50,000 would remain partially in place, but refugees who could demonstrate a “bona fide relationship” would still be allowed to enter the country even if the new cap of 50,000 had already been filled (IRAP v. Trump 6/26/2017).

Ultimately, the Supreme Court’s decision resolved some of the problems with the confusing and unevenly applied waiver program, since it was no longer necessary for officials to decide what exactly constituted “undue hardship”. But the Supreme Court’s failure to provide a thorough or complete definition of “bona fide relationship” created mass confusion and set off a new wave of litigation in the lower courts as government agencies and visa applicants tried to establish exactly which categories of relationships counted as “bona fide” (Pearle and Finnegan

6/27/2017). In instructions to embassy officials, the Trump administration immediately seized on the opportunity to define “bona fide” family relationships in the narrowest way possible:

‘Close family’ is defined as a parent (including parent-in-law), spouse, child, adult son or daughter, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, sibling, whether whole or half. This includes step relationships. ‘Close family’ does not include grandparents, grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, brothers-in-laws and sisters-in-law, fiancés, and any other ‘extended’ family members (US Secretary of State 6/28/2017).

Immigration activists and other critics quickly termed this a “Grandma Ban”, began a social media campaign posting pictures of their harmless grandparents under the hashtag #GrandmaBan to highlight the “absurdity” of the new policy and show solidarity with families who had been affected by the ban (Beaumont 7/10/2017).

Figure 2.1: #GrandmaBan Social Media Campaign



Social media campaign post by Muslim Advocates on Action Network website. Image posted with text: “Grandmas, jidas, bubbies, abuelas, meemaws or nanas. No matter what you call them, they love us, they spoil us, give us the best hugs of our lives, and teach us what it is to be a strong woman. So why is President Trump singling them out under the Muslim ban?” Source: Muslim Advocates 2017.

Refugees' status with regard to the "bona fide relationship" clause was initially unclear (Mohammed and Torbati 6/27/2017). Some could claim an existing relationship with a spouse, parent, or child who was already living in the United States. For those who could not, it initially seemed reasonable to assume that the relationship with their assigned resettlement agency would be sufficient, since it was well documented, and happened "in the ordinary course" of approved participation in the federal government's own resettlement program (Pearle and Finnegan 6/27/2017). But resettlement agencies had not specifically been included in the list of examples provided by the Supreme Court. This opened the door to a narrow interpretation that could potentially exclude refugee resettlement agencies as anchors of "bona fide relationships". The Trump administration argued that resettlement agencies could not constitute "bona fide relationships" because these relationships were impermanent and were also mediated by a third party, the government itself (Liptak 9/12/2017). And indeed, the government notified resettlement agencies that "the fact that a resettlement agency in the United States has provided a formal assurance for a refugee seeking admission...is not sufficient in and of itself to establish a qualifying relationship for that refugee with an entity in the United States" (quoted in *Hawaii v. Trump* 7/13/2017, p. 7). This statement was contradictory and confusing, since the resettlement agencies in question offered formal assurance only to refugees who had already completed multiple levels of in-depth background checks, and whose travel had already been approved by both the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security. In fact, the "assurance" referred to here is actually an agreement between the State Department and the resettlement agency, stating that the resettlement agency commits to providing services for the refugee named in the document, as requested directly by the State Department (*Hawaii v. Trump* 7/13/2017: 17).

The plaintiffs from *Hawaii v. Trump* reopened their case, asking the courts to reexamine the definition of “close familial relationship”. The court ruled that the government’s definition of “close familial relationship” was “unduly restrictive” because family composition varies from household to household, and often grandparents play an important role. It went on to state that “...the Government’s definition represents the antithesis of common sense. Common sense, for instance, dictates that close family members be defined to include grandparents. Indeed, grandparents are the *epitome* of close family members. The Government’s definition excludes them. That simply cannot be” (*Hawaii v. Trump* 7/13/2017: 15). With regard to refugees, the court ruled that legal service providers (such as IRAP) did not meet the criteria to count as a “bona fide relationship”, but that refugee resettlement agencies did:

An assurance from a United States refugee resettlement agency, in fact, meets each of the Supreme Court’s touchstones: it is formal, it is a documented contract, it is binding, it triggers responsibilities and obligations, including compensation, it is issued specific to an individual refugee only when that refugee has been approved for entry by the Department of Homeland Security, and it is issued in the ordinary course, and historically has been for decades. Bona fide does not get any more bona fide than that (*Hawaii v. Trump* 7/13/2017: 17).

So, the US District Court in Hawaii granted an injunction directing the US government to adopt a wider definition of “bona fide relationship”. From that point on, refugees with formal assurances from resettlement agencies were to be exempted from the travel ban, as were grandparents, grandchildren, brothers- and sisters-in-law, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins of persons in the United States (*Hawaii v. Trump* 7/13/2017). A week later, the Supreme Court weighed in on the “bona fide relationship” question, confirming the Hawaii court’s decision regarding close familial relationships. But the Supreme Court stayed the preliminary injunction that made refugee resettlement agencies “bona fide relationships” for refugees, pending a decision in the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals. So, grandparents and other such relatives

counted as “bona fide relationships” with regard to the travel ban, but refugee resettlement agencies did not (*Hawaii v. Trump* 7/19/2017). All new refugees would be banned until October 24, 2017 unless they could demonstrate a close family relationship with someone already living in the United States.

### **Travel Ban Version 3**

This state of affairs continued until September 24, 2017, when the 90-day ban on travel from the six affected countries was set to expire (but the 120-day moratorium on refugee resettlement remained in effect for another month). Trump issued another executive order announcing a third version of the travel ban, which changed the list of countries to remove Sudan and add Chad, North Korea, and certain people from Venezuela (Chad was later removed from the list in April 2018). Unlike the previous two executive orders, which were temporary, the third version banned travel from these countries indefinitely. But it was more targeted in the types of travel it covered. For most of the affected countries, immigrant visas were banned but some types of non-immigrant travel were still allowed, varying by country. There would be no more exceptions for people with “bona fide relationships”, because the executive order set up a waiver process allowing exceptions for people who could demonstrate undue hardship and who could establish that they were not a security threat.

Refugees were not specifically mentioned in this version of the travel ban, since refugees without family connections in the US were still banned under the previous order until October 24, 2017 (White House 2017c). After that, refugees from the countries mentioned in the travel ban remained essentially blocked under a new policy putting in place new “enhanced” vetting requirements that were nearly impossible for anyone to satisfy (Tillerson, Duke, and Coats 2017;

White House 2017d; IRAP 2020). At the time of this writing (January 2021), these enhanced security protocols remain in effect, and resettlement from these countries is still mostly cut off.

### Travel Ban Version 3: Justification

Travel ban version 3 avoided some of the most obvious legal pitfalls of the first two. First, for most of the countries listed—except for North Korea and Syria—it did not attempt to ban all travel completely. It banned permanent immigration from all the countries except Venezuela. But it took a more “tailored” approach to non-immigrant visas depending on the security situation in each country. Second, it laid out a system of case-by-case waivers, which could provide relief for people facing particular hardship—though in practice, these waivers were almost never granted (NILC 2019). Third, it implied that countries could be removed from the list later if they improved their security and information-sharing protocols. Chad was eventually able to do this, and moved off the travel ban list in April 2018 (DHS 4/10/2018). Fourth, the addition of two non-Muslim countries muddied the waters somewhat with regard to the religious animus question. The addition of North Korea and Venezuela gave the administration room to argue that the travel ban was not rooted in anti-Muslim sentiment. However, critics still found this argument unconvincing and contrived, since very few people were ever likely to be affected by the suspensions on visas from Venezuela or North Korea. The restrictions in Venezuela only applied to certain government officials and their families. And the restrictions on visas from North Korea applied to virtually no one, since that government restricts access to passports for most of its citizens and travel from North Korea to the United States is already vanishingly rare.

Travel bans 1 and 2 encountered problems in the courts because the text of these orders claimed urgent security-related justifications for the travel bans, but then failed to provide sufficient evidence to support security-related arguments that were convincing enough to justify sweeping travel restrictions. Judges repeatedly found the administration's security-related justifications unconvincing because Trump himself had made so many public statements about his intention to stop Muslims—most particularly Syrian refugees--from entering the United States, and these statements provided convincing evidence that the travel bans were motivated by anti-Muslim bias more than by true concerns about security. Eight months of legal battles taught the Trump administration that if they wanted to succeed in the courts, they must construct a more convincing security-related argument supported by specific evidence, and that they could not unilaterally push through a universal ban on travel that did not allow for exceptions without pushback from the courts. The third version of the travel ban aimed to accomplish substantially similar goals to the first two, but couched its argument in terms that ultimately proved more acceptable to the courts.

The security argument laid out in the September 24 proclamation was much more robustly developed than either of the previous versions. As part of the earlier executive order in March 2017, the Trump administration had ordered a worldwide review of potential immigration-related security threats, and established global requirements for information sharing in support of immigration screening and vetting. The State Department then worked with foreign governments to address deficiencies and request improvements. The eight countries listed in Travel Ban version 3 were those that the Trump administration claimed “remain deficient at this time with respect to their identity-management and information-sharing capabilities, protocols, and practices” (White House 2017c). The argument laid out in the September 24 proclamation

detailed each country's performance with regard to travel documents, identity management protocols, and information-sharing procedures, as well as evaluation of terrorism-related security risks. (See Appendices 2.1 and 2.2 for a summary of the provisions of each version of the travel ban.)

### Travel Ban Version 3: Immediate Consequences

With no more exceptions for people with “bona fide relationships” in the United States, the only way for most people from the affected countries to obtain visas to the United States was by applying for a waiver. In theory, waivers were available on a case-by-case basis via a special application process for people who would face “undue hardship” if their visa applications were denied. The order made no allowances for categorical exceptions to the travel ban—in other words, people would not be exempted from the ban just because they were students or businesspeople, or just because they were uncles or cousins of US citizens. Each individual case had to be decided on its own merits. The text of the presidential proclamation offered several examples of the types of situations in which a request for a waiver might be approved: a person who had previously been working or studying legally in the US and needed to reenter the country in order to continue that program of work or study; a person who had previously established “significant contacts” and had professional obligations inside the United States; a person entering the US in order to live with a close relative; a person seeking medical care; a child being adopted by an American family, etc (White House 2017c). But even for such people, there was no guarantee. In practice, such waivers were rarely granted.

Making matters even more difficult and confusing for visa applicants and their families, no clear process was laid out for how to apply. The State Department's website simply stated

that “there is no separate application for a waiver”, without explaining what applicants should do in order to show that they qualified. People whose visa applications were denied had no way to find out whether they had been considered for a waiver. Many people whose circumstances matched one of the specific examples described in the text of the proclamation were still denied with no explanation. Even more confusingly, many people whose visas had already been approved subsequently received notifications that their visas had been revoked because their waivers—which they had no knowledge of—had been denied (NILC 2019; Torbati and Rosenberg 3/6/2018).

It is difficult to say exactly how many people were affected by uneven implementation of the travel ban and its associated waiver program because the Trump administration did not initially make this information available. The only specific numbers from this period come from a series of letters between the State Department and Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, whose advocacy eventually resulted in somewhat greater transparency surrounding the implementation of the travel ban and its waiver program. By February 2018, a grand total of two waivers had been granted out of a pool of more than 8,400 visa applicants (US State Dept. 2/22/2018). By June 2018, fewer than two percent of visa applicants had been “cleared” for waivers—but even then, it was unclear whether or not those individuals had actually received visas and been allowed to enter the country (Torbati 6/26/2018). The percentage of applicants whose waivers were granted rose somewhat over time, but by February 2019 still had not topped six percent (Torbati 4/4/2019; US State Dept. 2/22/2019). Critics of the travel ban pointed to the tiny percentage of waivers being granted, combined with the lack of transparency about the application process as evidence that the waiver itself was little more than “window dressing” intended to create the surface appearance of fairness while concealing a darker reality (NILC

2019). Senator Van Hollen stated, “The Trump Administration has claimed to the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the American people that their travel ban is not unfairly targeting Muslims and that waivers are being issued on a case-by-case basis – but they have provided virtually no information to validate that claim. Instead, the process has been shrouded in an unusual level of secrecy that raises serious concerns about its legality” (Van Hollen 6/21/2018). Van Hollen was eventually able to secure new reporting requirements that would require the administration to release data about the waiver program to Congress every 90 days—but this did not happen until after the Supreme Court had already ruled to allow Travel Ban version 3 to remain in effect permanently (Van Hollen 6/21/2018).

Figure 2.2: Travel Ban Waivers Granted (December 8, 2017 to March 31, 2019)

<b>Nonimmigrant Visa Applications</b>		<b>Immigrant Visa Applications</b>		<b>Total</b>	
Visa applications	36,783	Visa applications	23,492	Total visa applications	<b>60,275.00</b>
Waivers granted	608	Waivers granted	2,463	Total waivers granted	<b>3,071.00</b>
Percent granted waivers	1.65%	Percent granted waivers	10.48%	Percent granted waivers	<b>5.09%</b>

Figure 2.3: Percentage of Travel Waivers Granted for Each Country (December 8, 2017 to March 31, 2019)

Immigrant Visa Applications			Nonimmigrant Visa Applications		Total		
Nationality	Visa Applications	Waivers Granted	Visa Applications	Waivers Granted	Visa Applications	Waivers Granted	Percent Granted
Chad	8	2	202	25	210	27	12.86%
Iran	10,441	161	23,495	279	33,936	440	1.30%
Libya	243	40	747	29	990	69	6.97%
North Korea	n/a	n/a	79	5	79	5	6.33%
Somalia	2,305	271	n/a	n/a	2,305	271	11.76%
Syria	1,889	371	8,966	220	10,855	591	5.44%
Venezuela	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Yemen	8,606	1,618	3,294	50	11,900	1668	14.02%
<b>Total</b>	<b>23,492</b>	<b>2,463</b>	<b>36,783</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>60,275</b>	<b>3,071</b>	<b>5.09%</b>

Source for data in Figures 2.2 and 2.3: Department of State Report: Implementation of Presidential Proclamation 9645 December 8, 2017 to March 31, 2019. Published by the Office of Senator Van Hollen.

### Travel Ban Version 3: Legal Challenges

Like the first two versions of the travel ban, Travel Ban version 3 encountered significant legal challenges. Though the administration had refined the text of Presidential Proclamation considerably, the first two travel bans had already cemented expectations that this ban was simply another attempt to block Muslims from entering the United States, just couched in different terms. The executive director of the ACLU had this to say: “Six of President Trump's targeted countries are Muslim. The fact that Trump has added North Korea — with few visitors

to the U.S. — and a few government officials from Venezuela doesn't obfuscate the real fact that the administration's order is still a Muslim ban. President Trump's original sin of targeting Muslims cannot be cured by throwing other countries onto his enemies list” (ACLU 9/24/2017).

Figure 2.4



Caption: Tweet from ACLU, September 24 2017. Reposted by ACLU Northern California at: <https://www.aclunc.org/sites/muslim-ban/>

The ACLU and their partner organizations quickly filed an amended complaint reopening *IRAP v. Trump*, arguing that the third version of the travel ban was just as discriminatory and unconstitutional as the first two (ACLU 9/29/2017, Wofsy 10/3/2017). The Supreme Court had scheduled oral arguments on travel ban version 2 the following month, but canceled them so that parties could address whether or not the new version of the travel ban rendered the Trump administration’s appeal on the second travel ban moot. This sent the plaintiffs for *IRAP v. Trump* back to the federal district court in Maryland to challenge the new order there instead (Wofsy 10/3/2017). The State of Hawaii also returned to federal court to reopen *Hawaii v. Trump* and request a temporary restraining order on travel ban version 3 (Hawaii AG 10/10/2017). The Hawaii Attorney General’s office argued that:

The new order replicates all of the legal flaws evident in its precursors. It again openly discriminates...in the issuance of an immigrant visa because

of...nationality. It still fails, despite its elaborate rationalizations, to make any finding remotely adequate to support its sweeping ban of millions of foreign nationals. It exceeds the limits on a President's exclusion authority that have been recognized for nearly a century, by supplanting Congress's immigration policies with the President's own unilateral and indefinite ban. And it continues to effectuate the President's unrepudiated promise to exclude Muslims from the United States (Hawaii AG 10/10/2017).

On October 17, the day before the new ban was set to go into effect, the court in Hawaii granted a temporary restraining order blocking enforcement of the executive order for all countries except North Korea and Venezuela (Hawaii v. Trump 10/17/2017). In support of its decision, the court pointed out numerous inconsistencies in the Trump administration's argument. First, the government's security-related arguments were still flawed because there was no reason to suppose that a person's nationality alone made them a heightened security risk. The terms of the ban suspended entry of children whose only offense was the nationality of their parents, while doing nothing to block people with known terrorist connections but who happened to reside in a country not listed in the executive order. The court called this result "absurd" (Hawaii v. Trump 10/17/2017: 28).

Second, the executive order did not explain why current security screening processes were inadequate enough to justify banning entire categories of people rather than simply denying visas to specific problematic individuals on a case-by-case basis. Third, the court pointed out that the criteria listed in the ban had been inconsistently applied. There were numerous countries in the world that failed to meet the security and information-sharing criteria outlined in the ban, but were for some reason not included. Iraq failed to meet the criteria, but was exempted from the ban for policy reasons. Venezuela failed to meet the criteria, but received a pass except with regard to certain government officials. And Somalia was still fully included in the ban, despite meeting the information-sharing baseline that Venezuela failed. Further, there was no

explanation of the rationale behind the ban's so-called "tailored approach" to travelers from different countries. If there were specific reasons why Yemeni students were blocked but Iranian students were allowed, or why business travelers and tourists were blocked in some countries but not others, these reasons were not explained (*Hawaii v. Trump* 10/17/2017).

The following day, a district court in Maryland followed suit by issuing a partial preliminary injunction in response to *IRAP v. Trump* (*IRAP v. Trump* 10/17/2017). The court found that travel ban 3 violated the anti-discrimination clause in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 because it barred entry of immigrants on the basis of nationality. The court pointed out that the order did not provide any examples of vetting failures involving people from the listed countries that resulted in the entry of people who actually posed a security risk (*IRAP v. Trump* 10/17/2017: 51). The court agreed with the plaintiffs that Trump had exceeded his Presidential authority by imposing more restrictive limitations on visas beyond those formally imposed by Congress (*IRAP v. Trump* 10/17/2017: 54).

The Maryland district court noted that the travel ban was unprecedented in scope. The Proclamation was unique in that, while other presidents had issued executive orders addressing immigration issues, none had attempted to ban entry by nationals of more than one country at a time, let alone 150 million people from 8 countries at once. Rather, most similar proclamations had been issued in response to a specific event, and their effects had been limited to a specific group of individuals directly associated with that event (*IRAP v. Trump* 10/17/2017: 59). But the court stopped short of concluding that Trump had exceeded his authority under the Immigration and Nationality Act because the Act does not actually specify the exact limits of Presidential authority over immigration. The court agreed with the plaintiffs that there ought to be some limit to the President's discretionary authority over immigration, but could find no specific statute

defining what that might be. They were thus unable to find that the order definitely exceeded Trump's authority. But the court went on to state that "If there is an example of a[n] order, past or present, that exceeds the authority of that statute, it would be this one" (IRAP v. Trump 10/17/2017: 60).

Ultimately, the Maryland district court also found the security-related arguments for Travel Ban 3 unconvincing. The court found no particular merit in the Trump administration's claims that the inclusion of two non-Muslim countries in the travel ban negated any possibility of anti-Muslim animus. It noted that "the inclusion of Venezuela and North Korea has little practical consequence" because the Venezuela ban only applied to certain government officials, while the North Korea ban was likely to affect fewer than 100 people (IRAP v. Trump 10/17/2017: 74). With regard to security, the court pointed out the same inconsistencies noted by the court in Hawaii. It concluded that the global security review seemed to have been initiated in order to provide evidence supporting the need for a travel ban that had already been decided, rather than the other way around, noting that Trump himself had made several public statements to that effect (IRAP v. Trump 10/17/2017: 82). The court called the third version of the travel ban "the inextricable reanimation of the twice-enjoined Muslim ban...[which would] convey the message that the third iteration of the ban—no longer temporary—will be the 'enhanced expression' of the earlier ones" (IRAP v. Trump 10/17/2017: 83).

However, the Maryland court stopped short of enjoining the travel ban entirely. Citing the June 2017 Supreme Court decision, it put in place a nationwide injunction that barred enforcement of the travel ban for people who lacked a "bona fide relationship" with someone in the United States. Following the Supreme Court's stay of the Ninth Circuit's decision in July 2017, the Maryland court determined that refugee resettlement agencies once again would not

count as “bona fide relationships”. The injunction also did not apply to people from Venezuela or North Korea, leaving a tiny number of potential visa applicants from those countries barred (IRAP v. Trump 10/17/2017: 90-91).

Travel ban 3 remained partially blocked until December 4, 2017, when the Supreme Court granted the Trump Administration’s request to allow the travel ban to go into effect temporarily while pending cases worked their way through appeals courts in Maryland and Hawaii (IRAP v. Trump 12/4/2017). The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in Honolulu upheld the lower court’s decision in Hawaii v. Trump a few weeks later, amending it slightly to impose a “bona fide relationship” requirement (Dotinga 12/22/2017). In their view, the Proclamation conflicted with existing immigration legislation already passed by Congress—specifically, the existing visa waiver program—and thus such sweeping executive restrictions could only be allowable on a temporary basis in response to a specific threat unfolding too rapidly for Congress to act (Hawaii v. Trump 6/26/2018: 8). The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals followed suit in February, upholding the lower court’s decision in IRAP v. Trump (IRAP v. Trump 2/15/2018). But the travel ban remained in full effect pending Supreme Court hearings, scheduled for April 2018.

### *Travel Ban Version 3 Goes to the Supreme Court*

Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled along ideological lines with conservative justices Roberts, Kennedy, Thomas, Alito, and Gorsuch in the majority and liberal justices Breyer, Sotomayor, Kagan, and Ginsburg dissenting. At issue was the question of whether or not the travel ban violated the First Amendment of the Constitution by establishing a preference for one religion over another. Also at issue was the question of the balance of power between the

executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, and whether or not any limits could be imposed on Presidential authority on matters relating to immigration and national security. Official court records illustrate a deep ideological chasm between liberal and conservative justices on these issues, with conservative justices ceding apparently limitless and unquestioned authority to the President while liberal justices issued scathing dissents accusing the majority of ignoring an “overwhelming record of anti-Muslim animus” (p. 16) and “blindly accepting the Government’s misguided invitation to sanction a discriminatory policy motivated by animosity toward a disfavored group, all in the name of a superficial claim of national security” (Hawaii v. Trump 4/25/2018; Hawaii v. Trump 6/26/2018: Sotomayor and Ginsburg dissent, p. 16, 28).

The majority, led by Chief Justice John Roberts, concluded that Trump had not exceeded his authority in enacting the travel ban because the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act “exudes deference to the President in every clause”, granting the President “broad discretion to suspend the entry of aliens into the United States” (Hawaii v. Trump 6/26/2018: majority decision p. 10). As noted by the district court in Maryland, the Act does not specifically delineate any hard limits to this power. The Court pointed out that other US presidents had from time to time suspended entry to nationals of certain countries, not necessarily because the individuals themselves posed a threat but because the US government wanted to retaliate against their governments for actions that the United States found objectionable (p. 20). Further, the Court argued that the President is empowered to determine whether entry into the United States “would be detrimental to the United States”, and is under no obligation to explain that finding in enough detail to enable judicial review (p. 12). Strikingly, the Court declined to address limits on Presidential powers in any way, ascribing almost supernatural powers to the executive office. The Court stated, “...We cannot substitute our own assessment for the Executive’s predictive

judgment on such matters, all of which ‘are delicate, complex, and involve large amounts of prophecy’” (p. 35).

On the issue of the separation of powers, the Court dismissed the plaintiffs’ argument that the President should not issue executive orders conflicting with legislation that had already been passed by Congress, arguing that in this case, additional security reviews actually supported existing legislation because it would be impossible for border and customs officials to do their jobs if they lacked sufficient information to judge whether a person posed a security threat before allowing them to enter the country (p. 16).

The Court accepted the Trump administration’s security-related arguments for the ban virtually without question, arguing that since foreign nationals had no constitutional right to enter the United States, they were not entitled to redress in the courts. In stark contrast to the Supreme Court’s own conclusion on the same issue the previous year (*IRAP v. Trump* 6/26/2017), the Court decided that in such cases, it was not obligated to address harm done to US citizens either (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018: 30). Nor did it accept that there was any reason to question the motives behind the travel ban. The Supreme Court chose to limit its review to “whether the Executive gave a ‘facially legitimate and bona fide’ reason for its action” (p. 30), concluding that it was not necessary either to look behind the stated reason for other motives or to balance it against the constitutional interests of US citizens (p. 31).

Plaintiffs argued that the ban amounted to a “religious gerrymander” and that the results of the worldwide security review were “foreordained” (p. 27), exhibiting Trump’s public statements to demonstrate that the travel ban was motivated by anti-Muslim animus (p. 29). But the Supreme Court was unmoved by this argument. Since the actual text of the Proclamation was

“facially neutral toward religion” (p. 29), the Court concluded that there was no reason to examine allegations of religious discrimination or anti-Muslim bias.

In order to determine whether the Proclamation was lawful, the Supreme Court chose to apply rational basis review, which considers “whether the entry policy is plausibly related to the Government’s stated objective to protect the country and improve vetting processes” (p. 32)—a decision that the dissent found “perplexing”, given that in other religious discrimination cases the Supreme Court has applied more stringent standards of review (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018: Sotomayor and Ginsburg dissent, p. 15). The Court acknowledged that it hardly ever strikes down a policy as illegitimate under these standards, because in order to strike down a policy as illegitimate under rational basis scrutiny, it would have to be “impossible to discern a relationship to legitimate state interests” (p. 34)—a standard which is almost impossible to meet. Since the text of the Proclamation itself said nothing about religion, and since it did make a security-related argument that could plausibly be legitimate, the Court ruled that there was no necessary reason to strike it down under rational basis review. According to the standards of rational basis review, the Government need only state some “plausible” reason for the policy that is related to state interests. Since the text of the Proclamation cited the results of a worldwide multi-agency security review process, this requirement was fulfilled (p. 34). This argument left aside the question of whether or not the results of the security review process were “foreordained”, as alleged by the plaintiffs.

The Court went on to list several pieces of evidence that supported the claim that the travel ban was legitimately connected to US national security interests rather than religious animus. First, three countries—Iraq, Sudan, and Chad—had already been removed from the list. This demonstrated that it was indeed possible for majority-Muslim countries to move off the list

if they improved their security and information-sharing protocols (p. 36). Second, the Proclamation outlined exceptions for certain categories of people and included a waiver program for people facing undue hardship. The Court saw the existence of a waiver program as evidence that the Proclamation was not attempting to ban all Muslims without exception. In oral arguments, Justice Breyer called this assumption into question, pointing out that although the waiver program existed on paper, there was strong evidence that it had not been implemented in any consistent or meaningful way (*Hawaii v. Trump* 4/25/2018). But Justice Breyer's concerns did not sway the Court because rational basis review did not require the Court to examine whether or how the waiver program was actually being implemented; the fact that it existed on paper was sufficient to satisfy the standards of rational basis review (p. 37).

Arguing that the courts were not well equipped to make decisions on issues of national security, and should not "inhibit the flexibility of the President to respond to changing world conditions" (p. 32), the Supreme Court concluded that as long as the Trump administration could make a plausible claim that their actions were rooted in some real security concern, it was not the job of the Court to look further. "Under these circumstances, the Government has set forth a sufficient national security justification to survive rational basis review. We express no view on the soundness of the policy. We simply hold today that the plaintiffs have not demonstrated a likelihood of success on the merits of their constitutional claim" (p. 38).

Two conservative justices concurred fully with the decision but wrote their own opinions. Justice Kennedy concurred with the majority opinion of the Court, but warned that while there may be many instances in which government officials are not directly subject to judicial scrutiny, that does not mean that those officials are free to disregard rights protected by the Constitution. Rather, an official who has broad discretion to act without judicial scrutiny is obligated to take

extra care to adhere to the Constitution, even in foreign affairs, so that “an anxious world” can know that the US Government remains committed to the liberties that the Constitution seeks to protect (p. 2).

Justice Thomas expressed deep skepticism about the authority of district courts to issue nationwide injunctions in the first place. He argued that in recent years, district courts have begun issuing sweeping nationwide injunctions without considering whether they have the authority to impose universal injunctions, “making every case an emergency for the courts and for the Executive Branch” (p. 2). Proponents of injunctions argue that they allow affected people who were not plaintiffs in the legal case to be treated consistently, and that injunctions are a powerful way to check the powers of the executive branch. But Thomas argued that “the people already made that choice” when they ratified the Constitution. For Thomas, the case seemed to be primarily about the proper allocation of power between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, with the executive branch granted a level of authority that should rarely be challenged. In support of his claims, he presented a seemingly bizarre and convoluted argument that since US law was originally based on 18<sup>th</sup>-century English law, and since 18<sup>th</sup>-century English courts imposed few limits on the powers of the king, American courts should not limit the powers of the President either. It was not clear from his argument which branch of the government could legitimately check the power of the President, if the nation’s highest court declined to do so.

The Supreme Court ruling contrasted strikingly from those of the lower courts in several crucial ways. First, it granted sweeping and apparently unlimited powers to the President, with no clear way for any other branch of government to check his power or overturn or moderate his decisions. Second, it applied a lax standard of judicial review which the lower courts had already

rejected. Rational basis review assumed good faith on the part of the President, without questioning or examining it, and allowed the court to avoid dealing with many of the central issues of the case—such as Trump’s repeated anti-Muslim statements, and the concerning low number of visas granted under the waiver program. Third, it entirely ignored the context of the order. Fourth—and perhaps most importantly—by referring only to the text of the order itself and not to its context, the court avoided dealing with the case’s most central issue, that of religious discrimination in defiance of the First Amendment of the Constitution.

But an examination of court records reveals a deep divide within the Court on these issues. If the Proclamation was significantly affected by anti-Muslim bias, then it violated the First Amendment of the Constitution. But if it was primarily motivated by genuine concerns about national security, then it did not. Members of the Supreme Court disagreed about which was the primary rationale behind the ban (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018: Breyer dissent, p. 1) Justices Breyer and Kagan argued that the system of exceptions and waivers should help to answer this question. If the Government was applying these exceptions and waivers as written, that would strengthen the argument for the Proclamation’s lawfulness. But if Muslims who satisfied the terms of the Proclamation were being excluded without explanation, that would weaken the argument that the Proclamation is lawful and strengthens the argument that it is motivated by anti-Muslim animus.

Breyer and Kagan called out concerning evidence that the Government was not applying exceptions and waivers as written. First, the proclamation called for the Departments of State and of Homeland Security to issue guidance for consular officers to follow when making decisions about waivers. But to Justice Breyer’s knowledge, no guidance had been offered. In a pending legal case in New York, a consular official had sworn that the waiver process was “window

“dressing” because consular officials were not actually allowed to issue waivers (p. 7). During oral arguments, Justice Breyer repeatedly brought up this concern, stating that he had been unable to find any information about how to apply for a waiver, and asking whether a process for applying for a waiver had been formulated and publicized to people in the designated countries. The counsel for the administration stated that there was no need for a specific application process, since consular officials applied the waiver process automatically. When pressed further, he said, “I don’t know how well publicized it is, but I suspect that people understand how to get it” (*Hawaii v. Trump* 4/25/2018: 37).

But Breyer argued that publicly available statistics called this into doubt. During the first month, only two waivers were granted. During the first four months, there were 430—but this was only a miniscule percentage of the applications reviewed. Numerous applicants who met the criteria had been turned down without explanation—including Shaima al-Omari, whose case Breyer had specifically called out in oral arguments. In addition, almost no refugees from the designated countries had been admitted since the Proclamation took effect, even though the Proclamation did not apply to refugees. Student visas and other non-immigrant visas from the designated countries had also decreased significantly, even though those visas were not included in the Proclamation (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26 2018, Breyer dissent). Taking all this into account, Justices Breyer and Kagan found sufficient reason to suspect anti-Muslim bias and would send the case back to the district court for further proceedings in order to determine whether the waiver process was actually being implemented as written (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018, Breyer dissent).

Justices Sotomayor and Ginsburg took their written dissent further, disputing not just the implementation of the waiver program but the entire basis of the Supreme Court’s majority

decision. They argued vehemently that the Court had failed in its basic responsibility to safeguard the fundamental principle of religious liberty:

It [the Proclamation] leaves undisturbed a policy first advertised openly and unequivocally as a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” because the policy now masquerades behind a façade of national-security concerns. But this repackaging does little to cleanse Presidential Proclamation No. 9645 of the appearance of discrimination that the President’s words have created. Based on the evidence in the record, a reasonable observer would conclude that the Proclamation was motivated by anti-Muslim animus. That alone suffices to show that plaintiffs are likely to succeed on the merits of their Establishment Clause claim. The majority holds otherwise by ignoring the facts, misconstruing our legal precedent, and turning a blind eye to the pain and suffering the Proclamation inflicts upon countless families and individuals, many of whom are United States citizens (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018, Sotomayor and Ginsburg dissent, p. 1).

Sotomayor and Ginsburg accused the Court of presenting only an abridged version of Trump’s anti-Muslim comments. They catalogued a long list of public statements from Trump, including one in which Trump approached an aide asking for advice about how to put together a Muslim ban that would pass through the courts: “[W]hen [Donald Trump] first announced it, he said, ‘Muslim ban.’ He called me up. He said, ‘Put a commission together. Show me the right way to do it legally.’” (*Hawaii v. Trump* 6/26/2018, Sotomayor and Ginsburg dissent p. 7).

Sotomayor and Ginsburg took exception to the Court’s decision to apply rational basis review to the case, arguing that “a reasonable observer would readily conclude that the Proclamation was motivated by hostility and animus toward the Muslim faith” (p. 4). But even under rational basis review, they argued that the Proclamation should still fail the test because the Proclamation was “‘divorced from any factual context from which we could discern a relationship to legitimate state interests,’ and ‘its sheer breadth [is] so discontinuous with the reasons offered for it’” that the policy is “‘inexplicable by anything but animus’” (p. 16).

They pointed out that even if security were assumed to be the primary concern, Congress had already addressed the security vetting and information-sharing issues in existing legislation, and that the Trump administration had not provided convincing reasons why the current system was not sufficient (p. 21). Sotomayor and Ginsburg expressed shared concern with Justice Breyer that “there is reason to suspect that the Proclamation’s waiver program is nothing more than a sham” and that “the remote possibility of obtaining a waiver pursuant to an ad hoc, discretionary, and seemingly arbitrary process scarcely demonstrates that the Proclamation is rooted in a genuine concern for national security” (p. 22).

Even more concerning, Sotomayor and Ginsburg noted parallels with the arguments used in *Korematsu v. United States*, an infamous World War II era case in which the Supreme Court upheld an executive order that invoked national security as a justification to imprison Japanese American US citizens in concentration camps on the basis of their race. In both cases, the order was rooted in dangerous stereotypes about the targeted group’s inability to assimilate, and in both cases the government refused to disclose its specific reasons for considering that the people in question were a real security threat (p. 27). Sotomayor and Ginsburg issued a stunning rebuke of their fellow Supreme Court justices: “By blindly accepting the Government’s misguided invitation to sanction a discriminatory policy motivated by animosity toward a disfavored group, all in the name of a superficial claim of national security, the Court redeploys the same dangerous logic underlying *Korematsu* and merely replaces one gravely wrong decision with another” (p. 28). Despite their vehement objections, the majority opinion prevailed, leaving the third version of the travel ban in effect indefinitely.

## **Travel Ban Version 4**

After the Supreme Court’s ruling, there was no longer any legal obstacle preventing the Trump administration from adding more majority-Muslim countries to the travel ban. In January 2020, the White House issued the Proclamation on Improving Enhanced Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry (White House 2020), which left in place the existing travel restrictions on the countries included in travel ban version 3 and added six more countries to the list: Burma (Myanmar), Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania. Once again, Iraq failed the security review but was still excluded from the travel ban for foreign policy reasons. And Sudan—which had not been included in the third version of the ban—was once again included in the fourth (White House 2020).

The text of the Proclamation once again referred to the results of an ongoing global security review, which had found these six countries particularly deficient with regard to security and information-sharing protocols. It explained that immigrant visas presented a higher level of risk than non-immigrant visas, because of the difficulty of locating and removing a person who was belatedly discovered to have terrorist connections once they had already entered the country. So for the six new countries, most immigrant visas were banned but no restrictions were imposed on nonimmigrants. The ban did not include Special Immigrant Visas, issued to people who had “advanced US interests” by working for the US government or military. And for two countries, Tanzania and Sudan, Diversity Visas were banned but other immigrant visas were still allowed. Diversity visas were explained to be particularly problematic because people entering the country through the diversity lottery were less likely to have existing ties to family members or employers in the United States, and so they would be harder to track (White House 2020). (See Appendices 2.1 and 2.2 for a summary of the provisions of each version of the travel ban.)

Of the six new countries, five have substantial Muslim populations. Two are majority-Muslim—Kyrgyzstan (86%) and Sudan (70%). Nigeria is approximately half Christian and half Muslim, but it still has the fifth largest Muslim population in the world. Eritrea (36%) and Tanzania (30%) have sizable Muslim minorities. With a Muslim population of only 4%, Burma / Myanmar is the notable exception (Pew 2009). But it is important to point out that this small Muslim minority is largely made up of members of the Rohingya ethnic group. Many of the Rohingya have been forced to flee the country to escape genocide. So Burmese Muslims were the ones most in need of a safe harbor elsewhere. Though the Proclamation does not specifically bar refugees, it could result in unexpectedly long family separations for Rohingya refugees who had already resettled in the United States and were in the process of applying for visas for family members (Beech 8/22/2019, Kanno-Youngs 1/31/2020).

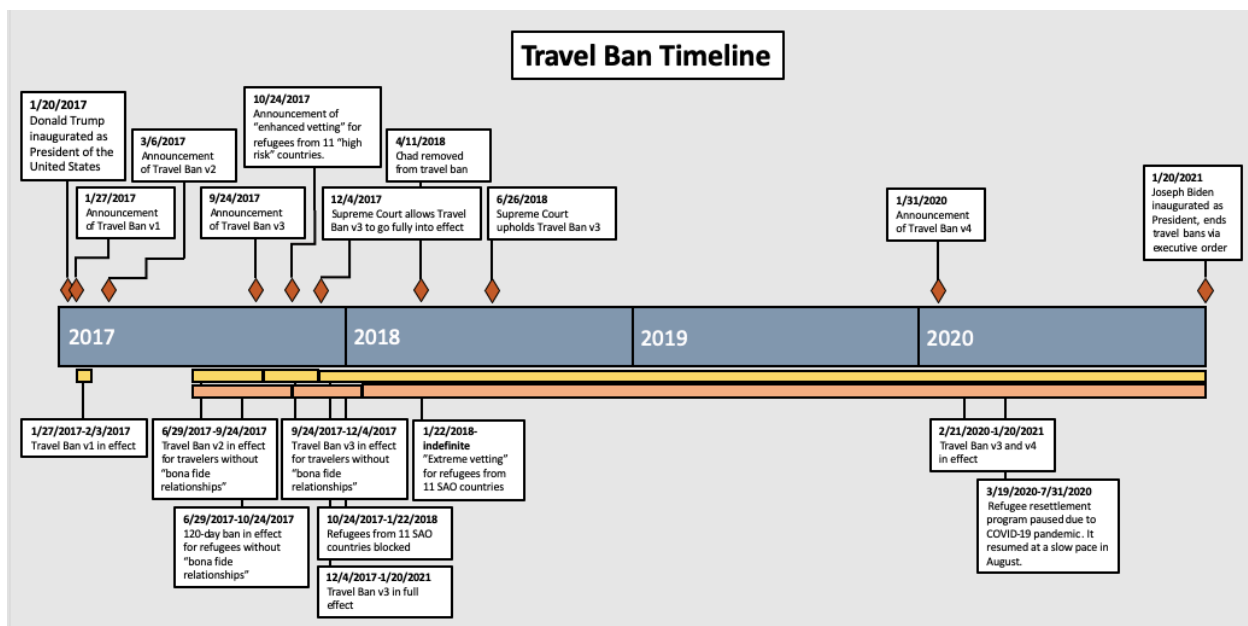
Immigration advocates began referring to the new version of the ban as an “Africa Ban”, in response to the administration’s decision to include Eritrea, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania (Narea 1/31/2020). Trump’s vulgar remarks about immigrants from “shithole countries” in Africa sparked outrage and accusations of racism (Fram and Lemire 1/12/2018). Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country and largest economy, was expected to be the most severely affected by the travel ban because of the large Nigerian diaspora already living in the United States, who are generally highly educated and tend to be employed in professional fields like healthcare, technology, and finance (MPI 2015). Nigerians already living in the United States reacted with shock and anger when they discovered that their country of origin had been included in the same category as problem states like Eritrea and Myanmar (Busari 2/1/2020; Narea 2/1/2020).

Though the text of the Proclamation explained the diversity visa decision as a special security issue, it is particularly concerning that the administration singled out diversity visas to be blocked in two African countries. Because of the exclusionary history of immigration policy in the United States (Daniels 2004; Zolberg 2008), Africans are much less likely than people from other continents to be able to enter the country through existing family connections. The diversity lottery program was created specifically in order to balance other US policies that privileged family reunification and left no pathway for potential immigrants from countries that did not already have substantial immigrant populations in the United States. It remains the only way for people from many African countries to immigrate. Blocking the diversity visa program is a significant blow to immigration from countries like Tanzania and Sudan, where diversity visas may be the only way for many people to come to the United States. In effect, ending the diversity program in these countries removed the only immigration line that many people had access to stand in.

Within a few short months of the announcement of the fourth version of the travel ban, a devastating global pandemic forced many countries including the United States to close their borders and impose various kinds of travel restrictions in an attempt to stop the spread of the deadly virus SARS-COV-19 (Wamsley 10/19/2020). At the time of this writing, it is difficult to say with any certainty what the practical effects of the latest travel ban have been because the pandemic has proved so disruptive to travel and immigration of all kinds. When the dust finally settles, it may be impossible to know how much of the decrease in visas from the affected countries is due to the travel ban, and how much can be attributed to the widespread effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which has sickened many millions of people worldwide and shut down travel across much of the globe.

Figure 2.5 is a timeline summarizing key events relating to the implementation of various versions of the Trump administration’s travel bans. See Appendices 2.1 and 2.2 for more detailed information about which travel ban orders were in effect in each of the affected countries, during which periods of time.

Figure 2.5: Travel Ban Timeline



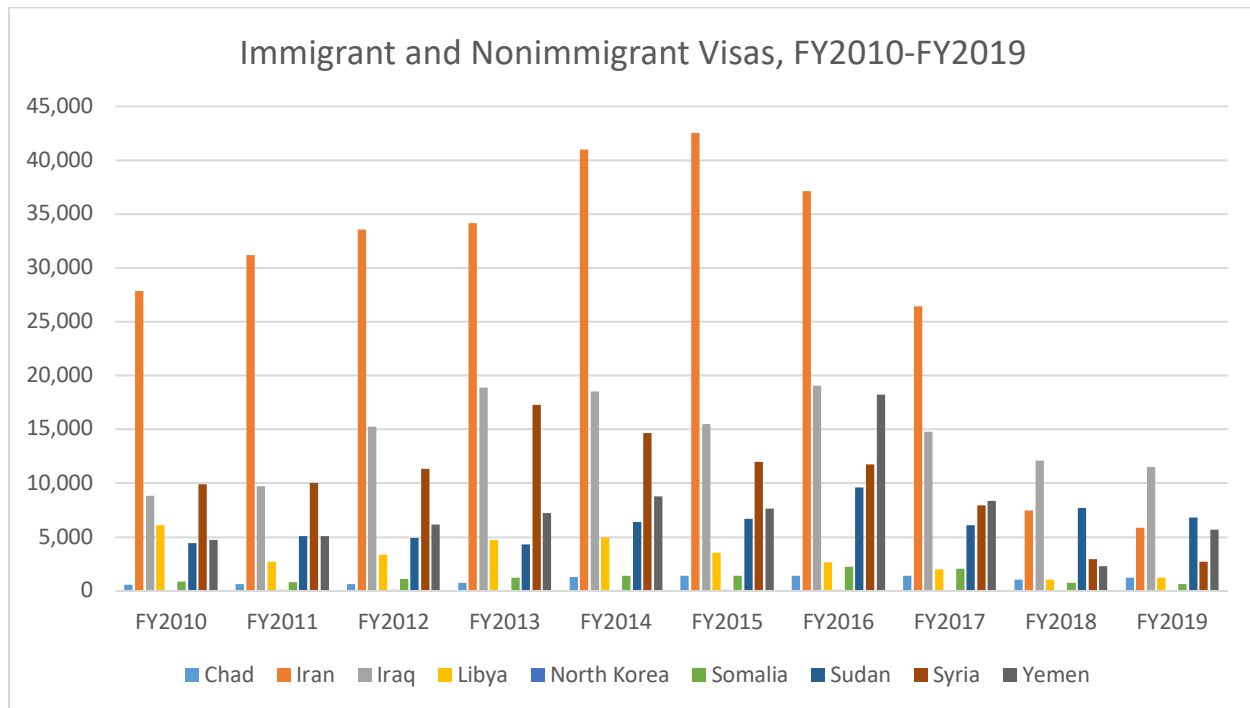
All of Trump’s proclamations and executive orders relating to bans on travel from Muslim and African countries were revoked effective immediately via an executive order signed by President Biden on his first day in office on January 20, 2021 (Kavi 1/20/21, White House 2021). Immigrant and Muslim advocacy organizations declared a hard-won victory. But the official end of the travel ban did not erase the consequences for people whose lives had been disrupted.

## Conclusion

What were the practical effects of the Trump administration's travel bans? State Department data shows a massive drop in both immigrant and non-immigrant visas from the targeted countries beginning in 2017, when the first travel ban went into effect. Even discounting the staggering drop in business and tourist visas from Iran, the difference is dramatic. The State Department granted a total of 2,690 immigrant and non-immigrant visas to people from Libya in fiscal year 2016, but only 1,235 in 2019—a drop of 54%. Visas fell even more dramatically from war-torn Somalia (72%), Syria (77%) and Yemen (69%). This is particularly noteworthy considering that massive humanitarian crises in these countries should logically have resulted in steep increases in immigration during this period (US State Department 2020a, b). See Figure 2.6, shown on the next page, for a graphical representation of these trends.

But decreased numbers of admissions from majority-Muslim countries were not the only effects of the Trump administration's travel bans, which had a number of other ripple effects in terms of activism and advocacy. The main purpose of this chapter is to set up arguments made in future chapters by explaining the policy currents that pro-refugee activists and volunteers were swimming against. It demonstrates how pervasive anti-Muslim sentiment had become in the United States and how willing people were to justify and institutionalize it, even in the nation's top courts. The travel ban situation shows how willing many people in the United States were to go along with policies that perpetuated xenophobia and racism, but it also explains why other people decided to stand against it. The travel bans set up a moral and ethical problem that many people found they could not ignore.

Figure 2.6: Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Visas, FY2010-FY2019



Note: These numbers do not include refugees, asylum seekers, or people already living in the US who applied for permanent residency (green cards). Source: State Dept Visa Statistics, FY2010-FY2019.

