

Testimony of Venus Bradley
Before the Senate Judiciary Committee
“Ensuring the Safety and Well-Being of Unaccompanied Children”
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My name is Venus Bradley. My husband and I have been licensed foster parents in Durham, North Carolina for