The arguments put forward for and against the Trump administration's travel ban demonstrate that this issue was more than just a policy disagreement about how to prioritize visa applications. Rather it was a deeply moral struggle over how to define the nation itself, which categories of people deserved to participate in it, and who had the power to decide. From the beginning, the travel bans were a central facet of the Trump administration's effort to exert its political and cultural power to shore up nationalist and ideological defenses against what many people perceived as the threatening disorder of a rapidly changing world. This could only be accomplished by marshaling overwhelming strength to draw lines and build walls. Historians and future constitutional scholars will doubtless have a great deal to say about the place of the

travel ban in the troubled history of the United States. For the present, three themes emerge that I outline below.

In terms of policy, the travel ban was a crucial early experiment in testing the limits of Presidential power. The crisis tested the fragile balance of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government to learn exactly how far a leader with authoritarian tendencies could go in unilaterally overriding laws that had been set by Congress. While the system did provide some limited checks and balances in that it delayed and rerouted some of the administration's earliest and most legally questionable attempts, the Trump administration was ultimately able to institute a travel ban that was not much different in practice from what it originally espoused. Over the course of four years, the Trump administration used what it learned from the travel ban to transform the face of American immigration policy—and managed virtually all of it without input from Congress and with only limited oversight from the courts.

The struggle over the travel ban forecast the future by exposing a growing ideological division between segments of American society, who held different political values, consumed different news, and came to widely divergent conclusions when presented with the same set of information. Over the course of Trump's four years in office, these differences in political and moral orientation would only grow. The themes and arguments from the four-year-history of the travel ban repeated themselves over and over throughout Trump's presidency in various guises. On one side was the perceived need for collective security against external threats, whether physical or cultural, even at the expense of potential harm to individuals—especially those like Shaima al-Omari, who were not considered full members of the group. On the other side were human rights and religious freedom for all, even at the risk of uncertainty and change.

While the travel ban was eventually successful in making it through the Supreme Court and limiting travel from majority-Muslim countries, and while the Trump administration gradually became more skilled at couching its arguments in terms that the legal establishment might marginally accept, it also had the effect of mobilizing a large portion of the American population to unite against it. For many people, the travel ban issue was a moral struggle over the core of American identity, and it evoked visceral responses in the people who rose up to push back against it. The travel ban invoked a massive public outcry precisely because it violated people's closely held ideals about human decency and religious freedom. For these people, resisting Trump became a fundamental moral imperative that started with the travel ban and eventually expanded into a wide range of other policy areas.

During the field research for this dissertation, it quickly became clear that the travel bans mattered intensely to interview participants, who saw the travel bans as a harbinger of dark times to come because they signaled willingness on the part of the federal government to support and encourage a pattern of burgeoning white Christian supremacy while the nation's highest courts looked the other way. Interview participants saw this as a clear and present danger to the moral and democratic integrity of the nation, a pattern that had too much in common with the exclusionary policies that, little by little, paved the way for greater future atrocities in Germany of the 1930s. In light of these concerns, interview participants explained active support of refugees and other excluded people as a clear moral imperative that they could not ignore. The travel bans alerted them to a danger that they later saw repeated in inhumane conditions at detention facilities, in the forced separation of migrant children from their families, and in kangaroo tent courts at the US-Mexico border. For many, collective resistance to the travel bans

helped them practice organizing skills that they would later deploy in support of other causes and in defense of other kinds of immigrants. That part of the story will be told in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### **“This is what Dallas looks like”: Practicing Solidarity in Response to the Muslim Travel Ban**

#### **From Field Notes**

Donald Trump’s surprise ban on travel from seven majority-Muslim countries had been in effect for about 24 hours when I came across a local news report showing a couple of dozen people holding hand-lettered signs, gathered in the baggage claim of DFW International Airport in support of the families of an unknown number of travelers who had already been detained under the ban. Instantly, the feeling of outraged helplessness I had felt since the announcement of the travel ban vanished; now I knew what to *do* about it. I gathered up my trusty bilingual “Welcome Home Syrian Refugees” sign along with some extra sheets of poster board and markers to share, jumped in the car, and drove 45 minutes to the airport.

By the time I reached the international arrivals terminal, the protest was already in full swing. At least a hundred people were already gathered on either side of a roped-off walkway where disembarking passengers were exiting the secure area of the terminal to walk toward the baggage claim. In the front of the gathering crowd, two preteen girls in hijabs held up a sign that said, “Free Our Grandma”. Across the way, a group of people waved a huge Mexican flag that said, “Chicanos for Muslims and Refugees”. The crowd was made up of people of all descriptions. Several people carried leftover posters from the Women’s March, depicting a woman in a star-spangled headscarf done in patriotic colors. Scattered through the multi-ethnic

crowd were several real-life women in Islamic headscarves styled to match the poster. People were holding up handmade signs with a variety of messages written in magic marker:

“No Ban No Wall”

“Welcome to America!”

“Stop the Hate”

“When Injustice Becomes Law, Resistance Becomes Duty”

“No Person is Illegal”

“Jesus was a Refugee!”

“Christians for Kindness”

“First they came for the Muslims, and we said NOT THIS TIME FASCISTS!”

The energy in the room was electric. The crowd was chanting with one voice, “Say it loud, say it clear! Refugees are welcome here!” Within five minutes, my small stock of extra poster board had been transformed into protest signs scattered among the crowd. I didn’t know who was organizing this thing. Maybe no one was, or maybe everyone was. All around, people were taking photos and videos with their phones and sharing them via social media with exhortations to their friends and relatives to come and join in. And it was working. Every minute, more people streamed in from outside. Soon a crowd of hundreds stood shoulder to shoulder. The noise was thunderous. At some point, a cluster of young men became self-appointed chant leaders, keeping energy high with driving rhythms played on a Middle Eastern hand drum. When one chant leader’s voice grew tired of maintaining the call and response, another voice would call out a new chant from a different corner of the crowd. Sometimes two chants started on

opposite sides of the terminal, building strength and rolling toward one another until they crashed and rippled against one another like the waves of the sea.

“Let them go! Now! Let them go! Now!”

“The people united will never be divided! The people united will never be divided!”

“No KKK, no fascist USA! No Trump! No KKK, no fascist USA! No Trump!”

“Hey hey, ho ho, Muslim ban has got to go!”

“Muslim rights are human rights!”

“No hate, no fear! Refugees are welcome here!”

“Our home is your home! Our home is your home!”

“Palestine to Rio Grande, no more walls on our land!”

“Show me what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!”

Many of the chants demonstrated solidarity with other social justice movements, especially those about immigrant rights. At one point, a group in the corner began waving a huge Mexican flag and everybody began shouting, “Si, se puede! Si, se puede!” The man standing next to me tried to follow along and finally tapped my shoulder politely, looking puzzled. He wanted to know what we were saying. I explained that it was Spanish for “Yes, we can!”—a chant reminiscent of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign rallies just a few years earlier.

The crowd used the chants to pass more practical messages as well. At one point during the long evening, airport employees brought out several cartons of bottled water and started passing bottles hand to hand through the crowd. We all shouted, “Thanks for the water! Thanks for the water!” Another time, the crowd began shouting as one: “Debbie, we found your debit

card! Debbie, we found your debit card!” I never found out who Debbie was or who exactly among all those hundreds of people had found her debit card, but I chanted with gusto along with everyone else. At some point the next day, a child got separated from his family and the whole crowd chanted, “Charlie Walker’s parents, go to the front! Charlie Walker’s parents, go to the front!”

Whenever a plane arrived, a stream of passengers would wheel their carry-on suitcases through the doorway from the main terminal. Their eyes would widen in a moment of surprise as they realized they would have to walk between two halves of a thunderously chanting crowd in order to get to the baggage claim. Some studiously ignored us, meeting no one’s eyes and looking straight ahead. Some whipped out their phones to take videos of the crowd as they passed through. And some lit up with smiles, waving or pumping their fists in the air as they took in what was going on. These people were the crowd’s favorites. Each one received a rock star greeting with massive clapping and cheering. One African American woman broke out in a little dance move as she passed down the walkway, and the crowd immediately switched chants in appreciation of her support, shouting, “Black Lives Matter! Black Lives Matter!”

My arms grew tired from holding up my sign, and my voice must have grown hoarse from all the shouting. Minutes melted into hours. I had no firm sense of time passing, because we were so firmly anchored in the unified experience of the moment that time simply didn’t seem to matter very much. Occasionally I thought to scribble a few terse notes, but for the most part I was too caught up in what was happening around me to remember to be an anthropologist. Individual identities faded away; we spoke with one voice; we were all one. I remember that at one point a little cognitive light bulb went off in my brain. I thought, “Oh, so this is what Victor Turner (1969) meant when he talked about *communitas*!”

Every now and then, someone official-looking would emerge from a hidden door to make announcements. Imam Omar Suleiman—already well-known and respected around the city for his interfaith efforts in the wake of the disastrous Black Lives Matter rally where five officers had been shot and killed the previous year—was a constant presence, conveying information, encouraging the crowd, and keeping attitudes positive and focused. By his side much of the time was a rotating cast of Jewish and Christian religious leaders. Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins and Mayor Mike Rawlings also made brief appearances. Later I learned that one member of Congress had joined the protest in person and another had sent a statement of support (Dallas Morning News 1/30/17).

But while enthusiasm was high, actual information was mostly lacking. Our goal was to push for the release of all the detained travelers—but no one seemed sure exactly how many people had been detained or under what conditions. Dozens of immigration lawyers showed up at the airport to offer their services pro bono, but they could not get access to speak to the detainees, even after worried family members had signed papers to officially secure them as legal representatives. Conflicting reports circulated among the crowd. Thirty or forty or maybe even fifty people had been detained, and word spread that at least nine were still in custody. No one seemed to know what had happened to the others. None of the detained people were entering the country illegally; all were legal permanent residents or had valid visitor visas. Their family members—many of whom were standing at the front of the crowd—were frantic with worry. Several of the detained travelers were said to be elderly parents and grandparents who suffered from medical conditions that made a long flight followed by overnight detention difficult or painful. At least one person was in a wheelchair, a Special Immigrant Visa holder whose pelvis had been broken in an attack after his work for the US military made him a target in his home

country of Iraq (Mervosh, Chiquillo, and de Bruijn 1/31/17). Another was an eleven-month-old US citizen who had been detained along with her mother, who had legal permanent resident status. The baby's aunt was standing next to me in the crowd.

Around eight o'clock PM, word went out that a federal judge had ordered a nationwide emergency stay preventing people with valid visas from being deported. The crowd exploded in deafeningly celebratory cheers, chanting at the top of their lungs: "USA! USA! USA!" When we received word that some of the detainees were being released, euphoric mass singing broke out, as though the United States had scored a winning soccer goal at the World Cup: "Ole, ole ole ole! Ole, ole!" The crowd jumped, clapped, and danced in rhythm. The people on one side of the walkway demanded: "Tell me what democracy looks like!" "*This* is what democracy looks like!" the other half of the crowd roared back.

The protest finally wound down well after one AM so that people could go home for a few hours of sleep, but by nine o'clock Sunday morning we were back for a second day. Before long, it was clear that word had spread. As churches let out, Sunday's crowd swelled even larger than the day before, reaching somewhere between eight hundred and twelve hundred people at any given moment. Families with children had come straight from church. Someone had organized a sign-making table, equipped with poster board, markers, and other art supplies. Someone else had organized a refreshment table. Sympathetic friends and neighbors who couldn't attend the protest themselves stopped by to drop off boxes and grocery bags full of snacks and bottled water. Restaurants donated sandwiches and pizzas. Girl Scouts in uniform circulated among the crowd, handing out cookies.

Around noon, Imam Omar Suleiman asked airport staff to clear a place for Muslims to pray. Those protesters who were Muslims quietly lined up among the baggage claim stations

while the rest of the crowd chanted encouragingly, “You pray, we stay! You pray, we stay!” Then silence descended over the terminal for the first time since the protest had begun, giving the Muslims a time of quiet for their prayers. Imam Omar Suleiman later wrote in an op-ed for CNN that this was one of the most meaningful moments of the whole weekend for him and for other Muslims, many of whom had never had the opportunity to claim space for themselves so visibly or so publicly. “There we were in the baggage claim of one of the biggest airports in America, protected while praying. It was a moment that left tears in the eyes of many...The prayer wasn’t meant to be part of the protest, but it turned out to be its most captivating episode. For those few moments, we got to be fully us, unashamed in our American-ness, unapologetic in our Islam and fully acknowledged in our humanity. And for those few moments, all of the protesters, of all faiths and backgrounds, were reminded that the promise of America is still worth fighting for” (Suleiman 2018).

The chanting and singing went on all afternoon, long until after the remaining nine detained travelers were finally released. After the last flight of the day arrived from the Middle East without further incident, Imam Omar Suleiman expressed to the crowd his appreciation and his hope that we would continue to stay alert to future threats against marginalized people. “This here is a new family,” he said. “We’re all family. This is what Donald Trump is unintentionally creating: his worst nightmare.” The crowd erupted into cheers. As the crowd finally broke up, someone started one final chant to speed us home:

“Show me what democracy looks like! *This* is what democracy looks like!  
Show me what America looks like! This is what America looks like!  
Show me what Dallas looks like! This is what Dallas looks like!”

As people began to move toward the exits, a number of us remained behind, picking up discarded water bottles and other assorted detritus left behind by the crowd, leaving Terminal D

as clean as we had found it when we first arrived on Saturday. There was a general feeling of triumph, of renewed determination, of togetherness and unity. But there was one particular protest sign that caught in my memory and stuck there like a thorn: “White people: Y’all are coming to the next Black Lives Matter rally, right?”

### **Why Was the Protest at DFW International Airport so Important?**

The protest at DFW International Airport turned out to be crucially important in ways that I could not have known to recognize at the time. Years later, when I asked my interview participants to tell me the story of how they got involved in pro-refugee work, the airport protest stood out as a recurring theme. In interviews, memories of the airport protest created instant rapport, a feeling of kinship and remembered solidarity, a sense that anyone who had shared this experience would understand this feeling that was so difficult to put into words.

Several interviewees described the airport protest as personally meaningful, even transformative. Long-time activists remembered the airport protest as a time of special solidarity, when they mobilized their existing networks, met new people, and built lasting partnerships that formed the basis of pro-immigrant or anti-racism projects for years to come. People who were new to this kind of work explained that the airport protest inspired them to get involved with new social justice projects for the first time. People who worked in city government talked about how the airport protest motivated the city of Dallas to spearhead and coordinate dozens of projects to improve access to services for the quarter of its population who were foreign-born.

Why was the airport protest so important to the people who experienced it? What made this protest—of all the protests that have taken place in Dallas over the years—so memorable? What was really happening here? I argue that the airport protest was an important exercise in

unity and active citizenship, in which ordinary people practiced solidarity, flexed newly developing political muscle, and learned how to put their ideals into practice in new ways. At the airport protest, people experienced themselves as part of a larger and more diverse whole, a group that could unify across boundaries of race and religion and social background in the service of a common goal—a group that could learn to speak with one voice. People made connections with others of different backgrounds who shared their values. Some of these new connections were fleeting, but some lasted for years afterward. People activated the personal networks that they already had in place, and they saw how quickly they could mobilize instant support. People realized—sometimes for the first time—that they had the power to accomplish change.

### **The Anthropology of Ethics, Activism, and “Becoming”**

The DFW airport protest was remarkable because more than a thousand ordinary people of all colors and creeds came out spontaneously—with no official organization or sponsorship and no advance planning—to defend the rights of a few strangers who were not US citizens, who did not share the same religion in common with most of the people who came out to support them, and who most of the protesters would never meet in person. This was among the first of the Trump-era protests, and for many participants one of the most meaningful because it set the stage for years of collective action afterward, and also because it helped them begin to think of themselves as people who could make a difference by pushing back against discriminatory policies through collective effort and by exercising their democratic rights. But why was this event so deeply important to people that they remembered it with special clarity for years afterward and worked to recreate and extend the experience at other times and in other settings?

Why were people so strongly motivated to take action—not tomorrow, but right now; not at a distance by giving money or sharing their opinions online, but by showing up in person; not by single-minded attention to causes that served their own personal interests but by commitment to causes that supported someone else?

The DFW airport protest provides a useful opportunity to explore some of the key issues in the anthropology of activism: namely, what motivates people to take action, and what mechanisms they employ to create lasting social change. In recent years, the growing subfield of anthropology of activism has drawn on the work of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze to conceptualize social action as a fundamentally ethical endeavor connected to people's efforts to enact their ideas of "the good" in the real world. In a study of queer activists and sex workers in India, Naisargi Dave (2010) concludes that, "People are drawn to activism because they have an ethical orientation to the world. They act because they nurture ethical ideals of what the world *ought* to look like. They act in part because they desire the practice of new freedoms that they can only yet imagine, but still strive to enable" (p. 370). Drawing on a growing body of anthropological literature that explores everyday life as a space for people to enact and experiment with notions about what constitutes a "good" life, Dave theorizes that at the heart of this struggle is an affective exercise in which people work to change not just the norms and expectations of society but also their own sense of themselves as moral subjects with the capacity to reach beyond existing realities to imagine new possibilities, and also the moral imperative to take action to make these imaginings a reality. In other words, in order to change society, people who become activists in order to change society must first learn to change themselves.

If activism is fundamentally about thinking beyond the unwritten rules, unconscious expectations, and habitual injustices of the social world as it exists now, in order to imagine and bring into reality another, better way, then the anthropology of activism must be a study of ethics and morality, of the ways that people imagine what *should* be and then work to make it real. Lambek (2010) writes that although ethnographers frequently encounter people around the world wrestling with thorny everyday questions about how to do what they think is right and good, anthropologists frequently pass over the ethical and moral aspects of ordinary people's lives in favor of analyses that focus on structure and power rather than choice (think Foucault), or else they become so mired in debates about cultural universalism vs particularism that they pay insufficient attention to the ethical complexity that animates everyday decision-making within every culture (think Boas). When anthropologists ignore the ways that ordinary people engage daily with ethical issues, they miss out on understanding an aspect of human life that is fundamental to human life everywhere.

Lambek argues that as a species, humans are fundamentally ethical and moral beings, in that most choices happen in the context of complex cultural understandings of what kinds of actions people believe are right and good. Ethics are so fundamental to the human condition that people cannot live outside of a social reality that is completely permeated by ethical awareness, and cannot act without reference to their own (or other people's) ideas about what kinds of actions are right and good and what kinds of choices will constitute a failure to live up to deeply ingrained ethical codes (Lambek 2010). Even ordinary decisions that do not immediately seem to have a clear right and wrong—such as choosing which brand of eggs to purchase at the supermarket—often become deeply ethical as people try to balance ideals of social justice, fairness, animal rights, and environmental responsibility against the everyday constraints of

limited household budgets (Fischer 2014). Thus, ethics ought to be woven into every anthropological project in the same way that ethics is woven into every aspect of ordinary life (Lambek 2010).

Lambek writes that most of the time, people's awareness of this ethical reality is usually implicit. In many ordinary situations people do not find it necessary to speak out loud about ethics because the "right" thing to do is usually already known. When the discussion of ethics becomes explicit, it often happens in the context of a teaching situation, such as when an adult explains out loud to a child a rule that normally goes unspoken among adults because it is already understood. Ethical discussions also become explicit at infrequent moments when something has changed; when there is disagreement about the right thing to do in some particular circumstance; or when there has been some sort of ethical breach and people must now decide how to respond (Lambek 2010). Following Lambek, I argue that protest events fall into this category because these are settings in which some aspect of social reality is contested, usually in strongly ethical terms—not about what *is* but about what *should be*. Muslims *should* or *should not* be part of the American community; refugees *should* or *should not* be afforded special protection and benefits; travelers of one particular religion *should* or *should not* be subjected to extra security protocols. Protests are events at which ordinary people speak collectively—and write on signs—about what they believe *should be*. Frequently, these are ethical statements that go unspoken at more ordinary times either because they are too obvious to bother speaking out loud, or because it is assumed that most people already agree, or because change does not yet seem possible.

If activist projects are about thinking beyond the current reality to imagine possibilities of what could or should be, and then bringing those imaginings into reality, then activism is about

*becoming*: becoming a better society that lives up to the values and ideals of its members; but also becoming a better person. The concept of “becoming” comes from the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze’s work is post-structural in that he sought to move beyond a system that attempted to structure thought in terms of difference and opposition—black vs white, night vs. day, raw vs cooked—in order to affirm a positive, creative notion of difference (Bright 2020). For Deleuze, reality is not made up of differentiated objects which can be clearly labeled, categorized, and defined. Instead, what is most essentially real is “becoming”—a endless process of infinite creation and change, which expresses itself in a material universe full of an ever-changing variety of differentiated people and things. Becoming can never and should never be finished, since it is always in a perpetual process of recreating itself anew (Deleuze 1995; Biehl and Locke 2010; Bright 2020).

For Deleuze, reality is made up of the actual—that part of reality which people can directly see, touch, and experience in the present moment—and the virtual—that aspect of reality that is immanent within the actual but cannot be fully contained within it. The virtual is a space of possibility, which already contains a myriad of potentialities that have not yet become manifest in the actual world of the present moment. For Deleuze, a key challenge for humans is to break through the limitations placed on our thoughts by the realities of the present moment in order to reach for other possibilities, which already exist within the virtual. In other words, the world is more than what is experienced directly in the present. It is always full of potential change that can be actualized in new and often unexpected ways (Bright 2020). Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism supplies a hopeful antidote to the violence and inequity of the current moment because it calls on people to break free from their habitual ways of seeing and understanding the world in order to create real alternatives based on new ways of thinking,

instead of unthinkingly perpetuating the same problems as before (Parr 2015). This concept is particularly potent in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century social protest movements pushing back against the despair of habitual injustice and baked-in inequity, because of the reminder that change is possible—indeed, other possibilities already exist if only people can remember to reach for them and make them real.

Key to Deleuze’s philosophy is the recognition that in trying to reach for personal and social change, people cannot know in advance exactly what the end result will look like. For Deleuze, there cannot be a final end result because there can never be a time when the process of becoming reaches its end (Deleuze and Guattari 1986; Deleuze 1994). This recognition is a double-edged sword. It means that the choice to reach for a better reality is an act of hope that can never be anchored in certainty. But it also means that the possibility of change does not disappear, even if a particular action does not immediately produce the desired results. Deleuze’s concept of becoming thus locates hope in the choice to embrace positive change and work toward the creation of the better world we imagine, rather than in the attainment of specific concrete results. But it is also crucial to acknowledge that “becoming” refers to an ongoing process of change which is not necessarily positive or negative. There is no guaranteed upward trajectory moving closer and closer to “the good”. Good intentions can produce bad or mixed or unintended consequences—but mistakes and bad choices can also lay the groundwork for learning and trying again.

In this project, people who lasted long enough in refugee and asylum work to become experienced were acutely aware of their own mistakes and limitations, and knew better than to invest too much emotional energy in the expectation of any specific outcome, because such expectations were frequently disappointed. Instead, they had learned to derive personal meaning

from ongoing commitment to work that they believed in, even though it would never be finished. An interviewee who had worked as an asylum lawyer for many years put it this way, with a nod to Czech statesman and former dissident Václav Havel:

Hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is working for something not because it has a chance for success but because it is the right thing to do. And that is how I've remained hopeful. Because in the short term, you're fooling yourself if you say, 'I'm hopeful because we're going to win this case'... When you're in a moment like now, that's illusory. And activists I think that are going to be in this life for years have to have a very long-range view. And you think about activism, for years they fought in social justice movements for abolition, for the rights of gay people to marry. Sometimes people worked for an entire lifetime and didn't see change. And that's how you have to look at it. And if you don't, you are really setting yourself up [for disillusionment]. (Interview C11)

I argue that the people who dropped everything to participate in the travel ban protests did so because they perceived Trump's travel ban as a severe breach of deeply-held ethical principles that might go unspoken during more ordinary circumstances: principles like religious freedom, equal rights, diversity, and welcome for immigrants and refugees. But in coming out to protest against Trump's travel ban, people were also forced to directly confront and come to terms with their own habitual complicity in other, less obvious forms of inequality that had come to seem ordinary and commonplace. The DFW airport protest became a liminal space—and a liminal moment—during which ordinary expectations and constraints about social relations were suspended (Turner 1969), and people were free to experiment with the kind of social reality that they thought *should* be, rather than the one they saw around them every day. Jewish and Christian and atheist people stood in silent solidarity to protect the rights of Muslims to pray publicly and visibly in an airport—a place that was still a symbol of heightened suspicion and profiling against Muslims in post-9/11 America. White and Latino and Asian protesters chanted their support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Pro-Palestinian Arab Americans stood next to

Jewish Americans and Latino Americans to chant and sing against border walls and in support of displaced people everywhere. The airport protest thus became an opportunity for people to imagine new forms of solidarity and practice making them real, in a liminal space outside of ordinary reality, shoulder-to-shoulder with others who were also engaged in practicing solidarity. The next challenge after that was to carry these reaffirmed values of solidarity out beyond the protest space and find concrete ways to enact them in the real world.

### **After the Rally**

After the protest itself was over, the real work began. Once people had imagined and practiced the potential of a different kind of social reality than the one expressed in Trump's travel ban, the next step was to figure out how to enact these moral possibilities in real life. Some people may have attended the airport protest and then gone back to their ordinary lives relatively unchanged, feeling no particular obligation to carry the work further. But there is strong evidence that for many people, the airport protest was personally transformative in some essential way that required them as people of conscience to take personal responsibility for bringing the ideals embodied in the travel ban protest into reality. There was no central authority to hand down instructions about how to do this; rather, people took a multiplicity of different actions using whatever resources and connections they had access to. Over the coming weeks and months, an array of new social justice projects were born. The following four examples demonstrate how individual people with different kinds of personal and social resources put the ideals of the DFW airport protest into practice at the grassroots and institutional levels.

### Nora: Volunteering as a Form of Activism

After the protest, some people expressed their desire for social change by starting new volunteer projects. A high school teacher named Nora told me the story of how she sat down with a bottle of wine and couple of female friends to commiserate about the unwelcome news of Donald Trump's election to the White House. "Initially we sat down and had this kind of 'holy shit' moment, you know. There were a couple of glasses of wine. And 'what's happening to our country? This is really scary! What are we going to do?'" Dismayed and frightened of Trump's vision for the future of the country, Nora and her friends debated where to focus their energy. Climate change? Planned Parenthood? Refugees? Nora had occasionally donated a little bit of money to various causes, but she had not done much volunteer work before, and had certainly never been the one in charge. But Trump's election made her rethink her habits of complacency: "I think it was really that email from Refugee Services and that feeling of, 'I need to do something. This is no longer a time for me to be complacent.' I was legitimately scared for my country." She went to a meeting at Refugee Services of Texas, but none of the standard daytime volunteer opportunities seemed feasible for a public school teacher working in the classroom five days a week, so she let the idea drop.

Then the airport protest happened, and it changed her life. Nora broke down in tears as she tried in broken half sentences to explain how the experience had affected her. She arrived at the protest full of righteous anger about the travel ban but left the airport filled with unexpected love for the people around her.

ND: We went there, and that was one of those moments. I was like— I mean you saw it. It was so full of love. I was like, 'what the hell?' I mean I was angry. But then you had these women in hijabs passing me flowers and saying thank you. And I was like, 'oh, my God.' See, I'm going to cry! [starts crying] But it was! It was one of those moments. I was like, 'OK.' And I think that was—sorry—[still

crying, wiping away tears]. That was a turning point as far as being committed. And that—sorry!

SM: Oh no, you don't have to worry! Don't feel strange. You're fine!

ND: And then our very first family too. I think that kind of solidified it. And then you start meeting the kids, these refugee kids, and that's kind of like, 'OK, I'm hooked.' I had the first family that we dealt with, and we got really close to them. We got to be more like mentors for them than we did for any other families. And so we got close to them and the kids. And so that kind of solidified it. And then you just—it's the right thing to do... [both laughing and crying] I think it's just this... The one positive thing that has come out of his presidency is my own personal activism. And I think the people that I know and I love, I've seen the same thing happen with them. I mean you're faced with just inhumane behavior toward... I think you either step up, or you allow it to happen. And I didn't want to be part of that. (Interview ND1)

Nora went home from the protest and changed her life. She and her friends collected enough donated furniture and household goods to set up an entire apartment for a newly arrived refugee family from Afghanistan. When she saw how much it mattered to the family to have their own place after more than a decade of fear and uncertainty, Nora was hooked. Before long, Nora was spending every weekend and every spare moment in the evenings after school collecting donations and organizing volunteers to help her set up apartments for refugees arriving from all over the world. Furniture donations poured in from neighborhood associations that Nora contacted on Facebook, until she ran out of space in her house and garage and started renting a storage unit to make room for it all. Nora's students started asking questions about the donations piling up in her classroom at school, and then they wanted to get involved too. Students who were old enough to have driver's licenses borrowed their parents' trucks and SUVs to haul furniture back and forth. Three years later, Nora and her cohort of friends, neighbors, and students had outfitted dozens of apartments for refugee families from all over the world. Nora confided to me that what kept her motivated to continue was the sense of connection with the

families she helped, the knowledge that she had done something to make a concrete difference in their lives. Years later, Nora still remembers the first refugee family she ever helped:

ND: He walks in...[trying to talk through tears] And he puts his hands up and he says, 'I have not had a home for eleven years. And he starts crying. And I asked him, 'Can I give you a hug?' And he said yes and so we hugged and he's crying. And he had a home for his kids. His kids were now safe. And I heard that from so many of them, like the Afghanis that I told you about that I had tea with. I said something about Trump, and he looked at me and he's like, 'There are no bombs here.' And it was just like--! [temporarily speechless] I think that for me it's just knowing that it's not perfect. They are going to struggle. But they're safe. (Interview ND1)

For Nora, the airport protest was a major life turning point, a moment of personal transformation that permanently changed everything about how she lived her life afterward.

Nora's story illustrates a pattern that I soon came to find familiar:

1. She became directly aware of a particularly egregious social problem that her conscience told her was fundamentally incompatible with her values.
2. She had a personally transformative experience in which she became aware that there was another way to do things.
3. She accepted that doing something to solve this problem was her personal responsibility.
4. She actively sought out connections with people who were different from herself, and she used her existing connections to get a new project started.
5. She carried this conviction out into the real world and sought a way to make it real, using the resources and connections available to her.

For Nora, volunteering on behalf of refugees was a form of ethical activism because it involved recognizing a disconnect between the current state of the real world and the possibility of a better world that could be. She found a practical way to bring that possibility into reality through

practical action to help solve a real and pressing problem of lack of affordable and homelike housing for refugee families.

### Maddie: Grassroots Organizing

But this desire to carry the ideals of the travel ban protest out into the real world took different forms for different people. While Nora took her commitment to change in the direction of volunteerism and practical action, others turned to more traditional forms of activism. As one of my participants said, “And then my hobby became marching” (Interview MF1). The airport protest was an opportunity for likeminded people to make and strengthen social connections with others who shared a commitment to social change and a desire to spread that commitment in the community at large through activism and social justice awareness projects.

During the course of my work in Dallas I was constantly running into Maddie, a long-time refugee advocate who had been heavily involved in volunteer projects for decades. Maddie had inexhaustible energy and a gift for bringing people in touch with one another. Maddie knew people at all the local refugee resettlement offices, and she had strong personal connections with all the clergy who were most committed to building connections between faiths. If there was a refugee advocacy or interfaith event anywhere in the city, there was a good chance that Maddie was involved in some way. So it was not surprising that Maddie was among the thousand-plus people who attended the travel ban protest. At the protest on Saturday night, Maddie struck up a conversation with a group of young people who were interested in starting a grassroots community organization to work on intersectional social justice issues. For their very first public event just a few days later, they teamed up with Maddie to help organize a candlelight vigil in

solidarity with Muslims and refugees. And a new community organization—Grassroots Power—was born.

Over the next several years, Grassroots Power went on to organize events supporting all kinds of social justice related causes. They wrote postcards to with messages of love and support for Dallas’ Jewish community when bomb threats and swastikas threatened their peace of mind. They organized rallies against white supremacy, pushed for the removal of Confederate monuments, spread awareness of LGBTQIA issues, and joined with city leaders and interfaith clergy in a prayer vigil to end gun violence after the Las Vegas mass shooting in 2018. Because of their lasting connection with Maddie, Grassroots Power organized a series of refugee-related events: an Eid picnic, another downtown candlelight vigil, and several Halloween-themed “Trunk-or-Treat” benefit events. Four years later, In Grassroots Power is still going strong.

This example illustrates the importance of events like the DFW airport protest as opportunities for people to establish and strengthen social networks with other like-minded people who they might not otherwise have met. Chance meetings at events like the DFW airport protest have the potential to grow into new social networks, which can be activated to support members’ projects. Community groups like Grassroots Power provide an organized way for ordinary individuals to take action with others in support of social justice causes. These sorts of organizations are crucial to creating real social change, because they are led by community members who decide for themselves which causes to support and what actions will be most useful. They have a powerful capacity to reach ordinary people whose job and family responsibilities might prevent them from being able to devote themselves to social justice causes full time, because the network (organized primarily via Facebook) allows them to be alerted when there is a one-time event or opportunity that they can participate in. Thus, the social

networks formed and strengthened at protest events are instrumental in creating real social change, since their effects have the potential to continue long after the event itself.

### Phillip: Building Interfaith Connections

Places of worship also function as social networks that can be activated in support of various events or causes. Faith-based social networks were one key reason why word of the airport protest spread so quickly and attracted so many people. Though it is impossible to say what percentage of the crowd attended at the behest of their ministers or rabbis or imams, data from interviews make it clear that faith-based social networks were a key factor in recruitment. Faith leaders were a constant presence at the airport protest, led by Imam Omar Suleiman with rotating support from several different Jewish rabbis and Christian ministers. In telling the story of how they arrived at the protest, several people said that they heard about it—and told others about it—through their existing social networks at their church, mosque, or synagogue.

Faith leaders who were involved in the airport protest talked about a commitment to fostering stronger interfaith dialogue and connections between their congregations and people of different faiths. Phillip, a Methodist minister, talked about his congregation's response to the interfaith dialogue event that his church organized in partnership with a local mosque. Phillip saw the travel ban as only the latest in a pattern of events that attempted to undermine the constitutional rights of Muslims to live and worship according to their faith. He recalled the armed anti-Islam protests that took place outside of Dallas-area mosques in 2015 and 2016:

FG: That was very disturbing to me because everybody has the right to worship. I'm not Muslim. I'm not a brown-skinned person but everybody has a right to worship I think as they wish. That's part of our constitution. It should be what we believe. And so we invited the Muslim community to our church, and then we invited a lot of clergy to come...And it was packed. We had 450 people, mostly Muslims, invited into our church basically for the express purpose of us saying,

‘We’re really sorry. We’re sorry this happened. It shouldn’t have happened. And we stand with you.’...As they were leaving, there were some Muslim people that I met on the way out. And they were literally in tears thanking me for what we had done that day. And I realized just how rare unfortunately that still was, if that makes any sense. It made me both angry and gratified...At those moments when we’ve really done some hard work and we’ve gotten through some things and can see each other in our humanity. That is, that’s the payoff for me. (interview FG1)

Phillip is one of many faith leaders who took on leadership and organizing roles behind the scenes at the airport protest, and the interfaith dialogue event at Phillip’s church was just one of many such events organized by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith leaders during this time period. At the center of these interfaith efforts was a coalition of North Texas clergy members from different faiths who met regularly to coordinate responses to various emergencies and challenges and crises as they arose throughout the city. Faith Forward Dallas formed partially in response to a rash of anti-Muslim incidents around the city in 2015 and 2016, and they saw it as their mission to present an alternative to hatred and division by building strong partnerships between people of different faiths, especially during times of crisis. Faith Forward Dallas made it their mission to present a unified front in response to all manner of natural disasters and social justice crises: tornadoes, immigration crises, homelessness, racial justice issues, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Faith Forward Dallas also came to serve as a liaison between the mayor’s office and faith groups during times of crisis. In the public response to the Muslim travel ban, they saw an opportunity for North Texans to come together. The co-chairs of Faith Forward Dallas made a point of modeling this togetherness by always appearing together in their various ecclesiastical garments, speaking publicly side-by-side.

Faith Forward Dallas was formed with the intention of building interfaith solidarity in response to situations like the armed anti-Muslim protests that happened in 2015 and 2016. So it was no accident that the congregations associated with Faith Forward Dallas were already

primed to respond to the travel ban crisis in force. When the protest was over, these congregations continued to organize interfaith events over the course of the coming months and years, supporting one another particularly in response to events that threatened to turn people of different backgrounds and religions against one another—such as the violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in 2018, the border crisis in 2019, and the nationwide summer of racial justice protests in 2020. This coalition of faith leaders—founded in response to rising anti-Muslim sentiment—was also the network that laid the groundwork for the Dallas faith community’s response to the mounting crisis at the southern border two short years later.

The history of Faith Forward Dallas demonstrates that once a social justice oriented interfaith network forms for one purpose, it can already be in place and ready to mobilize when future crises break out. Had this network had not already formed in response to the anti-Muslim events of the early Trump years, it would not have been possible to mobilize people and resources quickly enough to respond to new crises. So one indirect result of the Muslim travel ban was that it ended up providing a catalyst for the formation of interfaith social justice oriented networks that responded to a wide range of other crises as they unfolded later on. Faith Forward Dallas and its associated network of congregations later formed the core of Dallas Responds, a massive interfaith effort to respond to the crisis at the southern border in 2019. That effort will be the subject of chapter 6.

#### Mayor Mike Rawlings: Building City-Wide Partnerships to Support Immigrants

The DFW airport protest was also the catalyst for institutional change at the level of city government. As seen in the previous examples, different people took different types of action

after the travel ban protest, partly because they had access to different sorts of resources and different kinds of social networks to draw upon. As a single, atheist school teacher with a full-time job, Nora organized friends and neighbors and fellow teachers to collect furniture donations for refugees. This was a form of action that was possible and accessible for her, given her particular circumstances. Phillip was already a Methodist minister with a large congregation, a reputation for activism, and a strong network of social connections among clergy members of other religions, so his version of action involved building closer connections between people of different faiths. But when Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings left the protest determined to do something in response, the resources and networks available to him were on a completely different level, and so was the action that he was able to take. As the mayor of the ninth most populous city in the United States, Mayor Rawlings could mount an institutional response, not just an individual one. Mayor Rawlings lacked the power to overturn Trump's executive order or to influence federal immigration policy. But he could marshal the resources of the city government to provide a more welcoming atmosphere for immigrants to thrive, and that is what he did.

During the weekend of the airport protest, Mayor Mike Rawlings and County Judge Clay Jenkins met with detained travelers after their release and presented them with bouquets of white roses along with personal apologies for what had happened to them (Chiquillo, Steele, and Mervosh 1/30/17). In a press conference, Mayor Rawlings said that he was "deeply distressed" about the travel ban, calling Trump out directly for making politically-motivated false claims about a made-up refugee terrorist threat to justify an executive order that would be destructive to businesses and families alike. Mayor Rawlings argued that the travel ban would not only damage the city's ambitions of becoming an international business hub but would also exacerbate the

suffering of thousands of thoroughly-vetted refugees who would otherwise become good members of the Dallas community. Speaking to the press, Mayor Rawlings decried the travel ban in deeply moral terms:

So I am very, very sad about what this does for Dallas, because Dallas is not this sort of city. Lastly, on a personal note, I am a Christian and a Christ follower. This is not a Christ action. This is not what the Gospel preaches. And as the new Bishop Burns just told me, he said Joseph and Mary had to go to another land for Jesus to be born in, and somebody had to take them in. And to make this a political issue when we try to live out our faith every day, I think it's important for Christians to speak in a loud voice to our president and say, 'That's not the spirit that we want our country to take, because we have a different spirit. We have a spirit where we help strangers. We help our neighbors. And so I believe that on many, many fronts this is ill thought out. It's bad policy. It's bad for business. It's bad for families. It's bad for cities. And it's bad for the heart. We as people are defined not by how we treat ourselves but by how we treat the other. Today is a great failing of America in that regard. (Fox4 News 1/29/17)

Mayor Rawlings returned to the office the following Monday still deeply upset over the events of the weekend and determined to do something about it. As the mayor of the ninth largest city in the country, he had an established institutional network of people and resources at his fingertips, and he also had an idea for how to put those resources to work. Mayor Rawlings conferred with the new city manager about what Dallas might be able to do to better serve the needs of more than a quarter of a million foreign-born residents. The city manager expressed surprise that Dallas did not already have an office dedicated to immigrant issues, since many smaller cities already did. Rawlings then called another colleague of his, a former private immigration attorney who was returning to Dallas after a stint working as a senior advisor for the Obama administration. He asked if she would be interested in helping him start a new office of immigrant affairs. Within two months, the new Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs (WCIA) was up and running.

This was not the first attempt at starting an Office of Immigrant Affairs in Dallas. Immigrant advocates around the city—including the new director—had put forth a concerted effort to get support for an office of immigrant affairs more than a decade previously. It seemed a reasonable goal for a large city whose population was 25% foreign-born (City of Dallas 2018). Such offices were becoming increasingly common in other large cities around the country. For a year and a half, a determined coalition of immigrant advocates met every month to try and muster support for the idea from Mayor Tom Leppert and other city leaders. But something about the timing wasn't right; they were never able to build enough support for the idea, and it eventually fell apart.

But in early 2017, in the wake of the travel ban protests, it was a different story. Everything fell into place. Many of the people who had been involved in the previous effort to start an office of immigrant affairs were still living and working in Dallas. So the office's new director was immediately able to call on her previous connections in the city to recruit experienced staff, who used their existing connections to put together partnerships with immigrant service and advocacy organizations around the city. Together, they constructed an ambitious city-wide strategic welcoming plan, which was unanimously adopted by the city council in 2018 (City of Dallas 2018). Lena, who worked in city government, marveled at how smoothly everything fell into place:

We were tugging and tugging and tugging to make it happen 12 years earlier. But it just fell into place and continued to just fall into place beautifully with everyone we turned to opening their doors to us and opening resources and sharing their resources with us. And while you might have thought we'd have some speedbumps along the way, we really haven't. Amazing. It really has been. The community as well as the city of Dallas itself. Every door we've knocked on people have wanted to help us... Yeah, so I really have to chalk it up—maybe we planted some seeds a while, fifteen years ago or however long it was. But I think it was all timing. (Interview UT1)

Good timing or not, putting together the welcoming plan was still a massive amount of work. The new office had three full-time employees, two of whom had decades of experience in immigrant services and connections with others at various immigrant-related organizations in the city. Their first task was to find out what was needed. Toward that end, they surveyed everyone they could think of who was involved in providing services to Dallas-area immigrants in order to learn what they thought the biggest needs were and how they thought the city could help meet those needs. They found that the biggest problems interfering with immigrants' ability to improve their quality of life in Dallas were: fear of immigration enforcement; lack of English language skills; poverty and lack of resources; transportation; and affordable housing. Next, they recruited a task force of 85 people from immigrant service organizations in order to develop formal recommendations for the city to help integrate immigrant residents fully into city life. The task force conducted listening sessions, site visits, and informational interviews over the course of several months. The result was a 44-page formal welcoming plan with specific commitments from the city and dozens of community partners in the areas of communications, housing, transportation, education, language access, civic engagement, citizenship, economic opportunity, and legal support (City of Dallas 2018). Amazingly, Dallas was able to accomplish all of this without hiring an outside consultant to design and oversee the process.

After months of committed work on the part of the city and dozens of community partner organizations, Dallas had made enough progress to apply for certification through Welcoming America—a grueling process that involved months of data-gathering and self-assessments, followed by an intense three-day site visit packed with dozens of stakeholder meetings. Welcoming certification served several purposes. It laid out specific goals and benchmarks for the city and its community partners to achieve. It built stronger partnerships at all levels, and

reinforced commitments from an array of different stakeholders, who were then committed to following through on their part of the action plan. It gave the city something to brag about, and it sent a message about the kind of city that Dallas aspired to be. Even more importantly than that, Welcoming America's three-year renewal requirement created a mechanism to hold city leaders and community partners accountable to maintain their commitments over time, even after city leadership changed hands. Knowing that losing the certification would reflect badly on the city's public image, the members of the task force hoped that the requirement to renew the certification would hold future city officials' feet to the fire to continue making welcoming a priority even after the initial enthusiasm faded.

The other practical benefit to Welcoming certification is that it created a way to spread ideas and best practices from one city to another. Revamping entire systems to be more accessible and welcoming for immigrants can seem overwhelming for cities with limited resources. To overcome this barrier, Welcoming America sends representatives from fledgling cities on site visits to cities with more established programs to learn how they accomplished it. Boston and Cincinnati sent representatives to Dallas in 2019. Once they saw what Dallas had accomplished with a tiny paid staff and a strong network of partnerships, they were able to envision ways to accomplish something similar in their cities. So Welcoming certification is a means not only of improving access to services in the city, but also of exporting best practices to other cities around the country.

Along the way, the city of Dallas made a number of large and small changes that made an impact. In an effort to make services more accessible, the city compiled information about organizations providing low-cost services to immigrants, and made it publicly available via a virtual platform that immigrants can access in more than 100 languages. WCIA staff have

spoken at hundreds of community outreach events to promote citizenship and to provide information about policy issues affecting immigrants, such as the public charge issue. The city council approved a \$100,000 fund for civil legal representation for immigrants—something that would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. The city used that money to apply for an additional \$100,000 in matching grant funds from the Vera Institute, which is now paying for a new program run by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to provide legal representation to immigrants in detention. The city also funded several smaller grants for non-profit organizations to promote citizenship, and this resulted in a series of mass citizenship workshops at the downtown library, at which hundreds of volunteers helped eligible immigrants fill out the paperwork to apply for US citizenship.

These actions on the part of the city of Dallas are not a direct result of the DFW airport protest itself. But most of them probably would not have happened without the WCIA, which exists in large part because of Mayor Mike Rawlings' response to the travel ban. Even after Mayor Rawlings left office in 2019, the Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs and its associated network of immigrant service partners remained strong because so many people were committed to working for its success. Perhaps the office of immigrant affairs never got off the ground twelve years ago because at that time, people with the power to do something did not have the same sense that immigrants were under direct threat. Perhaps, in an indirect and convoluted way, the time was “right” in 2017 because travel ban and other anti-immigrant policy changes provided the impetus for people act. To achieve these changes, hundreds of people all over the city worked to build something good out of the political chaos and anti-immigrant vitriol coming out of the Trump administration. The people of Dallas wanted to prove that they had a different vision of America from Trump—so they did.

## Discussion

The story of the DFW airport protest illuminates some key questions about the reasons why ordinary people decide to take action and the mechanisms by which they do it. I propose that the decision to take sustained action—whether in the form of volunteerism or activism—is a fundamentally ethical choice which requires several basic components:

- 1) Direct recognition of a problem that needs to be solved or an injustice that cannot be allowed to continue. Recognition often comes through some sort of direct personal experience which brings the person to awareness of a new problem or injustice that didn't exist before, or which makes an old problem or injustice impossible to ignore.
- 2) Conception of the problem or injustice as a moral / ethical issue, such that inaction conflicts with the person's ability to understand themselves as a good person. The problem is framed—and experienced—in ethical terms: “This isn't who I/we want to be”; or “It's just the right thing to do”. This leads to acceptance of direct personal responsibility for doing something about the problem / injustice. The person stops saying, “*Someone* should do something about this” and starts saying, “*I* should do something about this.”
- 3) Exposure to a real-life situation in which habitual ways of thinking are suspended and new ways of thinking and behaving start to seem possible. Perceived impossibility is one of the biggest barriers to action, because people frequently become hardened toward habitual problems that they see no real chance of solving. In order for people to be motivated to take action, they need to think that change is possible. Overcoming this barrier requires entering into a situation that invites the person to break down or suspend their habitual way of thinking in order to actively envision new possibilities, and practice

bringing these new ways of thinking and relating into reality through action with like-minded others.

- 4) Personal commitment to continued action after the event itself, even when it comes at a cost of time, effort, and resources. This chapter has demonstrated how highly-motivated people find diverse ways to mobilize their own resources and social networks to take continued action after the end of the motivating event itself. These individual choices are all motivated by a shared response to the core ethical problem, but take different creative forms depending on the types of resources and networks that are available in individuals' different circumstances.

Here, it is important to note that for every highly-motivated brand-new social justice activist who successfully starts and sustains their own action plan over time, there are likely many others who feel strong internal motivation but lack the social and material resources to sustain continued action. Many people may consider participation in one protest event enough to satisfy their need for action. Some people may leave the event with good intentions about staying involved but no specific plan for follow-through. Still others may feel a deep personal commitment to ongoing action, but cannot marshal the personal, financial, or social resources to keep going over time. So for practical reasons, it is common for people to drop in and out of active social justice work at different points in their lives, according to the demands of changing life situations. This means that one of the most important functions of organizations is to provide a mechanism to sustain the work over a period of time so that responsibilities can shift from one person to another as individuals drop in and out. Several interview participants stressed that it is not usually necessary or practical for individual people to "reinvent the wheel" by pioneering their own brand-new social justice projects, because new projects tend to waste time and effort

dealing with practical start-up issues that more established organizations have already resolved. Only a small minority of people will have the motivation and the resources to be successful in starting something brand new. Most interested people would be better served by taking advantage of the existing social networks and collective know-how at established organizations rather than wasting time and energy starting something new.

This leads to one final key component of effective ongoing action:

- 5) Social networks are key to effective ongoing action. These networks can take different forms. They can be personal networks of friends and neighbors, like the people involved in Nora's furniture donation project. They can be religious networks, like the chains of people from churches, mosques, and synagogues who recruited one another to go out to the airport to protest, or to connect with one another at interfaith events afterward. They can be grassroots community organizations, like Grassroots Power. They can be professional networks, like the one Mayor Rawlings employed when he started the Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs. Social networks formed for one purpose can be reactivated later to serve other purposes, as long as the new purposes are perceived as being in line with the basic values and goals of the group. Social networks make it possible for their members to organize themselves quickly in response to new crises or challenges, and they make it more likely that motivated but busy people will remain involved over time. The DFW airport protest amassed quick and spontaneous support because people activated their social networks to recruit more people to come—and it had a sustained effect over time because people used the protest as a way to form new connections which could later be reactivated for new purposes, as will be seen in the coming chapters.

In terms of anthropological theory, the events surrounding the 2017 DFW airport protest are instructive because they illustrate important connections between several different arenas of theory. The protest can be viewed as a liminal event à la Victor Turner (1969). Participants stepped aside temporarily from ordinary reality to enter “a moment both in and out of time”, in which they set aside the usual divisions of rank, hierarchy, race, and class, in order to reinforce social bonds with one another and express renewed commitment to shared beliefs and values. In this case, unity across differences of race, class, and religion *was* the core value they sought to express and reinforce, in opposition to political rhetoric and policy that made division and distrust seem inevitable. This liminality allowed participants to practice the kind of solidarity that they wished to carry with them into the real world.

The events detailed in this chapter also provide fodder to fuel continued discussion of the old chicken-and-egg question about the relationship between structure and agency (Ahearn 2001; Ortner 2006): that is, how much free will do ordinary people have to shape and define the social and cultural worlds they live in, and how much are they at the mercy of larger structural and cultural forces that shape the world—and even their thoughts—for them? Protests and demonstrations are a particularly interesting social context for exploring issues of structure and agency because they involve clear intentionality (Ortner 2006). People involved in protest events are generally very explicit about exactly what they hope to accomplish by their participation—or at least, they usually have very clear ideas about what they object to and wish to change. Thus, protests and demonstrations are inherently moral and ethical events at which participants try to reshape reality to match deeply-held beliefs and values about what a “good” society should look like. In this sense, activism is a deeply moral / ethical endeavor tied closely to participants ideas about what constitutes “the good” (Dave 2010, 2012).

But protests alone are not enough to accomplish real social change. The people in this chapter carried the values expressed at the airport protest back into their everyday lives, where they took steps to reshape their own social worlds through small everyday choices. Here, civic engagement is about public protest, but it is also about ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010)—that is, individual people making intentional daily efforts to reshape their society from the ground up, by living according to a chosen set of values and influencing others to do the same. In this project, participants frequently articulated the intentional ways that they reshaped their own everyday lives in order to align with the changes they wanted to see in the larger world. In order to change their world, they first had to change themselves (Coutin 1993). This kind of intentional everyday restructuring of everyday decisions adds a new dimension to the concept of agency, because it shows the ways that ordinary people often see themselves as part of a larger social whole which they have the power to influence, not just occasionally at public protest events, but a little at a time via their own everyday personal choices.

## **Conclusion**

As the DFW airport protest came to an end, Imam Omar Suleiman offered the following words to the crowd, sending us home with the exhortation to come back in even bigger numbers if and when injustice threatened again:

This is going to be a long, hard-fought battle for the heart and soul of this country. But we will win this battle. [loud cheering]...Any time any politician decides to take advantage of any marginalized community, decides to pick on refugees or undocumented immigrants, decides to support racially oppressive policies against our black brothers and sisters. [crowd cheering]. Anytime they do that. This here is a new family. You are all family now. These are new alliances and this is what Donald Trump is unintentionally creating. His worst nightmare. [loud cheering]

The crowd spontaneously took up one final chant, a moment that Phillip remembered years later as “the most beautiful thing I’ve heard in a long time”:

Show me what democracy looks like! This is what democracy looks like!  
Show me what America looks like! This is what America looks like!  
Show me what *Dallas* looks like! *This* is what Dallas looks like!

The nationwide protests after the Muslim travel ban demonstrate that events or policies that are widely perceived as reprehensible can end up sowing the seeds of their own destruction. While people often tend to ignore habitual social problems that they have come to think of as normal or unsolvable, they are more likely to actively push back against new problems or injustices that seem sudden, abnormal, or morally repugnant. In the early days of the Trump administration, policies such as the Muslim travel ban inspired shocked resistance and refusal from large portions of the population because they were too extreme, too sudden, and too draconian to be easily accepted as normal or necessary. In Dallas, the travel ban protest was a catalyst for change. People at the protest were confronted with a new injustice that they could not allow to stand without losing their sense of themselves as “good people”. They formed new connections with like-minded people who were interested in social change, and practiced new forms of collective action and solidarity, which temporarily suspended habitual ways of thinking and relating and opened up space to consider new possibilities. And afterward, people used their existing resources and social networks to bring those possibilities into reality by working in diverse ways toward sustained social change.

The travel ban protest can be seen as a catalyzing event that propelled its participants on a course of “becoming”: becoming activists and volunteers; becoming allies in active solidarity with neighbors of diverse backgrounds; becoming the kind of country and the kind of community that they wanted to see. This kind of “becoming” is not without its challenges, as we will see in

the upcoming chapters. At this protest event, people of diverse backgrounds were able to practice the kind of solidarity that they hoped to bring from possibility into reality. People built partnerships using whatever networks they had or could build. And so they entered into messy intersectional relationships that required them to deal with ugly issues like white privilege and charity vs. solidarity. But for that liminal moment at the airport protest, such messy realities could be postponed. For that fleeting weekend, a thousand people asserted that *this*—this exuberant, angry, hopeful, multilingual, multicolored, multi-faith crowd—is what Dallas looks like.

## CHAPTER 4

### **“It’s just the right thing to do”: Becoming a Refugee Volunteer-Advocate in North Texas**

The goal of this chapter is to answer the question of *who* gets involved in pro-refugee activities in North Texas and *why* they choose this particular type of volunteer project over a host of other social problems and concerns. The previous chapter, about the travel ban protest at DFW International Airport, argued that people made the decision to take action because of direct personal exposure to some event that framed a new social problem as an ethical issue or that made an old social problem impossible for a person of conscience to ignore. Not everyone involved in this project started volunteering because of Trump. But even those who had already been doing this work for many years saw important aspects of their work and their approach to it change dramatically in response to the actions of the Trump administration. For many people the Trump years were a wake-up call that called habitual political complacency into question and lent special urgency to social justice issues of all kinds. But that is only a partial answer because it still does not explain why people looking for a way to push back against Trump-era policies chose to express their fears for the country by pushing back on *this* issue. Given the host of social problems that people might see as urgent, it matters why people with limited time and resources chose to devote their attention to immigration—as opposed to climate change, voting rights, mass incarceration, or child poverty. And within the relatively large category of immigration issues, it matters why these people chose refugee issues—as opposed to deportation,

or the border wall, or inhumane conditions in detention facilities, or legalizing the status of the millions of undocumented immigrants already in the country.

In order to answer these questions, I asked each interview participant to share the story of how they got involved in their pro-refugee work. Each story was unique. Some people gave short but emotionally intense accounts of a single catalyzing event, one experience that would forever change everything that came after. Other stories of “becoming” were long and meandering, touching on a lifetime of small choices made in the same direction. For some people, pro-refugee work was a conscious act of resistance against rising tides of xenophobia and intolerance. Others fell into the work more or less by accident, but found in it a kind of purpose that gave depth and meaning to their lives over the course of decades. Almost everyone talked about the richness of the personal relationships they had formed in the course of the work. Almost everyone talked about how much they cherished the memories of particular moments when they saw that their efforts had made a real difference in someone’s life, even if those successes were fleeting and far between. And everyone talked about something they had learned.

My participants came from a wide range of different perspectives, and they framed things in different ways, but they all shared a commitment to working on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers *because they saw it as the right thing to do*. This moral/ethical responsibility was more important than personal comfort or convenience. Though they all did derive some personal satisfaction from the work, it came with considerable cost in terms of time, material resources, and emotional bandwidth. It was more important than having the approval of their peers (though they did not all face the same kinds of social risks). It was more important than avoiding the discomfort of acknowledging past faults. For some, it required reshaping their personal identity and belief structure in order to be compatible with this new moral imperative.

How did these people come to understand “helping refugees” as a moral/ethical imperative that they could not ignore? This chapter does not pretend to give an exhaustive list of all the reasons that people volunteer with refugees. It does not necessarily apply to all times and places. But it does raise some common themes about how people living and working in North Texas came to understand “helping refugees” as a powerful moral imperative that shaped their lives. In the following pages, I highlight several individual stories of “becoming” in order to illustrate a few key themes uncovered in the interviews: compassion for refugees and asylum seekers, often recognized based on firsthand experience; shared identity with persecuted and displaced people; international experience and global worldview; and orientation toward political activism and systemic change.

### **Literature Review: Why Do People Volunteer?**

What motivates people to volunteer? Volunteerism (also called voluntarism) is a tricky concept in anthropology because it does not necessarily translate neatly across cultures. While all societies have some form of resource redistribution, the concept of giving—who gives to whom, in what circumstances, and why—is understood very differently in different parts of the world. Giving—and volunteering—is a deeply moral/ethical activity, embedded with all kinds of usually unspoken cultural ideas about who should give, who should receive, when, and why. For example, Bornstein (2012) found that Indian people in New Delhi were often perplexed by the enthusiasm with which expatriate Americans organized themselves to volunteer time and donations at local orphanages. In New Delhi, people expected most giving to happen either in the context of family relationships, or in acts of *dan*, in which an anonymous giver gained spiritual merit by taking pains to avoid any possible benefit to themselves. According to the concept of

*dan*, any gift that confers material or social benefit to the giver is spiritually polluted, and gifts can only be spiritually pure if the giver lets go of all possible connection to the results of the gift. So in New Delhi, local staff at orphanages were perplexed and confused by expatriate Americans' expectations that they could enrich their own lives through meaningful volunteer "experiences" at orphanages, where they hoped to build friendships and social connections with the people they met. These Western-style expectations about volunteerism as a meaningful personal experience frequently caused confusion and misunderstanding because they clashed with local understandings of how "giving" should work (Bornstein 2012). Where most people in New Delhi would simply have sent an anonymous donation without expectation of further involvement, American expatriates expected to gain something from the experience of giving—not necessarily in material terms, but in terms of enriched life experience.

This example speaks to one of the big questions that anthropologists and other social scientists have repeatedly asked about volunteerism: who really benefits? Do people truly "do good" in order to help other people with no thought for themselves, or is there always some kind of self-interested cost-benefit analysis at work, in which helping others is mostly an indirect means to gaining something for oneself? Proponents of the "rational actor theory" explanation of human motivation—a concept borrowed from economics—would argue that people are more likely to help others when they are counting on some potential benefit for themselves, such as in a quid pro quo relationship where the giver is saving up obligations that they can cash in for future favors (Smith 1982; Wilson 2000). But even if we extend this explanation to include less concrete benefits—a line on a resume, spiritual merit, warm fuzzy feelings—rational actor theory is often still insufficient to explain people's willingness to dedicate themselves to altruistic

projects that are often more expensive in terms of time, resources, and even reputation than any concrete returns they may receive.

In particular, rational actor theory is insufficient to explain a whole constellation of human choices in which people are more concerned with *meaning* than they are with material benefit per se. In Lebanon, Deeb (2006) found the Shi'i Muslim women of Hizbollah running orphanages and soup kitchens for the poor as an act of public piety or "women's jihad". For them, volunteering was a way to demonstrate public commitment to a modern form of Islam that required practical action in the world rather than blind devotion to tradition. In this context, giving became more than just a way to fulfill the basic requirements of one of the five pillars of Islam. It was about acting out a new interpretation of Islam in which women rejected perceptions of Shi'a Islam as "backward" and uncivilized by comparison with European secular modernity. Through actions of religiously-oriented public service, these women claimed an identity as modern, empowered, virtuous, and unapologetically religious. For them, giving was more about *meaning* and *identity* than it was about any particular kind of material benefit. Working in the soup kitchen was about choosing to *be* the kind of modern, empowered, unapologetically Shi'a Muslim women that they wanted to see in the world.

Other examples from the anthropological literature demonstrate that in many different cultural contexts, volunteering often has something to do with a desire to *be* a certain kind of person, or to create a certain kind of social reality, or to restore a sense of meaning and purpose in the face of personal loss. Work is about more than the task performed when it helps to create the conditions for social belonging. In Italy, Muehlebach found unemployed and elderly people engaging in volunteerism as a way to "purchase" social belonging and reclaim a sense of self when other forms of social value—such as regular gainful employment—were lost. As the

neoliberal state withdrew funding and support from social services, more and more social service work was done by unpaid volunteers, who were often unemployed or underemployed people who had lost their social status and their sense of worth in the world that came from having paid employment. Rather than feeling like failures, people who had lost paid employment could claim special status and worth in the world by giving their time to this sort of affective labor, and elderly people could feel that they were contributing to society instead of being a burden (Muehlebach 2011, 2012). So in this context it was the marginalized people who were the most motivated to participate in volunteering, and who gained the most from the experience. Volunteers were able to claim a special kind of virtue by performing care work without compensation. They even claimed that the fact that they were volunteering, not working for money, made their work more moral and thus more meaningful and worthwhile than similar work that others did for a paycheck (Muehlebach 2011).

Similarly, in interviews with professional humanitarian aid workers and local volunteers in Finland, Malkki (2015) found that both categories of people participated in their humanitarian activities out of a deep emotional need to help—a conclusion which Malkki says calls into question basic assumptions about who “the needy” truly are. Both aid workers and locally based volunteers felt a strong desire to contribute something meaningful to the world, to be part of something larger than themselves. But Malkki’s interviews with local knitters involved in a Trauma Teddy project uncovered questions about who really benefited from the project. The knitters were mostly elderly people who wanted to regain a sense of meaning and personal value in the world by imagining how their handmade stuffed animals would help needy children in faraway countries—but it was by no means clear whether the Trauma Teddies actually helped

these children in the way that their makers imagined. Malkki argues that the lonely knitters may have gained more from the project than the children they purported to help (Malkki 2015).

What do all of these projects have in common? All of these projects, across disparate times and places, demonstrate that there is something going on in volunteerism that cannot be explained by a simple cost-benefit analysis. Rational actor theory is not sufficient to explain what motivates people to dedicate time, effort, and resources to volunteer projects, often at significant cost to themselves and without any particular expectation of material return. Perhaps they do seek practical experience or professional advancement or a line on a resume. Perhaps they seek a sense of meaning, purpose, or belonging. Maybe they hope to build social connection or new friendships. Perhaps volunteering serves to relieve “the burden of unequal world order” by feeling as though one is doing something about it, even if one cannot do anything to address the root cause of the problem (Fassin 2012). And perhaps, as for many people in the current study, volunteering is a form of moral/ethical political activism.

### **Seeing is Believing**

Carrie initially felt nervous and uncertain when a Christian aid organization approached her about their idea of sending a team of Evangelical Christian women to Mexico to make a short documentary film about the migration crisis in Central America. As a lifelong conservative Christian, Carrie had built a certain amount of credibility in Evangelical Christian circles because of her advocacy on pro-life (or as she termed it, “pre-birth”) issues, which she had expanded beyond abortion to include adoption and foster care. But she knew very little about the crisis at the US-Mexico border, which had become an incendiary political issue in the Evangelical circles where Carrie lived and worked. Carrie knew enough to recognize that the trip would likely force

her into uncomfortable territory that might challenge some of her preconceptions. She believed that it was important to have a secure border. But she had also read that migrant children were being forcibly separated from their parents. She found the conflicting news headlines confusing and disturbing. How could she know the reality of what was happening at the border unless she saw it for herself?

CT: I was waiting in line for my drink and I was looking at the newsstand. My daughter was three at the time. And the picture had said, 'ten-year-old boy traveling with three-year-old to make it to the border from Central America'. And I thought to myself, I have a three-year-old. Would I send her 700 miles with my ten-year-old neighbor? That's a better situation than keeping her with me? What kind of situation are these people leaving, knowing that that's what they're going to be facing?

Joining the Mexico trip was not an easy decision. In the social world that Carrie inhabited, politics and religion were inextricably intertwined. Many people in her church community took it for granted that a hardline stance on immigration was a necessary response to a frightening security threat. Carrie and her fellow travelers had to consider the potential social cost of becoming associated with a policy issue that was widely perceived as "liberal" and thus outside the realm of acceptable political discussion. Engaging with immigration issues felt risky, and even potentially disloyal. But Carrie decided that she had a responsibility to leave her comfort zone to go and bear witness to whatever was really happening.

In Oaxaca, a film crew followed Carrie and her fellow travelers as they visited a shelter for migrant children, interacted earnestly with the people at a waystation for families, and prayed tearfully over young teenaged mothers. Carrie described the experience as life-changing, like being "hit by a train":

CT: I broke down in the child migrant center. And the film crew wasn't allowed in there because of the age of the kids. I just went into a room and I just started bawling. And the event coordinator followed me into the room and she said, 'oh my gosh, I know it's so hard.' And the executive level staff member from the

forum came in the room, and she said, ‘are you ok? What’s going on?’ And I couldn’t verbalize and I was crying. And my friend looked over and she just said, ‘She’s grieving how big she missed this.’

Carrie’s experience in Oaxaca transformed her perspective on immigration. She saw that the migrants she met in Mexico were no threat to anyone; they were simply families fleeing violence. They were fellow Christians, mothers like herself who were trying to provide safety for their children in the only way they knew how. Carrie began to think of immigration as a human dignity issue rather than a straightforward security issue. She explained that she had come to understand “pro-life” as something bigger than “anti-abortion”. She no longer believed that it was productive for Evangelicals to focus on the abortion at the expense of other social issues, because all “human dignity” issues were ultimately interconnected. She realized that she could no longer in good conscience accept the status quo.

CT: I came back and it was just tough. How can I not try and do something? These people share my faith. I can see that. And they have dignity and worth and we’re treating them like they are animals. Or like they are less than. Or we are choosing as an American church to stay in our comfortability rather than engage in hard and messy spaces. And I just wasn’t willing to stay in that place.

Carrie realized that as a lifelong conservative Christian, daughter of an Evangelical pastor, stay-at-home mom, and respected pro-life advocate, she was equipped to reach her community in a way that people who were already known as immigration activists could not. For those who knew her reputation as a committed pro-life advocate, she was already a trusted source. It became her mission to use her influence to encourage others in the Evangelical community to start having difficult conversations about immigration. To that end, Carrie used her experience making the documentary to build an online community that provided a nonpolitical, nonpartisan, nonthreatening environment for conservative women to explore

Biblical concepts of compassion and welcome without feeling pressured to engage in a confrontational way.

Carrie's approach displays a shrewd understanding of Evangelical Christian politics. Carrie knew that many people in her Evangelical community were primed to think of immigration at worst as a serious security threat, and at best as a distraction from the only political issue that really mattered—the fight against abortion. If she wanted the message to carry weight with its target audience, it needed to stress the scriptural importance of compassion while avoiding ideas and phrases that might trigger a knee-jerk emotional refusal. The resulting film is designed to resonate with a very specific audience of devout Evangelical Christian women with very traditional family values, for whom motherhood is more important than individual accomplishment outside the home, Biblical teachings carry more weight than fact-based knowledge, and family values are more important than worldly politics. These are people who value kindness and compassion toward other people—especially other Christians—but who are not necessarily inclined to support political positions that challenge the traditional social order or that hint at disloyalty to any part of the political platforms of politicians who also oppose abortion. By focusing on the emotional journey of sympathetic Evangelical mothers, and by framing “leaving our comfort zones” as a brave and morally upright choice, the film paves the way for other Evangelical women at home to follow suit. The film presents immigration primarily as a moral, emotional issue that women can feel confident to engage in based on their innate moral sense of right and wrong, regardless of their level of specific factual knowledge about immigration as a policy issue. The film is presented from the point of view of respected Evangelical women who present immigration not as a separate issue but as an extension of issues

that Evangelical women are already primed to care deeply about—mothering, family values, and Christian pro-life ethics.

Carrie readily acknowledged that people who were already comfortable engaging with immigration-related issues might view the film as an extremely soft pitch. But for those people within the Evangelical church who felt niggling doubts about the situation on the border but were not yet confident enough in those doubts to speak them out loud, the film and its associated discussion guides provided an easy, palatable on-ramp to build confidence to engage with a taboo issue.

CT: The film itself really is designed mostly for those who are needing to engage on the issue, who are feeling a stirring of compassion about the issue and about the need of competent reinforcement. Like OK, so I'm not crazy that I'm feeling icky about what's taking place. I'm not crazy when I'm crying because I see that another person has drowned in the Rio Grande. I wanted to give confidence to the compassion that women are feeling. And we want to provide a safe space for them to take a journey to dig in. That's what we want to do.

Strikingly, Carrie understood that her goal was *to show Evangelical Christian women that it was acceptable to feel compassion toward people in need*. Many people in Carrie's world felt caught between a desire to be compassionate and a fear that they could afford to relax the rules without being overwhelmed or taken advantage of. She needed her audience to view asylum seekers as people—mothers, sisters, children—and as fellow Christians seeking safety rather than as a faceless, threatening mob of opportunists and lawbreakers, as they were frequently characterized by conservative news outlets and politicians. Carrie trusted that when presented with a way to reframe migrants as people in need of compassion, her people would respond:

CT: I know my church. My church has no idea what they're missing. And if they knew how badly they were missing it on this issue they would be as grieved as I am. They would! I know this. And so what I want to do is, I want to be as shrewd as possible in the best way so that I can engage my people effectively. Because

they're missing it. They're missing it by miles and miles. And if they could see what I am seeing or if they could engage one step closer and continue that journey I know that they would have the same reaction that I do. And they would become endeared to these people and they would become advocates for these people. And so many of them already have. And yet not enough. So I just, that's where I get emotional about it because I believe in my church.

### Interpreting Carrie's Story

Several themes emerge from Carrie's story that merit discussion and analysis. All have bearing on a question that the refugee advocates I encountered during my fieldwork asked themselves and one another over and over—the question of how to reach people who were not already primed to accept their message. Carrie's story illustrates the effectiveness of seeing injustice firsthand rather than via passive viewing of news reports at a distance; the crucial importance of framing messages in ways that resonate with the priorities of specific communities; and the need to have a nuanced understanding of the local political context in which the message will be received.

### *Seeing Firsthand*

Carrie's story illustrates the importance of *seeing firsthand* the human reality of the situation at the southern border. For Carrie, helping asylum seekers was not an obvious moral good until she personally witnessed their predicament and interacted directly with them as real people with names and families and stories. But once Carrie saw with her own eyes, helping became an obvious moral imperative that she could no longer ignore without sacrificing her understanding of herself as a moral person doing God's work in the world. This theme—bearing witness, or seeing with one's own eyes—recurred over and over in interviewees' explanations of

what they were doing when they organized trips “down to the border”, and will be explored more fully in chapter 5.

### *Speaking the Local “Language”*

Carrie made sense of her experiences in Mexico and justified her change of heart on the issue by fitting it into a familiar conceptual framework that she and others in her social world were already primed to accept. In this sense, Carrie’s story also highlights the importance of working with trusted local leaders and “speaking the local language”. Here, I am referring not to an actual spoken language like Spanish or Chinese, but to a mode of communication based on an understanding of shared values and priorities—in this case, the “language” of conservative Evangelical Christians. People like Carrie who are already respected within their communities know best how to frame messages that will resonate in the communities of which they are a part. Due to a widespread fear of a creeping loss of Evangelical Christian cultural identity, many people in the Evangelical communities are already primed to reject pressure to relax their stance on controversial social issues, particularly if that pressure comes from sources perceived as “liberal” and therefore inherently un-Christian. Carrie’s reputation as a respected pro-life advocate and stay-at-home mother made her an aspirational figure for other Evangelical women and gave her a platform so that when she began to speak about immigration, people were more likely to listen. Carrie does not frame this issue in terms of “social justice” or “immigrant rights”—concepts that are too closely associated with anti-Christian “liberal” politics to carry weight in her world. Rather, she frames it as an extension of the Biblical call to compassion and pro-life, pro-family ethics. The people Carrie met in Mexico thus became part of a “pro-life”, pro-family story, not a “border-crossing” or “systemic racism” story.

### *Refugee Issues in Evangelical Christian Politics*

Carrie's story also illustrates that contrary to popular perception, Evangelical Christian culture is not a monolith. Evangelical Christians are not universally opposed to immigration reform or to taking in refugees and asylum seekers. In fact there are strong voices speaking out on behalf of refugees and other immigrants from within the community. Organizations like World Relief, the National Immigration Forum, and the Evangelical Immigration Table are working to reframe the immigration debate in Biblical terms and mobilize conservative Christians to advocate for more compassionate and welcoming policy approach toward immigrants. Pressure from Evangelical faith leaders may even have influenced the Trump administration to back off of some of its more extreme efforts to ban refugees (Jackson 2018; McNeel 2019, 2020). But those who do dare to advocate on behalf of immigrants and refugees are facing a steep uphill climb because of the way that conservative politics often interact with religious identity in Evangelical Christian circles. Regardless of what scripture says or does not say, for many Evangelical Christians, compassion toward immigrants is not the obvious response, particularly if there is a perception that the immigrant in question might have bent or broken the rules in the process of crossing the border. In this social context, compassion is contested, conditional, and carries with it a real risk of social disapproval, so speaking out requires an extra dose of bravery.

### Other Christian Perspectives on Refugee Issues

Speaking more broadly of religious perspectives on refugee issues, it is important to note that Carrie's experience is not necessarily representative of religious Americans—or even Christian Americans—as a whole. In this project, many other interviewees came from religious

perspectives that were more oriented toward social justice in the first place and so did not necessarily experience the same kind of “conversion” experience that Carrie did. For them, protecting refugees and asylum seekers was simply and obviously the right thing to do—to the point that interviewees frequently found it difficult to believe that any responsible person of faith could think otherwise. Some of the more theologically-minded Christian interviewees talked about finding a faith rooted in liberation theology, a Latin American Christian faith tradition centered on aiding the poor and liberating oppressed people. Some talked about American evangelist John Wesley’s call to remedy social injustice and work to improve the lives of others in this world, not only in the next. Some Christian denominations were more amenable to this sort of thinking than others. For example, the Methodists—despite an impending denominational schism over LGBTQ rights—were particularly active in pro-refugee activities all over the city, and even seemed to act as a magnet for social justice converts from other Christian denominations. Several interviewees who started out in conservative Evangelical denominations said that they became Methodists when they realized that their commitment to social justice issues put them at odds with the priorities of their conservative churches. For these people, leaving the church was a deeply ethical/moral decision that hinged on a perception of some sort of fundamental incompatibility between the narrow priorities of the church and the need they saw for greater justice in society. In this light, Carrie’s willingness to manage the cognitive dissonance of an uncomfortable position in order to work toward changing her church from within is even more noteworthy.

## Compassion as a Moral / Ethical Imperative

Carrie's desire to include refugee issues under the larger umbrella of "pro-life" issues is tied to her concern about how to rehabilitate the tattered reputation of the Evangelical church, and conversations with other interview participants showed that this concern was justified. Polina, who began volunteering with refugees as a response to the 2016 election, explained that Evangelical Christians' willingness to accept Trump's cruelty toward immigrants severely tarnished her opinion of religious people in general. Polina's desire to do good is not rooted in religious belief or identity. Polina describes herself as an atheist. Polina confided that she felt disappointed and disturbed watching so many Evangelical Christians continue to support Trump while explaining away the worst and most un-Christian of his actions. But volunteer work helped to some extent to ease her distrust of religious people.

PR: Me and my friend that started this are both atheists. But now our team actually has a Hindu person and a Muslim person and a Christian person. So we now have kind of everybody. But we don't talk about religion. We just have the cause. But the people that started it are 100% atheist. And so I think at first I was very disappointed in religious people...And so seeing them kind of do the same work—I don't know. Not everybody—Not all religious people—you've got to see like even in religion people are different. People have different motivations. There are different intentions. So maybe that was unfair.

Polina is not the only one of my interviewees who expressed a fundamental disinterest in religion. In interviews, most people who saw this as a religious issue brought it up on their own. But if they never mentioned religion—and if it seemed appropriate in the context of the rest of the conversation—I asked a question about it near the end of the interview. When I asked whether religion had anything to do with the motivation behind their work, nonreligious people gave a range of responses:

MO: It's not. For many people, I see that it is part of their faith. For me it's just part of my nature. It's not religious-based. It's not my motivation.

UK: For whatever reason...I guess it's because I don't feel like I have to have a reason to be a human? [rueful laugh]. You know what I mean? I don't feel that I need to have a directive to be compassionate. So I understand that for a lot of people that that is a big part of their faith. Like, not that it's just 'this is horrible and we need to help', but 'we have been instructed in our religious upbringing and by our God'...I think we all have that obligation. I don't need a religious doctrine to tell me I should be compassionate and take care of the stranger. So I guess it's just not part of my story.

ND: We're all a bunch of agnostics and a couple atheists thrown in there. So none of us have any religious orientation. None of us go to church. So I think for us it's just that basic humanity, is what it comes down to...I do think your question is interesting though, because a lot of people assume when they see us in the apartment complex that we are with a church organization and we're like, 'Nope! We're just a bunch of women that got together one night and drank some wine.'...I think anyone who is doing this service with a true heart, it's just about helping another human. I think that's basically what it comes down to.

PR: To me, as an atheist it's just the right thing to do. I don't want to live in a world where we're treating people that way, religion or no religion.

But devoutly religious people often responded to the question about religious motivation in a similarly ambivalent way.

GR [Muslim]: I would say that the honest answer is that it [religion] hasn't really been a factor in my—It hasn't been an intentional factor in the things that I kind of volunteer my time with. But at the same time, um, it is...how would I describe this? It is a part of who I am. And there is an aspect of volunteerism and giving back and being there for other people that is inherent in religion for me. And so it has never been kind of the full reason—or really the reason for me doing this work. But because it's a part of who I am it is a component, I guess, of why I do the work, if that makes sense.

NU [Christian / Lutheran]: I think my religious beliefs are just such a part of my life that it's kind of hard to separate them from anything else. But it's not that I feel obligated or anything because of it. I do feel that that is an integral part to being a Christian is helping those around you. But that's also how I was raised. And so I don't know that I can [separate those two].

These responses show that for all the differences in religious and cultural experience, something about the moral / ethical motivations of religious and non-religious people is fundamentally similar. Both religious and non-religious people identified “helping” as something

that was an inherent part of who they were as people. Both religious and non-religious people helped because helping was the right thing to do. Both religious and non-religious people hesitated and stumbled when they tried to articulate *why* helping was the right thing to do, because in their minds it didn't need a reason. It simply was.

Both religious and non-religious people all tended to talk about the issue in much the same way—as an ethical/moral imperative that in some sense transcended the requirements of any one particular religion. In other words, the work itself mattered more to people than the religious (or non-religious) identity of the people who were part of it. This demonstrates that there is something fundamentally moral / ethical motivating the choice to help refugees, something that can be conceptualized as part of religious belief but cannot be contained by it. People who already subscribed to religious faith of some sort sometimes—but not always—described their motivation in religious or scriptural terms. But everyone who participated in this project—without exception—described it in ethical / moral terms. Upon thinking about it for a moment, even those who subscribed to religious faith often said that their commitment to helping ran deeper than religion itself. They imagined that even without their faith, they would still know that helping refugees was the right thing to do. One Christian interviewee answered the question this way:

KD: Yes, the religion might be a motivating factor for many people because for example, we do what we do because of what Jesus has done for us. So I would say that yes, our faith motivates us to do that. But I think for me, even if there was no faith, I would have been involved with that because of the factor that I told you before, which was how I grew up and what I saw in my life before I came here. That I was like, 'Oh yeah, me too, I will help others.'

In this project, it was not particularly useful to directly compare people of different religious faiths against one another. This is largely because the subset of religious people who care passionately about refugees and asylum seekers usually adopt a flexible, borderless version

of faith that counts practical action on behalf of people as more important than the specific content of religious belief. Some denominations and some congregations were more amenable to this way of thinking than others, but across all faith backgrounds everyone who did decide to participate shared this same kind of thinking in common. And those volunteers who claim no religious faith at all exhibit the same set of values, though they do not express it in religious terms. They care about the work, regardless of the religious identity of the people they work with or for. And they care about the people—despite of, or perhaps even because of their differences. For these people, the difference itself is part of what makes the work worthwhile. They want to help people who are different from themselves because part of what they want to accomplish is the healing of rifts and the intentional erasing of hatred and division. This does not necessarily mean that *everyone* at volunteers' mosques, synagogues, churches, and other social networks cared equally about crossing boundaries. In fact, frustration and disappointment at friends' and relatives' failure to join them in what they saw was an obvious moral/ethical good was a common theme in the interviews. But this basic interest in healing rifts and crossing boundaries does go a long way toward explaining why this subset of people directed their helping impulse toward refugees rather than some other category of people in need.

### **Repairing the World (and Keeping a Suitcase Packed, Just in Case)**

In order to understand more fully *how* and *why* people came to think of helping refugees as “the right thing to do”, it is necessary to explore the backgrounds and origin stories of the volunteers. We can contrast, for example, Carrie's experience with the stories of several Jewish women who became involved in immigration and refugee advocacy. The women were members of three relatively liberal synagogues in North Dallas. All were college-educated, with

professional careers, and all had been involved in pro-refugee work of one sort or another for their entire adult lives. For each of these women, their Jewish identity was an important reason for their involvement in refugee work. For these women, the Trump era was not about doing *new* things but about intensification of the things they had already been doing for many years. In many ways their stories are all quite similar, so I have presented them together.

### Remembrance in the Sukkah

Eva had been volunteering as a teacher in English (ESL) classes for refugees and other immigrants for decades. At her synagogue, she was active in social justice and tikkun olam work. Currently, she and others from her congregation teach an ESL class at a Christian-run community center. I first met her in a tent outside her synagogue, during a sukkah event she had organized to raise awareness in her congregation about refugee issues. For Eva, as for the other Jewish interviewees, the responsibility to help refugees was deeply connected to her own family's history of persecution, displacement, and survival.

EM: My family came here from Eastern Europe by and large. Romania and Eastern Europe. So I've always had in the back of my mind, what if they had not come? Because our entire family would have been in the Holocaust...I'm fairly certain that the Romanian folks left after a massive pogrom that happened in their community. It happened around maybe a year before they came. And I'm pretty certain that my great-grandfather on my grandfather's side experienced very terrible things...It's almost impossible to be Jewish in this context, this day and age and not understand what it meant. Because we had been in exile for thousands of years. And to understand what it meant to be able to go to a homeland and what that meant for the Jewish people...And so out of that really the sukkah thing started. Because I was thinking about the folks whose spouse or whatever get picked up by ICE and how in my history our wandering and how people had to pack their bags.

As we all gathered around tables set up in the tent behind the synagogue, with the delectable smells of a potluck dinner wafting through the late summer air, Eva gave a short

explanation of the concept of Sukkot for those who did not come from the Jewish tradition, saying that the most frequently repeated command in the Torah directs us to welcome immigrants and to treat them well. During one week of the year, Jews spend time in a tent called a sukkah to remember what it was like to be a people without a land. Eva reminded the group that more than half a century after the Holocaust the Jewish history of persecution and genocide still feels close; some Jewish people still keep a suitcase packed just in case they ever have to flee once more. She then passed around a cardboard suitcase filled with markers, paper luggage tags, and colored ribbons. Tonight, we would all share our families' histories of migration. We would write them on the tags and leave them hanging in the sukkah so as not to forget.

One by one, each person in the sukkah shared their own family's immigration story. Some shared harrowing tales of escape from pogroms in Eastern Europe. Some told of extended family members scattered all around the world in the wake of the Holocaust. Some talked about relatives on boats, shuttled from one port to another after the war, because "nobody wanted the Jews". One person said that he didn't know his family's immigration story because his grandparents had been through such horrors that they could never bring themselves to talk about it. Two recent immigrants from Eva's ESL class gave brief accounts of their journeys to the United States from Afghanistan and Cuba. The man from Afghanistan had lost his entire family in the war; he and his sister were the only ones left alive. When it was my turn, I shared a few fragments of stories that my family still remembered from the Irish Potato Famine and the persecution of the Huguenots, but most of the details had been lost to time. There were a couple of representatives from refugee resettlement agencies present; they told their own families' stories too, before sharing some general information about how refugee resettlement worked, for those who didn't know. After we had shared a delicious potluck dinner together, we each wrote

something about our family's story on a paper luggage tag and tied it to the poles of the sukkah with colored ribbon, so as not to forget.

For the Jewish participants in my project, immigration and refugee issues were experience-near. They could not think of themselves as separate from refugees because each one of them knew the stories of grandparents and aunts and uncles who had experienced genocide firsthand. Remembrance of displacement had become a deep part of Jewish cultural identity that they turned to useful purpose by aiding others who had likewise escaped something terrible.

Whether or not they actually kept a suitcase packed in the front closet, the possibility of anti-Semitism rearing its ugly head again loomed large. Olivia, who uses her influence as a rabbi to build stronger connections between the Jews in her congregation and people of other faiths, explained that the recent resurgence of anti-Semitism in the United States makes it easy for her to identify with the experiences of displaced people in general. She expressed to me the mixed grief and confusion she felt when she came across some right-wing social media posts that attempted to stoke anger against American Jews by blaming them for the influx of refugees from other parts of the world. As best Olivia could explain it, the idea seemed to be that since the Jews were and always would be outsiders, they were trying to ruin white Christian America by bringing in more outsiders—this time Muslims—to wreck American culture from the inside. This kind of thinking—spreading unchecked in the darker corners of the internet—motivated the white nationalist shooter who massacred eleven mostly elderly worshipers at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018 (Lord 2018).

OL: Yeah, well, it comes from the top. It's not that the ideas are new or the language is new or the feelings are new. But they are now given a platform and they are encouraged. It used to be that reasonable people, responsible people, leaders would discourage it. Instead, they're encouraging it...And in the past years when I have seen the millions of people who have no home I've been—you know, I keep sort of—I would say right now my feeling is that for a long time I

felt like as a Jewish person who grew up in America that I had two homes. That I could be accepted and protected and welcomed either in the US or in Israel. Either one would be my home. And frankly in the last few years I feel like I have no home. In some ways I have really identified with that mentality of the homeless person or a stateless person because I feel like the governments of those countries have abdicated responsibility for taking care of everybody in your borders.

For Olivia, as for many others, the Trump years were a reminder that even for Jews who felt they had achieved some measure of acceptance and security in the United States, safety was still in some sense an illusion. The memory of past displacement and the ever-present expectation of potential future displacement made it easy to identify with persecuted and displaced people. They helped others because they remembered that one day they too might have to escape. This is quite different from Carrie's struggle to convince her Evangelical Christian friends and neighbors to remember that the lives of migrant families mattered to God. The Jewish participants didn't have to remember, because for them it was impossible to forget.

### Early Volunteer Experiences with Soviet Refuseniks

All of the Jewish women whose stories are told in this chapter are old enough to remember the massive efforts on the part of American Jews to come to the rescue of Soviet Refuseniks in the 1980s and early 1990s. These ambitious—and often clandestine—projects to bring Soviet Jews to safety and then to help them adapt to life in Israel or the United States formed many Jews' first practical experiences with helping refugees. Diane tells her story this way:

DR: Because I'm Jewish I have always had this desire, this compel to work with immigrants. And in the 1980s I traveled to the former Soviet Union to meet with refuseniks. And refuseniks were people who were denied the right to get visas to leave the Soviet Union. They were being persecuted because of their religious beliefs. They weren't allowed to practice their Judaism. If people found out that they were Jewish, they were often fired from their jobs and were unable to work.

And the conditions were really really bad in the early 80s there. So there were clandestine trips. People going over there to meet with these refuseniks who were people who had lost their jobs and were trying to leave to go to Israel or the United States or elsewhere and had been refused, and were stuck in this limbo...And we helped, we did a lot of lobbying and advocacy work around that issue and formed sort of a lifeline for the people over there who were needing material goods and just emotional support to get through what they were getting through. And finally around 1990 the Soviet government allowed people to start coming in. And at that point I became the sponsor of a large family and worked to get them resettled and to get their children in school and to get all of the things that you well know that people need when they move here...And that was a life changing experience. And I am still in contact with that family. I was the witness at one of the little girls' weddings recently. Well, not that recently. She now has two children. But I've been there for the births and for the funerals and for all the life cycles that they've gone through since 1990. I'm still in touch with them and see them. My children grew up with their children. We celebrated holidays together. So that was my first really in-depth experience. And from there it just sort of continued.

Diane's work on behalf of Jewish refuseniks from Soviet Russia in the 1990s was the start of a lifetime of service to refugees and other immigrants from all over the world. Diane began teaching English and civics classes in the Vickery Meadow neighborhood in her scant spare time as she pursued a high-pressure legal career. By the time Trump took office in 2017, Diane had volunteered in Vickery Meadow in one capacity or another through decades of change and had built long-term relationships of trust with the people living there. But it wasn't until she retired that she could afford to start a second—unpaid—full-time career as an immigration advocate. For her, the crises of the Trump era triggered an intensification of effort, but not a complete change. When a surge of unaccompanied children flocked to the border in 2014, Diane—a seemingly inexhaustible woman with a deep reserve of both energy and compassion—started a court monitoring program to make sure the children were getting due process. Diane discovered that even though she had not trained as an immigration lawyer, her legal background combined with decades-long relationships of trust with people in the neighborhood made her an important resource. When the Trump administration stepped up immigration enforcement in

2017, Diane was horrified to realize that the mothers in her ESL classes did not know what would happen to their children if they—the mothers—were suddenly arrested and deported. Families in the neighborhood were staying away from free food pantries and keeping children home from school because they were too terrified to drive lest they be deported and separated from their children. Diane had no training in immigration law and knew she was the wrong person to advise these families. But when she started asking her other lawyer friends, it became horrifyingly clear that the immigration enforcement system was in such chaos that no one really knew what would happen to these children if their parents were suddenly swept away by ICE while they were at school. Diane told the social justice council at her synagogue that she was starting “Know Your Rights” and “Family Preparedness Planning” programs in Vickery Meadow whether the council approved it or not, because no one else was going to help these families. The council approved.

Over the next years, as the Trump administration continued ratcheting up ever more draconian policies targeting immigrants, Diane became a tireless advocate working on a host of different projects. Each project in the neighborhood exposed a new need that required a new kind of action in response. In Diane’s mind, it was entirely irrelevant whether the families in Vickery Meadow shared her faith or not. Though her early work on behalf of Soviet Refuseniks was based on a desire to help fellow Jews in trouble, the rest of her self-made career as an advocate was motivated by a simple desire to protect displaced people, period, regardless of whether they shared her language or her faith. To Diane, what mattered was not belief per se but action.

DR: So, you probably have heard the story about the starfish, the man walking down the beach and there’s all these starfish on the beach. And as he’s walking down he’s throwing the starfish one at a time back into the water. And he passes a guy coming the other way. And he says, ‘What are you doing? You’re never going to get all those starfish back into that water. It just doesn’t matter, what you’re doing doesn’t matter.’ He picks up the starfish, throws it in the water and

he says, ‘Well, it mattered to that one.’ So I guess I can’t stop. I can’t look away. We saw in witnessing, once you’ve seen you can’t unsee. And once you look you can’t look away.

To summarize, Eva, Olivia, and Diane are all operating within a Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam*, often translated as “repairing the world”. According to this tradition, human beings carry a responsibility to join in partnership with their Creator by working to fix a broken world. While *tikkun olam* may have started out as a call to build proper Jewish society by following commandments such as daily prayer and observance of the Sabbath, American progressive Jews in particular have interpreted the phrase to mean something akin to “Jewish social justice”. *Tikkun olam* means that Jews have responsibility not only for themselves and their own behavior, but also for the welfare of society at large. This requires acts of compassion toward all human beings, not only those who are part of the Jewish faith tradition. According to this interpretation of *tikkun olam*, welcoming refugees and immigrants of all backgrounds is part of a moral/ethical Jewish project to repair—or build—the world. Mark Hetfield, president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, was following in the tradition of *tikkun olam* when he said that, “HIAS was founded in 1881 to welcome refugees because they were Jewish. Today, HIAS welcomes refugees because *we* are Jewish” (Hetfield 2017; Fine 2018).

### **A Borderless Worldview**

Eva, Diane, and Olivia drew on family histories and cultural memories of displacement and persecution to build a sense of shared identity with refugees and asylum seekers. For others involved in pro-refugee work, the connection came from personal experiences of trying to adapt to life in another country. Many of the people who volunteer or advocate on behalf of refugees share an international or global worldview based on previous life experience living or working in

some country other than the United States. Some, like Jabir and Polina, use their own experiences immigrating to the United States to help others navigate their new lives in Dallas. Some, like Katherine and Nadine, did a short stint studying or working abroad. And some, like Kaleb and Gulshan, are former refugees themselves.

### International Experience

Jabir first became involved in refugee work in the 1990s during the Bosnian crisis, when Texas had an influx of Bosnians, Kosovars, and Macedonians. Jabir was a board member at his local mosque when a representative of the mayor's office approached them to coordinate efforts to provide aid to families who had fled the war and were now resettling in the area. The mosques were suddenly flooded with Bosnian refugees who needed an enormous amount of practical help establishing new lives in Texas. Jabir had a truck, so he joined a group of volunteers who helped out by picking things up and dropping them off. Getting to know the families was "eye-opening" for him because it was difficult to reconcile their stories of violence and trauma with his own preconceived ideas about modern life in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Some of the Bosnian families had complicated long-term problems like post-traumatic stress disorder, which Jabir did not feel equipped to solve except by offering friendship. And sometimes that human connection turned out to be the most important thing they needed. Some of the Bosnians that Jabir met in the 1990s became lifelong friends who are still important in his life today.

Jabir himself had some understanding of the refugee experience because his own family had been forced to flee from West Pakistan to East Pakistan during the 1971 War of Liberation. He himself was too young at the time to understand the details of what was happening, but he did remember the journey. Jabir family eventually ended up in Zambia, where he grew up attending

mosque on Fridays and playing with the Hindu next-door neighbors when he got home from Catholic school. Jabir laughed when I asked him about his religious background, because growing up among so many mixed influences had given him a “borderless” approach to religious affiliation. For him, helping refugees had nothing specifically to do with being a Muslim because in the end he saw all the religions as more or less the same in terms of helping people in need. Jabir saw the differences between religions mainly as a distraction from the central concerns that they all had in common.

JV: By the end of the day you are so absorbed in the dos and don'ts of the ritualistic aspects of religion that you forget about the humanitarian aspects of religion, which usually trump everything else. The foundations of faith, that's what it's there for. That's a problem we face across all faiths, I think... The problems we face in the mosque are the same problems that I hear in the churches and the synagogues and the temple. It's the same administrative issues, the challenges with the youth, how to get them to come and to help the younger generation focus on a more meaningful life versus a heavily materialistic life—another aspect of what religion is supposed to focus on.

While religion remained centrally important in Jabir's life, he did not see Islam as fundamentally better or worse than other religions. Rather, the religions were different pathways leading people in a similar direction, toward a more meaningful and ethical life.

Jabir still remembered his first months in the United States, when he lived in a one-bedroom apartment with six or seven other young men and his father could only afford to send fifty dollars a month to help with rent. By comparison, his life now is wonderfully comfortable. Jabir is now married, with a comfortable professional job at a well-established tech company, and his material needs are met. Living in such privileged circumstances, he says it is sometimes disturbingly easy to forget that most of the world is not so lucky. Jabir has continued to involve himself in refugee aid projects of one sort or another for many years. Most recently, he joined the board of a new group that puts on monthly benefit dinners where people can buy tickets to share

a home-cooked meal with a refugee family. At the time we last spoke, the most recent dinner had raised more than \$2,000 to help a chef from Syria realize his dream of opening a new restaurant. But despite all he has given over the years, Jabir says that he benefits from these experiences because working with refugees reminds him to keep the petty annoyances of American suburban life in perspective and not to take the comforts of his current life for granted. When he becomes annoyed about people in his neighborhood failing to deal appropriately with their doggie poop, he remembers that this is a superficial first-world problem.

JV: I think engagement with these families who have these traumatic life experiences is a reminder that don't be too comfortable in life. It's nothing to feel guilty about. But it's a moral. Don't forget the reality of the world today. It's just the way it is... Wars are always going to be there. Trials will come and we understand that, it's a reality. But the human element of that is what I think is very valuable. It's really, I benefit more. They [refugees] are surviving. We are getting lost. They help us to reset our own mind to what we really need to focus on. Our gripes then become meaningless and shameful.

Jabir's story speaks to another important theme throughout the interviews. People who do pro-refugee work tend to be people who have some sort of international life experience. Sometimes they are former refugees themselves. Sometimes they have lived or worked or studied overseas in some other capacity. Sometimes—to a lesser degree—they gain “international” experience secondhand, through close contact with immigrants at work or at school. These experiences tend to give people an intimate sense of how difficult it can truly be to navigate everyday life in a language and culture that is not their own, and they tend to foster a cosmopolitan, global outlook that constitutes them as active members of *world* society, not just *American* society. So if pro-refugee work is a *moral/ethical* decision, it is also one that extends the person's moral/ethical responsibilities beyond the boundaries of the United States. Jabir explained that most of the people he volunteers have in common a sense of the world as a deeply

interconnected place, where people's ethical commitments to one another are not limited by borders:

JV: They [the volunteers] are very, very dedicated and they have similar background. They came as either foreign exchange students or they came with very little. So I think it's the background of, the idea of the world is borderless or the world is an oyster. And anything that is 5,000 miles away is something we should be concerned about. Whether it is 5,000 miles away or 100 miles away it's sort of the same thing. I think that level of awareness is probably shared by all the board members.

People were more likely to have this kind of global understanding of the world if they had firsthand experience living in another country. Several other responses echoed Jabir's assessment, including Nadine, who sought out refugee work after returning to the US from several years in Japan:

NU: Helping out someone that's beyond my neighbor on my street or my neighbor in my community who looks like me and speaks the same language is something—My parents are more comfortable in that bubble. And I'm more comfortable in a bubble that has no boundaries. And that's been hard for them to understand at times. And I think that's because they've lived in the same place pretty much their whole lives. And since I have lived around the world and lived in all of these different states it's like I'm just more aware of differences than they are, and maybe more comfortable with it.

But sometimes people gained international experience secondhand, through close contact with immigrants at work or at school. Dana had never lived overseas herself, but gradually gained secondhand understanding of culture shock and other immigration-related challenges when she was assigned to work with several international researchers at her job.

DT: I ended up working in the research institute with people from all over the world. And coming to realize that there are many scientists in other countries besides the US. [embarrassed laughter]. Honestly, I had to learn that! And we actually had majority foreign PhD-level staff.... I mean when you're white and you live in a rich community surrounded only by people who look like you...I think if you allow yourself to be in a situation where you can be with other people and learn to appreciate them you start to learn things differently. But some people either by their choice or just by the luck of how they grow up haven't been exposed. Either they haven't been or they don't want to be.

This kind of international experience made people more sensitive to the difficulties of navigating everyday life in a different language and culture. Nadine explained how living as a white American in Japan helped her develop an enhanced awareness of the practical and social challenges that immigrants face on first coming to the United States:

NU: I've been in situations where I am the odd man out. And I may not speak the language, and I don't know what's going on...I think knowing a little bit of what that feels like makes me especially want to be more welcoming and helpful...I mean I certainly was helping out before I had lived abroad. But I think having had that experience, especially. I lived in Japan for a couple of years...And I was one of maybe two or three foreigners in the entire town. And so just being the Other all the time...People are welcoming, but at the same time it's difficult to figure out where you fit.

Frequently, international life experience better enabled people to anticipate the practical needs of the people they were trying to help. Meena felt that her Indian heritage enabled her to help in ways that her white volunteer colleagues could not:

MO: Through the power of Facebook, I saw this lady who was setting up a house for a refugee family. And she was asking for donations. There was an empty apartment and she was setting it up from scratch for this family of seven arriving from Afghanistan and it was a single mom. I started thinking to myself, Americans are extremely generous. They will donate cans and cans and cans of food and pop tarts and cereal. My own family back in India—I'm of Indian heritage—has never opened a can in their life. All their vegetables are bought fresh every day at the market. This concept of canning is from very cold places, extremely cold places, and it's a very non-Asian thing. And I was thinking they're going to get off the plane, and they're going to have no idea what their kitchen is filled with. Let me buy them groceries...So I looked up food from Afghanistan and I realized that it's extremely similar to food from India. So I went to the Indian grocery store and I bought eggplant, garlic, things that traditionally Americans may not even think to donate. I bought okra. I bought spices, turmeric, chili powder.

International experience and dual identity as an immigrant sometimes made it easier to explain the refugee experience to people who had no experience with it. Basimah explained it this way:

BI: I'm a dual citizen. And I'm not a refugee, but I am a foreigner and I have the experience of coming here from another country. So I'm different, but I'm not too different. So I think that's a good thing because it means that people feel

comfortable asking questions that they might not ask refugees and might not ask an American citizen. It's my opinion that the volunteer coordinator position shouldn't be held by someone who is a former refugee because then people won't be as open with their questions, especially questions that come off as xenophobic.

For Americans who had lived overseas before, volunteering with refugees sometimes served as a way to remain connected with that part of their lives by seeking out a wider variety of friendships and experiences. Volunteering helped Nadine establish herself socially when she first moved to Dallas and had trouble finding friends:

NU: I find connecting to the community through doing service is so much more fulfilling than just going and hanging out at a restaurant or bar...I liked meeting people from around the world, because as an archaeologist I spent a lot of time traveling around the world getting to know different countries, different groups of people. And I'm just fascinated by anyone who's different, has a different experience...That's how I managed to get connected, because I think Dallas is just so big. I had trouble getting connected in traditional ways of what I've always done.

### Former Refugees

In many ways, the most valuable volunteers in practical terms are the people who have lived as refugees themselves. These are people with deep practical knowledge of what is necessary to navigate American life as a resettled refugee. Not all resettled refugees have the desire or the capacity to volunteer in a formal capacity, especially during the first few years, when their attention is usually focused on meeting the basic needs of themselves and their families. And many people who have faced political persecution will never feel that public advocacy on any topic is a safe risk to take. Many people want to leave the "refugee" part of their lives behind as quickly as they can. So in resettlement work, former refugees who can speak in-demand languages and have inside knowledge of the resettlement process are worth their weight in gold. Kaleb is one such person. He tells his story this way:

KD: I was born a refugee in Africa, in East Africa. I grew up in the refugee camps. And when I grew up, there were some employees from humanitarian organizations like UNHCR or those organizations. And when I would see them, I was like, 'You know what? I am living right now because these people are helping.' I'm like, 'When I grow up, I'm want to make sure I do the same to other people who will be in trouble, who will be in difficult situations.' So when I came to the United States of America in [year omitted], I was blessed to speak three languages. So I started using those other language abilities to help my family, and then my community around me...So I started helping the refugees from my country, and then I started helping refugees from all over the world. So that's how basically I started working in the refugee ministry. I got interested in that because I'm also, I myself was a refugee.

After Kaleb came to the United States through the refugee resettlement program more than a decade ago, he began volunteering for his resettlement agency, and eventually they hired him as a full-time staff member. When a new Christian-run community center opened in the neighborhood, Kaleb saw an opportunity to do the work he loved while also sharing his faith. Now he runs youth programs, job readiness training, and resource distribution at the community center, which is fully funded through donations from his church. Kaleb is fluent in Swahili, French, Kinyarwanda, and Kirundi, and he is also working on learning Spanish. At the community center, Kaleb's multilingual communication skills are invaluable.

KD: So we have many refugees from East Africa. And in fact when they come and they find me, you can see their eyes open and you can see the smile coming up. Because when they hear somebody speaking their language in the other country it's a big miracle.

Kaleb's personal life experience as a refugee in East Africa gives him insight into the practical and emotional challenges that refugees are dealing with when they first arrive in the neighborhood. He has watched the same patterns unfold many times. For the first few weeks after their arrival, people are elated. But after that, there is a struggle as they try to navigate their new lives. They usually have preconceived ideas about life in America, which conflict with the everyday realities of their real lives in this country. During the first year or two, people are

usually in what Kaleb calls “desperation mode”. But after that, things start to look up. Kaleb says that the most satisfying part of his job happens when he sees clients going to school, buying cars, starting businesses, and “running their own lives with happiness” again. For some people, positive change might take a long time, and for some he might never get to see the impact. But most of the time things work out, and seeing that change makes Kaleb’s work worthwhile.

KD: For some we might not even see the impact. But most of the time, it’s working... Yeah, because you know the product is bigger. The results will be bigger. Because you know I believe that making a lot of money, when the end of my [life] comes, and if I died that will be it. I might actually enjoy that money. But the impact I make in somebody’s life will be forever.

Like Kaleb, Gulshan first came to the United States as a refugee. But unlike Kaleb, Gulshan arrived as a very young child and has spent most of her life in the United States. Her experience as a fully bilingual, bicultural American gives her a special insight into the challenges facing refugee youth. Gulshan moved to Dallas several years ago to start a new job. Like thousands of other young professional transplants streaming into Texas’ growing metropolitan areas from out-of-state, Gulshan worried about whether she would be able to find compatible friends in a state often caricatured for its bombastically conservative politics. When she learned that Dallas was a hub of refugee resettlement, it seemed like the perfect way to meet people and get involved in something she already cared about.

GR: You know, it’s a volunteer opportunity, it’s a group of young professionals, and you get to do work with the refugee community here in DFW. I am a refugee myself. I was born in Afghanistan. We left when I was very young during the Soviet war and I grew up mostly here. And so it’s definitely a personally meaningful topic to me, and also had that added connection of doing kind of semi-international work locally, and then also meeting a group of people who share similar values. So that was basically why I got started.

Like many of the other volunteers I spoke with, Gulshan worries about negative perception of refugees and other immigrants. She thinks that if more people had direct in-person contact with refugees and began to understand them as real people, it might change their perspective.

GR: And I feel like if more people had experiences like that, they would—it would speak to them in the same way that it speaks to those of us who volunteer with refugees, in that it's not like they're asking for the moon and the stars. They're just asking for respect for their basic human decency and a little bit of support so that they can get on their feet and take care of themselves. I don't think any of them want a handout. They just want a little bit of support to be able to build their lives here. And that's not easy in the United States. That's the other thing that I think people don't understand. It's not easy to build a life here or build kind of quote unquote 'the American Dream', because you could lose it at any second. You could lose it if you lose your job, or lose your health insurance, if you go into debt, if you have a medical bill. All of these things that I think the people who are anti-immigration just don't think about necessarily.

Gulshan's family left Afghanistan during the Soviet war, when she was still a baby. Like many refugee families, their journey to the United States happened in fits and starts, with many temporary stopovers.

GR: We left when I was 3 weeks old, basically as soon as I got out of the hospital. And then we were in India for a few months, registered with the UN there. And then from there we went to Germany, where two of my mother's brothers had fled to before we left. And we were in Germany for about five years. So I went kindergarten there. Unfortunately, I don't remember much German because I was so young when we moved here... So my mother and I, we moved to Florida in [year omitted] where my grandmother, one of my aunts, and two of my uncles all lived. And so we basically moved in with them and were one big happy family all taking care of each other.

Like Kaleb, Gulshan found that her experience as a former refugee helped her to understand the experiences of the people she worked with as a volunteer, and gave her a special empathy for the pressures that many refugee youth face as they try to balance conflicting responsibilities toward family, work, and education.

GR: Because I was so young when we moved here, I wasn't quite grasping all of the logistical and administrative things that we had to do in order to register for

school and all of the other things that caseworkers help refugees with here. That part I was too young to see and understand. But the emotional aspect of seeing refugee families, especially refugee youth, I think I connect with most because they work so, so hard, not only to go to school, get themselves an education, go to college. But they do that at the same time as you know, working a part-time or full-time job to help bring money in, or taking care of multiple siblings after school, trying to help younger siblings with school work or homework, because they have the language ability, right, and their parents don't. So seeing them really speaks to me because I experienced a portion of that just with my own family...I think I really connect with refugees on because I know how challenging it is. And I know how challenging it is and how emotionally distressing it is to want to do everything you can for your family, but also kind of being exhausted by it at times, but also kind of making sure that you're not lost in the fray and making sure that you're kind of pursuing your dreams and education and your kind of professional aspirations all at the same time. So yeah, I definitely do connect with that.

Gulshan's and Kaleb's experiences are important because they illustrate that *refugees* and *citizens* and *volunteers* and *professionals* are not separate categories; they are different realms of experience that frequently overlap as people move back and forth, taking on different roles at different points in their lives. Kaleb is a refugee—but he has been a volunteer, and is now a professional aid worker, with just a touch of missionary. Gulshan began life as a refugee—but she now fills the role of newly-arrived professional transplant from out of state, looking for like-minded cosmopolitan friends. These examples illustrate the fluid nature of people in this work moving back and forth between different categories: volunteer to employee, refugee to volunteer, non-profit employee to city staff, volunteer to advocate.

It should be unnecessary to explicitly state that people who come to the United States are not limited in their ability to develop as people or to contribute to society; on the contrary, as multilingual professionals with refugee experience, Kaleb and Gulshan are uniquely valuable in their respective fields. Kaleb's and Gulshan's stories also demonstrate the importance of having volunteers and staff—preferably in decision-making positions—who have in-depth personal

experience in what refugees are going through and can speak the languages of the people they are trying to help.

## **Volunteering and Activism**

During Donald Trump's four years in the White House, many people who cared about refugee issues found it necessary to blend their volunteer work with political activism. For Polina, co-founder of a group that runs refugee benefit dinners, helping refugees is at least partly about claiming her place as an adopted American by helping to build the country she thought America should be. Polina confided to me that as an immigrant, she had very idealistic views about her adopted country until 2016. Polina grew up in a very poor environment without much hope. When she first arrived in the United States at the age of 17, Polina's life was transformed. America seemed to embody lofty ideals of hope, education, opportunity, and gender equality that she had never had access to before. For the first time, she had a straightforward path to success.

PR: In Russia you go from a very chauvinistic, racist, homophobic society with no rules and no laws and no support structure for people. And coming to America, to me it was just like—until 2016 I had an idealistic view in the sense that, not that America is perfect but America is moving in the right direction. You know what I mean? And I love America for that...It was a straightforward path to success for me...You didn't have to bribe anybody. You didn't have to sleep with anybody.

The first time Polina voted for president, she voted for Barack Obama, and the experience was "amazing". Like many people, she saw Obama's election as a sign of social progress. So the 2016 election results came as a shock.

PR: And so when all these trajectories in my view is the right direction, is progress, turned around so rapidly it was a shock. It completely destroyed my view of what the country that I thought I knew. So then I thought, well, what am I going to do about it? And another thing too is, I thought somebody was in charge...And then I thought, wait a minute. It's up to us. Nobody is in charge. Nobody's making sure everything's going to be OK. It's up to us, normal people

to make sure that everything's OK and make sure that the country goes in the right direction. So to me that was a big realization and that's really what it is. It's up to us. It's up to me specifically to do something. I think that's really what's driving it, not necessarily anything else.

Polina asked herself who would be most at risk in a country led by Donald Trump and vowed to do something about it.

PR: It basically started with the 2016 election. I'm going to tell you now that it woke up a lot of people. All of us, the people that decided to step up and help refugees, have the same story. That after 2016 election I thought, who is the community that's going to be screwed the most? Pardon my language. And I assumed it was going to be refugees because there had been a lot of rhetoric about refugees. And so I kind of wanted to step up and counter all the negative rhetoric and what's to come, potentially. And so I became a volunteer [at a refugee resettlement agency]. Right after 2016 election.

Soon, Polina and a friend came up with a new idea. They heard something on the radio about a group in another city who had started putting on friendship dinners in order to foster connections between refugee families and other people in the community. Polina realized that this was a way to counter the negative rhetoric about refugees while also providing refugee families with a much-needed financial boost. Each month, the refugee resettlement agency would help identify a family with solid cooking skills and enthusiasm about the project. Polina and her friends would find a venue, sell tickets, and help the family manage the shopping and cooking. And at the end of the night, the family would go home with a big check. The monthly dinners were a huge success with cosmopolitan, philanthropically-minded people who wanted to enjoy a delicious dinner, explore world food culture, and do something good at the same time.

All kinds of people came to the dinners, including Colin Allred, who was running for Congress in Polina's district. Miraculously, the brief connection that Polina made with future Representative Allred (TX-32) later put her into a position to ask him to intervene to get visitor's visas for the parents of a dying refugee to come to Dallas to say goodbye. She began to see how

involvement in politics could have a concrete positive effect in people's lives. Gradually, Polina's determination to help refugees morphed into a budding interest in politics. The dinners were wonderful, but they were not enough to effect systemic change. Polina decided that refugees shouldn't be at the mercy of random strangers; they needed systemic change, not just lucky spurts of help from random strangers. Leading up to the 2020 election, Polina began to shift her focus away from volunteer activities and toward political activism. Polina wanted to make sure that whoever was voted into office in 2020 would do more to support the refugee community.

PR: It matters for refugees, it matters for poor people, it matters for people that don't have health insurance, for people that rely on food stamps. A whole community of disadvantaged people is at the mercy of either the government or communities, big religious communities, or whoever is the trickling help that's coming in. I would like to see systematic help coming from the government. Us. All of us.

So for Polina, as for many others, volunteerism and political activism were two sides of the same coin. Both kinds of activities were in service to the same moral / ethical goal of making this country into a place that welcomes refugees. Organizing dinners—and organizing votes—were at least partially about feeling less helpless in the face of massive injustice. Polina realized that if she wanted to live in the America she believed in, she would have to build it herself. She wanted to see America going in the right direction, towards good.

PR: It's kind of selfish but it makes me feel better about the world. It makes me feel like I am doing something good. It's like very, very—like for me it's just almost like a need to make myself feel better about the government... You know, I watch the news every day and there's all this stuff happening. And so to go back to our events and see the good in people around, that for me is helping counterbalance that uh...not evil. Whatever you want to call it. [uncomfortable laughter]

Polina's gradual shift toward more overt political activism was born out of a realization that while she could make a small difference for a few people as a volunteer, she could not create

systemic change on an individual level. Many of the participants in this project wrestled with the question of how to make *enough* change. Frequently, they moved back and forth between actions that benefited a few specific people on an individual level and actions geared toward accomplishing systemic change on a broader societal or policy level. Polina's quest to create broader change carried her from volunteering into politics. But her friend Meena moved in the opposite direction.

MO: I have done a lot of work that was very advocacy focused, and events to educate the public. And then after the last presidential election I was just thinking, 'what's the point?' I was done. [laughter]. I was totally put off! Completely put off, completely done. I was like, OK, what I'm doing is not working. It's not that it's not working, but I was done. After 15 years or 16 years of doing it I was like, OK, I'm done.

Burnt out on politics and exhausted with the seeming impossibility of accomplishing meaningful social change through advocacy, Meena turned to volunteer work. Meena found solace and hope in practical, hands-on work where she could see a direct and immediate benefit instead of waiting and working for intangible social change that never quite seemed to materialize.

MO: It was such a satisfying change to do hands-on work after all those years of advocacy where I felt like it was pointless and going nowhere. And so now, if you give me this cardigan as a donation you will know exactly where that cardigan is going and the person will be using it, instead of dropping it off at Goodwill or one of these donation boxes...And then we take pictures of our [apartment donation] setup and send it to our donors who will say, 'Oh, there's my rug! There's my table!' And it makes me feel so happy.

Katherine, who had served for two years as an immigration policy aide in the office of a Republican senator, had a similar experience when she moved from policy and advocacy work into more practical projects. She described her overwhelming dismay when she finally realized that anti-immigration sentiment was so strong in her district that even on the inside track working in the office of a sympathetic United States senator, she couldn't make any difference in the issues she cared about.

KX: I was floored. Because to me, I thought all I had to do was convince the senator and he would go ahead and start making changes, right, or pushing for changes with the other senators. But it was not about him. It was about the public. And the public response was so negative that nothing happened. Nothing changed... So even as an insider in the Senate, even with access to the senator and with him agreeing with me, nothing changed.

Katherine felt so deeply discouraged after this incident that she took a step back from politics and started thinking of other ways to help. She began using her credentials as a trained mental health professional to provide trauma counseling and conduct mental health assessments to support legal cases for asylum seekers. Katherine now juggles two mental-health careers side-by-side: the work she does with paying clients helps to cover her pro bono work with asylum seekers, who rarely have the ability to pay. This theme, too, was a common one in interviews. Few of the people who cared enough about refugee and asylum work to do it full-time could afford to make it into their main career, though some tried. For most, refugee work was a second unpaid career, one that they somehow balanced simultaneously with the work that paid their bills, or else one that they started after retirement from something else.

Like Polina, Meena, and Katherine, many interview participants moved fluidly back and forth between practical volunteer work, advocacy, and political activism. For the most part, they did not see these activities as separate. Rather, volunteering and activism were different facets of the same larger moral/ethical project of making Texas more welcoming to refugees, both on an individual/family level and on a broader society level. This was a particular concern during the early years of the Trump administration, when many people perceived that immigrants—particularly refugees—were under threat from racially-motivated policies.

At organizations serving refugees, interest in volunteering surged. But this politically-motivated surge in volunteer interest could sometimes be a mixed blessing. Ellen, who runs a reading program for elementary school children, expressed mixed appreciation and frustration

with volunteer tutors whose outrage at the Trump administration's policies fueled a determination to find a way to help refugee kids—but only refugee kids.

EC: Two years ago, the January 29<sup>th</sup> edict was that we're not going to have any more refugees. People were so upset that we were not going to be welcoming people who need a home, at a time when in the world there are more refugees than ever in history and America's going to close their doors. People said, 'By damn, I'm going to do something about it.' And they wrote, and they picketed, and they voted, but that still wasn't enough. They had to do something every day...And I had so many people just flocking in here! And I'm not joking. They came handfuls at a time saying, 'What can I do?'

Suddenly, Ellen had more volunteers than she knew what to do with. But too many of these new volunteers were interested in the children as *international experiences* or as *activist projects* rather than as children. Children, she said, rarely benefited from recounting their traumatic memories for avid adult listeners who kept distracting them from the book they were learning to read by asking endless questions about their former lives back in Somalia or Iraq. Even worse, many of the new volunteers refused to work with those children in the program who were not refugees. Ellen worried that if refugees stopped coming to the neighborhood, she would be unable to get enough volunteers to keep the reading program going, even though there would still be just as many Texas-born children who both needed and deserved their help. Ellen had gradually come to the conclusion that new volunteers wanted to work with refugee kids partly because refugees seemed to them like a blank slate; they had no bad history in this country yet, so their problems seemed solvable. But volunteers did not necessarily make the same assumptions about the other disadvantaged children in the classroom, whose problems with poverty and racism seemed inevitable, unsolvable, and therefore not worth the same effort. Ellen pointed to a young Black boy reading to himself on the other side of the room. His main problem, she said, was that nobody believed in him, including himself.

EC: That's a bright boy. And his circumstances are only slightly better than the ones where the children came because they were being slaughtered, their homes were being burned, blah blah blah. Whatever it was. And I don't diminish any of the trauma, but this child has just as much trauma...I almost want to change his name to Mohammad. Because then he will be acceptable to no matter who walks in the door.

Ellen's outrage at her activist-volunteers' neglect of non-refugee children illustrates the dark side of pro-refugee volunteer-activism because it raises difficult questions about how refugee activist-volunteers conceptualize deservingness (see Willen 2012), which problems they think are worthwhile to solve, and who gets left out. Strongly implied—but not quite spoken—in Ellen's complaint are issues of race and class. Because refugees are not quite part of established American racial hierarchies—not yet—Ellen believes that there may be a perception among volunteers that refugees can still be set on a different path in which they can remain free from the consequences of entrenched racial politics. Refugees' past histories may be dark, but those histories happened elsewhere. This means that Americans—especially white Americans—can feel free to help without necessarily becoming entangled in seemingly unsolvable questions about race, intergenerational poverty, and the legacy of American slavery and white supremacy. By comparison with other categories of historically disadvantaged Americans, refugees can seem like they come with a clean slate, with the past washed away and the future wide open to possibility.

If people could become outraged enough in 2016 to use their time and resources to rise up *en masse* to fight for the rights of refugees, then uncomfortable questions arise about why they do not necessarily respond with the same level of outrage on behalf of other people living with habitual, baked-in disadvantages like systemic poverty and racism. And of course, many do. It is certainly true that in every social justice movement, some volunteers drop in for an hour or a

day and then disappear. This is perhaps inevitable, because no one can sustain committed involvement in multiple movements simultaneously. The seeming moral simplicity and positivity of refugee work may be one part of what brings new volunteers in the door. But it is not what makes them stay. Many interviewees in this project cared deeply about social justice as embodied in all kinds of rights for all categories of disadvantaged people. Many had also worked tirelessly on other projects. They talked about DACA, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, gun violence, dog and cat adoption, domestic violence, food insecurity, planned parenthood, child literacy, and saving the environment. But they also talked about being tired, about struggling to balance more commitments than they could handle, and about needing to choose one or two core projects in hope and faith that others would pick up the things that they could not. This too was a moral/ethical choice.

## **Conclusion**

In North Texas, the people who volunteer or advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers generally share a few things in common. They feel a deep compassion for humanity, especially for those who have been victimized through no fault of their own, and they share a desire to do something concrete to improve the lot of disadvantaged people. They may or may not frame this in terms of religion. If they are religious, they tend to adopt a version of religion that crosses boundaries easily, and they prioritize the work itself above any concern about the specific beliefs of the people they work with. They tend to see moral commitments to action as more important than ideological purity or strict loyalty to a particular religious identity.

The people who volunteer or advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers often—but not always—come to identify with displaced and persecuted people through some aspect of

their own personal experience. Jewish people with cultural memories of the Holocaust are the most obvious example here, but they are not the only ones. People tend to choose some aspect of their own experience—Jewish, Black, LGBTQ, etc—that helps them understand what it is like to suffer persecution and displacement. People who can imagine themselves in the position of someone who has been persecuted and displaced find compassion more of an obvious response than people who have never felt themselves at risk—so long as they do not view newcomers as a threat to their own interests.

Pro-refugee volunteer-advocates usually have a global, borderless worldview based on some kind of international life experience. People who have lived as immigrants themselves—even on a temporary basis—tend to have a clearer understanding of the everyday challenges refugees face, and also tend to see themselves as citizens of a globalized world in which boundaries are porous and connections are more interesting than walls. When faced with another person who is different from themselves, they tend to respond with curiosity and openness rather than suspicion and distrust.

Especially in the Trump era, people who work on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers tend to have an orientation toward political activism and systemic change. This has not always been the case, and may not remain the same five years from now. Since the beginning of the current US refugee program, refugee resettlement has typically been presented as an apolitical, bipartisan issue on which people on both sides of the political aisle can broadly agree. But in the Trump era, many people who cared deeply about refugee and asylum issues found the Trump administration's attitudes toward refugees and asylum seekers to be morally repugnant, and so active resistance against these policies became a moral imperative that they could not ignore. They identified activism and advocacy on refugee issues as a way to resist the depredations of

Trump. This goes a long way toward explaining why so many people with more liberal political attitudes suddenly became involved in refugee issues after 2016 when they never had been before. It also explains why people in politically conservative communities—like Carrie—found more compassionate policies toward immigrants and refugees to be such a difficult sell.

Finally, the people I interviewed for this project tended to enjoy access to a level of mainstream cultural capital and material resources that are not shared by everyone in the Dallas population. It is important to point out that almost everyone I interviewed for this project shared certain qualities in common. Almost all were at least college educated, most of them with graduate degrees, professional careers, and incomes that placed them solidly in the middle class or above. Pro-refugee volunteer and advocacy work requires a significant commitment of time and personal resources, which not everyone can afford. To some extent, it was a luxury for my participants to be able to *choose* to engage in a social issue that usually did not directly affect them personally. This reality—perhaps unavoidable—sometimes led to a disjuncture between the well-intentioned efforts of volunteer-advocates and the real-life priorities of the people they were trying to help.

So why did people decide to help, and what motivated them to continue? The people I interviewed generally felt that they gained more than they lost, but these “gains” were usually not material or concrete. Pro-refugee volunteer-advocates often invested enormous amounts of their own time and resources, even going so far as to pay for project expenses out of their own pockets, turning whole rooms of their houses into donation storage facilities, and working late into the night to sustain the paid and unpaid sides of their careers simultaneously. They frequently voiced concerns about mental health, burnout, and compassion fatigue as they tried to find some kind of balance between their refugee work, their paid careers, and their personal and

social lives. They struggled with disillusionment and disappointment on days when it seemed like progress was impossible.

But they kept coming back. Refugee work remained deeply important to these people because it gave them a sense of meaning and purpose. It introduced them to fascinating new people whom they otherwise would never have met. It gave them a way to experience a little bit of the world, without ever leaving Texas. It gave them something to do that felt important and worthwhile. It gave them a concrete way to work against terrible and uncontrollable things like racism, hatred, and poverty, and it gave them a way to see the direct results of their work in the lives of real people whom they came to care about.

What kept these people involved in the work over time primarily had to do with *meaning* and *human connection*. Above all, they wanted to know that they were doing something with their lives that mattered, that allowed them to live in a way that was consistent with their ethical values and with the kind of people they wanted to be. People stayed involved with the work because they found meaning in it, but also because of the personal relationships they built, both with refugees and with fellow volunteers. They—like the people they helped—were searching for human connection. They wanted to know that they were making a difference in someone’s life. Everyone I interviewed shared a few cherished memories of someone they had helped, of some difference that they had made, of interesting people whom they otherwise would never have met. These were well-polished memories that reminded them of the importance of what they were doing on days when they felt tempted to forget.

From the stories shared in this chapter, we can begin to assemble an elementary framework for understanding how refugee volunteer-advocates in North Texas conceptualized “the good”. They understood “the good life” in terms of several interconnected moral values:

meaningful work that made a concrete difference in the lives of others; human connection, especially with people of different backgrounds whose variety of experiences could complement and enrich their own; curiosity and openness toward the world at large and the people in it; and deep personal commitment toward righting wrongs and working against hatred and injustice, even when that commitment came at a personal cost. In refugee work, they found meaning, connection, and purpose. These findings reinforce the conclusions drawn by others working within the theoretical framework of “anthropology of the good” (Robbins 2013; Fischer 2014; Mattingly 2014; Malkki 2015). Further, they demonstrate that for people who are motivated by a desire to “do good” in the world, activism and volunteerism are not separate realms of activity but simply two ways of working toward the same better world.

The next chapter is policy-oriented; it explores the intended and unintended consequences of the Trump administration’s travel bans and “extreme vetting” policies for refugee service organizations in Texas as they worked to keep their programs operational in an atmosphere of general policy chaos.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Trump-Era Policy Chaos and the Dismantling of the United States Refugee Resettlement Program**

In November 2015—one full year before the Presidential election that would send Donald Trump to the White House—the members of the Dallas Area Refugee Forum held their usual monthly meeting to discuss and coordinate the ordinary practical challenges of refugee resettlement in North Texas. Representatives from all the local resettlement agencies were there, along with people from the health department, the local hospital, the public schools, the city police, and a smattering of other community and faith-based organizations providing various services in Vickery Meadow, a polyglot neighborhood on the north side of Dallas where refugees from all over the world had been resettling for decades.

After the usual announcements and roundtable discussion of how to coordinate various practical services, discussion turned to the future. There was a palpable air of anticipation in the room. It was the height of the Syrian civil war. Millions of Syrians had already been waiting for years in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, many of them desperate enough to attempt risky journeys across the Mediterranean Sea in leaky rubber boats. President Obama had just announced his intention to raise the refugee admissions ceiling for fiscal year 2016 from 70,000 to 85,000, and his assumed successor Hillary Clinton had signaled her strong support for increasing the numbers even further the next year. Around the big table, representatives from the various organizations speculated energetically about what this would mean for their plans to

accommodate the long-awaited surge of new Arabic-speaking families fleeing the Syrian civil war. How many of them would end up coming to Texas? How soon would they begin arriving, and how would local organizations need to adapt or expand their services to make arrangements for them all? Several people in the room expressed impatience with a bureaucratic process that seemed needlessly slow; we had all known for months that the Syrians were coming at any moment, and yet they never seemed to arrive. Still, it was only a matter of time. When the dam finally broke, and the Syrians began to arrive in earnest, we had to be ready.

In order for Dallas to accommodate a large influx of Syrian refugees—most of them Muslim—more community resources would be needed. A representative from a local synagogue spoke up to announce that her congregation was ready and eager to provide volunteers to help the newcomers get settled, and she knew of another synagogue nearby who also wanted to join the effort. Next, a pastor from a nondenominational Christian church stood up to announce that his congregation had raised enough money to open a brand-new community center in Vickery Meadow, which would provide English classes for adults, tutoring and homework help for kids, a low-cost medical clinic, and weekly donations of food and supplies. An asylum-seeker from Syria stood up and reminded everyone how crucial it was to build support among local political leaders in order to make resources available for asylum seekers as well as officially recognized refugees.

As the meeting came to a close, people buzzed around, making connections and debating possible solutions. I reflected with satisfaction that the timing was perfect: I would be able to be a part of the ramp-up to the Syrian refugee resettlement process in Dallas, one of the biggest hubs of refugee resettlement in the United States. I estimated that it would take me about the right amount of time to finish my coursework and brush up my Arabic skills. By the time I

started my dissertation research, the process would already be well under way and I would be well situated in the community. Everything was aligning.

But the much-anticipated influx of Syrian refugees to North Texas never happened. Later that same day came the shocking news that nearly 500 people had been injured or killed in a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, and that Syrian refugees were thought to be responsible. ISIL / ISIS / Daesh claimed responsibility for the attack. Though the Syrian passport found at the site of one of the bombings was later proven to be a fake, and authorities never demonstrated any other evidence of any connection to Syrian refugees, the political damage was already done. Anti-immigration activists were quick to seize on the Paris terror attacks as evidence of the terrifying potential consequences of opening national borders to refugees fleeing conflicts in the Middle East, especially Syria. In the United States, the refugee resettlement program abruptly became the center of a political firestorm, further intensified by political maneuvering in the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential election. Then-candidate Donald Trump quickly vowed in a campaign speech that if he were elected President, he would order a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on” (Taylor 2015). Within a week after the Paris attacks, Texas Governor Greg Abbott had led a coalition of 31 governors signing a letter petitioning the federal government to stop the resettlement of refugees from Syria in their states (Fantz and Brumfield 2015; Healy and Bosman 2015). By the time the Dallas Area Refugee Network met again in December—just one month later—the state of Texas had launched a lawsuit against the federal government, announcing its intention to withdraw completely from the federal refugee resettlement program (Abbott 2016; Ura 2016).

The Paris terror attacks presaged a long period of uncertainty and turmoil for the US refugee resettlement program, and for US immigration in general. Immigration—particularly for Muslim refugees—became a hot-button issue throughout the 2016 presidential election season, and immigration restriction became a cornerstone of Donald Trump’s policy agenda when he entered the White House on January 20, 2017. Over the next four years, Trump transformed the face of US immigration policy—not by passing immigration reform laws through Congress, but through hundreds of regulatory changes and executive orders which, taken together, narrowed pathways for most forms of legal immigration and sowed confusion, instability, and fear among immigrants who were already in the United States (Pierce and Bolter 2020). As outlined in chapter 2, the refugee and asylum systems were particular targets of dozens of anti-immigration policy changes enacted during this time. These changes created a general atmosphere of policy chaos which repeatedly derailed service organizations’ efforts to advocate on behalf of immigrants and to mitigate the practical effects of these policies on their clients’ lives. The shifting policy landscape made it difficult for organizations serving refugees and asylum seekers to deploy resources effectively or to provide their clients with accurate information and advice. Meanwhile—as discussed in chapters 3 and 4—draconian policy changes galvanized individuals to volunteer, advocate, and donate on a nearly unprecedented scale.

In this chapter, I tell the story of the gradual destruction of the refugee and asylum systems in Texas, and the people who tried to keep them alive. I begin with background information on the US refugee resettlement program. In the latter part of the chapter I will explore how the laws and executive orders impacted the work of refugee organizations and volunteers in Dallas in both positive and negative ways. The chapter ends with a discussion of

deservingness, compassion, and the politics of refugee resettlement in a state of exception (Agamben 2005).

### **Background on the US Refugee Resettlement Program**

Each year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) seeks commitments from member states to resettle some portion of the world's registered refugees. UNHCR begins the screening process and submits lists of the most likely candidates for resettlement to the US government. At that point, candidates enter a long and complicated process of paperwork, interviews, security checks, and health screenings administered by multiple different US government agencies. For most people, the application process takes a minimum of two years and often much longer. There is no certainty of success at the end of the application process, since the number of qualified, deserving candidates is always much larger than the number of resettlement spots available. A refugee's application can be summarily rejected at any stage of the process with little or no explanation and no opportunity to appeal (IRAP 2020; Thomson 2012).

### **The Role of the VOLAG**

Once their application is finally approved—a process that takes anywhere between two and twenty years—the refugee will be assigned a destination and scheduled for travel. Refugees cannot choose their specific destination in the United States, and often do not know where exactly they are headed until the last minute. Each refugee or family is assigned to one of nine VOLAGs (voluntary organizations) under contract with the State Department to provide services to assist with the practical aspects of resettlement. Resettlement destinations are assigned

through a bidding process, in which VOLAGs try to distribute their new clients among partner offices in different cities, balancing clients' needs against the availability of local resources. For example, a client with relatives in the United States might be placed in the same city, or a speaker of a minority language might be sent to a place where services are already available in that language, or a person with a serious medical condition might be placed near a major hospital. Once the destination is set, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a partner agency of UNHCR, makes travel arrangements and issues a loan in the amount of the airfare, which refugees must repay before they can apply for citizenship. In this way, refugees arrive in their host communities already in substantial debt for the cost of their travel.

The VOLAG, also referred to as a resettlement agency, plays a crucial role in setting up the conditions for successful resettlement during the family's crucial first months in the United States. The resettlement agency's reception and placement (R&P) team is responsible for facilitating most practical aspects of life during the first three months. They find and furnish an apartment, stock it with groceries, pick up the refugee family at the airport, introduce them to the public transportation system, set them up with bank accounts and ATM cards, and register the family for public programs like Social Security and WIC. They make care arrangements for clients with disabilities and chronic medical conditions. They register the children for school, help them find out where to catch the bus in the mornings, and make sure everyone has school uniforms and backpacks and appropriate footwear. They register the adults for English and cultural orientation classes. They help people get to medical appointments, resolve misunderstandings with landlords, and rescue clients when they get lost on the subway. And—most crucially as far as the US government is concerned—they provide job placement services in

order to make sure that new refugee families are at least marginally financially self-sufficient by the time their initial welcome benefits expire.

All of these services are expensive. Refugee resettlement agencies are funded through contracts with the US government, which pays a per capita amount for each refugee the organization resettles. Currently, the per capita grant is \$2,175, about half of which goes to the resettlement agency to cover staffing and administrative costs. This leaves about \$1,000 to cover rent, food, furniture, clothing, transportation, healthcare, and other costs for the refugee during their first three months in the United States (Bruna 2011; Mathema and Carratala 2020; CMS / RCUSA 2020). Most or all of this money has usually been spent on the refugee's behalf before their arrival in the country. Resettlement agencies strive to fill as many of their clients' needs as possible with donated clothing and household goods, so that they can preserve at least a little of the welcome money for the client to receive in cash to help with groceries and other expenses. But even under the best of circumstances, the financial margins are tight. Refugee benefits end within four to eight months after arrival, depending on how programs are structured in the state where they live. This means that there is little time for them to adjust or to learn English, and there is intense pressure for them to take the first available low-income job regardless of whether it matches their education or qualifications (Bruno 2011).

Since the financial margins are tight, refugee resettlement agencies rely heavily on volunteer labor to do much of the day-to-day practical work of resettlement. This practice serves several purposes: it provides additional labor to accomplish the basic practical tasks of resettlement, which otherwise would overwhelm the limited staff at resettlement agencies; it helps to promote social integration between newcomers and other people in their host communities; and it keeps community support for the refugee resettlement program alive. In this

effort, they have traditionally found strong support from churches, synagogues, and other religious groups (Eby 2011). They also bolster their professional workforce through robust (but usually unpaid) internship programs that recruit student workers from local universities. Volunteers and interns collect furniture donations, stock new apartments with donated groceries and household goods, drive clients to medical appointments, assist with English classes, answer refugees' practical questions about life in the United States, and often serve as refugees' first American friends.

### **Dismantling the Refugee Resettlement Program**

Starting in 2017, refugee resettlement agencies faced a host of challenges due to the Trump administration's chaotic approach to governing in general and immigration policy in particular. Under the Trump administration, resettlement agencies could no longer rely on a predictable funding stream from a well-oiled pipeline of incoming clients. Instead, they had to provide ongoing services for refugees who were already in the United States without any way to reliably predict future income or program needs. Funding streams from the federal government were so severely disrupted that many smaller offices around the country were forced to suspend programs or close their doors entirely. Larger, more established offices survived by restructuring their services, forming new partnerships, and seeking out new sources of funding. This section will address the following questions: What actions did the Trump administration take to restrict and dismantle the refugee resettlement system? How did this affect the refugee resettlement program? And how did refugee service providers in North Texas respond?

Since the beginning of the current US Refugee Resettlement Program in 1980, the Trump administration is the only one that has consistently worked to undermine and dismantle the

program. Trump never eliminated the refugee program entirely. But by the end of his four years in office, he had employed various mechanisms to cut refugee arrivals by almost 90%--from a ceiling set at 110,000 in FY17 to a ceiling of 15,000 in FY21, with less than 12,000 admitted in FY20 (Refugee Processing Center). The Trump administration took aim at the refugee resettlement program through a series of executive actions and regulatory and administrative changes that essentially hobbled the program and shrank it to a fraction of its former size. Briefly stated, these changes were: repeated cuts to the annual Presidential Determination; a series of executive orders that attempted to limit or delay the resettlement of refugees from certain majority-Muslim countries; changes to the security vetting system; and the imposition of various other administrative requirements. Taken together, these changes constituted an existential threat to the refugee resettlement program. Even if the next administration has the political will, it will likely take several years to rebuild the program to its former size and strength.

### The Presidential Determination

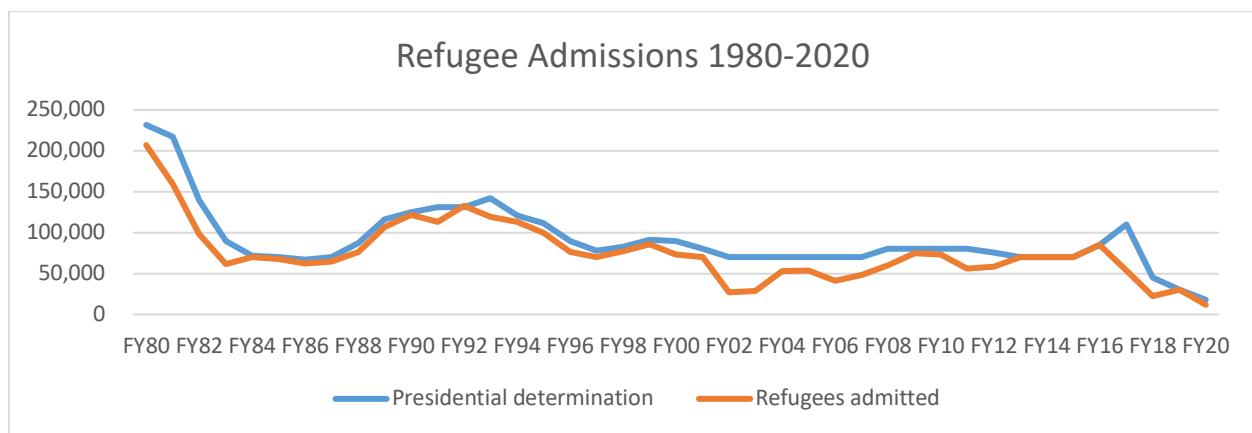
In the United States, the number of refugees accepted for resettlement each year depends on a number called the annual Presidential Determination. US law requires that each year before the new fiscal year starts on October 1, the President must consult with Congress to set a goal number of refugees to admit during the coming fiscal year. This number is a “ceiling”—in other words, it is a goal for the maximum number of refugees to be admitted in the upcoming fiscal year, which is not always one hundred percent filled depending on the practical realities of that particular year. Government agencies and private organizations involved in the resettlement process rely on the Presidential Determination to project expected arrivals, gauge anticipated program needs, and allocate funding and resources for the year.

Due to its humanitarian focus on aiding victims of violence and persecution, the refugee resettlement program has not usually been particularly controversial and has historically enjoyed broad bipartisan political support. In most years since the beginning of the current refugee program in 1980, the Presidential Determination has been set somewhere between 70,000 and 110,000 per year, regardless of which party was in power. Though this number is a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the total number of refugees in the world, it is still a hefty percentage of all the refugees who are permanently resettled through the United Nations—about half. As seen in the chart below, the Presidential Determination has remained high under every President, both Republican and Democrat, except for Donald Trump. The program did suffer major setbacks after the 9/11 terror attacks, when the Bush administration paused the program while security protocols were completely redesigned (Kerwin 2012). But the 9/11 slowdown was never intended to be permanent. The Bush administration signaled its intent to maintain the program by leaving the Presidential Determination at its previous level of 70,000 per year, and even provided bridge funding to maintain program infrastructure and staffing while arrivals were low. It took years for refugee admissions to gradually recover to their former levels—but the Presidential Determination itself remained relatively steady under both Republican and Democratic leadership (Mathema and Carratala 2020). The Obama administration eventually increased the Presidential Determination to 110,000 in response to the massive crisis in Syria. But even this increase was relatively modest compared to the numbers of refugees accepted in peak years during the early 1980s under Republican President Ronald Reagan, and again in the 1990s under Presidents George HW Bush (Republican) and Bill Clinton (Democrat).

Figure 5.1 shows changes in overall numbers of refugee admissions over time, starting at the beginning of the current refugee resettlement program in 1980. Actual admissions are often

slightly lower than the annual Presidential Determination but usually track roughly together. Note that the Presidential Determination remained steady after the 9/11 terror attack in 2001, even as actual admissions dropped due to the implementation of new security protocols. Both the Presidential Determination and annual admissions dropped sharply every year starting in 2017.

Figure 5.1: Refugee Admissions 1980-2020



Source: PRM Refugee Admissions Report. State Department. Refugee Processing Center.

Trump drastically decreased the Presidential Determination every year that he was in office. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, President Obama set the 2017 Presidential Determination at 110,000. But immediately after taking office in January, Trump took drastic steps to decrease refugee arrivals. Through a series of executive orders and administrative changes, the Trump administration left unfilled 56,284 of the 110,000 slots that were originally set aside for refugees in fiscal year 2017—more than half. The next year, Trump decreased the Presidential Determination to 45,000, and still left about half of those slots unfilled. Fiscal years

2019 and 2020 saw the refugee cap slashed again to 30,000 and then 18,000 respectively (Refugee Processing Center).

The year 2020 brought yet another unforeseen catastrophe for the refugee program in the form of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As borders closed and cities around the world went into lockdown to slow the spread of disease, the US refugee program stopped accepting new arrivals from March 19 through the end of July 2020, except for a small number of emergency cases. As a result, more than a third of the tiny allocation of 18,000 slots went unfilled in fiscal year 2020 (US State Dept. 2020). Unless something changes, the same thing is likely to happen in fiscal year 2021. When Trump left office in January 2021, the FY21 Presidential Determination was limited to only 15,000 refugees. Supposedly, that number included spots for people whose entry to the US was deferred in 2020 due to the pandemic. But the number was too small to accommodate the vast majority of these people. Resettlement agencies have already warned the State Department that taking into account existing processing delays for Iraqi and Central American cases, it is likely that half of the allocated spaces will go unused once again in 2021 (CMS / RCUSA 2020).

Though President Biden has already indicated his intent to reverse many of Trump's immigration-related policy changes, it remains to be seen whether the refugee resettlement program will be among his top priorities. As of the time of this writing, his commitment to rebuilding the refugee program appears shaky (Alvarez and Vazquez 2021). Even if Biden eventually raises the Presidential Determination to the level that the program enjoyed under President Obama, program infrastructure has been eroded to the point that it will likely take a long time to rebuild (Refugee Council USA 2019; Mathema and Carratara 2020; Hauslohner 2020).

## Executive Actions Limiting Refugee Admissions

Donald Trump's presidency is unique in that the Trump administration is the only one that has specifically and intentionally worked to shrink the size of the refugee program and dismantle the infrastructure that holds it together (Mathema and Carratara 2020). Trump's executive orders were only the most obvious and most public attempts. There were also a number of less obvious methods that were less visible to the public. The Trump administration also intensified security vetting procedures for refugees coming from parts of the world with high levels of conflict, complicating the process and overburdening staff and resources to the point that refugee flows from some countries virtually came to a stop because it was next to impossible for anyone to make it through the process. At the same time, the Trump administration reallocated trained staff and other resources away from the refugee program, saying that they were more sorely needed to deal with a huge number of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border—while simultaneously tightening asylum requirements to the point that it became virtually impossible for anyone to get through the asylum process either (Meissner, Hipsman, and Aleinikoff 2018).

During his first week in office, Trump issued the first of several executive orders specifically designed to block immigration from several of the countries producing the largest numbers of refugees. The executive order took direct aim at the refugee resettlement program, reducing the annual refugee ceiling from 110,000 to 50,000, banning Syrian refugees indefinitely, and putting the entire refugee program on hold for 120 days (White House 2017a). This executive order was quickly blocked in the courts, but not before throwing the refugee resettlement program into confusion as thousands of people whose travel had already been approved found themselves blocked at the last minute. Resettlement resumed within a few

weeks, and the program gained a temporary reprieve when the courts blocked a revised version of the travel ban in March. So for the first half of 2017, refugee admissions continued, albeit at a slower pace. But in June, the Supreme Court allowed a modified version of the travel ban to go into effect. Refugee admissions were put on hold for 120 days from June 29 to October 24, 2017, except for refugees who had a “bona fide relationship” with close relatives in the United States. Although refugee advocates argued that refugee resettlement agencies should count as anchors of “bona fide relationships”, this argument ultimately failed in the courts, leaving tens of thousands of approved refugees in limbo.

By the time the 120-day pause on refugee resettlement expired, the Trump had come up with a new, less politically objectionable way to block refugees by instituting extreme security vetting requirements that were nearly impossible for anyone to pass. In this way, Trump managed to prevent refugees from entering the country without exposing himself to political fallout; rather than publicly barring them from entry, he simply mired them in unresolvable administrative and bureaucratic delays.

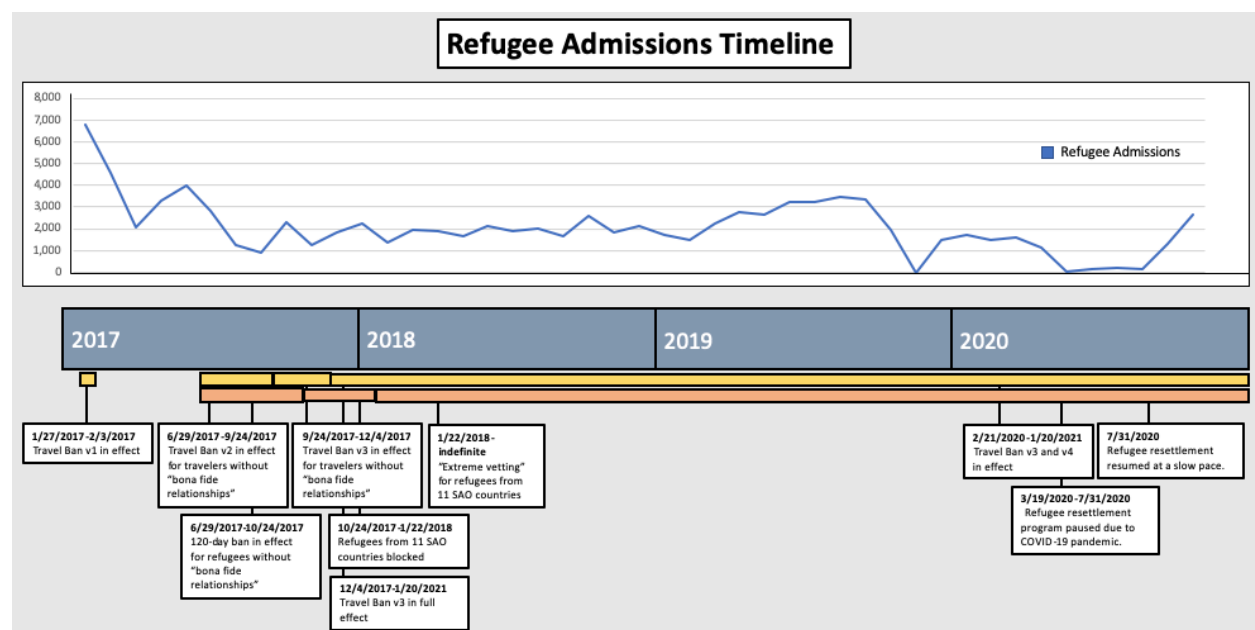
### Enhanced Vetting

After the 120-day moratorium on refugee resettlement ended in October 2017, it appeared to the general public as though one of the most objectionable pieces of Trump’s travel ban had been removed. The third and fourth versions of the travel ban did not include refugees, which made it more difficult to object to the ban on purely humanitarian grounds. But in fact, the Trump administration’s war on the refugee resettlement program had simply gone underground, continuing in subtler ways that were just as effective but less visible to the public.

Figure 5.2 shows when various categories of refugees were officially blocked from entering the United States under various travel bans over the 4 years of the Trump administration.

When were refugees officially blocked from entering the United States?	
Refugee categories	Dates at least partially blocked
All countries	1/27/2017-2/9/2017 3/19/20- 7/31/2020 (COVID-19)
All countries (unless there is a “bona fide” relationship with relatives in the US)	6/29/2017-10/24/2017
“High risk” (SAO) countries blocked: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen	10/24/2017-1/22/2018
Extreme vetting for “High risk” (SAO) countries: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Yemen	1/22/2018-Indefinite

Figure 5.3 shows changes in refugee admissions against a timeline of major policy changes affecting refugee admissions. For a timeline of events relating to the travel bans more generally, see chapter 2.



At the time that the third travel ban was issued, the refugee resettlement program was still closed to all refugees without family connections in the United States under the 120-day ban from the second version of the travel ban. But people entering the United States through the refugee resettlement program were exempt from travel ban 3. The reason for this apparent omission became clear when the 120-day ban expired in October. On October 24, the White House issued another executive order resuming the refugee resettlement program with “enhanced vetting capabilities” (White House 2017d).

The text of the executive order itself says very little about what specifically “enhanced vetting capabilities” meant. For that information, we have to look to a memo from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to the President, dated October 23 (Tillerson, Duke and Coats 2017). Tillerson’s memo explains that due to continued concern about refugees from 11 “high risk” countries, the State Department would conduct an additional 90-day detailed threat analysis and review of the situation in those countries, during which time refugee admissions from those countries would remain suspended. Meanwhile, resources and personnel would be reallocated to prioritize the processing of refugees from other places. Refugee applicants from the 11 “high-risk” countries would be subjected to an extra layer of scrutiny, and would only be admitted on a case-by-case basis if their admission was “deemed to be in the national interest and poses no threat to the security or welfare of the United States” (p. 2). Also subject to additional scrutiny would be derivative refugees following to join family members in the United States, regardless of their nationality, since “follow-to-join” refugees (usually spouses, minor children, or elderly parents) were not always subject to uniform security protocols worldwide. Tillerson recommended putting these individuals’ applications on hold while additional screening measures were implemented (p. 3).

The memo itself does not specify which 11 countries were designated “high risk”, but it refers to a confidential State Department list of countries whose nationals are routinely recommended for an additional level of security screening called a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) when they apply for visas to the United States. These countries include Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. It is worth noting that all of these countries except for North Korea and South Sudan are majority Muslim, and most of them had already been included in at least one version of Trump’s travel ban.

It is unclear whether the additional security measures imposed on refugees from these 11 countries actually made anyone in the United States safer. Refugees already went through an exhaustive multi-agency vetting process before they were approved to enter the country. As attested in a letter signed by 20 high-level government officials and military leaders, refugees were already more extensively vetted than any other kind of traveler and were more likely to be victims of terrorism than perpetrators of it (Collins 2015). Due to their inclusion on the SAO list, adult male refugees from all 11 countries were already subject to higher-level security screening procedures before the Trump administration called for enhanced vetting, so it is not clear what practical purpose this “enhanced vetting” served (Torbaty and Rosenberg 2017).

What is certain is that these “temporary” additional security measures made administrative processing so time-consuming, difficult, and complicated that they virtually choked off refugee streams from these countries. Refugee advocates argued that the “enhanced vetting” executive order amounted to a de facto refugee ban (Torbaty and Rosenberg 2017). Despite Trump’s campaign-era promises to block Middle Eastern refugees, refugees were exempt from the final version of the travel ban approved by the courts. But critics argued that the “enhanced vetting” program—which covered almost the same list of majority-Muslim countries

included in the travel ban—was merely a subtler way to accomplish the same purpose, while avoiding the obvious appearance of targeting vulnerable refugees of one particular religion. Since internal changes to administrative processes could be carried out largely without oversight or public knowledge, the Trump administration was able to manipulate a lack of transparency in security vetting protocols to carry out a near-ban of Muslim refugees without accountability (IRAP 2020).

Figures 5.4, 5.5, and 5.6 show how refugee admission allocations changed with the implementation of “enhanced vetting” in fiscal year 2018. Charts include all 11 SAO countries. (All of the refugee-heavy countries included in the travel bans are on the SAO list except for Burma and Eritrea, which were added in travel ban 4).

Figure 5.4: Refugees from “SAO” countries as compared to total refugees from all countries

	Presidential determination	Refugees from all countries	Refugees from SAO countries	SAO refugees as percentage of total
FY16	85,000	84,994	36,952	0.4348
FY17	110,000	53,716	23,357	0.4348
FY18	45,000	22,517	619	0.0275
FY19	30,000	30,000	1,893	0.0631
FY20	18,000	11,814	1,601	0.1355

Source: Arrivals by State and Nationality, FY15-FY20. State Department. Refugee Processing Center. Accessed 10/31/2020.

Figure 5.5 compares refugee admissions from “SAO” countries to refugee admissions from non-“SAO” countries. Note that “SAO” refugees dropped to less than three percent of the total after the implementation of “enhanced vetting” protocols.

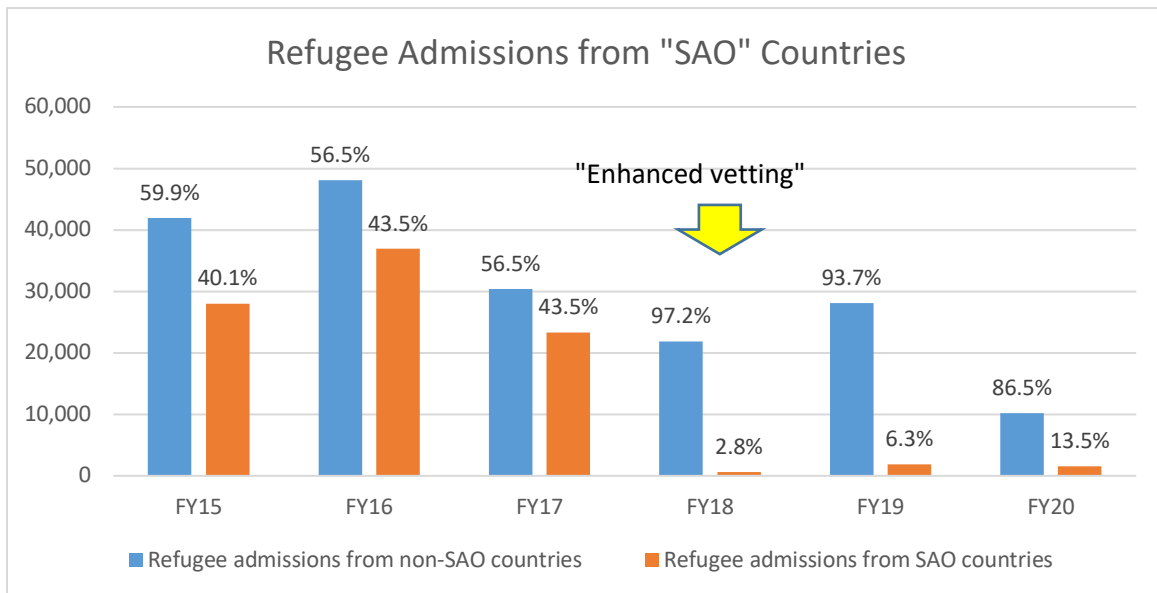
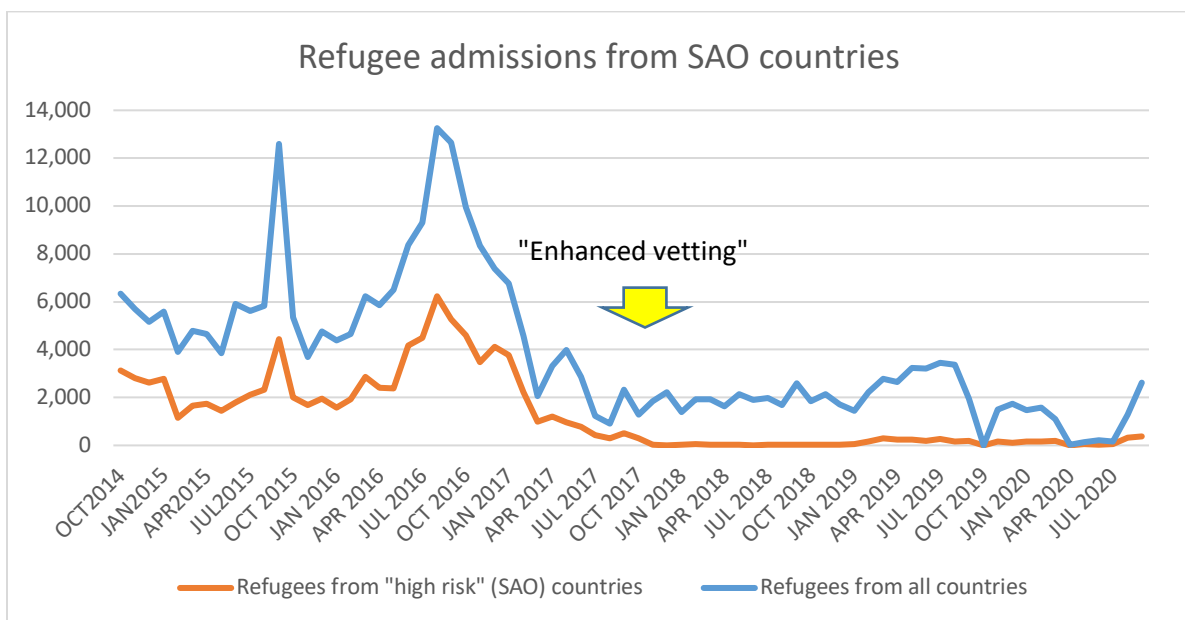


Figure 5.6 compares refugee admissions from “SAO” countries to refugee admissions from all countries over time. After the implementation of “enhanced vetting”, admissions from “SAO” countries remained low even during periods when refugee admissions in general increased slightly.



\*Note spikes in September 2015 and 2016. Spikes at the end of the fiscal year are not uncommon as agencies push to fill quotas before October.

\*Lower numbers in spring 2020 reflect a pause in refugee admissions in due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most resettlement agencies were closed and many cities were under stay-at-home orders during this time.

The security vetting process for refugees has always been much more robust than vetting processes for any other category of person seeking entry to the United States. But several changes in recent years have made the process even more stringent, often in ways that are not particularly useful in identifying real security concerns. Some of these changes began during the Obama administration, but were later expanded under Trump. For example, in 2016 the FBI started using bulk data collection to analyze cell phone data of refugee applicants in SAO-list countries in order to find out whether the applicant might be in contact with anyone known to have terrorist connections. This process was inherently problematic because it was too easy to disqualify someone based on connections that were not meaningful—such as if the applicant called the same food delivery service as someone whose phone number was on a terrorism watch list. Simultaneously, the FBI decided to adopt a “zero tolerance” policy which automatically disqualified anyone with even one suspicious connection. Together, these changes resulted in “not clear” results for almost every SAO check, including those for trusted local partners who had been working for the US government for years. Since there was no oversight and no public accountability in the vetting process, refugees whose applications were refused for arbitrary or superficial reasons had little recourse and no means of appeal (IRAP 2020, Torbati 2018b).

Similarly problematic were new protocols that involved security checks on refugees’ social media accounts. After some failed early experiments, the Obama administration concluded that social media vetting was too time-consuming and resource-intensive to be useful, because each application required individual attention from a live person who had to be culturally and

linguistically competent enough to understand the nuances of humor and sarcasm in the local language, and such people were in demand for other, more obviously important tasks. Added to that, the information gained from in-depth analysis of people's social media accounts was rarely useful in determining whether they might present a future security threat (IRAP 2020; USCIS 2016: 198-202). Nevertheless, the Trump administration expanded social media checks, instructing officers who did not speak the local language to perform security checks by using notoriously unreliable free online translation services such as Google Translate (Torbat 2019b, IRAP 2020).

After October 2017, refugees were required to provide several pieces of additional information that had not previously been included in their applications, including all the street addresses and phone numbers used by all members of their family for the last decade. While those requirements might seem unexceptional from the perspective of middle-class people living in the United States, they presented major problems for refugees living overseas. Often, refugees were unable to provide formal street addresses because they had been living in unstable, temporary conditions for years. It was likewise difficult for many applicants to provide a complete list of all the phone numbers they had used over the past decade, because cell phones were often passed back and forth between networks of relatives and friends rather than belonging to one specific person. The new requirements created insurmountable obstacles for people who had already completed the security vetting process and were already close to their departure dates, because refugees from countries on the "SAO" list could not travel until portions of their screening process had been re-done (IRAP 2020). Several portions of the years-long security check process had expiration dates attached—meaning that the delay of the departure date in

itself created additional delays, as various security checks expired and had to be done over again (Mathema and Carratala 2020).

Meanwhile, the new requirements generated tens of thousands of additional SAO checks since not only adult men but also women and underage children were now required to undergo additional screening. The agencies responsible for conducting security checks quickly fell behind due to the increased administrative burden of repeat work. During the 90-day period starting October 24, 2017, the Trump administration drastically increased the workload of security vetting in “SAO” countries while simultaneously reallocating resources to other parts of the world. In effect, this meant that refugee processing slowed down everywhere but virtually came to an end for people from the eleven “high-risk” countries. Though it was theoretically still possible for people from SAO-countries to get a waiver during this period, no waivers were actually granted. Thousands of refugees who had previously been about to depart found that their applications were once again indefinitely on hold (IRAP 2020).

After the end of the 90-day review period, the Trump administration put in place still more “extreme vetting” protocols that created additional hurdles for refugee applicants from SAO countries (Higgins 2018; Nielsen 2018; USCIS 2018). Interviews must now be longer in order to allow additional time to discuss potential national security issues, and older children were required to do individual interviews separately from their parents. Since each family now required more and longer interviews, fewer families could be processed in the same amount of time (Nielsen 2018; Higgins 2018; IRAP 2020). In a separate directive, the Trump administration required the Department of Homeland Security to conduct an additional review (Pipeline DHS Review, or PDR) of refugees from SAO countries who had already completed interviews with USCIS, in order to determine whether they needed to be interviewed again. This

additional step delayed the processing of refugees from SAO countries for several more months, even though the vast majority of applicants were never actually called for additional interviews with USCIS (IRAP 2020).

By early 2018, the backlog of cases had grown to the point that the State Department began imposing monthly quotas on the number of SAO requests that the refugee program was allowed to request each month, in order not to overwhelm personnel at the FBI. But vetting agencies still failed to meet these lower monthly quotas, which were eventually dropped (IRAP 2020). Refugee advocates alleged that once people's names had been flagged for superficial reasons their applications remained stalled indefinitely, without any recourse and without any timeline for adjudication. Since security review processes are shrouded in secrecy, it is difficult or impossible to access information about how many applications may still be "stuck" in the process (IRAP 2020: 16). Human rights advocates accused the Trump administration of intentionally dragging its feet on refugee security checks, pointing out enormous case backlogs at both the FBI and DHS. DHS argued that it could no longer assign the same number of staff to managing its refugee caseload because these personnel were needed to handle asylum cases on the US-Mexico border. But human rights and refugee advocates pointed to administrative hurdles and staff reallocations as evidence that the administration was attempting to accomplish through bureaucratic means what it could not accomplish by executive order. Rather than banning refugees outright, they would simply starve the refugee program of resources and let it wither on the vine (De Luce and Aisley 2018).

All of Trump's proclamations and executive orders relating to bans on travel from Muslim and African countries were revoked effective immediately in executive orders signed by President Biden on his first day in office on January 20, 2021 (Kavi 2021, White House 1/20/21).

Before taking office, the Biden administration declared its intention to raise the annual refugee admissions cap to 125,000 (Alvarez 2020). But halfway through 2021, the administration is off to a very slow start (Alvarez and Vazquez 2021). In actuality, reestablishing refugee admissions will be much more complicated than simply issuing new executive orders. In order to restore refugee admissions from countries that were originally included in the travel bans, the Biden administration will need to revamp security protocols for those countries once again in order to establish procedures that address security threats in an effective way without bogging down the entire system with circular and unnecessary double work (RCUSA 2019, Mathema and Carratala 2020).

### **Consequences for US Refugee Resettlement**

There were several cumulative effects for refugee resettlement program as a whole. First, fewer total refugees were resettled, and refugee streams from SAO countries were cut off almost entirely. Second, the new security policies created long, nonsensical delays while people were trapped indefinitely in a Kafka-esque bureaucratic hell of endless paperwork and repetitive security checks. The problem here is that many refugee security clearances have time limits attached. This means that a seemingly minor administrative delay at one point in the process can result in a chain of expired clearances, which then results in indefinite postponement of admission to the United States as security checks are repeated (Mathema and Carratala 2020). Meanwhile, families already in the United States had to endure longer separations from relatives caught in administrative delays overseas (RCUSA 2019; IRAP 2020). Trump's repeated attempts to limit immigration from majority-Muslim countries meant that proportionately fewer Muslim refugees were resettled, even though many of the world conflicts that are currently producing

large numbers of refugees mainly affect Muslim people (RCUSA 2019; Greenberg, Gelatt, and Holovnia 2019). Even though the Trump administration tried to claim credit with Evangelical Christians for setting aside specific allocations for religious minorities, in terms of raw numbers the administration actually resettled fewer Christian refugees than before, because Christians made up a larger proportion of a drastically reduced refugee population (RCUSA 2019). In addition, because programs for existing refugees are funded by projected per capita funding for future refugees, fewer new arrivals meant drastic cuts in programs and support for refugees who are already here (RUSA 2019, Mathema and Carratala 2020).

### Funding and Infrastructure

The cuts to the Presidential Determination have had far-reaching consequences for refugee resettlement infrastructure inside the United States as well. The main problem here is that the entire system is built on predetermined allocations and arrivals, so that even a temporary interruption in arrivals creates major disruptions and setbacks (Mathema and Carratala 2020). Federal funding for the VOLAGs depends on a per capita grant for each refugee resettled. The annual Presidential Determination is key to budgeting and program planning for refugee service agencies. They must prepare ahead of time to make sure they can provide appropriate services for the number of new arrivals expected during the coming year as well as providing continuing services for people who have already arrived. An unexpected drop in arrivals is disastrous for these agencies because they depend on per capita grants from projected future arrivals to pay for continuing services for those who have already arrived. A high Presidential Determination combined with a drastic cut in actual arrivals means that they must plan facilities and staff based on the expectation of funds which never actually arrive. But eliminating programs and

experienced staff during a temporary slow period carries heavy consequences because it means that they lose resources and expertise which cannot easily be restored if arrivals pick up again a few months later (CMS / RCUSA 2020; RCUSA 2019; Mathema and Carratala 2020). Under Trump, budgeting and program planning were particularly difficult because of Trump's tendency to delay announcing the annual Presidential Determination until the last possible moment, sometimes even failing to make the announcement until after the start of the new fiscal year. This made it impossible for organizations serving refugees to plan appropriately because they could not know the size of their expected budgets or the number of clients they should plan to serve. The Trump administration did not sign the Presidential Determination for fiscal year 2021 until October 27, four weeks after the start of the fiscal year. As a direct result of this delay, exactly one refugee was resettled in all of the United States during the entire first month of the year (IRC 2020; CWS 2020; Refugee Processing Center).

Further complicating the situation, Trump's State Department instituted various administrative requirements that made it even more difficult for already-strapped refugee service organizations to keep their doors open. For example, in December 2017 the State Department announced a new requirement that refugee service organizations must consolidate. 26 local resettlement offices that had previously partnered with more than one national organization instead could now only partner with one. This meant that smaller refugee service organizations could no longer piece together funding by accepting subcontracts from more than one of the nine major VOLAGs, forcing them to dissolve longstanding partnerships (RCUSA 2019). Refugee Services of Texas is the largest resettling organization in the state, but it operates primarily as a local subcontractor for the national VOLAGs, since it does not operate outside the state. As a result of the directive to consolidate, RST had to end its longstanding partnership with Lutheran

Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) and accept contracts from Church World Service (CWS) only. But RST was lucky in that it was still able to keep its offices open. During the same time period, the State Department announced that any office projected to handle less than 100 new arrivals in fiscal year 2018—due to the Trump administration’s shrinking allocations—would not be recertified to continue operations the following year (Center for American Progress 2020).

Taken together, the loss of US government contracts combined with new administrative requirements to consolidate resulted in the loss of approximately one third of refugee reception and placement centers around the country. At the end of 2016, there were about 325 local resettlement offices helping refugees integrate. As of April 2019—less than three years later—more than 100 local affiliate offices had suspended programs serving refugees. 41 offices in 23 states had temporarily suspended reception programs for new arrivals but continued to provide some services for refugees who were already living in their communities. 51 offices had been forced to close permanently. Many of those that remained in operation were faced with the difficult choice to cut vital programs or lay off staff (RCUSA 2019). Financial pressure on refugee service organizations have been further exacerbated by the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down resettlement operations almost entirely for several months in 2020—thus preventing resettlement agencies from fulfilling their contracts and blocking revenue from per capita refugee arrivals without decreasing their financial responsibility to maintain staff and facilities. By the end of 2020, more than a third of local resettlement offices across the country had buckled to financial pressure and closed their doors (CMS / RCUSA 2020).

## Local Consequences in North Texas

In North Texas—as elsewhere in the United States—refugee admissions dropped precipitately after Trump took office, and so did the federal funding that paid for ongoing services for refugees who had been resettled in previous years. This had far-reaching consequences, not only for refugee resettlement agencies but also for all kinds of other community programs. School districts that normally expected to receive refugee students no longer knew how to allocate funding and teachers for English language programs. Employers who relied on refugees to fill entry-level service and manufacturing jobs received fewer applications. Across the board, all the community organizations providing programs and services that included refugees struggled to adjust to a funding situation that had become wildly unstable. Eric, a high-level staffer at a resettlement office in Dallas, explained the organization’s predicament this way:

ES: In 2014, 15, 16, we were resettling between 800 and 1200 individuals a year, and we were staffed to do that and had the capacity to do that. If that suddenly gets cut in half or even more, we now have excess capacity and staff that is not needed to resettle that number. And it’s not just us. It also has ripple effects on the school district and how they prepare. The health system. So on and so forth. It really has ripples across the whole system...The reason why you want to make up the funding gap is just because we’re going to go from receiving 800 new arrivals this year to 300 next year. Well, the 800 that arrived last year are still here, and they still need [support]. And it’s not like we only work with people for a few months and then say good luck and never see them again. All of these programs and all of this funding interlocks with each other in very complex ways. And we’re built to really help people in the long term.

Funding instability had real practical consequences in terms of the services that resettlement agencies could provide. Especially in the beginning, they struggled to adjust. Less federal funding meant that severe budget cuts were inevitable unless agencies could find some way to make up the difference. Staff members worried that their jobs would be cut, or that they would be unable to provide essential services that vulnerable clients relied on. Even volunteers

noticed a heightened level of stress among agency staff. Meena, a volunteer who helped set up apartments, expressed to me her dismay when basic arrangements for some newly arrived families fell through the cracks—a situation she attributed to stress and budget cuts:

MO: I've seen that because with budget cuts there are so few caseworkers now. Their caseworkers are so overwhelmed. They do not have time to do even the basics with them. And I have no idea how these agencies are surviving or what they're doing, but they're exhausted... They're just completely overwhelmed and their funding keeps getting cut. And as the numbers get cut the funding is getting cut. That's what people aren't understanding.

Last-minute changes in allocations and delays and cancellations due to “enhanced vetting” made the day-to-day work of resettlement more unpredictable and difficult to manage. When new families’ travel approvals dematerialized at the last minute, it caused a domino effect for all the staff and volunteers making practical arrangements ahead of their arrival. *Undoing* arrangements that had already been made created re-work for people who were already working extra hours. As Meena explained, this problem cascaded down from paid staff to volunteers, making everyone’s jobs harder.

MO: In October we were in the middle of setting up an apartment when we learned that their flight had been canceled. That's right when he [Trump] was kind of forcing all the senators to re-vote and renegotiate and find out what's happening. And so we had to get everything back out of the apartment. And we don't know when or if they came again.

On the positive side, when new arrivals plummeted some organizations serving refugees unexpectedly found themselves with extra staff and volunteers who suddenly had nothing to do. If budget shortfalls could be made up through donations or outside contracts, staff could sometimes spare the time to work on new projects or look for ways to improve old ones. Ibtiyah, who works for a local Muslim charity, explained that while the unpredictability of new refugee arrivals created a difficult situation in terms of budgeting and planning, it also afforded unexpected opportunities to rethink and re-strategize.

IJ: Now we have a lot of supplies but no demand. Right? So we have a lot of donation from the community, a lot of furniture, a lot of supplies, a lot of volunteers. Mentors, classes. But there's no demand...In a positive way, now we have more time to focus on issues that we didn't have time before to focus on. When we had a lot of people coming, we focused more on the supplies, furniture, money, this and that, but we didn't have enough time to focus on education as much as we are focusing right now. So now since we have more staff we met with the refugees [to ask], 'If you are now coming newly what are the things that you missed? What do you think would help you?' They said, 'We wish you did visas.' So now we are trying to think again to see what we missed and focusing on it more.

### **Strategies for Survival and Renewal**

Smaller local organizations that partnered with the larger VOLAGs to share federal contracts were the most vulnerable during the Trump years because they often lacked other sources of revenue or did not have enough name recognition to build a broad enough donor base to make up for the lost revenue. Meanwhile, larger national organizations were better able to survive because they could rebalance funding streams from other sources. Larger organizations with wider name recognition were also better positioned to diversify the types of services they provided and to pursue additional grants, contracts, and donations from new sources. While these changes were difficult in the short run, in the long run it made the surviving refugee service organizations less vulnerable in that it forced them to make necessary changes in order to diversify their sources of funding, the programs they offered, and the populations they served in order to become more resilient and less reliant on fickle government funding.

For example, unlike many other refugee resettlement offices the Dallas office of International Rescue Committee (IRC) managed to ride out the Trump years without laying off staff because they built new partnerships and diversified the kinds of services they offered. The Dallas office of IRC won a competitive new municipal grant that enabled them to start offering legal services to asylum seekers housed in detention facilities, and they applied for grant funding

to provide longer term case work for refugee families who needed it. This enabled the organization to reallocate staff to new assignments instead of laying them off. Eric expressed to me his hope that his agency could reposition itself as a truly community-based organization that could serve a broader range of local people with a wider variety of needs—a shift that could benefit both the organization and the community as a whole.

ES: We'll always have our core mission, assisting people who are fleeing persecution. But there's a lot of overlap obviously once people are resettled in the United States, are living in Dallas, that their needs are the same needs as other folks who are struggling here. So we want to be able to help as many people as we can.

While these changes were challenging, in the end they helped the organization make strategic changes that ultimately served them and the community better in the long run. Eric reflected that in retrospect, the Trump administration may actually have helped the organization become less reliant on federal funding and better able to weather other financial challenges such as the one associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

ES: We knew before this administration came in, before 2016, we knew that it was not wise to be so reliant on federal funding. There's many reasons that federal funding is not something that you should stake your entire office on, and it doesn't even always have to do with who's in the White House or which political party is in charge. With federal funding, things happen. I mean look right now at what's happening...COVID-19 is not a partisan thing but it's going to impact federal funds to agencies for years and years to come. So we definitely, at least it helped us to get ahead of that by diversifying our funding and looking more local, by thinking a little bit outside of the box on how we fundraise and what we want our portfolio to look like in terms of how our office is funded...Trying times really forces you to be resilient and forces you to think outside the box. I think it probably maybe nudged us to do some things that we should have been doing a long time ago. It provided that fire, so to speak. And I think it's kind of helped to push us. Maybe it's brought a lot of our operations and made it more mature, more professional than they were before. Maybe we were a little bit comfortable before.

## New Advocacy Efforts

In terms of advocacy, refugee service organizations also had to seek new ways to flex their political muscle by engaging in legal battles to push back against the Trump administration's anti-refugee policies and fight for the rights of their clients. For example, two refugee service providers, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and International Refugee Assistance Project, partnered with the ACLU to fight the administration's travel ban in a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court (*IRAP v. Trump* 3/16/2017). A coalition of three VOLAGs sued the federal government over Trump's executive order mandating specific approval from states and localities before refugees could be resettled there (Hesson 2019). And in Texas, the state government sued IRC over their decision to continue fulfilling federal contracts to resettle Syrian refugees in Texas over the objections of Governor Abbott (Ura 2016).

Trump-era anti-refugee policies also forced refugee service organizations to put more resources into public education and advocacy initiatives. As non-profit 501c3 organizations, refugee resettlement agencies are not allowed to engage in overtly political activities, and they do not organize on behalf of any particular political party or candidate. But they do work to counter anti-refugee rhetoric by providing local, state, and federal lawmakers with information about the refugee resettlement program, and they do organize public education campaigns in order to spread awareness about refugee issues. Speaking about his organization's efforts to build their capacity for advocacy, Eric explained that public interest in refugee issues expanded by leaps and bounds during the Trump years:

ES: It wasn't like this when I first started. I actually started as a volunteer in 2009. And I remember one of my first jobs as a volunteer was answering the phones. And three or four out of every 10 phone calls was about someone in the community who wanted to either drop off or adopt a dog or cat. Because they thought that the International Rescue Committee was for animals! And when I

would explain to them, ‘No, it’s a refugee resettlement agency’, they would go, ‘What does that mean? What is that?’ People didn’t know what refugees were.

Eric went on to explain that since 2016, refugee and asylum issues had become one of the top ten talking points in the national conversation. Suddenly, everyone had an opinion. Being at the center of such heated public debate was frequently difficult for staff members who were not accustomed to thinking of themselves or their jobs as political.

ES: We’re not a political organization. We’re not partisan. We’re secular. We’re here just to do the work that we’re here to do as a humanitarian organization. But we also receive a lot of federal funding. And so we’re kind of sometimes caught in the middle of that and I feel like our staff is sometimes caught in the middle of that.

The Trump years forced refugee resettlement agencies to develop their capacity for advocacy and public outreach. They could no longer afford to assume that refugee resettlement was a bipartisan or apolitical issue; instead, they learned that the very survival of their programs depended on their ability to communicate effectively with lawmakers and with the public. Some of the larger organizations already had a small number of staff working in full-time positions devoted to advocacy and public education. Now, more resources had to be devoted to these efforts. One person involved in refugee advocacy explained that when the state government of Texas pulled out of the refugee program, it was a “big wake-up call” to the resettlement community as a whole. Previously, they had gotten away with assuming that refugees’ reputation as “good immigrants” would shield the refugee program from the political ups and downs that plagued other categories of immigrants. Now, they realized that they could no longer afford this kind of thinking. Basimah, who did refugee advocacy work on behalf of a coalition of refugee service organizations, explained how the anti-political stance of refugee service organizations backfired during the Trump years.

BI: My personal opinion is that even though Texas is one of the states that resettles the largest numbers of refugees, there has been little to no advocacy work done for refugees in Texas. There has been this idea that conservative folks like refugees, so let's not ruffle any feathers and let's just keep our heads down and keep doing the work. But honestly, I think it was a wake-up call because all of a sudden this history of saying, 'we're not under attack and we're the good immigrants' isn't working. This history of doing nothing is backfiring. Nobody thought that would happen.

After the state of Texas sued IRC and pulled out of the resettlement program, a coalition of organizations supporting refugees banded together to create a full-time state-level grassroots organizer position using money from a grant. The goal was to build a sustainable network of support for refugee resettlement in Texas by communicating more intentionally with people in communities around the state. This task proved to be a massive challenge because the state itself is so large and so diverse. Each of the state's large, Democratic-leaning cities had its own personality and its own set of priorities. What worked in Houston or Dallas would not necessarily work in San Antonio. And the state's vast rural areas were a whole different ballgame requiring a completely different approach. In small communities with few opportunities, standard-issue economic arguments proved counterproductive because struggling Americans did not want to hear stories about successful former refugees opening businesses, graduating from college, and buying houses when they could not afford such things themselves. Such stories only made them angry. Depending on the characteristics of the audience, attempts to educate people about how the larger system works could be perceived as condescending and elitist instead of helpful. Gradually, advocates learned that successful organizing depended on nuanced messaging based on an intimate understanding of local issues in each particular community. Usually, this meant that the most effective advocate was someone who already had strong relationships in that place, someone who was part of the "in-group". The key was to find and develop more leaders who could go back and speak to their own communities.

In building their capacity for advocacy, refugee organizations worked to establish and strengthen partnerships with organizations serving other types of immigrants. Basimah explained how building strong relationships between immigrant advocacy organizations was proving more challenging than it might first appear, because refugee organizations did not necessarily have a strong reputation as solid partners in the pursuit of immigrant rights in general.

BI: Historically there has been competition—or maybe competition is not the right word—between refugee rights and rights for other kinds of immigrants. Personally, I believe that in Texas refugee resettlement has had a lot of bipartisan support. Since refugee resettlement was never an issue before, refugee organizations didn't play well with other immigrant groups, and there wasn't a desire to lump them together with other groups. So I see a fissure between refugee rights and other kinds of immigrant rights.

This divide likely stems from refugee organizations' reliance on arguments that frame refugees as “good immigrants”. This kind of language makes refugees into an exception that deserves special treatment. It also implies that other categories of immigrants—particularly undocumented immigrants—are the “bad” ones. So it is perhaps not surprising if advocates for other categories of immigrants did not perceive refugee organizations as potential partners who could be relied upon to support their interests. In the Trump era, refugee advocates made a particular point of being more inclusive in their actions, in order to provide support for immigrant rights movements more generally. The first and easiest step involved making sure that public education events included asylum advocates as equal partners. This helped to promote a growing understanding among volunteer-advocates that border issues and refugee issues were all part of the same thing.

## Policy Chaos

The policy chaos that threw refugee resettlement agencies into disarray was part of a larger pattern that affected immigrant service organizations more generally during the four years of the Trump administration. People working on behalf of immigrants described the Trump years as unpredictable, chaotic, and draining because it was impossible to mount an organized, strategic response. The unpredictable policy environment repeatedly forced them to abandon suddenly unworkable plans and change course midstream, wasting precious time, energy, and resources in the process. This problem affected everyone involved in pro-refugee work from top to bottom, including paid staff, volunteers, and everyone in between. Olivia explained that the chaotic, scattershot nature of the pro-immigrant work in the Trump era felt exhausting and disheartening.

OL: It sometimes feels like whack-a-mole. It doesn't feel particularly strategic or...um, progressive? It feels like when something comes up over here, we bang it. When something comes up over here, we bang it. If it pops up back over here, we bang it. It pops up over there, we bang it. In the meantime, there are ten other whack-a-mole things going on at the same time.

Organizations serving immigrants struggled to keep up with policy changes largely because they lacked access to basic information about what was happening. Many of the most consequential policy changes happened as internal regulatory or administrative changes that took place behind closed doors instead of through public changes in law. Those that did happen publicly—such as the controversial “public charge rule”—were often framed in such convoluted terms, or were so confusingly worded that people had difficulty parsing what they meant or how they might actually be applied in real life. Practical information about new policy changes often spread via word-of-mouth instead of through official channels, causing perpetual doubt and uncertainty about how to respond. Interview participants consistently interpreted this lack of

transparency as an intentional and sinister campaign on the part of the Trump administration to obfuscate and hide information. Wendy, who had been working in the immigrant service world in one capacity or another for decades, saw this policy chaos as an intentional attempt to confuse and frighten immigrants, especially immigrants of color.

WT: I think of the daily, daily barrage of things that the Trump administration is doing to hurt immigrants. And we see it. Every single day something comes out....It's a back door way to eliminate immigrants from poor countries and countries of color...I think that accounts for just the vast willingness of people to step in and take a stand and do something. Because every single day it's been something. Whether it's the Remain in Mexico policy or Migrant Protection Protocols or the public charge issue or—it's just—nothing has been good news on the immigration front.

While some ordinary Americans were digging in their heels against refugees, others were taking the opposite stance. An unintended by-product of the Trump administration's very public anti-refugee stance was a new energy for pro-refugee activism, volunteerism, and philanthropy among the general public. Refugee resettlement organizations saw a huge bump in fundraising in 2016 and 2017 that helped them balance the loss in federal funding from new arrivals. Eric saw this as a direct consequence of broad rejection of Trump's anti-refugee rhetoric among the general public.

ES: If we look at our goals that we try to meet for fundraising year over year, we threw out 2016. We're not even going to count this. This is such an outlier that we're not even going to consider this when we look at our goals because there's no way to replicate that...I would say this is true across the board for all local organizations working in this space.

Along with the welcome bump in donations came a massive increase in public interest in volunteering at resettlement agencies, which Eric attributed to a strong desire on the part of ordinary people to take direct action to keep refugee resettlement going, despite the Trump administration's efforts to tear it down.

ES: We saw a big increase in interest and enthusiasm and volunteering and donating cash and material goods you know around 2016, 2017 when there was this really ratcheted up heated rhetoric about refugees and immigrants in general... That really spurred people. There was a lot of people who had maybe looked at it from afar, who had maybe been interested, who were supportive and when they saw what was happening it kind of spurred them into action. They felt like it was—maybe people felt a little bit helpless or they were looking for something to do and they realized this was something that they could do. So we were inundated with volunteer requests and organizations wanting to get involved.

Suddenly, refugee service organizations had so many potential volunteers that they could not find work for them all. But refugee resettlement agencies were not particularly concerned with making it easy for all of these new people to volunteer. They preferred to have rigorous standards, or as Eric put it:

ES: We kind of make people jump through a lot of hoops to become a volunteer... That kind of helps us weed out people who aren't as serious about it or aren't willing to make the commitment. And so if we have 100 and only 40 of them make it through the process, we know we have 40 that are really willing to follow through, really willing to do what they say they're going to do.

The steep on-ramp meant that not everyone who wanted to volunteer could immediately find a place doing work at a resettlement agency, and this trend continued as the numbers of new refugee arrivals continued to drop. People who were interested in volunteering with refugees overflowed into a wide variety of other projects serving similar populations—tutoring programs, fundraising events, English classes, intercultural friendship dinners, border justice projects, etc. Churches, synagogues, and mosques began organizing trips “down to the border” to volunteer at migrant shelters. Gradually—and mostly by word of mouth—awareness began to spread about a devastating humanitarian crisis unfolding on the US-Mexico border as a direct result of the Trump administration’s determined program to undermine and dismantle access to legal asylum for a growing number of Central Americans fleeing gang violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and

El Salvador. Slowly, people began to argue that these people were “refugees” too, even though they lacked the official designation. Volunteers’ response to the escalating border crisis is the topic of the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter tells the story of the gradual and systematic dismantling of the US refugee resettlement program through a series of executive orders and administrative policy changes that purported to protect the United States from foreign terrorist attacks. As outlined in chapter two, the Trump administration’s characterization of the risk of accidentally importing terrorists under the guise of refugees was wildly exaggerated. But it still served as an effective pretext for blocking people from certain countries—most of them Muslim—from entering through the refugee program, simultaneously starving the program of resources intended to support refugees already living in the United States. The people admitted to the US refugee program had already passed an exhaustive system of multi-agency security checks, and many of the new security protocols ate up enormous amounts of time and US agency resources without adding anything in particular in terms of stopping real security threats. Taken at face value as policy changes directed toward a rational goal of reducing the threat of terrorism, these measures seem both disproportionate and counterproductive—something akin to using a sledgehammer to kill a fly briefly glimpsed on a glass table. Even after the end of the Trump administration, the consequences to the refugee resettlement program will likely last for years.

In terms of a rational, goal-directed approach to policymaking, these policies are illogical and ineffective at best and chaotic and destructive at worst. In this sense, Trump-era refugee policy joins a long and well-established tradition of ineffectual immigration policies that employ

the logic of “security” in order to justify policy decisions and budget expenditures that, more often than not, fail to accomplish their stated goals. In his in-depth ethnography of the US Border Patrol, Robert Maril (2004) argues that despite billions of dollars in federal spending on military-style enhanced security measures at the US-Mexico border, US border security policy is not much more than a symbolic attempt to portray an *image* of orderly enforcement of laws based on the principle of deterrence, which are perpetually doomed to failure because they do not take into account the complex reality of the situation in South Texas. Maril is by no means the first or the only person to make this point.

But if these policies are not accomplishing their stated goal of protecting Americans from terrorist attacks, then what are they doing instead? Newton (2008) argues that it is a mistake to assume that public policy—particularly policy about immigration—is a mechanism for rational, evidence-based problem solving. Newton argues that US immigration policies repeatedly fail to accomplish their stated goals because at its core, immigration policy is not about problem solving but about the “politics of reassurance”, in which politicians rely on established immigration myths and carefully crafted storytelling to generate political consensus in order to structure and manage claims made on the state. According to this logic, Trump’s approach to the issue need not necessarily be focused on making either refugee or border policy more rational, more effective, or more secure, because it is only partly about immigration. For the rest, it is about the consolidation of political power.

In his 2005 book *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben investigates the increase of power that governments claim in supposed times of crisis. While these states of exception are in effect, constitutional rights can be diminished or suspended, extending the government’s authority beyond what the law has granted in the past. This state of exception can become prolonged,

lasting well beyond the original crisis, and can operate to deprive individuals of citizenship or of rights that would previously have been protected under the law. Agamben used Nazi Germany as his primary example, but found parallels elsewhere, as in the US government's suspension of the Geneva Convention for suspected terrorists held without trial at Guantanamo Bay.

The suspension of immigration from several majority-Muslim countries following the Paris terror attack in 2015, and the subsequent dismantling of the US refugee program, can be viewed as happening within a state of exception in which Republican politicians, led by Trump, capitalized on the fear and uncertainty of that moment in order to claim enhanced status as defenders of the American people—a tactic that was particularly effective during an election year. Framing the refugee situation as a terrorist emergency allowed Republican politicians to build consensus based on a politics of fear and reassurance, in which immigrants—particularly Muslim refugees—were constructed as a dire threat requiring an immediate and drastic response. The Trump administration was then able to capitalize on the situation to claim power to take actions which would not have seemed justified under other circumstances.

The arguments that Trump and other Republican politicians deployed as justification for cutting the refugee program *and* the arguments employed by pro-refugee activists and volunteers rest on common narratives and counter-narratives about deservingness (Willen 2012, 2019), many of which are well enough established in the American imagination to have a well-worn familiarity (Chavez 2001, 2008; Newton 2008; Haines 2010; Haines and Rosenblum 2010). According to this logic, immigrants are imaginatively sorted into different categories and assigned different levels of deservingness based on origins, legal status, and various personal qualities like honesty and hardworkingness. Thus, legal immigrants who are constructed as hardworking, honest, and willing to earn their citizenship by waiting their turn for legal status

and pulling themselves up by their bootstraps rather than relying on public aid are frequently framed as more deserving of legal rights than those seeking mere economic benefits, those perceived as freeloaders, or those who came illegally or were not willing to wait their turn. Hardworking immigrants escaping persecution—i.e., refugees—have usually been framed as particularly deserving because they reinforce the narrative of America as a haven for people seeking freedom from oppression. Trump broke this pattern by painting refugees—traditionally deemed one of the “most deserving” categories of immigrant—as particularly undeserving because he framed them as an imminent threat to Americans’ basic physical safety and cultural identity. Meanwhile, he borrowed familiar rhetoric about “illegal immigrants” and made it more extreme by portraying people who came without documents as criminals, rapists, drug dealers, and murderers.

The people who came out of the woodwork to defend refugees during the Trump years also deployed familiar arguments about deservingness when they told stories that emphasized refugees’ hardworkingness, law-abidingness, and patriotism toward their adopted country. Sometimes they were not sure how they felt about “illegal immigrants”—people who came to the United States without official permission—but vociferously defended refugees, frequently expressing frustration with their friends and neighbors who did not realize that refugees were “the legal ones”. They characterized refugees as especially deserving of compassion because of their willingness to work hard and because of their assumed history as innocent victims of persecution.

The problem with applying a humanitarian logic based on compassion is that compassion is not the same as human rights (Fassin 2012; Holmes and Castañeda 2016). Compassion may be morally admirable, but it is also optional and thus arbitrary; it puts vulnerable people in the

position of having to prove special deservingness in order to access basic care and legal protections that others already have as a matter of course. Refugee and asylum advocates thus have to play the deservingness game by proving that their clients are the exceptions to a rule that is set up to justify exclusion (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012). People who want to argue for compassion for refugees but who do not challenge the status quo for undocumented people are frequently caught in a confusing tangle of rhetoric about deservingness that is perpetuated and reinforced both by the government (which is currently focused on exclusion) and by refugee aid organizations (which argue that their clients are the exception, but do not challenge the rule). This tension is at the root of what makes cooperation between refugee aid organizations and other immigrant aid organizations so fraught.

Humanitarian organizations frequently find themselves in the position of needing to portray themselves as politically neutral, in order to keep donations rolling in and continue doing their work without interference from governments and political leaders (Ferguson 1994; Bornstein and Redfield 2010; Redfield 2013; Malkki 2015; de Valle 2016). But Miriam Ticktin argues that when those who act in the name of moral imperative claim to be apolitical—beyond or outside of politics—they actually work to reinforce the status quo by refusing to challenge established forms of inequality (Ticktin 2011). For decades, refugee aid organizations have enjoyed a privileged spot in the immigrant aid ecosystem where they could claim to be above or separate from the realities of immigration politics. But events under the Trump administration have exposed the reality that these claims of refugee anti-politics were always deeply political in that they accepted the status quo of injustice and denial of basic rights for immigrants who happened to fall into other, less privileged legal categories. One consequence of Trump's repeated attacks on the refugee resettlement program is that they have forced a rethinking of the

problematic logic that privileges the arbitrary, unreliable, and optional application of compassion for refugees over rights for all. It remains to be seen whether that kind of rethinking will continue under the Biden administration, especially if increased refugee admissions allow the refugee resettlement program to regain its old privileged, “apolitical” place in the American imagination.

In the next chapter, refugee advocates wrestle with questions of deservingness and justice as they travel to the US-Mexico border and witness firsthand the devastating human consequences of the Trump administration’s Remain in Mexico policy. They begin framing asylum seeking families there not as “migrants” but as another—equally deserving—kind of refugee.

## CHAPTER 6

### Going Down to the Border

Diane: It's upsetting and frustrating and challenging because we have people that want to do this work and we're just getting shut down by government policies. (Interview DR)

Nicole: We didn't realize that the child separation thing was still going on, because it was officially supposed to be over. But of course you can always take a child away from their parents if you claim that the parents are a danger to them, and if you are motivated to claim the parents are a danger you can find a way. So it was still going on. (Interview NC)

Charles: There's been a systematic dismantling, there's an effort to completely systematically dismantle our asylum process. That's what we're experiencing. (Interview CI)

Sarah: I'd easily say that the most challenging aspect of this work has been our US government. The border challenges are absolutely the worst part of this in every possible way. Because it's not just keeping us from the ability to help. It's creating new justice issues with separation and the treatment of children. I think without a doubt, without question, that's the hardest part of this. We are our own problem...[The Remain in Mexico policy] has made illegal that which is legal. (Interview SC)

As the numbers of people admitted to the country through the refugee resettlement program dwindled, the number of people who wanted to volunteer with refugees grew even as refugee service organizations needed fewer volunteers. Refugee supporters overflowed into other immigration related projects when refugee agencies started to downsize and their help was no longer as urgently needed. During the humanitarian crisis that resulted from the Trump administration's zero-tolerance and Remain in Mexico (MPP) policies, many of them joined group trips organized by faith-based organizations and advocacy groups to go "down to the

border” (or sometimes, “down to the Valley”) to bear witness to what was happening and to provide much-needed humanitarian aid at shelters and migrant camps. Once they saw firsthand what was happening on the border with their own eyes, they returned to Dallas disturbed, heartbroken, and fired up to spread the word about what was “really” happening.

Activist-volunteers conceptualized the people coming to the US-Mexico border during this period as another kind of refugee. They saw these asylum seekers—primarily Central Americans—as categorically different and more deserving of help than the usual kind of undocumented migrant. These were not single men traveling north in search of better economic opportunities; they were families fleeing real physical danger from escalating gang violence in Central America. Volunteers who went “down to the border” in 2019 viewed the situation there as a particularly abhorrent exception to the normal state of affairs because Trump’s policies repeatedly violated and circumvented existing asylum law, leaving families with young children trapped in squalid makeshift tent towns with few resources and no legal alternatives. The policy chaos engendered by the Trump administration created a humanitarian situation at the southern border that was nearly impossible to navigate, both for asylum-seeking families and for the people trying to help them. Relief efforts were frequently thwarted by a morass of ever-shifting policy changes that obscured public understanding of the situation and made effective, organized response nearly impossible. This chapter explores the experiences of activist-volunteers from North Texas as they attempted to navigate chaos, bear witness to human suffering, and find meaningful ways to respond.

## **Border Policy Under the Trump Administration**

North Texans' volunteer activities at shelters and migrant camps along the border took place in the context of a barrage of draconian new policies aimed at deterring Central American migrants from crossing the US-Mexico border to seek asylum. The “zero tolerance” and Remain in Mexico (MPP) policies were part of a larger attempt to halt unauthorized border crossings and dismantle the legal asylum system.

Starting in 2017, the Trump administration quietly piloted a strict policy of zero-tolerance and family separation for people who crossed the US-Mexico border illegally in the Border Patrol's El Paso sector, which includes West Texas and New Mexico. Enforcement of the new policy became official practice along the entire US-Mexico border in May 2018. Under the new zero-tolerance policy, all adults caught illegally crossing the border faced criminal—not civil—prosecution, and were arrested and sent to criminal detention facilities where children were not allowed. This meant that migrant children were separated from their parents, often by force and without prior warning, and sent to government-run shelters for “unaccompanied minors”. Family members were then shipped off to separate facilities in different parts of the country, often with no knowledge of one another's locations and no reliable way to communicate. In many cases, the parents were eventually deported back to their home countries while their children remained in government custody in the United States indefinitely (Dickerson 2020a). Family separation was an intentional “shock-and-awe” policy intended to deter families from crossing the border, for fear that they would lose custody of their children if they were caught (Burnett 2019). When knowledge of the new family separation policies became public, there was a massive outcry with hundreds of protests across the country. The Trump administration finally relented, with Trump signing an executive order officially ending the family separation policy in June 2018. But by

then the damage was done. Thousands of children had been forcibly separated from their parents, apparently without any serious attempt to keep track of which children belonged to which family or where the various family members had been sent. Reuniting the separated families took years, and for some children the separation became permanent (Monico, Rotabi, and Lee 2019). Some children had already been adopted by American families after their parents were judged to have abandoned their parental rights when they missed court hearings after being deported back to their own countries (Associated Press 10/9/2018). Others who had been separated at young ages no longer remembered their parents, or recognized them but no longer trusted them because they thought that their abandonment was their parents' fault (Monico, Rotabi, Vissing, and Lee 2019).

Meanwhile, the Trump administration enacted its new Remain in Mexico policy in stages over a period of several months, starting at border crossings in California in January 2019 and working gradually east until the enforcement area covered the entire border by summer 2019. Under the Remain in Mexico policy—officially known as the “Migrant Protection Protocols”, or MPP, asylum seekers entering through the US-Mexico border would no longer be allowed to stay in the United States while they awaited final decisions on their asylum claims in the courts. Instead, they would be required to wait in Mexico until their court dates, a process that usually took many months (Dickerson 2020b). This policy had an array of devastating consequences for asylum-seeking families, who were suddenly faced with an impossible choice: return home to the same dangerous situations they had already risked everything to escape; wait for several months on the US-Mexico border in the tenuous hope of eventually getting an asylum hearing; or cross the border illegally, risking arrest and indefinite separation from their children.

Together, the Remain in Mexico and new “metering” policies limiting the number of people who could apply for asylum each day left tens of thousands of Central American asylum

seekers stranded in border towns in northern Mexico (Kao and Lu 2019). There was no way for asylum seekers to know how many weeks or months they would need to wait in order to submit their application, and no way to hold their spot in line if they left the immediate vicinity of the border crossing. Makeshift tent camps—many of them lacking basic necessities like running water and toilet facilities—rapidly grew up in the areas immediately surrounding official border crossings. Though the families living in these camps waited months for their asylum hearings, they had little realistic chance of actually receiving asylum in the United States. Few of them could afford legal representation, and even if they could, the immigration lawyers who were most well versed in American asylum law were mostly located on the other side of the border where their potential clients could not travel to meet them (Bova 2019, Alvarez 2020a).

Eventually, the Trump administration began batch processing asylum claims in tent courts on the Mexican side of the border. Immigration advocates criticized these tent courts as “kangaroo courts” set up to give a bare pretense of due process. Cases were decided at a distance via teleconferenced hearings, frequently without interpreters and without access to legal representation (Bova 2019; Alvarez 2020a).

During this same period, the Trump administration signed a series of “safe country” agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. These agreements required asylum seekers passing through one of these countries to seek asylum there instead of traveling on to the United States. But these “safe country” agreements—pushed through by the Trump administration under threat of tariffs and other dire foreign policy consequences—were widely viewed as a sham because the countries involved did not have functioning asylum systems and could not realistically offer protection (Semple 2019; Miroff 2019a, b). Nevertheless, the Trump administration began summarily deporting asylum seekers to Guatemala, regardless of whether

they had ever actually set foot in that country. These deportations were intended to serve as a deterrent, because people were less likely to make the difficult journey to the US-Mexico border in the first place if they knew they would be summarily sent back to Guatemala without a hearing (Chavez and Diaz 2020, Hernández and Sieff 2020).

The Trump administration also took various actions to dismantle access to legal asylum in general. The Trump administration narrowed the definitions of who could might qualify for asylum by raising the bar for preliminary “credible fear” interviews meant to determine whether applicants had a “significant possibility” of succeeding in their final asylum claim. Under the Trump administration, these initial screenings became much more difficult to pass (Meissner and Pierce 2021). Trump’s Attorneys General also took several direct actions to narrow the criteria of who could qualify for asylum. In *Matter of A-B-*, Attorney General Jeff Sessions overruled prior precedent to decide that domestic abuse and gang violence would no longer be considered grounds for asylum. This change was devastating for Central American asylum seekers, a large proportion of whom were fleeing exactly those circumstances. Later, in the *Matter of L-E-A*, Sessions’ successor William Barr limited the ability of asylum seekers to use their immediate family as the “social group” on which the persecution claim was based. This meant that it was no longer possible for an entire family to claim asylum based on violence or threats made against one of its members. Later, Acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen further narrowed the conditions under which people could qualify for asylum based on persecution by nongovernmental actors (Meissner and Pierce 2021).

In a last-minute push before leaving office, Trump further restricted access to asylum by issuing new rules directing judges to reject asylum claims made by people who crossed into the United States illegally, used fraudulent documents, or passed through other countries on the way

to the United States without seeking asylum elsewhere first (Hesson and Dwyer 2020). Had they not been blocked in the courts, these rule changes could have proven a devastating blow to asylum seekers from Central America, who had previously been allowed to fend off deportation if they applied for asylum within a year of entering the country (Naishadham 2021). Throughout the four years of the Trump administration, court battles and injunctions over the onslaught of new asylum-related restrictions created a seemingly endless tug-of-war over asylum, which made it extremely difficult for immigration lawyers to prepare successful cases or give clients accurate legal advice, since the legal requirements were constantly changing. As a result of these and other changes, the percentage of asylum claims approved by judges fell from 43% in 2016 to 26% in 2020 (Meissner and Pierce 2021).

### **Seeing With Your Own Eyes**

After word of the “zero tolerance” and family separation policies spread, an array of North Dallas churches, synagogues, mosques, and advocacy groups began organizing trips down to the border to witness what was going on and spread the word. The goal of these trips was to provide a means for ordinary people to learn more about the border crisis through firsthand experience rather than simply reading about it in the news. Most of these trips involved some combination of education and practical volunteer work. Trip organizers arranged opportunities for people to serve food or sort donations at shelters, observe hearings in immigration court, ask questions at informational meetings with local advocates, and speak with asylum seekers firsthand. These kinds of firsthand experiences were considered invaluable in combatting misinformation and confusion resulting from haphazard and incomplete news coverage of the situation. Unlike a two-minute news story, knowledge resulting from firsthand experience could

not be set aside or ignored. People talked about “going down to the border” as a transformational experience which could never be forgotten. They returned angry, heartbroken, and galvanized to do something about what they had seen. Stephen described to me the shock and horror he felt in response to what he witnessed on the border, despite researching the situation as best he could beforehand:

Stephen: It was brand new. I mean I’m a news junkie and I read the New York Times every day and so I had that awareness of the situation. So I mean I considered myself informed. But I had not done any advocacy work around it or volunteer work or anything like that. So I was coming in—and actually we both were—we were coming in like, ‘This is horrifying and what the hell is going on? What is this? What exactly is happening and how is this possible?’ (Interview UI)

Even people who considered themselves well-educated about the situation frequently expressed a deep sense of shock and near-trauma when faced with the firsthand reality of the humanitarian situation. Despite extensive preparation and planning, the adult leader of an educational trip for high schoolers described the experience this way:

Nicole: What we saw at the border was so shocking and overwhelming, we just weren’t prepared. My heart was just racing and my pulse was high all the time. I kept worrying that I was having some sort of heart attack, and plus I was down on the border with responsibility for all these teenaged kids and I was worried about taking care of them. When I got back, I had all these tests done and they didn’t find anything heart-related, and finally I realized that I had just been having panic attacks the whole time but didn’t realize that was what it was. It was just a lot. I don’t know how I could have prepared for it better, because we just didn’t know. Even from what you see on the news, you don’t get a real idea of what it’s really like. I remember walking into the Catholic Charities shelter—this was before they moved to the new one across the bus station. At that point they were operating out of an old nursing home or something, and they were processing hundreds of people a day. People were getting dropped off there [by the Border Patrol] with no idea where they were being taken, and you could just see them looking shell-shocked and confused. There were sleeping mats all over the floor. I walked in, and I remember just being hit with this human smell. There were nuns crying because it was all just too much. And there I was with responsibility for all these kids, and I myself was having trouble dealing with what we saw. (Interview NC)

When they returned home from the border, volunteers felt a powerful compulsion to do something about what they had seen. Some of them began traveling regularly back and forth, spending a few days each month volunteering in shelters in El Paso or Brownsville, or working at migrant tent camps on the other side of the border in Matamoros.

### **Border Relief Work as the “Wild West”**

These trips to the border revealed to their participants a devastating humanitarian crisis that was directly caused by US policy but remained mostly invisible to the American public because its worst consequences had been relocated just outside the borders of the United States. This crisis was created by the confluence of escalating violence in the Northern Triangle, limited access to resources and services in Mexico, and a series of abrupt policy changes that left tens of thousands of asylum seekers unexpectedly stranded, without shelter and with no legal solution to their predicament. Volunteers described their efforts to provide aid as a “moving target” because the Trump administration’s chaotic approach to border policy made it impossible to predict what would be needed from one day to the next. One volunteer described border work as “almost like the Wild West or something, always communicating and figuring out what to do next. Almost like being in a war zone. Kind of a war for good” (interview DT1).

Aid organizations struggled to provide for the needs of Central American asylum seekers. Over time, organizations running migrant shelters inside the United States put together networks of committed volunteers and built pipelines of donations and supplies. Respite centers in border cities like El Paso, San Antonio, and Brownsville took in shell-shocked asylum seekers as they were released from crowded Border Patrol facilities to travel on toward family members or sponsors in other parts of the country, where they would wait for their legal cases to be decided.

Migrant shelters and respite centers provided a few meals, basic hygiene items, and a place to sleep for a night or two until people could make arrangements to continue their journeys.

But relief organizations' efforts on behalf of asylum seekers often suffered due to a lack of accurate information about upcoming policy changes that affected their work. For example, Catholic Charities in Brownsville had just finished moving their shelter to a larger space that could accommodate up to a thousand people a day, when the number of incoming migrants abruptly slowed to a tiny fraction of what it had been before. Unbeknownst to the people running the shelter, the federal government had just expanded its Remain in Mexico (MPP) policy to include the Brownsville / Matamoros border crossing. The people running the shelter were left with a perplexing quandary. They were now in possession of an enormous facility run by a rotating army of hundreds of volunteers who traveled in and out from all over the United States to help a week at a time. They had a fully stocked industrial kitchen run by volunteers, equipped to serve hundreds of people at a time. Upstairs, they had a full medical clinic which now stood empty, as well as a warehouse stocked with mountains of donated clothing, food, diapers, and other basic supplies. But most days, the shelter sat empty. Meanwhile, just a few miles away on the other side of the border, hundreds of families with young children huddled ankle-deep in the rain, dependent on scanty meals provided on a rotating schedule by volunteers who walked over the border from Brownsville, hand-carrying whatever supplies they could. Local organizations like Team Brownsville and Angry Tias and Abuelas mobilized to keep the people in the camps fed and supplied with the basics of life. At first, they did this by hand-carrying donated items across in a backpack or wagon, or by bringing money across and buying items locally in Mexico so as to support local merchants. They solicited donated tents, and started a waiting list for who

could get them. But they were hard-pressed to serve the needs of a community of stranded travelers which grew larger every day.

Relief efforts shifted from the shelters on the US side of the border to the camps on the Mexican side. The people in the camps lacked basic supplies: lighting, tents, safe places to bathe and wash their clothing. They had no legal permission to work in Mexico, so they could not earn money to feed their families, and they were reluctant to leave the immediate border crossing area for fear that they would either lose their place in line or be exposed to kidnapping or assault from gang members who might have followed them north. Instead of offering protection, US policy had in effect created a bottleneck that trapped asylum seeking families in a few easily identifiable, unprotected places where their attackers knew they could be found. Reports circulated of people who had strayed too far from the camps and been raped, assaulted, or kidnapped (Human Rights Watch 2021). A Dallas-based volunteer who collected donations to provide solar-powered lights for the camp described the situation this way:

Daniela: If you go down to the border, it's chaos. These people are trying to live their lives in chaos, and you have to be very flexible to respond to that...In the respite center, they were able to take care of people's needs and get them on to their families pretty quickly. It was safer. There was a building and lights. If there was a pregnant woman or a mother with a baby who needed something in the middle of the night, there was always someone that she could ask for a diaper in the middle of the night if she needed something. At the camp, it's not like that. At night, they can't get up and get what they need. They're in fear for their lives. They didn't even have lights. And when we started working down there, they didn't even have toilets or port-o-potties or anything. It's hard to work in those conditions because things are constantly changing. You have to be very flexible and willing to go with the flow. (Interview DTU)

Meanwhile, volunteers who observed court proceedings were shocked to discover that asylum seekers—even unaccompanied children—frequently had to navigate complicated court proceedings without legal representation or adult support, in a language that they did not speak. Stephen recalled watching a frightened child try to get through a court hearing on his own.

Stephen: There was a kid that was really heartbreaking because it was a kid who spoke [a Guatemalan dialect]...When we got into the court setting and the judge was like, 'Do we need to get you an interpreter?' And it was clear that the kid was terrified. But he, I think the only thing he knew to do was to cause as little trouble as possible. That was his whole goal. So he just kept saying, 'No, I don't need an interpreter.' And it was clear that he didn't speak Spanish...And it was just so horrifying because the kid just didn't know what—and all he wanted to do was to please, and not cause any waves, even if that meant [not understanding] anything that's happening... I had to go deal with some court stuff when I was a kid, when I was like 11. And I spoke English. I was a smart kid. I had someone who was prepping me for what was going to happen. And I just, I felt bewildered and at a loss during the whole process. And there were certainly high stakes, but nothing like what these kids were dealing with. (Interview UK)

In interviews, volunteers reported that even as American citizens and native speakers of English, they found it almost impossible to navigate the extraordinarily complex maze of government agencies, changing policies, and legal requirements that shaped the lives of the people they were trying to help. Charles, an attorney working full-time on behalf of asylum seekers, explained that even immigration lawyers found it nearly impossible to keep abreast of all the changes well enough to do their jobs effectively.

Charles: It takes everything I can do to stay informed and do everything that's actually my job [as an asylum lawyer]...I just don't have time to be informed. It's because the immigration world's changing every week. It's very, very difficult to stay informed. (Interview CI)

The combination of changing policies, confusing requirements, lack of legal representation, and uneven application of constantly-changing rules created a deep arbitrariness in the way that people were treated and the outcomes they experienced. In interviews, volunteers described this very arbitrariness, complexity, and opacity of procedures as an intentional effort on the part of the Trump administration to hide information from the general public and mire legal asylum proceedings in a morass of requirements that made a successful asylum case nearly impossible to achieve. Stephen described his own frustration and confusion at trying to find out which government department was responsible for what.

Stephen: I think it also became clear that there was an intentional effort to obfuscate and to make it so complicated that it's impenetrable...I felt like they were intentionally making it so layered and so complex that you just can't figure it out. I mean there's 17 departments dealing with this issue and who's responsible for what? And they all pass the buck. I mean that's my experience, that they were all, 'It's not me, it's Border Patrol. That's who the bad guy is.' And they all do it. So no one—you never know how to get information. (Interview UK)

The arbitrary nature of the ways that policies were applied revealed a profound essential arbitrariness in human outcomes, which volunteers found deeply disturbing. In one instance, a group of teenaged Texan volunteers had an almost unheard-of opportunity to interact directly with kids their own age who were housed in a detention center for unaccompanied minors. One of the adult trip leaders recalled watching the kids from Dallas interacting with the kids who were in detention:

Nicole: There was a Catholic church service. And the kids from the detention center were just clustered around the icons of Mary, praying and crying. There were so many tears. Big teenaged boys, crying. For a while our kids and those kids were just interacting with each other, talking and acting like teenagers. There was some flirting because we had some girls in our group. But in the end our kids could walk away and those kids couldn't. They had to line up and go back. They couldn't even go to the bathroom by themselves. (Interview NC)

At the detention center, one of the Dallas teens unexpectedly encountered a former classmate who he remembered from elementary school in El Salvador. The Dallas teen, whose father had taken advantage of a Reagan-era amnesty program and was now a US citizen, could travel freely back and forth across the US-Mexico border without fear of being arrested or deported. But his friend from the same elementary school in El Salvador was facing an uncertain future, detained indefinitely and unable to rejoin his family.

Stephen: He'd known him, and they had been friends. And he didn't, he obviously was very conflicted and in the moment made the decision not to share that information for fear that it might upset the kid. They talked. But he never said, 'Hey, I'm [name omitted], I think I went to school with you.' But he was just, because the kid told him his name and where he was from he was like, 'It's that

kid I went to school with.’ So that was a pretty profound experience for him but for all of us. And just that arbitrariness of it all... This one was in a detention center and didn’t know when he was going to get out and didn’t know where his parents were. (Interview UK)

For many volunteers, these situations were particularly disturbing because they involved children—children in government-run detention centers, children going hungry in camps without running water, children forcibly separated from their families, children going through complicated legal proceedings without interpreters and without support from any adults who could explain to them what was happening. Daniela, a trained social worker, described the US government’s treatment of these children as child abuse.

Daniela: My background is really in foster kids and dealing with child abuse. Growing up, we had foster kids. And I’m a social worker. So I guess I’ve always had a pull toward the displaced, especially the kids. I want to help the adults too, but what I really think about is the babies and the children who don’t have a choice about what they’re going through. My background is in dealing with child abuse, and that’s what these kids are going through, not from their parents but from the situation. In the camp, these kids were only getting to go to school one day a week and it was just organized by volunteers. So helping those kids, that’s what keeps me coming back. (Interview DTU)

## **Bearing Witness**

Those who returned from volunteer work in shelters and camps at the US-Mexico border found that the people they had met and the things they had seen triggered a profound change in how they understood the world and their responsibility in it. They had seen things that they could not unsee. They felt that they had a responsibility to bear witness to the suffering and injustice they encountered on their trips to the border, and to share these stories as widely as possible after they returned home. The concept of witnessing became important for several reasons. Seeing what was happening with their own eyes and interacting face-to-face with the people affected by it made the suffering of others impossible to ignore. It also created a moral obligation to awaken

this understanding in other people in their social worlds, who often remained blithely unaware until someone found a way to show them. Volunteers saw the US government's choice to push the humanitarian consequences of its actions to the other side of the border as both a conscious denial of basic moral responsibility and an intentional attempt to hide what was happening from the American people. In this situation, "bearing witness" also meant showing the government that someone was watching—a responsibility that some volunteers said they internalized for the first time when they saw immigration judges granting more consideration to migrants in courtrooms with outside observers than in ones without.

In between trips to the border, volunteers found other ways to help. They recruited more volunteers from among their friends and family and raised money to support the organizations providing supplies and food to people in the camps. They also felt a keen responsibility to raise awareness about the humanitarian aspects of the border crisis that they had witnessed in person. They gave presentations at their churches and synagogues, started difficult conversations with family and friends, and spread information from their new trusted sources via social media. The high school group wrote and performed a play to raise awareness by replicating a version of "firsthand" experience for audiences who could not travel, and they performed it for sold-out, openly weeping crowds all summer long. In a situation where information was being intentionally distorted and obfuscated, raising awareness was a vital service.

For many volunteers from North Texas, regular trips to the border proved logistically impractical. They wanted to contribute in a meaningful way, but many could not solve the logistical dilemma of trying to volunteer regularly at a place that was a minimum of a nine-hour drive each way. These people sought other ways to help back home in North Texas. Dana, who I encountered repeatedly at volunteer events all over the city, returned from her trip to

Brownsville/Matamoros “fired up” to do something about it but worried that further trips back and forth to the border might be seen a form of humanitarian tourism that would make her feel better without actually having a positive impact for the people there. She explained that she was looking for meaningful volunteer work that she could do locally, on a regular basis.

Dana: I think it’s so easy to have opinions about things. But it’s much harder to find meaningful ways to do something. So I try to not just have opinions and talk about things but to actually be doing something to help too. But honestly, it is hard. It’s hard living in Dallas to find as many things to do as it might be if we [were closer to the border]...I follow groups that are in San Antonio and along the border and there’s always something to do down there that’s meaningful...I want to be sure that if I do that I’m doing something that somebody really needs me to do, not that they’re making something for me to do so I can, you know. You know, what is it, like ecotourism. You know, like what’s it called when people go to Africa to take their pictures with...I don’t know the word for it. But I want to make sure I’m doing something that people need done. It’s not for me but it’s for them. (Interview DT)

### **Bringing the Border to Dallas**

Given these circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising that North Texans who cared about the border crisis eventually found a way to bring the border to Dallas. In May 2019, Ruben Garcia, Director of Annunciation House in El Paso, put out an urgent distress call. Over the past several months, the Border Patrol had been releasing ever greater numbers of migrants from detention to shelters like Garcia’s, which was now packed beyond capacity. Annunciation House served as a waystation for asylum-seeking families. After they completed the initial asylum paperwork and interviews, the Border Patrol released them to travel on to join sponsors and family members elsewhere in the United States. But most of them left detention with little more than the clothes on their backs. Annunciation House offered them hospitality for a few days while they contacted their sponsors and made arrangements to travel on. But with 800 to 1,000 new people arriving every day in May 2019, Annunciation House was overwhelmed. Garcia put

out a call for cities further from the border—like Denver and Dallas—to help (KTSM 9 News 2019a, b). Olivia explained to me how Dallas activists got involved in providing relief for the shelter in El Paso.

Olivia: It was Mother's Day weekend last year when several of the activists in Dallas got a call from...Annunciation House in El Paso saying, 'We're being flooded with asylum seekers coming over the border.' And we had several people in our community that had been going down to El Paso to help process people. They would come over the border. They needed to have basic medical attention, they needed to get shoes and have food and get a shower. I mean people had been living in the desert or on the bridge in just terrible conditions on the other side of the border for however long they had been. Or walking from Guatemala or Honduras. They would get to the border and they would have sponsors but they needed to get to their sponsors and the sponsors were all over the country. (Interview OL)

The people of Dallas responded to Garcia's call. For some time, Diane had been traveling back and forth to El Paso to volunteer at Annunciation House. When she saw Garcia's press conference, she started calling everyone she knew from decades of immigration-related advocacy and volunteer work in Dallas. She talked to the people on the social justice board at her synagogue, who called people that they knew at other places of worship around the city. Within a few short weeks, a massive interfaith effort was under way to shelter asylum seekers at a new respite center to be housed at a Methodist church downtown. Shelters in El Paso would send two buses every week on a ten- to twelve-hour drive across Texas. Asylum seekers would then stay in Dallas for a maximum of three days while volunteers helped them contact sponsors and family members to make travel arrangements to move on by bus or plane (Manuel 2019; CBSDFW 2019; Murphy, Shefte, and Mesner-Hage 2019).

Setting up the respite center was a massive undertaking made just barely manageable by the combined expertise of people who had experience volunteering at shelters in El Paso, San Antonio, and Brownsville, and knew how things should go. The asylum seekers would need hot

meals, clothing, hygiene supplies, medical care, and places to sleep and shower. They needed help contacting their families and sponsors, since most would not have phones. They needed transportation to airports and bus stations. They needed basic items like belts, shoelaces, and hair ties, which experienced volunteers knew were routinely confiscated by the Border Patrol. They needed friendly faces, preferably attached to people they could communicate with in their own language, which would not necessarily be Spanish. They needed a designated quiet room where they could go to settle upset emotions. Most of all, they needed to know that they were safe, and that their children would never be removed from their sight. Iris explained how the organizers' volunteer experience working at other relief shelters along the border translated into practical understanding of everything that needed to be done to set up their own respite center.

Iris: When we were contacted about receiving folks from El Paso last summer, it was kind of a no-brainer. Yes, we will do that. We have so many different faith communities that are represented around the table. We have community resources, whether that be people power, thought, influence, financial resources. We can make this happen...Many of our congregations were traveling down to the border and working and volunteering in respite centers at the time...And so a lot of our faith communities were seeing how respite centers were operating. So we kind of had that background knowledge. Personally, I've been down to the border. I've worked in a respite center. I see the problems. I see the need. I see how they're operating and functioning, and so we can replicate that. (Interview IN)

A strong interfaith network sprang into action. A Methodist church set aside its lower floor to turn into a daytime shelter, and rushed to renovate the bride's dressing room to make a space for a tiny medical clinic. A hospital association recruited volunteer doctors and nurses to staff it. A synagogue pledged to provide hot meals three times a day all summer long. An Islamic association brought backpacks and other donated supplies. A team of Mormon volunteers helped set up cots. A local hotel association donated hotel rooms. At the initial volunteer orientation, hundreds of people of all descriptions stood shoulder to shoulder, fanning themselves in the

sweltering Texas summer heat while organizers explained how they could help with food, transportation, healthcare, and security. When the first busload of asylum seekers arrived, organizers were taken aback at the overwhelming enthusiasm of volunteers who showed up to welcome and support them. Iris attributed volunteers' desire to help as a response to feelings of helplessness in the face of an escalating humanitarian crisis that people had been watching unfold on the news but felt powerless to solve.

Iris: We had way too many volunteers. Like the response from the community was so strong. That was what was so amazing, is that we almost had too many! I think the final database ended up, I want to say 500 people...People want to volunteer in a crisis. They feel so powerless. They want to be able to do something, to contribute something...It's a one-time volunteer opportunity. It's meeting a crisis that people feel so helpless and powerless in, that people feel like, 'Oh, I actually was able to help and to do something'. And so it really hit that kind of sweet spot of why people volunteer...I think the reason why we were able to kind of mobilize quickly is that this was such a topic of the day. We were hearing about it all the time, and people felt, 'Oh my gosh, this is something that I can do and I'm in.'

But in the end—despite hundreds of hours of planning, boxes and boxes of donations, and an overwhelming number of enthusiastic volunteers—Dallas Responds only ever served one busload of people. That very week, the Trump administration enacted its new Remain in Mexico policy. Instead of being released into the interior of the United States to await their final asylum hearings, Central American asylum seekers would now have to wait on the other side of the border in Mexico. Between one weekend and the next, there were no longer enough asylum seekers to fill shelters in El Paso, let alone a satellite respite center in Dallas. Diane, one of Dallas Responds' key organizers, was completely taken aback at the change.

Diane: We had our first busload that first weekend in June. And then they changed the policy! The government changed the policy! And all of a sudden, rather than having overcrowded 15 or 20 respite centers in El Paso, they closed! There was one left! And they had no need to bus people to Dallas. In fact, they were closing all their respite centers. (Interview DR)

This was crushing news for organizers in Dallas, who had been pouring every waking moment into intensive preparations for a respite center that now served no purpose. Organizers were left at loose ends, perplexed about how to make use of the donations they had collected and the community energy they had generated, now that the purpose behind it all was gone. Organizers expressed angst and frustration at their inability to provide effective help in the face of government policies that seemed designed to block them at every turn.

Diane: It's more than challenging, it's kind of disappointing and hurtful. It's that I feel like I'm fighting my own government when it comes to these things. I feel like that we the people should be guiding this conversation. I'm getting dizzy just thinking about it, honestly. And we are fighting our government in doing this work. And it is really distressing. It is really distressing and it is really challenging. And it's challenging when you have good hearted people who have such limited resources, both money and time and volunteers who are trying to do so much and we're just getting shut down by the policies. I mean we would have taken care of people all summer long! (Interview DR)

But they also talked about how Dallas Responds helped them to develop and deepen intersectional partnerships between city officials, nonprofit service organizations, and congregations of different faiths. Without existing relationships between faith groups, immigrant advocacy organizations, and city government, it would never have been possible to mobilize people and resources quickly enough to build a brand-new respite center in a matter of weeks. These connections—many of them born out of community responses to Black Lives Matter and the Muslim travel ban—were strengthened again every time someone in the community called upon the others for help in a time of crisis.

Iris: I think that ultimately things at the border are always changing. And so we just weren't needed anymore. And so I think that was a disappointment. Obviously, because we had put so much energy and work, and the community had really rallied around that. So there is obvious disappointment in that. But you know, I think it deepened relationships... Anytime people work together for the common good or a common goal or purpose, it ultimately just deepens your bond. So I think this moment did that in a lot of ways... I think the ability to deliver such a cross-sector collaboration from Judge Jenkins, from the Dallas Medical

Association, from Catholic Charities, from Faith Forward Dallas and the faith community, that cross-sector collaboration I think really bred goodwill for all of us. And knowing that we wanted the same thing, which was to offer our care and love and hospitality the best that we could. So I think that was a powerful outcome of something that could have been just overall disappointing. (Interview IN)

Though Dallas Responds went on to provide other services—like a food pantry, and a weekly Know Your Rights workshop for undocumented people—the Remain in Mexico policy effectively prevented it from ever serving as a functional respite center for asylum seekers. So Dallas Responds serves as a lesson in the local, lived consequences of policy chaos engendered by the federal government. But it also serves as a lesson in coalition-building. Quick mobilization depended on relationships developed and strengthened in part in response to the Muslim ban a few years prior. These relationships were now reactivated and redeployed in service of a new goal. Cooperation between groups was seen as a positive outcome, even if the outcome of the project itself was disappointing. With these relationships reinforced, the community as a whole built its capacity to respond to future crises.

### **Social Justice Conversions**

It was impossible for the people involved in humanitarian work at the border to separate volunteer work from activism because what they were doing was inherently political. It was also deeply ethical. In bearing witness and taking action to help, these people strove to spread awareness of injustice and to push back against a government that they saw as intentionally creating an unforgivable, unjustifiable humanitarian crisis by intentionally circumventing its own asylum laws. In this context, activism and humanitarian work were inextricably intertwined. Volunteers saw this as an issue of justice and basic human rights. In order to take action, they had to come to a place where they accepted their own culpability in allowing the problem to

exist, and therefore their own responsibility to do something to solve it. They expressed discomfort and even a deep sense of shame about being complicit in the actions of their own government. Sarah and Stephen voiced their conclusions about who or what was ultimately responsible for the human suffering they encountered on their trips to the US-Mexico border. On one level, they blamed the Trump administration. But they had come to believe that the real problem lay deeper than that.

Sarah: Our desire for comfort. Our pretend, our manufactured sense of safety or security being rooted in who is not welcome or not accepted. That's absolutely I think the cause of a lot of oppression right now. That sounds and smells deplorably like some points in history that I think we'd be really embarrassed if we knew we were repeating. That I am really embarrassed that we are repeating. (Interview SC)

Stephen: And how could we not know that we are in some way responsible for the suffering?...I know that's the message I get from the Valley. Maybe it's why I stopped being so angry...Those words haunt me, and maybe even more so now because I have the information. I have that question of—that feeling that everything that I do is in some way fairly meaningless now. And that sense of like, you know, my obligation should be to be a full-time warrior in this battle. Because that's certainly how I feel. *We* are doing this. And I also feel like it's not going to change unless there is there is that obligation. The truth is, one million people at the border could make this all end. One million people marching down there and protesting and saying this is not acceptable and there would be a seismic shift...And I have no doubt that there are one million people who feel passionate about it, who may not know everything but what they know is enough to make them horrified. But it's a big commitment to go all the way down. It's a long drive from Dallas, I can't even imagine New York. (Interview UK)

Sarah and Stephen shared in common with many other interview participants a deep and lasting moral discomfort with a kind of comfortable blindness that they perceived in the people around them—and even, or perhaps especially, in themselves. Though they expressed anger about the Trump administration's acts of outright cruelty toward asylum-seeking families and children, they did not hold the government solely to blame for what was happening on the border. They saw the Trump administration not as the root cause of migrant families' suffering,

but as a symptom of a deeper and more chronic condition besetting a society in which most people, most of the time, seemed content to look away from everyday evidence of injustice. They came away with a renewed awareness of the ways that their own material comfort often came at someone else's cost. They wrestled with the idea that as members of a society that had collectively chosen to allow unnecessary suffering, they themselves were in some way responsible for what was happening at the border. And they held themselves responsible to do what they could to fix it.

## **Discussion**

In American public discourse, the US-Mexico border looms large. In the academic literature and in the media, borders have been conceptualized in a diverse variety of different ways— as a “liminal landscape” where migrating people strategically exploit the ambiguous potentialities of life in between one place and another (Wittekind 2016); as a zone of mingled danger and opportunity, in which government entities both create deadly risk for migrants and deny responsibility for the consequences (de Leon 2015; Juisonyte 2017); as an arbitrary dividing line separating loved ones and creating inequalities between family members with different legal status and thus different life possibilities (Dreby 2010; Castañeda 2019); as the fetishized center of a vastly profitable industry focused on controlling illegal immigration (Andersson 2014); as an unruly, racialized internal colony filled with dangerously noncompliant people (Fleuriet and Castañeda 2017); and as a no-man's land where refugees are confined in perpetual limbo (Cabot 2014).

Andersson (2014) describes the border between North Africa and Spain as a deeply fetishized space in which all kinds of actors—border security agencies, people smugglers,

journalists, activists, and even PhD students—are engaged in various projects that perpetuate an obsession with the border as a zone of threat, exploitation, and humanitarian emergency. The US-Mexico border is no different. In this project, both politicians connected with the Trump administration and pro-refugee activist-volunteers conceptualized the border as a zone of exception, where the usual laws and expectations of behavior did not quite apply. The Trump administration repeatedly portrayed everything south of the border as a chaotic realm of danger and criminality, and people from anywhere south of the border as inherently lawless and potentially violent. The Trump administration treated the US-Mexico border as a dumping ground for unwanted problems that it wished to shunt aside. Deploying a strategic argument that the United States bore no responsibility for the welfare of non-citizens located outside its borders, it stranded asylum seekers to the other side of the border and eventually relocated the “legal process” there too, denying all responsibility for the resulting humanitarian crisis. This strategy worked admirably well as a way for the Trump administration to claim to be “tough” on illegal immigration and deny responsibility for unwanted asylum seekers while also shielding the human consequences of these actions somewhat from public view. The success of this strategy rested on the assumption that since most Americans were generally ignorant about asylum law and did not necessarily think of “migrants” as people who were entitled to legal rights in the United States, they would not rise up in outrage at this category of people being excluded from legal protection. With the asylum seekers firmly shut out, the Trump administration was then free to deny responsibility for the problem and blame Mexico for any potential fallout. The US-Mexico border thus became a zone of exception, where US asylum law was indefinitely suspended.

Volunteers also experienced the border as a zone of exception where the usual laws did not apply because the US government had abdicated its responsibility toward people who should have been able to claim temporary protection according to US asylum law. They likened the border zone to the Wild West, a place of chaos and lawlessness where no one held real authority and government power was exercised to perpetuate harm and disorder rather than to protect. Rather than blaming the people in the camps for trying to bring their problems to the US, volunteers blamed the Trump administration for exporting its own lawlessness and chaos to a place and to a set of people who had done nothing to deserve it. Volunteers thought the same kind of morality ought to apply on both sides of the border, since in moral terms, the people on both sides were more or less the same. By providing aid to stranded asylum seekers, they saw themselves as extending ordinary morality to the border zone in an attempt to restore a kind of moral order that Trump's chaos and cruelty repeatedly sought to destroy. For the volunteers, the border became a zone of moral responsibility, where their consciences compelled them to do what they could to mitigate the consequences of terrible wrongdoing on the part of their own government.

The people who organized the respite center in Dallas likewise understood themselves as doing their part to push back against injustice perpetrated by their own government. In their eyes, ordinary people had a moral responsibility to stand up and resist this wrong by making their own form of welcome when their government fell short. The story of Dallas Responds illustrates the capacity of local communities to form partnerships and marshal resources in support of projects that people see as "good" and worthwhile. In many cases, ordinary people may be more generous and tolerant toward displaced people than the politicians who represent them in government. Paradoxically, a frustrated desire on the part of local people to work against the xenophobia and

cruelty of the Trump administration probably partially explains why volunteers came out to support the new respite center in such overwhelming numbers. Resistance against injustice can be a powerful motivator.

But the story of Dallas Responds also illustrates the difficulty of relying on local people to solve immigration problems that are in large part created by the federal government. Not every community has a Diane or an Iris who is equipped with the time, social connections, and material resources to shoulder such a huge responsibility and make it a success. Even if they do, they may face insurmountable difficulties if the federal government is actively working against them at every step. In the case of Dallas Responds, the project ultimately fell apart as a direct consequence of the Trump administration's ongoing program of chaos and bureaucratic opacity, which made it nearly impossible for local people to mount an organized and effective response. Determined local people can accomplish a great deal without—or even in opposition to—the federal government, especially if they have the support of local city leadership. They can accomplish even more when government leaders are sharing information and working with them and not against them.

The story of Dallas-based activist-volunteers' trips to the border also points to something important about the power of the people to make change from the bottom up. Though the Trump administration worked to stymie their humanitarian relief efforts at every opportunity, Dallas-based activist-volunteers did accomplish meaningful cultural change. Meaningful change is not only measured in legal actions and policy shifts. It is also about ordinary people engaging in intentional projects to raise awareness about social issues that they care about; spread information that has been left out of accounts approved by the powerful; and influence the way others think and talk about contentious issues. Here, we see this process happening when people

agonized over how to convince their friends and neighbors that the migrants at the southern border were families in need of aid, not criminals in need of prosecution; when they organized their friends and congregation members to take awareness-raising trips to the border; and when they put on dramatic productions to recreate a semblance of “firsthand experience” for audiences who could not travel to the border themselves. Through these activities, volunteer-activists actively challenged the Trump administration’s narratives about security threats and migrant undeservingness, and attempted to replace them with narratives about the moral responsibility of “good” people to provide welcome for persecuted families seeking safety. Through these efforts, they attempted to change the local conversation about the situation at the US-Mexico border. This kind of social change starts with internal personal transformation and works outward, one person at a time.

In her early work with Sanctuary movement activists in the late 1980s, Susan Coutin (1993) argues that researchers have not paid enough attention to the personal transformations that occur in the process of protest. Protest is an attempt to change the social order, but frequently it is also about personal transformation and even spiritual enlightenment. Coutin argues that the personal, emotional changes experienced by individual protesters can actually be just as crucial to the success of a protest movement as more observable political results like changes in legislation. This is because protesters who have been changed themselves frequently go out and try to change the worldview of other people around them, gradually building real cultural change in the social worlds they inhabit. Without such personal change, it would be impossible to sustain a movement.

The Sanctuary movement activists that Coutin encountered often found their worldview, faith, and sense of personhood changed by the work they did. Frequently, firsthand experience

with the suffering of Central American migrants triggered a “social justice conversion” in which people became aware of the avoidable suffering of others and accepted that the United States government was complicit in this suffering. By extension, they came to understand that they themselves were complicit and that their relative comfort and security came at someone else’s cost. Once they became fully aware of injustice, people found that they could not live with themselves unless they did something to change it (Coutin 1993).

In many ways, volunteer-activists who went “down to the border” and witnessed the human consequences of the “zero tolerance” and Remain in Mexico policies went through a similar social justice conversion. They found it impossible to reconcile unnecessary suffering of real people with increasingly flimsy political narratives about national security and law and order. They could not forget or ignore what they had seen without abandoning their most basic sense of themselves as decent, morally upright people. They imagined themselves in the broad scope of history, wondering what they would have done during the time of the Civil Rights movement, or slavery, or the Holocaust. If their children asked them one day what they had done during the time of family separation on the US-Mexico border, when the United States government separated refugee children from their mothers and locked them in cages, they wanted to know that they had made the right choice.

## **Conclusion**

The consequences of the Trump administration’s chaotic approach to border policy saddled humanitarian aid organizations with unmanageable and at times nonsensical logistical problems that made effective humanitarian action difficult or even impossible. Volunteers traveling back and forth from North Texas bore witness to harrowing conditions at migrant

shelters and camps on the US-Mexico border. For many of these volunteers, firsthand experience in the “Wild West” of humanitarian aid on the border proved personally transformative, permanently changing their understanding of their relationship to their own government and their sense of personal responsibility to work against injustice of all kinds. The next and chapter explores “lessons learned” as pro-refugee activist-volunteers reflect on the things they wish they had known from the start.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Lessons Learned**

The previous four chapters told the story of ordinary North Texans as they mobilized in response to the Trump administration's demonization and exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. These chapters followed pro-refugee volunteers and activists as they organized pro-refugee rallies and demonstrations, collected donations, volunteered in migrant shelters, traveled back and forth to the border, and worked to shift their friends' and neighbors' understanding of what it meant to be a refugee or an asylum seeker.

This chapter shifts the focus slightly to explore the practical and personal lessons that pro-refugee volunteers and activists learned from their work with refugees and asylum seekers. At the end of each interview, I asked participants what advice they would give to someone who was new to the work they did, things they wished they had known when they started. The level of personal commitment required in pro-refugee work meant that long-time volunteer-advocates had to marshal their personal and emotional resources differently from first-time or less experienced, less committed volunteers. They recognized their own limitations and made efforts to learn from their own past mistakes and misunderstandings, which they often saw reflected in newer volunteers who were just coming to the work for the first time. They were also acutely aware of differences of power and privilege between themselves and the people they were trying to help. When asked what piece of advice they would share with someone who was new to the work, they reflected on their own experiences and gave thoughtful answers based on the things

they themselves had learned from sometimes painful experience. Their answers align along strikingly similar themes. From the advice that people imagine offering to their past selves, we can learn something about how they think about the work they are doing: problems and solutions, lessons learned, common pitfalls, and ongoing challenges still unresolved. The advice they give mirrors the overall themes from the interviews.

### **Lesson 1: Don't be intimidated. You can do more than you think you can.**

When imagining the advice they might give to a brand new person just now thinking about getting involved in the work for the first time, participants gave answers that revealed broad concern about the difficulty of getting started. It was clear from their answers that participants saw in potential volunteers—or remembered from their own experience—a strong interest in the work and a desire to help, paired with deep uncertainty and doubt about their ability to contribute anything meaningful or worthwhile. They thought that for many people, an important barrier to volunteering might be potential volunteers' doubt about their ability to keep up with conflicting news reports about immigration issues that seemed too complex and confusing for ordinary people to understand fully. Participants imagined reassuring the prospective volunteer that it was OK to feel intimidated, that no contribution was too small, that no special knowledge or skills were needed because they could learn by doing, and that even the busiest person could find something meaningful to do. Current volunteers wanted potential volunteers to know that no special qualifications or inside knowledge was necessary in order to work with refugees. This was work that anyone with a big enough heart could decide to take on, so long as they were open-minded, flexible, and willing to learn. Maddie and Kaleb made this point in particular:

Maddie: The most satisfying part is just knowing that this is my small contribution. Something I can do...These are things that anybody can do if they just decide that they want to. You don't have to have anyone's permission. You don't have to have special training. You just find a need, establish relationships, educate yourself, and then share with others. (Interview MF)

Kaleb: Just show up. I think some people are, might be hesitant because they don't think they're ready to volunteer or help or serve refugees because they think there's some magical knowledge that they need to have to do that. But I think just showing up and extending dignity and respect and kindness to folks is really all that someone needs. I mean, that's what qualifies somebody, I think...Second, whether you have experience or not, don't worry...Whether you think you have experience, every day will be a new school day. It's a classroom. So you will learn new things. Because what you know working somewhere else, will not work today. Or what was working at the center two weeks ago may not work this week. (Interview KD)

Several people wanted to reassure potential volunteers that no amount of help was too little to be worth doing, and that even a busy person could find ways to contribute. Daniela thought that if she herself as a mother of four could travel regularly back and forth to the border, than anybody regardless of circumstances ought to be able to find some small thing they could do.

Daniela: A lot of people think they can't really do anything. People think they are too busy and maybe they'll volunteer when they retire or something. I have four kids, and I'm really busy, but I get down to the border once a month! And maybe it's easier because my kids are older now. If I still had little kids maybe I wouldn't be able to do it as easily. But I say to people, you can do more than you think. You can take one weekend a month and drive down to the border and you can even take one of your kids with you. And there are all kinds of other ways that people can help. For example, just now I went online and bought some groceries on Instacart for a pregnant refugee woman who has coronavirus. She can't go out and buy food. It didn't take very long for me to do that. So don't think you're too busy. You can always do something somewhere. (Interview DTU)

But they also wanted potential volunteers to think seriously about their strengths and weaknesses and to be realistic about what they could actually contribute, rather than over-committing and then realizing later that they were unable to follow through. They wanted volunteers to know that everyone could find a niche that suited them because there was a place

somewhere for every kind of personality and every set of skills. Meena had no shame in acknowledging that there were some volunteer tasks that she simply wasn't suited for. But there were other things that she could do better than anyone else. It was all about finding the right fit for each person.

Meena: I would say, first, sincerely think about how many hours you can dedicate and then based on how many hours you can dedicate find a cause or a task compatible with those hours. Because a lot of people can help in so many different ways and it all depends on how much time you can really give towards it. So if you can do once a month that's great. Find something that you can do once a month. A lot of things can be done remotely, seeking donations or spreading the word. So like maybe you're more skilled at that, or organizing, or you are more skilled hands-on where you can tutor someone in English. Like, I am terrible at selling something. But I have no problems asking people for money to help people. If you gave me [something] and said sell it, I would say no. There's no way I could do it... So you have to know your strengths and weaknesses and then know how much time you truly have to commit. That would be my advice before you commit to something. A lot of people have good intentions, but they don't understand that real commitment towards it. (Interview MO)

## **Lesson 2: Don't reinvent the wheel. Do your homework and join up with an organization that already exists.**

Most interview participants wanted to advise future volunteers to join an existing organization that was already working on the problem they wanted to solve, rather than succumbing to the temptation to waste time and resources starting something new. They tended to view new projects started by brand-new people as egotistical and unnecessary unless the project was addressing a true needs gap based on deep experience with the situation. The same loosely organized core network of people tended to be involved in refugee and asylum projects all around the city. Those who were already plugged into this network knew one another and frequently cooperated in response to new needs, sharing resources and support as needed to meet common goals. Projects and people who could draw on this network were much more likely to

succeed. New projects started by new or inexperienced people courted failure, especially if they could not draw on existing social networks and find a way to fit into the existing social justice ecosystem in a constructive way. Eva and Maddie in particular wanted new people to understand that it was better to join an existing group than to try to invent something new without first setting up the specific knowledge and connections necessary to succeed.

Eva: You really don't necessarily need to reinvent the wheel. There are organizations that are already doing the work. Sometimes they need something. Many times, I think especially around this they need a network of volunteers. They need a supply chain. They need communications help. They need to get people in the right place at the right time. They need to be able to mobilize people when it's necessary...In a lot of movements, what happens is that the people with the relationships are the ones who get the win...So we have to be allies and we have to work hand in hand with people who are most affected by it and who are closest to the problem because then you're going to get a solution that actually might work...So that's what I say, is to organize and find your people. (Interview EM)

Maddie: Collaborate. Find out who is doing anything related to what you're trying to do. Try to collaborate with others. It's not necessary to reinvent the wheel. That's why we do a needs analysis of what already exists and where there might be gaps. And particularly to collaborate across differences of political party, religion, opinion, other background.... There's a lot of collaboration across political party and every other difference there might be. And that's really where strength and power is. There are people who are moderate and are able to see not just two sides but multiple facets of complex situations and to work together on the aspects that we can agree on. Oh, I'm crying! [visibly tearing up]. And that it's not necessary to agree on everything...I just see that finding that overlap where there's common ground is the most effective way to get things done, and to not waste time and resources and energy focusing on all of the areas of disagreement that can pull people apart. (Interview MF)

### **Lesson 3: Check your ego. You're not here to be anybody's savior.**

Interview participants also wanted future volunteers to think seriously about their motivations before signing up. They agreed that too many people—especially white people with a certain amount of privilege—entered into the work at least partially because it fed their ego to imagine themselves as heroes swooping in to save helpless and downtrodden people.

Interviewees universally agreed that this was entirely the wrong attitude to take because it inappropriately cast refugees into an imagined role as helpless, childlike victims rather than as full social people with their own strengths, skills, and plans. Many of the interviewees reflected thoughtfully on the assumptions they themselves had made when they first started the work, and the growth process they went through as the relationships they made with refugee clients taught them to adjust their assumptions.

Tina, who worked with her husband to start a small faith-based nonprofit organization, explained how the priorities of the project changed as they came to know the refugees in the neighborhood as people. At first, Tina and her husband saw themselves primarily as missionaries. They hoped to spread the word of God, bring help to the poor and marginalized, and experience a little bit of the world without ever leaving Dallas. At first, they had big ambitions but very little knowledge of the problems they were planning to solve.

Tina: We didn't know anything about refugees. We just knew that we wanted to help people who were like, kind of lesser in society. And we were kind of driven by our faith because, OK, God tells us to care for the poor. He is very specific in his instruction to care for the orphan, the widow, the poor, the marginalized. And so we had just taken that very seriously. So much so that we picked up and moved into a poor community and lived there, because we thought this is what we felt the conviction to do... We could have ended up anywhere that there were marginalized people. It just happened that we lived really close to the refugee community. And because we had lived internationally before, we had both really missed that part of living in China... We were just kind of bored, living in our regular, like we would joke our 'white-people' apartment. So yeah, it was just kind of an adventure for us too. (Interview UD)

Over the course of several years, Tina's perspective changed, and so did the priorities of the organization that she and her husband ran. More than anything else, they decided, the people they met in the neighborhood were "hungry for relationship". Tina found that more often than not, she could not change the circumstances of her new neighbors' lives. She could not remove the pain of people who had experienced violence or devastating loss. But she could offer herself

as a friend, and she could remove aloneness. This realization became the model for a new mentorship program between volunteer families and refugee teens.

Tina: Our lens was kind of like, ‘what an amazing opportunity to share Jesus with people and to meet those needs.’...And then over time [tiny laugh], lots of time, lots of messing up, we just really began to see that all of this just really has to be based in a relationship. Everything is about seeing people as equally as valuable, carrying the same amount of dignity as you, immersing in their story as a learner, not as a hero. Right. At first we came in as heroes, you know, thinking we were going to change all of this, and really we were the ones who were changed...And I think that through all of that, like I said through making lots of mistakes, we began to just—our entire paradigm shifted with what it looked like to be in relationships with people who are in the margins of society. And it’s so much about partnering with them, not about saving them, not about changing things...What we do now is really about that partnership between people, and giving a platform for a relationship but then letting people use their own gifts and talents to be friends, to be equal and walk with them where they’re at in their life. I think it’s empowering to a lot of people [to say], ‘you’re not the hero and you don’t have to be.’

Nora echoed several other interview participants in expressing discomfort with some new volunteers’ tendency to imagine that refugees’ status as displaced people rendered them somehow less skilled or less capable than they really were.

Nora: I don’t know how to say this in a way that doesn’t sound bitchy or something. These people, they have this title of ‘refugee’, is what they are. But that doesn’t define them. That is what we are calling them so they have a legal status in this country. But refugee doesn’t mean uneducated, unable to take care of themselves. And I’ve watched a lot of people try to go in and try to micromanage or advise or kind of ‘parent’ adults. And whoa! Like, no! I think it was [the first refugee I met] who taught that to me because he was in his fifties. And it’s not like I wanted to parent him. But I figured out, he would ask me questions but also he was a grown-ass man! Like, he’s going to make decisions for his family and I can’t change that because he’s still an adult...But I’ve seen it happen with so many people and I want to be like, ‘Hey man, refugee doesn’t mean uneducated. These are adults and they need assistance because their world got decimated.’ (Interview ND)

Interviewees cautioned imagined future volunteers to check their egos and never to give in to the temptation to think that they were somehow better than the people they were serving. Over and over again, they stressed the importance of humility as an undervalued virtue.

Interviewees believed that the antidote to the “white savior complex” was to build strong relationships of equality and mutual respect with the people they were trying to help. Eric expressed his admiration for refugees’ strength and resilience and his hope that new volunteers would learn to see them as full equals rather than objects of charity.

Eric: It’s always good to check your ego, right?...Let’s not get this idea in our head that we’re anybody’s savior, or we’re the number one reason that people are going to have success in America or not...If you look at the refugee families who are the most successful, I would contend that that has very little to do with what the resettlement agency did. That’s something that people have inherently. That’s a lifetime of resilience and what it took to get to where they are. And I don’t think that those type of folks were going to be stopped by anything. So I don’t think we should assume that that’s what we’re trying to do. We’re just trying to get them what they need, to remove barriers, so that they can go do their thing. (Interview ES)

In interviews, respondents frequently launched into impassioned defense of refugees. They felt that part of their work was to dispel negative characterizations of refugees that they heard on the news and heard unthinkingly repeated in casual conversation among friends, neighbors, and co-workers. In their determination to counteract the notion of refugees as terrorist infiltrators or as helpless victims, volunteers occasionally over-corrected, characterizing refugees as *more* hardworking, *more* courageous, *more* patriotic, or *more* committed to democratic ideals than most ordinary Americans. Tim’s response echoes Eric’s admiration for refugees’ strength and resilience, but also shows his desire to portray refugees in a way that will be perceived by others as especially deserving. Like the other respondents, Tim wanted imagined future volunteers to see refugees as equals. But he went even further, flipping the narrative to say that refugees—not volunteers—are the real heroes in this situation.

Tim: I would love to see people befriend a refugee. Not just to hear their story but to be their friend and to be a peer to them, as opposed to—I think one of the things that we’re trying to mitigate is the kind of savior complex. We don’t want people to come in and be like, ‘hey, I have all these things that I am going to give you and I am going to help you or save you from your situation.’ I think we want

to help people understand that, hey, these are people who are just like us. They've seen lots of rough things but they're just like you and me. And in many ways they're probably braver and more courageous and have a harder work ethic than I do, you know? In many ways, refugees are my heroes. And so I want people who are coming into this space to see them that way. That they are their equals. And that they deserve everything that we have just as much as we do. (Interview TM)

#### **Lesson 4: Listen more than you speak.**

According to interview participants, the most important skill for advocate-volunteers to cultivate was simple: listening. They wanted potential volunteers to be humble enough to recognize that they didn't have all the answers, and sometimes didn't even have the right questions. They warned about how easy it was for "help" to be ineffective or even destructive if the person or organization doing the helping made too many assumptions about what refugees needed, rather than taking the time to ask questions and build relationships. This was particularly important in cross-cultural relationships where volunteers did not always share the same basic cultural assumptions as the people they were trying to work with. Eric explained that in these situations, patience and long-term relationship-building were often the best approach.

Eric: I'd give the same advice I'd give to anyone about anything, which is talk less and listen more. I think it's the number one thing...The fact that it's a multicultural, multilingual place with a lot of diversity, it just comes with the territory. And it can be overwhelming, you know. It can be overwhelming once you get past the surface level...Once you get past that, you start to realize there's a lot of other differences, deep down differences. I mean there's different ways that people see the world. It's not just as simple as where you might go to worship. It's also how that informs the culture of a place, and how that informs the way that you see everything. Politics to civil society to gender roles to the meaning of life—I mean everything. And you just kind of keep peeling back the layers and realize all the beautiful differences big and small in the human condition and how people live their lives. And I think volunteers or anyone that's working in this kind of work, the people that have the most success are the ones that really take time to listen and observe and learn before they do much else. So that would be my advice. (Interview ES)

Long-time volunteers pointed out that while the one-size-fits-all checklists provided by the resettlement agencies were helpful in giving volunteers an idea of where to start, they were often insufficient to meet clients' real needs. Jabir told a story of a Sudanese acquaintance who struggled for years to hold down a job until someone took the time to notice that he had specialized skills and training as a firefighter, which were wasted in the kinds of low-wage unskilled jobs where the resettlement agency placed refugees by default. After someone connected him to a program that allowed him to reestablish certification in his chosen field, the man's entire outlook on life changed. Like many resettled refugees in the United States, this man had been stymied by a one-size-fits-all approach that funneled him into a low-wage, low-status position without taking into account the expertise and training he already had. A trusting relationship with someone who listened and treated him as an equal was what finally helped him remove the institutional roadblocks that stood in his way.

Jabir: I think you need to reset the expectations of what you think they need and how you need to help them versus what they need. Because the family from Congo who we will be hosting in two months versus the family from Nicaragua in March versus the Syrian family, and the Afghani family, the previous one in November, had absolutely different set of requirements. So we really have to understand their scale in society, where they feel they fit in, and help them accordingly... So really the main thing I think is spend some time to be their friends. And then everything else will fall in place. You'll understand their cultural social background and you'll understand what they need. That impact will be significantly more meaningful from that point of view, once you've broken that ice. (Interview JV)

The same principle applied to volunteers who were working with asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants, and other communities who were particularly vulnerable to arrest, deportation, and exploitation. These people in particular had little reason to trust do-gooders from outside the community, unless that person had made the effort to build trust through long-term commitment over a period of time. Here also, active listening was the most important way

to build relationships of trust and learn what people in the community truly needed. Diane cautioned that good intentions were not worth much without long-term relationships of trust, which could only be built over a period of years.

Diane: From the outside you can't determine what they need from the inside. You have to be in the community. You have to be engaged in the community to listen and hear what they need...The issue of trust is huge. It's huge. And because I was a teacher in Vickery Meadow I had a certain level of comfort and trust with people who knew that I belonged in the community. But to walk into a community and think that you're just going to come in and tell them what they need to be doing, that's a lot of—we would say chutzpah! [laughter] But to have people trust you enough to say, 'I'm undocumented, I'm a single mom, I'm afraid that my kids are going to get taken away from me', that takes a lot. (Interview DR)

### **Lesson 5: Take care of yourself. Social justice work is a marathon, not a sprint.**

Though volunteers gained a significant amount of satisfaction from building relationships and helping people solve intractable problems, almost all of them reported that this kind of work, especially if done with real dedication over a long period of time, could be difficult and emotionally draining. Volunteers saw themselves as helpers and problem solvers, and derived considerable personal satisfaction from filling these roles. But each relationship they built and each problem they helped people solve tended to spawn multiple additional problems and responsibilities, which could easily overwhelm volunteers' realistic capacity to deal with them. Volunteers treasured the relationships they built with the people they helped. At the same time, they often felt the need to place limits around these relationships lest they become overwhelmed with needs they could not answer. Almost everyone expressed doubt about whether they were doing enough to help, mingled with pained awareness that oftentimes saying no was the only way to survive. Ibtihaj stumbled into work with Syrian refugees through a donation program at her mosque, and soon her Arabic language skills made her a key resource for the whole

community. She struggled to balance her desire to help with her own physical and emotional needs.

Ibtihaj: At the beginning, the very hard thing is, it was so hard for me because I'm taking the cases with me to bed. I'm taking it with me to the family. I'm taking it with me everywhere. I did not sleep. I'm giving the opportunity for people to call me at 2:00 after midnight...Because that work has no limit. Nooo limit. If you open the door for it, it will—I mean until now when I have a case, I literally feel like I can't sleep until I have this case solved or I find a way to help. But now I try not to let it get to my heart. Yes, working hard. But put limits...We're human beings. And when you see a person that's hungry or a person that's going to get evicted, it's not easy. But also you need to keep yourself strong and healthy to help more people. Otherwise—when I start with this work, believe me, we had 25 people in the group. I swear I'm the only one I'm still doing it. All of them, they left. Because it's so challenging. So demanding. So demanding.... Believe me. Relief work in general is really tiring. (Interview IJ)

The necessity of self-care came up in almost every interview. Frequently, volunteers reminded themselves and each other that the work they were doing was a marathon, not a sprint, and that they needed to care for themselves if they wanted to have the energy to wake up and serve the needs of others again the next day. Katherine and Iris both stressed the crucial importance of knowing when to stop, for their own sake and for the sake of the people they would try to help tomorrow.

Katherine: I think I would say that it's a marathon. That it takes a lot of time over time and if you want to be engaged in work that can be really challenging, allow yourself to not do it all right now. Keep going. Keep going without stopping but also, you can't—you'll never get done all of the work that you want to do. Know your limit and know where you have to stop in order to still be OK. And know that when you do that you've spared yourself for the long run. (Interview KX)

Iris: My one piece of advice would be to make sure that they have a good self-care plan in place, because secondary trauma is a real thing... I mean, you just can't, you can't keep going without it. The work is too hard. And it's not fair. If you're not taking care of yourself, it's not fair to the person you're trying to care for, because you're not your best self...Like your vessel, whatever, your container is going to be deficient...You can only operate in that kind of space for so long, and that's when it becomes unfair to the other person or to the other people who are waiting for your help. (Interview IN)

Self-care plans looked different for different people at different points during their volunteer careers. Often, self-care involved putting some type of limits on availability in order to create protected slices of time for family, for exercise or leisure activities, or simply for sleep. Sometimes it meant making a move from one volunteer role to another that felt more effective or less stressful. For nearly everyone, it involved making peace with the idea that no one could be responsible for everything, and that not all problems could be solved. Daniela explained that at first, she blamed herself for not being able to do more to solve the problems that she saw people struggling with every day. It took her a long time to accept her own limits and find a workable balance.

Daniela: [Long, long pause for thinking.] It's important to have compassion, not just for those you're serving but also for yourself. There's so much to do, and it's hard to have life balance. I can't do everything. I would like to be able to do so much more, but I can't. So I think if I could tell my past self some advice, I would give myself more grace. (Interview DTU)

Those who were engaged in long-term advocacy work learned over time to manage their expectations and redefine their ideas about success, failure, and hope for change. They frequently deployed the stories of social justice heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin to remind themselves and others to celebrate small victories along the way, because large victories were few and far between. Real social change, they learned to remind themselves, takes time. They learned to locate hope not in any particular expected outcome—because that kind of hope was too fragile and too frequently disappointed—but in their own repeated choice to continue doing the work and to surround themselves with others whose shared commitment would remind them to keep on trying. These were moral/ethical choices that had to be continually remade, over and over again. Basimah and Charles expressed it best:

Basimah: I think it's so important to remember that at the end of the day you do not have the ability to change policy. Take a breath and have the ability to affect

change but you are not the only person responsible. It is not your sole responsibility. Also, look back on past movements, especially the Civil Rights movement. It's easy to say, well, Rosa Parks just decided she wasn't going to have it anymore, and she decided to sit there, and then these other things happened, and that's how we got to where we are. We have a tendency for people to forget that it was decades and decades of work from people we'll never even know the name of who laid the framework for change. It didn't happen overnight. (Interview BI)

Charles: There's been a systematic dismantling, there's an effort to completely systematically dismantle our asylum process. That's what we're experiencing. And that's why I reacted when you used the word hope. I've thought a lot about hope. And I actually gave a sermon at a Unitarian church last year about hope. And I used this great quote from Vaclav Havel who said that hope is not the same as optimism. Hope is working for something not because it has a chance for success but because it is the right thing to do. And that is how I've remained hopeful. Because in the short term, you're fooling yourself if you say, 'I'm hopeful because we're going to win this case.' That's not—when you're in a moment like now, that's illusory. And activists I think that are going to be in this life for years have to have a very long-range view. And you think about activism, for years they fought in social justice movements for abolition, for the rights of gay people to marry. Sometimes people worked for an entire lifetime and didn't see change. And that's how you have to look at it. And if you don't, you are really setting yourself up. That said, we do want to win. And it feels really great to win...But you need to be prepared to lose. Because if you keep doing this work, you're going to lose. And as good as it feels to win, that's exactly how bad it feels to lose. So just be prepared for that emotional experience. (Interview CI)

Despite the difficulty of what they were trying to do, activist-volunteers found deep personal meaning in pro-refugee work. For each one of these people, this work had become a core part of their personal identity, a moral reality that they shaped their lives around. Even when they were tired, none of them talked about wanting to stop. Instead, they looked for ways to find balance so that they could come back and do more. For Diane, the sense of meaning and life purpose that she gained from the work far outweighed the cost.

Diane: What's been seen can't be unseen. You can never look away. And if you get into this, just know you can't get out. And that's a good thing because it gives your life purpose. It gives your life meaning. It really does. It's meaningful, it's purposeful. But it's not a part-time job... You just have no choice. You have to do it. (Interview DR)

**Lesson 6: Always remember that those whose lives are most closely affected by the issue at hand should have the most say in what we do about it.**

Finally, interviewees' answers to the "advice" question frequently revealed personal reflections and struggles with issues of race and white privilege. Many of the people I interviewed in this project were white, and the vast majority enjoyed high levels of education and employment in some kind of professional career. They knew that these characteristics lent them a certain amount of privilege which refugees and asylum seekers often did not share. Interviewees displayed widely varying levels of sophistication about issues of race and white privilege. For many, learning was a gradual, long-term process. But the most experienced among them took care to acknowledge the ways that their efforts to advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers often put them in positions where it would be easy to succumb to the temptation to speak *for* disadvantaged people instead of *with* them, or to take too many decisions on themselves rather than consulting and working in partnership and solidarity with the people whose lives would be the most directly affected by the outcome.

White activists learned from experience that there were some situations in which their skin color allowed them to speak out in ways that people of color could not. For example, more than one interviewee had noticed a phenomenon in which defendants tended to receive better treatment in immigration court if white court observers were present, because judges were more motivated to demonstrate to white observers that the courts were fair. So there were some situations in which simply *being white* made white activists' voices more likely to be heard. But this kind of privilege was a double-edged sword because well-meaning white activists sometimes had trouble discerning when to deploy it and when to step back so that people of color could

have space to speak for themselves. Eva and Phillip were both struggling with the messy but important challenges associated with learning to be better white allies.

Eva: I am very mindful that this is not my issue. Though my family ancestors experienced similar things of not being wanted in a country or having to leave a country or having to flee, this is not my experience. This is someone else's experience. And so you can't solve some of these issues for people. You have to solve things with people, when you act on someone's behalf...So we have to be allies and we have to work hand in hand with people who are most affected by it and who are closest to the problem because then you're going to get a solution that actually might work. You'll know how to get a good solution, how to really resolve things. Hopefully, maybe, and know what the go, no-go parameters are. And be able to be an ally and help them build their power. (Interview EM)

Phillip: I would only want to give advice to white people...And this comes not only from my activism but also from being married to a Latina woman for 30 years. You realize, even after that, even as close as you get, there's always going to be, she's going to see the world differently. She's had different experiences than I. And I have a privilege still that I walk around with that she has not been afforded. So my advice to white people would be, always be aware of your own bias and your own privilege in doing this. Don't expect to save anyone. Except maybe your own soul! [laughing] But know that if you do that, you can put yourself in a position to be a part of something beautiful with other people and to really help change the world. (Interview FG)

Activists of color appreciated support from white allies, but also struggled to know how best to respond when a well-meaning ally overstepped boundaries, ignored advice, or assumed a bigger place in the movement than others felt they had earned. White allies could be useful, especially if they had connections in places of relative power, but managing them could be costly in terms of time and attention because white allies tended to start with a fundamentally different set of assumptions about who could make decisions and how things ought to work. Explaining basic things to people who did not share the same experience could be prohibitively exhausting and time-consuming. For this reason, Latino activists working toward rights for undocumented people sometimes found it easier to build coalitions with Black activists because both groups shared concerns about systemic racism, police violence, and unfair detention and imprisonment.

White allies had to *learn* to understand these concerns, while Black and brown people *lived* them every day. Recalling a Dallas-area immigration rally that fell apart when well-intentioned white organizers failed to consult with Latino activists already working on the same issue, a Latino interview participant explained the dilemma this way:

Sebastián: I do genuinely believe that the people who are closest to the pain should be driving the train...I also think that we [people of color]...need to be aware when someone that is well intentioned comes to us, we need to be aware of how we on-board them. Because they might be well-intentioned hearing about this for the first time. And they don't know *anything*! They're like, 'I heard about what's happening to the kids. That's wrong. What can I do?' And we're like, 'How is it that you're just here right now? Where have you been the last five years, the last ten years?' And it's like, I understand that we have anger, we have pain. But you have this person that is saying, 'How can I help?' Or that doesn't even know to say, 'How can I help?' And you're pushing them away...It's one of those things that requires white people but also people of color to be intentional. And not every person of color needs to be equipped to deal with that. Like I know some friends that they just won't because their trauma is so deep, and I understand that. (Interview KB)

Sebastián was all too aware of the potential for burnout among activists of color, for whom educating white allies could seem like one burden too many. Sebastián explained that for many people of color, trying to explain their experiences to well-intentioned but uninformed white people felt like tearing open a wound over and over again. Not everyone felt equipped to do that, and even those who saw themselves as bridge builders could not find the emotional resources to do it all the time. It did not always feel worth it to invest time and emotional resources in new people who might not prove committed enough to come back. But at the same time, white people had an important role to play because they could reach their own communities in ways that people who looked like Sebastián could not. One solution, Sebastián thought, could be to designate a few select people as “bridge builders” who could be specially trained to welcome new people to the movement while also serving as a buffer between new recruits and those who did not feel prepared to deal with them. These “bridge builders” could be equipped

with prepared materials like videos, PowerPoint presentations, and book recommendations so that they could share information as widely as possible and help new allies build their knowledge without having to draw too deeply on their own personal and emotional resources. This kind of solution, Sebastián hoped, could serve as a form of self-care by making it easier for activists of color to recruit and train allies while decreasing the risk of emotional burnout.

In the ongoing struggle to learn how to become better allies, some white activists hit upon the concept of *accompaniment*. This idea, taken from Latin American liberation theology, gave people in situations of relative privilege a model for working alongside others, without either abandoning the struggle or trying to dominate it. The most experienced activist-volunteers talked about allyship as a process of *becoming*—a set of awarenesses and skills that could never be perfected but must be continually practiced and refined within themselves. The challenge for white allies was the temptation to start thinking that they deserved some sort of special credit for being progressive. Even after years of activist work, Phillip explained that he still struggled sometimes with a deeply ingrained assumption that he should be the one to lead.

Phillip: One of the challenges...for the past ten to twenty years of my adult life has been to challenge myself to listen, to really genuinely listen to the voices of those who are different from me. And not feel compelled to lead or control the process or the goals of whatever it is that's happening... I think especially as a white man I was certainly schooled that I was supposed to be in charge! [laughing] That was what I learned from a very early age. It's what we learn. It's what we're taught. It's how we're bred. And um, so it's a very humbling and constantly challenging journey to step back from that. I say—I've got to find a better way to say this. Because I like to say we white people just need to allow other people to lead. And when I've said that, some of my friends who are people of color or women have said, 'Oh, you're going to *allow* us to lead.'...I think that is The Challenge in our society today. (Interview FG)

Interviewees thought of social justice as something that might never be perfected, but required constant commitment to work toward, even when the results were not yet clear. Though they had

goals, they never expected the work to be finished, either in their own hearts or in society as a whole. Phillip said it best:

Phillip: Martin Luther King talked about ‘the arc of justice is long but it bends toward history.’ It bends up like this, right? [gesturing with hands]. I have to tell you I don’t think I believe that anymore. I think the past four years have knocked that view out from under me completely. I don’t believe history automatically goes in that direction. I think it has to be fought for and it has to be reasserted and racism and xenophobia—It’s in the human heart. It’s in my heart, it’s in your heart. It’s in all of our hearts. And unless we consciously acknowledge it and work to banish it, it will always come back in every generation. Racism doesn’t die out. That’s the bottom line. Xenophobia doesn’t die out. And even worse, it will never just die out. And that’s the big ‘aha’ that I’ve had...It is not going to die out, ever. Because..in theological terms what I would say it’s a part of the human condition. (Interview FG)

## **Discussion**

### Limitations, Fallibility, and Self-Care

When asked what advice they would like to give someone who was new to the work, most participants’ answers had to do with learning to understand and accept their own limitations as a crucial part of the process of *becoming* a good volunteer or activist. They talked about learning and practicing humility—not just as a characteristic of a stereotypically “virtuous” personality, but as a necessary first step before it was possible to begin doing effective work. New volunteers often got this wrong, falling into the trap of imagining themselves as heroes swooping in to save the poor and helpless. Experienced volunteers recognized this attitude as a kind of unthinking arrogance that was fundamentally incompatible with the work they were trying to do. People who wanted to be saviors made too many assumptions, asked too few questions, and too often failed to pay attention to the real needs of the people they were trying to help.

Others have noted that these sorts of paternalistic attitudes are not uncommon among refugee service volunteers, who often have relatively little training or supervision, and can easily end up alienating the people that volunteers are trying to serve (Erickson 2012; Vang 2021). In this project, experienced volunteer-activists eventually came to recognize the value of *not* having all the answers—or rather, the value of acknowledging the things they did not and could not know because they had not lived the lives that their refugee beneficiaries were leading. To be effective, they first had to acknowledge their own fallibility and the limitations of their knowledge. They also had to learn through trial and error that—unlike imaginary heroes out of stories—their own personal and emotional resources had limits. They eventually realized that they could not care for others indefinitely without also caring for themselves.

Participants in this project explained self-care as a way to manage seemingly endless demands on their time and emotional resources, drawing clear boundaries that allowed them to say no to one person today in order to help more people tomorrow. Without clear boundaries, they fell prey to overwork, compassion fatigue, and potential burnout. Learning how and when to maintain the personal boundaries they needed in order to keep going involved learning to accept and respect their own limitations. But especially for participants who were people of color, self-care—while necessary for survival—was not always enough when outside forces were depleting their emotional resources faster than they could be replenished. Self-care was never enough to make up for the ongoing harm of systemic injustice, but it helped people justify the personal decisions they needed to make in order to preserve enough energy to keep going.

The concept of “self-care”, pioneered in the medical community as a way for people with chronic health conditions to live fuller and more independent lives, has worn many faces over the years. Today, “self-care” seems to be everywhere. “Self-care” is touted by corporations as a

solution for employees struggling with job burnout, promoted by social media influencers as an excuse to indulge in bubble baths and shopping sprees, and aggressively marketed to consumers in the form of yoga retreats, mindfulness programs, and expensive skin-care and aromatherapy regimes. But before any of that, “self-care” had deep roots in the history of activism. During the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, women and people of color celebrated self-care as a way to control their own health during a time when the medical establishment treated them as second-class citizens. In this context, claiming autonomy over one’s own body and one’s own health was a self-consciously political act, a matter not of comfort or luxury but of basic survival (Nelson 2013; Nelson 2015).

While living with breast cancer, Black poet and activist Audre Lorde famously wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988). Across the board, volunteers and activists in this project considered self-care essential to doing effective work day after day and month after month. They understood self-care as a critical component to being a “good” volunteer-activist, both in the sense of being morally good and being good at one’s chosen work. But while “care” is an important part of the anthropology of the good, anthropological studies of care almost always focus on care of other people, not the self. In the anthropological literature, “self-care” is more likely to be explored in relation to elderly people with medical conditions than to people doing activist or humanitarian work (Guell 2012; Seligman et al. 2015; Chudakova 2016; Lamb 2018). This study contributes to the literature on care and the anthropology of the good by highlighting the ways that pro-refugee activists and volunteers strategically engage in care of the self as part of an ongoing moral choice to care for politicized others.

## Power and Representation

In this chapter, participants' responses also centered on another common theme: the problem of representation, or who is empowered to speak. This has always been a tricky issue in refugee studies because refugees are so frequently framed—even by humanitarian organizations seeking to help them—as powerless and voiceless (Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002; Haines 2010). This tendency, sometimes motivated by politics and sometimes by an understandable desire to evoke sympathy in order to elicit donations, leaves little room for displaced people to tell their own stories framed in their own way. Refugees and asylum seekers are by definition dealing with a particular kind of vulnerability that makes public self-advocacy challenging. This leaves pro-refugee advocates with a conundrum that should be intimately familiar to most anthropologists: how to speak convincingly but truthfully on behalf of a set of people who are not empowered by the political system to speak for themselves; or, how to provide a platform for disenfranchised people to tell their own stories according to their own priorities; or, often, how to know when to be quiet. In this project, refugee advocates—like many anthropologists—are striving to reach a tricky kind of balance. Frequently they learn that part of becoming a “good” advocate involves learning when to let go of the illusion of authority and step back so that someone whose experience is closer to the problem can take center stage. This is particularly true for advocates who have not lived as refugees themselves, and who—in their zealous defense of displaced people—may end up romanticizing the refugee experience, thus perpetuating familiar myths and stereotypes instead of disarming them.

These issues of representation tie together with a thread running through much of the anthropological literature since the 1970s as anthropologists reckon with the problematic historical legacy of the discipline as an arm of colonialism (Lewis 1973; Asad 1979; Said 1989;

Brettell 1993; Bošković and Eriksen 2008; Clarke 2010; Fassin 2017). In the summer of 2020, in the wake of a pandemic that disproportionately put the lives of people of color at risk even as young Black men were also facing death at the hands of police, racial justice demonstrations swept through every major city in the United States. Among the general public, there was renewed national attention to systematic injustice and inequality in the United States. Academics—including anthropologists—struggled to come to terms with their own role as educators, researchers, and gatekeepers of information working within a system that continues to perpetuate institutionalized racism and misogyny a half century after the Civil Rights era. As people in positions of relative privilege, many anthropologists are currently asking the same kinds of questions as white activists—how to play a responsible, constructive part in contributing to a public conversation that is more balanced, more inclusive, and less hobbled by the limitations of an unnecessarily narrow perspective defined by white, male, Christian, and economic privilege (Rosa and Bonilla 2017; Krueger 2018; Farber 2019; Rana 2020; Yates-Doerr 2020). For some guidance here, it is fruitful to look to emerging literature in the growing subfield of activist anthropology, particularly those projects that put participants’ goals at the center of the work instead of at the periphery (Speed 2006; Hale 2006, 2008; Low 2010; Kline 2013; Seif 2016; Stuesse 2016; Bejarano et al. 2019). Anthropologists have a great deal to learn from activists, whose hard-won insights into issues of power, privilege, representation, and allyship speak to many of the core questions under debate within academia and in society at large. Activists—particularly those who are people of color—are an untapped resource for scholars who are interested in “doing the work” of making universities and other sites of knowledge production more equitable.

## Conclusion

The responses detailed in this chapter demonstrate that activism is a delicate balancing act, often uncomfortable, and fraught with potential mistakes and failures. But the volunteers and activists who told me their stories believed that the difficulty of the work did not excuse them from trying, and that past mistakes and present inadequacies only pointed the way to *becoming* something better. The next chapter concludes this dissertation by returning to the key questions outlined in the introduction, and laying out conclusions and directions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation followed the experiences of forty ordinary Texans involved in pro-refugee volunteer and advocacy work during the four chaotic years of the Trump administration. It sought to answer important questions about civic engagement, activism, and “doing good” during a time of rising xenophobia and political polarization. This final chapter reviews the themes and major issues addressed in the rest of the dissertation and lays out some general conclusions with regards to refugee supporters’ ideas about what it means to do (and be) “good”; the role of faith-based organizations mobilizing (and sometimes suppressing) support for displaced people; the relationship between volunteerism, activism, and civic engagement; narratives of refugee / immigrant “deservingness”; and the anthropology of activism. It explains some limitations of the current study and proposes directions for future research. Finally, it speculates on the possible future of the refugee and asylum systems in the United States.

### **Review of Major Themes**

Chapter 2 set the stage for the rest of the dissertation by walking step-by-step through the chaotic implementation of the Trump administration’s bans on travel from majority-Muslim countries starting in January 2017. The arguments put forward for and against the travel bans illuminate how politicians, activists, and judges operationalized ideas about security, rights, citizenship, and deservingness. They demonstrate that this issue was more than just a policy

disagreement about how to process visa applications. Rather, it was a deeply moral struggle about how to define the nation itself, which categories of people deserved to be included, and who had the power to decide. The Trump administration gradually became more skillful at couching its arguments in terms that the Supreme Court was eventually willing to accept. But the travel ban also had the unintended effect of mobilizing a large number of people to unite against a policy that they saw as a harbinger of burgeoning white Christian supremacy. The Muslim travel ban thus set up a moral and ethical problem that many Americans found they could not ignore. The Trump administration's repeated vilification of Muslim refugees suggested to concerned citizens that active support of refugees was a symbolically meaningful way to resist what they saw as a violation of deeply-held ideals about the United States as a nation of immigrants, where people could be free of religious and political persecution.

Chapter 3 explained how a spontaneous mass protest at DFW International Airport expressed powerful local resistance to the Muslim travel ban and laid the groundwork for a broad-based grassroots coalition of immigrant and refugee supporters among ordinary people and city government officials. For participants, the airport protest served as a liminal event (Turner 1969) in which people set aside the usual divisions of race, class, and social status in order to reinforce social bonds with one another and express renewed commitment to shared moral values of unity, religious freedom, and welcome, in opposition to political rhetoric that made distrust and division seem inevitable. Demonstrators used the event as a way to establish and strengthen social networks and to practice the kind of solidarity that they wished to carry with them into the real world. This chapter demonstrated that protests and demonstrations are inherently moral and ethical events at which participants try to reshape society to match their ideals about what a "good" society should look like. This chapter explored activism as a process

of *becoming*: becoming a better society that lives up to the values and ideals of its members; but also becoming a better person. It followed several protest participants as they worked to carry the ideals they practiced at the protest out into the real world, where they engaged in a wide variety of social justice and immigrant rights projects, which were directly inspired by participants' experiences at the DFW airport protest in 2017. For these people, volunteerism and activism were not separate realms of activity but two sides of the same moral coin. Though the protest itself lasted for only one weekend, its effects kept going for years afterward. This chapter explored "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010) as a form of civic engagement, as individual people make intentional daily efforts to reshape their society from the ground up, by living according to a chosen set of values and influencing others to do the same.

Chapter 4 attempted to answer the question of *who* gets involved in pro-refugee activities in North Texas and *why* they choose this particular type of volunteer project over a host of other social problems and concerns. It explored interview participants' personal stories about how they got involved in pro-refugee work in order to understand how ordinary people living and working in North Texas came to understand "helping refugees" as a powerful moral imperative that they could not ignore. Participants came from a wide range of different perspectives, and they framed things in different ways, but they all shared a commitment to working on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers *because they saw it as the right thing to do*. This moral/ethical responsibility was more important than personal comfort or convenience. Often, it required reshaping their personal identity and belief structure in order to be compatible with this new moral imperative. The chapter highlighted several individual stories of "becoming" in order to illustrate a few key themes uncovered in the interviews: compassion for refugees and asylum seekers, often recognized based on firsthand experience; shared identity with persecuted and displaced people;

international experience and global worldview; and orientation toward political activism and systemic change. Though pro-refugee activist-volunteers often found their work exhausting and emotionally draining, they also found in it a tremendous sense of fulfillment. What kept these people coming back over time primarily had to do with meaning and human connection. People stayed with the work over time because it gave their lives a sense of meaning and purpose, but also because of the personal relationships they built with refugees and with fellow volunteers. They understood “the good life” in terms of several interconnected moral values: meaningful work that made a concrete difference in the lives of others; human connection, especially with people of different backgrounds whose variety of experiences could complement and enrich their own; curiosity and openness toward the world at large and the people in it; and deep personal commitment toward righting wrongs and working against hatred and injustice, even when that commitment came at a personal cost.

Chapter 5 gave an account of the local effects of federal and state changes in refugee policy during the Trump years, focusing on the gradual dismantling of the federal refugee resettlement program. It explored the intended and unintended consequences of the Trump administration’s travel bans and “extreme vetting” policies, and documented some of the challenges facing refugee service organizations in Texas as they worked to keep their programs operational in an atmosphere of general policy and funding chaos. In addition to various bans on refugee resettlement from majority-Muslim countries, the Trump administration decreased the annual refugee cap every year and imposed an avalanche of new administrative requirements that remained largely invisible to the general public even as they systematically gutted local refugee resettlement offices, starving them of resources and destroying the delicate infrastructure that kept them operational. New volunteers motivated by indignation at Trump’s vilification of

refugees came out of the woodwork to help, only to find that stripped-down resettlement offices no longer had room for them. Funding cuts forced refugee service organizations to restructure their operations, rethink longstanding assumptions about the refugee program as a special exception to the rules of immigration politics, and seek out new partnerships with other kinds of immigrant advocacy and aid organizations. The chapter ended with a discussion of deservingness, compassion, and the politics of refugee resettlement in a state of exception (Agamben 2005).

Chapter 6 explored the experiences of activist-volunteers from North Texas as they attempted to navigate chaos, bear witness to human suffering, and find meaningful ways to respond to the escalating humanitarian crisis unfolding on the US-Mexico border as a result of the Trump administration's "zero-tolerance" and Remain in Mexico (MPP) policies. Here, refugee advocates wrestled with questions of deservingness and justice, and began framing asylum-seeking families stranded in camps along the US-Mexico border not as "migrants" but as another—equally deserving—kind of refugee. The chapter also documented the efforts and failures of a city-wide project to provide aid and support to Central American asylum seekers bused in from overcrowded shelters in El Paso—a project which ultimately fell apart when the Trump administration changed its border policies yet again. It was impossible for people involved in humanitarian work at the border to separate volunteer work from activism because what they were doing was inherently political. It was also deeply ethical. Bearing witness to the human consequences of US border policies often triggered a sort of social justice conversion in returning volunteers, who often felt deep shame about being complicit in the actions of their own government. Volunteers internalized this as a new awareness of personal responsibility to do something about what they had seen, but they frequently found their efforts stymied by the

Trump administration's chaotic approach to border policy. Often, they found their worldview, faith, and sense of personhood changed by the work they did. They could not forget or ignore what they had seen without abandoning their most basic sense of themselves as decent, morally upright people. For many of these volunteers, firsthand experience in the "Wild West" of humanitarian aid on the border proved personally transformative, permanently changing their understanding of their relationship to their own government and their sense of personal responsibility to work against injustice of all kinds.

Chapter 7 took as its subject the advice given by interview participants to imaginary new volunteers as they reflected on what they had learned from their experiences as refugee supporters. Themes included self-care, active listening, resisting the "white savior" complex, and learning to be an effective ally for people engaged in struggle. When asked what advice they would like to give someone who was new to the work, most participants' answers had to do with learning to understand and accept their own limitations. They saw this as a crucial part of the process of *becoming* a good volunteer or activist. All too frequently, new volunteers entered the work with imaginary ideas that they would swoop in and be a hero to helpless people in need, only to find out that real life situations were more complicated, refugees were less needy and helpless, and they themselves were less heroic and more fallible than they had previously imagined. In order to be effective, experienced volunteers learned to acknowledge their own fallibility and the limitations of their knowledge. They also learned that their own personal and emotional resources had limits, and that they could not care for others indefinitely without first caring for themselves. Chapter 7 ended with a brief discussion of activists' engagement with issues of power, representation, and how to be "good" allies to people engaged in struggle. These issues—hammered out among activists over long decades of practice—run parallel to similar

debates among anthropologists and other scholars seeking to rebalance academic institutions steeped in a long history of colonialism. Here, activist anthropology can serve as a conduit to open up new forms of theoretical engagement based on the practical and theoretical knowledge developed among activists engaged in projects of social change.

## **Discussion**

### Doing (and Being) “Good”

This project asked how pro-refugee volunteer-advocates in North Texas operationalized their ideas about “the good”, specifically in terms of personal agency, religious belief, and civic engagement. On an individual level, what did these people think it meant to be a “good” person, a “good” volunteer, a “good” advocate, or a “good” ally to people engaged in struggle? What kinds of limitations and constraints did people encounter in the process of trying to do—or be—“good”? On a societal level, what did participants believe a “good” society, or a “good” city, or a “good” government should look like? What actions might these ordinary people take to try to bring these ideas about “the good” into reality? These are central to a growing theoretical stream known as the “anthropology of the good”, which seeks to understand how humans imagine, debate, and act in the world as everyday moral and social beings (Biehl and Locke 2010; Robbins 2013).

To answer these questions, this project asked interviewees to tell the stories of how and why they became involved in pro-refugee work, why it mattered to them so intensely, and what they learned from their participation. This project amply demonstrates that rational actor theory is not sufficient to explain what motivates people to dedicate time, effort, and resources to volunteer projects, often at significant cost to themselves and without any particular expectation

of material return. Regardless of differences in race, religion, or social background, everyone involved in this project shared a commitment to working on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers *because they believed it was the right thing to do*, even when that choice came at steep personal cost. Chapter 4 highlighted several individual stories of “becoming” in order to illustrate key themes uncovered in the interviews: compassion for refugees and asylum seekers, often recognized based on firsthand experience with displacement; shared identity with persecuted and displaced people; international experience and global worldview; and a basic orientation toward political activism and systemic change.

While news reports did serve to convey a general sense of crisis about immigration and refugee issues, news reports alone were usually insufficient to motivate people to take direct action. Interviewees who were newer to the work tended to perceive immigration policy issues as terribly complex and impenetrably confusing. People were slow to trust information about immigration issues that came from news reports, because such reports were frequently perceived as incomplete, biased, or politically motivated. Even when they believed the information they received, they did not necessarily trust their own ability to understand it fully enough to form a clear and informed opinion that they felt confident communicating to others. This lack of confidence about understanding the issues at stake frequently created a significant barrier to action.

People were more likely to commit to working on behalf of refugees or asylum seekers if they had some kind of firsthand experience that exposed the status quo as directly in conflict with their internal sense of right and wrong. This could come about in a variety of ways: through personal experience living as an immigrant; through relationships with immigrants and refugees at work or at school; through in-person experiences at the border; or sometimes through outreach

projects such as films or theatrical productions, which attempted to replicate firsthand experience without the need for physical travel.

This project also raised questions about the motivations of people involved in pro-refugee volunteer and activist work. Why was the work so important to them? What did they gain from participation in pro-refugee projects, and what did they give up? Regardless of how they first became involved in the work, most people who remained involved over a period of time were seeking two basic things: meaningful work, and satisfying personal relationships. They wanted to be part of something bigger than themselves. They wanted to do positive work that mattered in the world, often as an antidote to feelings of anxiety and powerlessness about big, impersonal wrongs that seemed impossible for ordinary people to solve. They wanted to know that they could *do* something about injustice. And they hoped to find their lives enriched by meaningful personal connections with others who shared the same values of curiosity, openness, generosity, and commitment to making the world a better place. They wanted to help others, but they also wanted to befriend them; and in so doing, they hoped to make their own lives a little bigger.

Like Muehlebach's unemployed Italian volunteer care workers (2011, 2012) and Malkki's lonely Finnish knitters (2015), the people involved in pro-refugee activities in North Texas gained a deep sense of meaning and purpose from their volunteer and activist work. But they differed in other important ways. The majority of people that I interviewed for this project were not using volunteer work to compensate for feelings of personal uselessness or loss of social value. Unlike Muehlebach's unemployed care workers or Malkki's elderly knitters, most of my interviewees had full-time professional jobs and many were also raising children. A few were older adults; these individuals tended to talk about retirement as a blessing because it allowed them the opportunity to finally concentrate their time and energy on things that they

cared about. The people involved in this project were more likely to struggle with burnout and compassion fatigue as a result of juggling too many responsibilities than they were to feel socially useless and in need of a job. As such, pro-refugee work did not replace other forms of social belonging in the same way that it did for Muehlebach's participants in Italy or for Malkki's lonely knitters. But it did create new social connections and new forms of belonging. The work created a new community of like-minded volunteers and activists, similar to the ones described by Coutin (1993) and Cunningham (1999) during the height of the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s.

In terms of agency, pro-refugee work helped people to combat the feelings of fear and helplessness that they experienced as they watched right-wing politicians led by Donald Trump use their government power to spread anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment. Interview participants consistently expressed feelings of disbelief and horror as they watched the Trump administration enact travel bans, erect walls, and imprison migrant children without blankets or adequate food. Interviewees saw their pro-refugee work as a way to reclaim a sense of *moral agency* (Mattingly 2014; Myers 2015) in a situation that otherwise seemed shocking and uncontrollable. By working on behalf of refugees and other displaced people, they actively resisted Trump's attempts to take the country in a direction they found morally unacceptable. The work allowed them to feel that they were *doing* something instead of passively allowing terrible things to happen. This project adds nuance to the literature on agency by showing that "doing good" can serve as a way to combat feelings of helplessness not only about the conditions of one's own life, but also about the condition of society as a whole.

The "anthropology of the good" is a relatively new theoretical trend (Robbins 2013, Ortner 2016). Several anthropologists have employed Deleuze's concept of "becoming" to

highlight the ways that ordinary people use moral and ethical decision-making to enact ideas about “the good” in life situations which are often fraught with uncertainty and injustice (Mattingly 2014, Stevenson 2014, Wright 2016). In anthropology, Deleuze’s concept of “becoming” provides a necessary counterbalance to theories of power that center on Michel Foucault’s concepts of biopower and governmentality and to theories of structural violence that place ordinary people at the abject mercy of larger cultural and economic systems that are too powerful to resist or overturn (Biehl & Locke 2010). It contributes to longstanding debates about structure and agency by opening up space to think of human experience in terms of both limits and crossroads, structure and agency, institutional power and individual choice (Biehl and Locke 2010). Looking at human societies in terms of “becoming” removes the temptation to put a straitjacket on culture, locking it into a narrow set of definitions and characteristics that do not allow for movement or change. But in its focus on change and possibility, “becoming” still acknowledges the powerful influence of habitual ways of thinking and acting. This concept—while far from a complete explanation of human culture change—is useful precisely because it allows for a both/and way of thinking: both structure and agency, both continuity and change, both institutional power and individual choice. It allows us to pay attention to the possibilities, the ambivalences, and the “noninevitabilities” of people’s lives as they build the best lives they can in a world where their choices are neither fully predetermined by circumstances nor completely free (Biehl and Locke 2010).

The current study adds depth and nuance to a growing anthropological literature about how people exercise individual agency in order to make their moral values real in the everyday social worlds they inhabit. The stories of North Texan pro-refugee volunteer-activists demonstrate that cultural ideas about morality and ethics are not necessarily permanently fixed,

nor are they fully dictated or defined by structures and institutions of power. In many everyday situations the accepted “right” thing to do is already known. But when faced with an unfamiliar or unexpected set of circumstances, individuals have to work out practical interpretations of “right” or “good” behavior through a potentially messy process of debate, reflection, and experimentation.

In this current project, pro-refugee volunteer-activists’ stories showed that in these moral projects of “becoming”, there was not always a handbook to read or a clear path to follow. People learned by trying, and doing, and making mistakes, and trying again, without the benefit of seeing the end result ahead of time. This is a process of personal transformation as well as societal transformation. When many individuals engage in this sort of moral reinvention in coordination with one another, they can build a sort of momentum that leads to larger-scale social change. This speaks to the capacity of ordinary individuals, in cooperation with one another, to exercise agency by collectively pushing for people to change their expectations of what constitutes morally acceptable behavior, not only on the part of individuals but also on the part of communities, religious organizations, and even governments. Neither individuals nor institutions are finished products. They are perpetually in the midst of a process of “becoming” something that is not yet predetermined.

### Moving Toward an Applied Anthropology of the Good

The “anthropology of the good” is also in a state of “becoming”, and one important way forward is to think about ways that these theoretical and philosophical ideas about “the good” can be operationalized in practical terms. The results of this study speak to a question that has frequently perplexed community organizers, faith leaders, and volunteer coordinators alike: how

to convince people to care enough about important social issues to stand up and act. At its core, this project is about what motivates ordinary people to take action. In practical terms, this study identifies several key ingredients for sustained individual action:

- 1) Recognition of a problem that needs to be solved or an injustice that cannot be allowed to continue, which is most effectively gained through direct personal experience rather than from the news or from secondhand accounts
- 2) Conception of the problem or injustice as a moral or ethical issue, such that inaction conflicts with the person's internal ability to understand themselves as a good person
- 3) Exposure to a real-life situation in which habitual ways of thinking are suspended and new ways of thinking and behaving start to seem possible
- 4) Specific personal commitment to continued action after the event itself, even when it comes at a cost of time, effort, and resources
- 5) Sustained connection to an active network of similarly committed people who share resources and information, create opportunities for members to practice their skills, and motivate one another to stay involved over time

This finding suggests several potential courses of action for organizations—such as refugee resettlement agencies—whose operational success depends on sustained involvement from a committed corps of volunteers. First, programs that attempt to educate the public about important issues will be more successful if they involve some type of firsthand experience that enables participants to see injustice with their own eyes instead of hearing about it from some secondhand source. Second, potential volunteers (and activists) gain motivation from participating in events that enable them to practice new ways of thinking and behaving, such that

they begin to believe that their actions can result in meaningful change. Third, people are much more likely to remain actively involved if they have made meaningful personal connections with likeminded others.

In the current project, I initially expected that people might be more likely to participate in pro-refugee advocacy/volunteer work if they perceived that such work would enhance their social status among others whose opinions they cared about. In reality, I found little specific evidence to support this hypothesis. But social networks proved extremely important in making things happen. The desire to accomplish a specific goal or project frequently motivated participants to seek out others who might have the resources, information, or connections they needed. In the process, participants formed a strong instrumental social network of committed colleagues working on different but related projects at different organizations, who frequently called upon each other to help get things done. Each of these favors strengthened the network and made facilitated reciprocal asks in the future as people and organizations built reputations for effectiveness and cooperation. In interviews, pro-refugee advocates also frequently described their attempts to use their personal networks to recruit additional support, with widely varying results. Sometimes friends, relatives, and co-workers became strong advocates in their own right; other times, all attempts to recruit them failed. These failures were frequently a source of great personal disappointment and regret. But the successes created an expanding network of people who became agents of change, who then recruited others—like ripples spreading outward in a pond.

When this project began, I expected that participation in pro-refugee advocacy/volunteer work might allow people to make meaningful connections across religious and racial/ethnic barriers. But I underestimated the importance of deep curiosity and desire for personal

connection in this process. When asked what aspect of their work they found the most satisfying, many participants talked about how fascinating it was to interact with other people with backgrounds different from their own. They frequently described the friendships they had formed with people—both refugees and fellow volunteers—who they otherwise would never have met. This desire for personal connection was not just a minor by-product of pro-refugee activism but in many cases was one of the primary reasons why people stayed engaged in the work over time. This suggests that organizations serving refugees should think about ways to facilitate the formation of true, socially equal friendships between all the people involved in their programs, regardless of their status as “helpers” or “helped”. Refugees need friends, and volunteers need friends too.

#### Religion, Politics, and Social Networks

This project also asked what role religion plays in the public furor over refugees. Does religion motivate people to help refugees or keep them out? And why does it so often seem to be doing both at the same time? These questions are complex ones to answer because especially with regard to the refugee issue, religion has become deeply intertwined with US politics to the point that it is often difficult or impossible to separate the two. In this project, people’s interpretation of religion was often heavily influenced by politics and vice versa. Both religion and politics influenced people’s perceptions about what was “really” happening with refugees and asylum seekers, and what kind of responsibilities they believed they had (or did not have) toward displaced people. Though conservative Evangelical Christians have—perhaps rightly—borne the brunt of public blame for the spread of anti-immigrant, anti-refugee sentiment, this project demonstrates that even within Evangelical communities, there are strong voices advocating more compassionate policies toward refugees and other immigrants.

In many communities of religious faith, helping refugees was an obvious, non-controversial choice. Some religious congregations were more supportive of refugees than others. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders served actively as pro-refugee organizers, and many people became involved in the work through social connections at their place of worship. But religious belief itself was not a particularly good predictor of who would become involved in work on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. In this project, Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostics, and Christians of various denominations all described helping refugees as “the right thing to do”. But that does not necessarily mean that the decision to help refugees was an obvious choice, particularly for religious interviewees who came from congregations oriented toward conservative Republican politics. These individuals often expressed anguish and frustration at their co-religionists’ refusal to accept a moral responsibility that they thought should be obvious. Their responses demonstrate that religious attitudes toward immigration and refugee issues are complex and multi-layered, particularly in denominations that have become strongly associated with loyalty to a specific political party. Among the people who did choose to work on behalf of refugees, personal qualities of flexibility, openness, and commitment to social justice more highly valued than strict adherence to any particular set of religious beliefs.

The structure of this project does not allow for direct comparison between people with pro-refugee and anti-refugee attitudes, and it does not attempt to compare opinions about refugee issues among people based on their religious background. I did not recruit interview participants who had negative or neutral opinions about refugees. As such, this study does not and cannot reach firm conclusions about the prevalence of anti-immigrant or anti-refugee sentiment among people of one religion versus any other. But it does show that ethical concerns over refugee and other human rights issues often lead to a crisis of conscience for people who perceive their own

moral commitments to be in conflict with the priorities of their religious communities. Several interviewees said that they had left their previous church because they could not square their beliefs about social justice with the political position of church leadership; they felt they had to choose between being a good person and being a good Christian. (This phenomenon is not necessarily unique to Christian churches, but all of the participants in this project who described this kind of experience were Christian.) Eyewitness experience of human suffering often led people to some kind of epiphany or social justice conversion experience, which permanently unsettled their previous understanding of their relationship to their government or to their religious community. When people's beliefs and ethical commitments came into conflict with their social identity as members of a religious group, they experienced cognitive dissonance which could be resolved in one of three ways. First, they could reject the new information in favor of keeping their previous beliefs and social position intact. I do not have data about the people who made this choice, since they did not become part of this project. Second, they could leave their religious community and seek a new one with priorities which were more in line with their new moral commitments. A surprising number of participants in this project did exactly that. People who cared deeply about social justice had a strong tendency to gravitate toward congregations that prioritized social justice projects, even if it meant leaving their original denominations behind. Third, they could make perhaps the most difficult choice of all—to embrace unresolvable dissonance and remain in their original church as the uncomfortable voice of dissent. Participants who tried to do this risked consequences for their reputations and relationships. But their ability to “speak the language” of their home communities may have made them the most valuable kind of advocates in places that were difficult for other kinds of advocates to reach.

Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are of course places of worship. But they are also gathering places where people who share a similar cultural background and a similar set of religious beliefs can strike up friendships and form social connections with others. Religious communities worship together, but they also eat together, celebrate weddings and birthdays together, raise children together, and do all the other practical and social things that human communities do. The personal relationships that develop among people in religious communities constitute an established network of people who are already accustomed to working together for various practical and social purposes. In North Texas, religious congregations—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—were critical social networks for organizing a quick and reliable response to refugee and asylum-related issues, especially in congregations that already had some sort of social justice committee in place. In Dallas, a strong network of connections between leaders of different faiths made it easier to share resources and mobilize help in response to a host of different crises, including ones related to immigration. In response to rising levels of xenophobia and distrust, leaders of different faiths made a concerted effort to model cooperation and facilitate connections between their congregations. This speaks to a need to consider faith-based organizations not just as places of worship but also as powerful social networks where like-minded people connect and share resources in support of common goals, even across lines of faith and belief.

The capacity of faith-based organizations to serve as mobilizing engines for civic engagement projects has long been recognized in the academic literature. African-American churches have long served as hubs of community-based Black activism (Harrisi 2001). During the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s, Christian churches worked underground to bring Salvadorans and Guatemalans to the US and help them apply for asylum (Coutin 1993;

Cunningham 1999). Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012) noted that churches, mosques, temples, and other faith-based organizations served as “localized communities of practice” that helped immigrants learn the practical and organizing skills necessary to enter the public sphere as political actors. And in the US, the refugee resettlement program has always relied on faith-based organizations to provide donations and volunteers (Eby 2011; Erickson 2012; Mathema and Carratala 2020). So it is no surprise that faith-based organizations in Texas play an important role in organizing aid for refugees and asylum seekers. What is particularly notable in this current project is the special determination of faith leaders in Dallas to organize city-wide *interfaith* efforts on behalf of displaced people. By joining their social networks together, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities could accomplish things that no single congregation could do on its own. In addition, working together on pro-refugee projects helped to build relationships of trust between local people of different religious backgrounds, who began to realize that they could call on one another for support during other kinds of crises too. Immigrants are not the only ones who need practice in order to enhance their civic skills. Here, refugee supporters formed an interfaith community of practice that helped people develop their organizing skills and build connections not just between individuals but between whole congregations.

### Volunteerism, Activism, and Civic Engagement

Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012) define civic engagement as “the process by which individuals enter into and act within civic spaces to address issues of public concern” (p. 2). Refugee resettlement is an issue of public concern, but it is also an issue that affects the everyday lives of ordinary people. In terms of citizenship and civic engagement, this project asked what

people believe they are doing when they help refugees. Were they working for the individual benefit of refugees themselves? In that case, we could categorize their work primarily as a volunteer project with no particular intention beyond helping with an immediate practical problem. Or were they trying to affect or transform society as a whole? In that case, their work might more properly be termed activism.

The results of this project made it clear that for people involved in pro-refugee work in North Texas, activism and volunteer work were both part of the same larger moral project. It proved impossible to distinguish between *volunteers* and *activists*, because people involved in pro-refugee work floated freely back and forth between activism and volunteerism, often working on both kinds of projects simultaneously. For the most part, they did not see volunteer and activist roles as separate realms of action. They tended to choose one primary type of action due to personal preference or practical necessity but frequently participated in both or switched roles according to circumstances, because both kinds of work involved the same set of underlying motivations and were part of the same moral project.

Like all ethnographic research projects, this one took place at a particular place and time, under a particular set of social conditions that inevitably influenced the results of the project. This project took place during a time of rising xenophobia and authoritarianism, and the results of the project cannot help but reflect that reality. Though interview participants rarely mentioned by Trump by name—as though, like Voldemort, using his name might grant him more power—they were acutely aware of his manipulation of white nationalist ideas to bolster his political influence over the American public. In this charged political atmosphere, welcoming refugees became a moral project that carried a special kind of urgency. During the Trump years, frequent and virulent attacks on refugees and immigrants from the Oval Office galvanized people to

volunteer for refugee service organizations *as a conscious act of participatory ethical citizenship*. In other words, they started volunteering in order to enact the kind of social change they wanted to see in the world. Not everyone involved in this project started volunteering because of Trump. But even those who had already been doing this work for many years saw important aspects of their work and their approach to it change dramatically in response to the actions of the Trump administration. Long-term volunteers began attending protests and organizing rallies as they realized that quiet acts of service would not be enough to counter the tides of white supremacy and xenophobia that they saw rising in the world around them. For these people, volunteerism and activism were two sides of the same coin, both motivated by the same deep moral/ethical concerns. Even those who limited themselves to practical volunteer work and not activist work explained their choice as connected to something bigger than themselves, as part of an effort to choose the kind of society they wanted to live in by building it themselves, instead of passively accepting the xenophobic version of America that political leaders were trying to push on them. Working against policies that they saw as morally reprehensible gave activist volunteers more powerful motivation to examine and reaffirm their own beliefs and then to seek out ways to act upon them. In other words, the need to work *against* Trump made it easier for participants' moral uneasiness to crystallize into a commitment to working *for* refugees. The contrast made the choice clearer.

This project contributes to the literature by adding a new moral / ethical dimension to the concepts of citizenship and civic engagement. Citizenship has been theorized by scholars in a variety of nuanced ways, mostly having to do with people's efforts to establish claims of legal rights and social belonging (Rosaldo 1994, Glick Schiller and Çaglar 2008; Brettell and Reed-Danahay 2012). Most of the people who participated in the interviews for this project were not

concerned with claiming new legal rights or social privileges for themselves, because their own rights and privileges were not at risk. Instead, they were acting on behalf of others. But they were also acting on behalf of society as a whole, because they wanted to live in a society that valued immigrants as people and prioritized welcome and compassion over power and profit. By involving themselves in issues of public concern, these people were engaging in intentional acts of civic engagement. They conceptualized citizenship as something more than legal status. They saw it as a realm of responsibility that they could actively inhabit, and could even transform from the inside as they sought to make space within it for disenfranchised others.

Where do the activities of North Texas pro-refugee advocates fit in terms of academic understandings of citizenship? Pro-refugee advocates involved in this project were using their own *legal citizenship* as a means of pushing for greater social and legal rights for others. This is not quite the same as *cultural citizenship* (Rosaldo 1994), although participants did want to respect others' rights to be different without compromising their right to belong. Likewise, they wanted to support others in their efforts to be treated as full citizens in social practice as well as in law (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2008). So the kind of citizenship that pro-refugee volunteer activists were practicing was compatible with these understandings of citizenship, but not quite subsumed under them. Muehlebach's concept of *ethical citizenship* (2012) comes closer to describing the activities of pro-refugee workers in North Texas during the Trump era, because it describes a form of citizenship in which people imagine themselves to be bound together by moral ties rather than political ones, in relationships primarily defined by duties rather than rights. Like Muehlebach's Italian care workers, pro-refugee volunteers in North Texas were using their work to make compassion-based connections between unequal parties, within a neoliberal economic situation that displaced the responsibility for refugee care onto individual citizens rather than the state. This

fits Muehlebach's description of ethical citizenship as a new kind of relationship between citizens and the state, a "neoliberal order rising under the sign of brotherly love" (p. 19). In Muehlebach's Italy, even the people who intended to be critical of the system ended up acting as part of it, because their own acts of compassion and volunteerism enabled the state to justify withdrawing financial responsibility for social service projects.

But in the Trump era, pro-refugee volunteer-activists shifted their stance; they were no longer acting simply as volunteer workers within a deceptively "apolitical" neoliberal system. They no longer believed they were working in cooperation with the priorities of the state but in resistance to it—and they were explaining their resistance to the state in moral / ethical terms. Working on multiple levels—public and private; individual and collective; political and religious; city, state, and federal—they sought to reshape their society into one that prioritized rights *and* compassion *and* belonging for displaced people. This moral project was complex, messy, and multi-layered, and frequently involved simultaneous cooperation with and resistance to the status quo. Thus, this project adds nuance to Muehlebach's concept of ethical citizenship by demonstrating the capacity of ordinary people to extend, reshape, and reframe internalized notions of compassion and social responsibility in ways that sometimes transcend their original purpose. For many participants in this study, the fight for compassionate treatment of refugees was only a starting place on a longer moral and activist journey, a project that enabled them to reach a vantage point where they could see the ways that seemingly disparate social justice issues were all connected.

## Narratives of Differential Deservingness

This project asked how pro-refugee volunteer-advocates in North Texas conceptualized deservingness, and how they decided who—among all the categories of people in need—was most deserving of their help. Just as it was impossible to distinguish between volunteers and activists, it also proved impossible to distinguish clearly between people who worked on behalf of officially recognized refugees and those who worked on behalf of asylum seekers. Pro-refugee volunteer-advocates supported officially-recognized refugees for fundamentally ethical, humanitarian reasons. But they frequently applied the same moral logic to Central American asylum seekers camped at the US-Mexico border. They understood both sets of people as victims of the politically-motivated racism and xenophobia of the Trump administration. They framed both sets of people as particularly deserving of humanitarian aid and special legal considerations because they were families fleeing violence and persecution through no fault of their own. They argued vociferously that both officially recognized refugees and asylum seekers were “the legal ones”, frequently expressing frustration that members of the general public did not understand why refugees and asylum seekers were different from undocumented immigrants. They pointed out to anyone who would listen that refugees had already been officially approved by the US government and had undergone extensive background checks before ever entering the United States. Likewise, they emphasized that Central American asylum seekers were fundamentally different from ordinary undocumented immigrants because they were motivated by a need for physical protection rather than by economic concerns, and because they were attempting to enter the country through an asylum application process that is protected under US law. They saw the Trump administration’s attempts to block refugees and asylum seekers as a moral offense that people of conscience could not justly ignore.

This finding connects to a large and well-developed literature about *deservingness* and *claimsmaking* with regard to refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants (Horton 2004; Ngai 2004; Coutin 2007; Feldman 2007; Haines 2010 a, b; Ticktin 2011; Willen 2012; Fassin 2009, 2012; Fox 2012; Cabot 2013, 2014; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Castañeda 2019; Getrich 2019). Other anthropologists have commented on the way that refugees and asylum seekers are frequently framed as particularly deserving of humanitarian aid and special legal considerations because of their identity as victims of violence and persecution (Horton 2004; Feldman 2007; Haines 2010 a, b; Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2009, 2012; Cabot 2013, 2014; Holmes and Castañeda 2016). The humanitarian logic that makes refugees seem like ideal potential Americans is built on emphasizing a stark divide between them and undocumented people, who are frequently framed as less deserving because of their lack of legal status. This dissertation is not in any way intended to cast doubt on the deservingness of refugees and asylum seekers, whose path to safety is already difficult enough. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which narratives of special deservingness can erect barriers to broader coalition-building. The language of special refugee deservingness can be alienating to people involved in immigrant rights more broadly because it rests on an underlying logic that specifically excludes people who arrived as undocumented immigrants, even though undocumented immigrants face threats of deportation and systemic injustice in the United States which registered refugees do not, and even though poverty can be just as much of an existential threat to survival as persecution (Getrich 2019). Others have observed a similar tension within the movement to make a special pathway to citizenship for people who were brought the United States illegally as children, because the same logic that holds DACA recipients as blameless for their legal situation and thus deserving of special rights also permanently excludes their parents, who are framed as doubly culpable for

putting their children in an impossible legal situation (Robles and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Seif 2016). This logic ignores the complex economic and political realities that push people to make risky border crossings in the first place.

This project contributes to the literature about refugee / immigrant deservingness because it demonstrates that the conceptual categories underlying the arithmetic of differential deservingness are permeable in the right circumstances. Words have power. The same set of displaced people can be recast as *migrants* or as *refugees* or even as *illegal immigrants*—with all the associated levels of *deservingness* or *undeservingness* attached—depending on the political goals of the people applying the labels. Trump-era policy approaches to refugee and asylum issues are instructive because they illustrate a profound arbitrariness in which categories of displaced people come to receive the official designation or “refugee” or “asylee” and thus can access the enviable label “legal”, and which cannot. Many of the people currently camped on the US-Mexico border are attempting to escape dangers just as real as the ones that pushed Syrian refugees to leave home—but the Trump administration has redefined the rules to make legal asylum almost impossible for most of them to achieve. This echoes policy decisions in earlier eras that blocked Guatemalans and Salvadorans from receiving refugee status even though they were facing a level of danger—and “well-founded fear”—that was equivalent to officially recognized refugees arriving from other parts of the world (Gammage 2007; Jonas 2013; Coutin 2007, 2016). In addition, poverty and natural disaster are not considered legitimate reasons to apply for refugee status, which leaves many displaced people in dire situations without any workable legal alternatives. Crossing a border without official permission is not truly a free choice, if no safe and legal alternative is available. The complexity of undocumented people’s experiences calls narratives of special refugee deservingness into question, and can make it more

difficult for refugee advocates to build durable coalitions with people advocating for immigrant rights more broadly.

### Anthropology, Politics, and Activism

Immigration—especially in the Trump era—is a deeply political topic. This is even more so when combined, as it necessarily must be in this project, with issues of morality, white supremacy, and human rights. Despite the necessary wisdom of advice to avoid dissertation research topics that might be perceived as “too political”, I found that during a time of social upheaval, political polarization, and widespread public protest, it was not responsible—or even possible—to make this kind of project apolitical. This raises some inescapable issues with regard to the relationship between anthropology and activism.

The anthropological literature distinguishes between the *anthropology of activism* and *activist anthropology*. Anthropology of activism refers to projects in which the researcher employs traditional anthropological methods to study activism as a research topic, but remains as neutral as possible and maintains full control of the research process. True activist anthropology, by contrast, moves beyond cultural critique to “affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results” (Hale 2006: 97). For understandable reasons, many scholars see activist research as suspect because of concerns that the researcher may allow political concerns to influence their conclusions or interfere with the quality of their methods. As a result, junior scholars are frequently advised to steer clear of activist research for fear that it might harm their professional reputations and limit their future career prospects (Speed 2006; Hale 2008; Smith-Nonini 2009;

Glick Schiller 2011). These concerns are not invalid, particularly in a field that makes participant observation the cornerstone of its methodology. It is a valid question whether it is possible to “participant observe” a political movement without joining it. For these and other reasons, activism—especially activism in researchers’ home societies—is under-studied in the field of anthropology. The growing literature on activism by and for immigrants—who are easy to frame as a logical extension of anthropologists’ traditional focus on study of “the Other”—is the exception that proves the rule (Unterberger 2009; Simoes 2013; Pallares 2014; Pallares and Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Seif 2016; Bejarano et al. 2019).

But this reluctance to engage with overtly political research topics has left anthropologists with blind spots, particularly in regard to domestic politics, activism, and social change in their “home” societies. By avoiding the appearance of political bias, anthropologists are missing opportunities to learn more about the mechanisms of social change by observing social change firsthand as it happens in real time. Activism is a realm of human social behavior that is rich with theoretical potential yet to be explored. This current project was instructive because it revealed how activists develop their own theories of social change through practical effort and in dialogue with other activists past and present. Activists—particularly those who are people of color—are an untapped resource whose insights into human behavior have the potential to infuse anthropological theory with new ideas. But most of this body of theory is currently opaque to academic anthropologists, whose claims of scientific objectivity and neutrality can often sound disingenuous and self-interested to disenfranchised people who are engaged in real struggle for basic rights (Hale 2008).

The promise—and the difficulty—of true activist research lie in its nature as a truly collaborative endeavor, in which partners in the community work together with the researcher to

define the goals and priorities of the project. This presents a long list of thorny methodological challenges, such as: conflicting academic and NGO timelines; disputes over project priorities; difficulties with funding; and ingrained distrust between disenfranchised communities and “ivory tower” university-based scholars. These problems were impractical for me to try to overcome in a short-term dissertation project. But some anthropologists—most notably Nolan Kline (2013); Angela Stuesse (2016); and Bejarano et al. (2019)—are making impressive strides toward establishing a fully collaborative kind of research methodology that still maintains its rigor and theoretical complexity. Competing priorities and timelines can and do present a daunting problem for scholars considering taking up activist research. But it is precisely this tension that makes activist research theoretically important. How else should scholars learn to understand the concerns of people engaged in struggle, other than by struggling alongside them? In this, as in many other things, anthropologists have something to learn from activists: listening more, speaking less, and letting go of the “heroic” lone-researcher archetype in favor of a collaborative model of research that puts the people closest to the pain in the driver’s seat of the train—a model of research that Emily Yates-Doerr (2020) refers to as “antihero anthropology”. Here, I posit that the discipline of anthropology itself is also in a process of “becoming”, and that the moral debates, reflections, and experiments of individual anthropologists can collectively push the discipline toward change.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

### Limitations of This Study

In many ways, this dissertation was an exercise in adaptation. The COVID-19 pandemic, which began during the interview phase of my research, imposed unexpected complications and

limitations. As schools and businesses closed down and cities imposed stay-at-home orders, in-person research became impossible. Organizations serving refugees and asylum seekers closed their offices, canceled in-person advocacy events, and put volunteer operations on hold indefinitely. Participant observation and in-person interviews were no longer an option. Shifting to Zoom interviews made it possible to continue the project, but also had unavoidable consequences for the research. First, the general stress and chaos that the pandemic introduced into everyone's lives made recruitment more difficult, particularly since it was no longer possible to build connections face-to-face. During the initial lockdown period, some people welcomed Zoom interviews as a relief from boredom and loneliness. Others, burned out on remote meetings after working from home all day, were reluctant to add one more Zoom meeting to their daily schedule. In addition, the necessity of conducting interviews and communication online made it less likely for people without reliable internet access to participate. The people who did participate in this project skewed heavily toward highly educated people with professional jobs and reliable internet connections. This might have been different had more of the recruitment and interviews taken place in person, as originally planned. Also, as the pandemic wore on, I observed that Zoom interviews were different in quality and content than the earlier interviews I had conducted in person. Zoom interviews felt more transactional and made it harder to establish a comfortable rapport, particularly with people I did not already know well. In Zoom interviews, I got more facts, less emotion, and fewer stories.

An important limitation of this study is that it focused primarily on the experiences of people who were living lives of relative privilege. Most of the people involved in this project could *choose* whether they wanted to become involved in immigration issues. Their own life circumstances by and large were not directly threatened by the Trump administration's anti-

immigrant policies. This is not the case for a large percentage of people involved in activist movements pushing for rights for undocumented people. Had this study been focused on the experiences of activists who are undocumented workers or DACA recipients, the content of the responses might have been very different. This is an important area for potential future research.

This project focused primarily on the experiences of committed volunteers—that is, those who made pro-refugee volunteer or activist work a regular part of their lives. As such, it cannot answer questions about why many people *don't* volunteer, or why some volunteers show up only once or twice and then disappear, or why some volunteers do a better job than others. This study did not attempt to measure volunteer effectiveness. It also did not attempt to explore refugees' or asylum seekers' perceptions of the people who were trying to help them. All of these issues are important questions for future research.

This study took place in a large metropolitan area with a long history of successful refugee resettlement, where networks of support for refugees were already well established. Results might have looked very different in a smaller town, or in a place where refugee resettlement was new or unfamiliar.

### Future Research in the Anthropology of Activism

This study contributes to a growing literature on the connections between morality / ethics, activism, and volunteerism. It demonstrates that activism often grows directly out of people's ethical and moral commitments, or their ideas about what constitutes a “good” person, a “good” society, or a “good” life. It speaks to some of the reasons why white or otherwise relatively privileged Americans volunteer and advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, who are primarily people of color. As such, it touches on complex issues of racism,

white supremacy, and white privilege, and it points to a need for academics and policymakers to work toward a greater understanding of activism and volunteerism as mechanisms of political resistance and social change. This is particularly salient given that the people in positions of power and prestige in the United States—including most academics and most policymakers—are still predominantly white, even though the population as a whole is much more diverse. None of these issues are truly new; anthropologists have been asking similar questions about power and representation for decades (Brettell 1993). The conundrum here is, how do we “speak truth to power”, as Fassin says (2017), if we are ourselves part of the structure of power?

During the summer of 2020, US society was steeped in exhausting turmoil over the baked-in inequalities that put some categories of people at higher risk of dying or losing family members to COVID-19 than others, even as Black Lives Matter protesters flooded the streets of cities across the country to plead for an end to police violence that repeatedly victimized young Black men and other people of color, but not white people. In Dallas, young Dreamers mobilized quickly to support the rights of people in Black communities. Due the necessary limitations of its subject matter, this dissertation does not and cannot attempt to address the roots of police violence against people of color. But there is space here to call for deeper study of activism and coalition-building, not just white allyship with people of color, but especially the strong Black-Brown alliances that have grown out of the turmoil of the Trump era. This current project touches on social networks and coalition-building, but falls regrettably short in some key areas, particularly in understanding Black-Brown alliances. It illuminates the need for future projects about how coalitions are built and maintained between groups that have different but compatible interests. How do they come to see—and frame—their interests as compatible? How durable are those partnerships? Under what conditions do they form, and when do they break down? These

questions must necessarily be at the center of the anthropology of activism and social change in the coming years.

### The Future of Refugee Resettlement in the United States

The future of the refugee resettlement program under the Biden administration remains deeply uncertain. Before taking office, President Biden signaled strong support for rebuilding the refugee program. But Biden declined to sign a revised Presidential Determination and avoided making any official commitment to a specific number of refugees to be admitted in FY21 until more than three months into his administration, when an outcry from Democrats in Congress finally pushed him to agree to a stretch goal of 62,500 for the fiscal year (Sullivan 2021; Shear and Kanno-Youngs 2021). The Biden administration's stated reasons for the delay echoes the excuses he criticized so freely under the Trump administration: that the resources of the Office of Refugee Resettlement are stretched too thin to handle both refugee resettlement and a high volume of asylum seekers at the southern border (Miller, Madhani, and Watson 2021). The Biden administration has already taken steps to adjust the misaligned quota allocations put in place under the Trump administration (Miller and Madhani 2021). But despite vehement objections from Democrats in Congress, the numbers of refugees admitted in FY21 remained woefully small. Just 11,411 out of a possible 62,500 spots were actually filled in FY21. In the end, the Biden administration admitted fewer refugees in fiscal year 2021 than any other president in any previous year, including Trump (Refugee Processing Center; IRC 2021). The Biden administration lays much of the blame for this problem at Trump's doorstep. Biden's claims that the previous administration damaged the refugee resettlement infrastructure more severely than anticipated are not exaggerated. Even with strong commitment from the White

House, rebuilding the refugee resettlement program to its former size would probably take years (RCUSA 2019; Mathema and Carratala 2020; CMS/RCUSA 2020). In order to succeed, it would also require serious rethinking of administrative requirements, security protocols, and funding structures, particularly in states like Texas where relationships with state and local governments have eroded or fallen apart since 2016. It remains to be seen whether the Biden administration will commit the necessary resources to rebuilding refugee resettlement once the current COVID-19 emergency is under better control.

### The Future of Asylum in the United States

Like refugee resettlement, the US asylum system is currently in tatters. This situation is consistent with a general pattern of decay of legal asylum around the world (Mountz 2020). The Biden administration took relatively quick action to end the Remain in Mexico (MPP) policy that kept Central American asylum-seeking families in limbo in squalid camps along the US-Mexico border while they waited for asylum hearings. But as of the time of this writing (June 2021), the Biden administration has left in place Trump-era policies allowing the US government to block noncitizens from entering the country on the grounds that they may be carrying the virus that causes COVID-19, despite objections from both immigration advocates and public health experts (Narea 2021). The Biden administration has made some exceptions, allowing unaccompanied children and some families to cross, and making some efforts to begin processing the applications of tens of thousands of asylum seekers who were summarily sent back to Mexico under the Trump administration, but it has a long way to go (Sullivan and Kanno-Youngs 2021; Narea 2021). The Trump administration made seeking asylum nearly impossible, especially for people fleeing violence in Central America. In order to restore the US asylum system to its pre-

Trump state, the Biden administration would have to undo dozens of administrative policy changes, including redefining persecuted “social groups” to include family members threatened by gang violence and domestic abuse. This, too, will likely take a long time.

### **Final Words: Help and Hope**

Liisa Malkki (2015) asked why some people have such a strong need to help. For scholars like Malkki and Muehlebach (2012), the act of helping is about laying claim to a sense of personal worth in the world, when other forms of social value and identity are lost. And perhaps, in some times and places, for some people, they are right. People do “help” at least partially as a way of establishing a place in the world and working out their relationship to it. But they are also doing something different. The North Texans who worked on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers during the Trump years were reaching for kindness as an antidote to the cruelty they saw spreading in the world around them, and building connection as a purposeful alternative to distrust and division. They sought to *become* the change they wanted to see in the world. They could not know the final outcome of their choices. But through their actions on behalf of displaced people, they chose to make their own hope.

## APPENDICES

Appendix 2.1 summarizes what restrictions were in effect for each of the affected countries, under each version of Trump administration's travel ban.

	<b>Travel Ban 1</b> <u>Effective date:</u> January 27, 2017 <u>Duration:</u> 90 days <u>Legal status:</u> Blocked in the courts February 3, 2017	<b>Travel Ban 2</b> <u>Original effective date:</u> March 16, 2017 <u>Modified effective date:</u> June 29, 2017 <u>Duration:</u> 90 days <u>Legal status:</u> Blocked by legal challenges before the effective date. A modified version went into effect June 29, 2017.	<b>Travel Ban 3</b> <u>Effective date:</u> 9/24/2017 for people without "bona fide relationships". 10/18/17 for people with "bona fide relationships". <u>Duration:</u> Indefinite	<b>Travel Ban 4</b> <u>Effective date:</u> 2/21/2020 <u>Duration:</u> Indefinite (ended by executive order 1/20/2021)
<b>Refugees</b>	Refugee admissions paused for 120 days, after which time the program would be refocused on victims of religious persecution. Number for FY17 reduced to 50,000. Syrian refugees banned indefinitely.	Admissions paused for 120 days	Not specifically mentioned. Those without "bona fide relationships" were still covered under the terms of Travel Ban Version 2 until 10/24/17.	Not specifically included (by this point, refugees from SAO countries were mostly blocked by "extreme vetting" policies)
<b>Burma / Myanmar</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are suspended, except for Special Immigrant Visas. Non-immigrant visas are allowed.
<b>Chad</b>	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visas are suspended. Chad was removed from the list in April 2018.	
<b>Eritrea</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are suspended, except for Special Immigrant Visas. Non-immigrant visas are allowed.

<b>Iran</b>	All visas suspended	All visas suspended	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant student (F and M) and exchange visitor (J) visas are allowed but are subject to enhanced security requirements.	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant student (F and M) and exchange visitor (J) visas are allowed but are subject to enhanced security requirements.
<b>Iraq</b>	All visas suspended	n/a	Visas are not suspended, but subject to additional scrutiny to determine if they pose risks to the national security or public safety of the United States	Visas are not suspended, but subject to additional scrutiny to determine if they pose risks to the national security or public safety of the United States.
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are suspended, except for Special Immigrant Visas. Non-immigrant visas are allowed.
<b>Libya</b>	All visas suspended	All visas suspended	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visas are suspended.	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visas are suspended.
<b>Nigeria</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are suspended, except for Special Immigrant Visas. Non-immigrant visas are allowed.
<b>North Korea</b>	n/a	n/a	Both immigrant and non-immigrant visas are suspended.	Both immigrant and non-immigrant visas are suspended.
<b>Somalia</b>	All visas suspended	All visas suspended	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant visas are allowed but are subject to enhanced security requirements.	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant visas are allowed but are subject to enhanced security requirements.
<b>Sudan</b>	All visas suspended	All visas suspended	n/a	Diversity visas are suspended. Other categories of immigrant and non-immigrant visas are allowed.
<b>Syria</b>	All visas suspended. Syrian refugees barred indefinitely	All visas suspended	Both immigrant and non-immigrant visas are suspended.	Both immigrant and non-immigrant visas are suspended.

<b>Tanzania</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	Diversity visas are suspended. Other categories of immigrant and non-immigrant visas are allowed.
<b>Venezuela</b>	n/a	n/a	Immigrant visas are allowed. Non-immigrant (B-1 and B-2) visas are suspended only for certain government officials and their families.	Immigrant visas are allowed. Non-immigrant (B-1 and B-2) visas are suspended only for certain government officials and their families.
<b>Yemen</b>	All visas suspended	All visas suspended	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visas are suspended.	Immigrant visas are suspended. Non-immigrant business (B-1) and tourist (B-2) visas are suspended.

Source: White House 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d, 2020

Appendix 2.2 shows when visas for people from various countries were at least partially blocked, after taking into account various injunctions, appeals, and other court decisions.

<b>During what dates were visas from various countries blocked under the travel bans?</b>	
<b>Country</b>	<b>Dates at least partially blocked</b>
Burma / Myanmar	2/21/2020-1/20/2021
Chad	9/24/2017-4/11/2018
Eritrea	2/21/2020-1/20/2021
Iran	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Iraq	1/27/2017-2/9/2017
Kyrgyzstan	2/21/2020-1/20/2021
Libya	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Nigeria	2/21/2020-1/20/2021
North Korea	9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Somalia	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Sudan	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 2/21/2020-1/20/2021
Syria	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Tanzania	2/21/2020-1/20/2021
Venezuela	9/24/2017-1/20/2021
Yemen	1/27/2017-2/9/2017, 6/29/2017-9/24/2017, 9/24/2017-1/20/2021

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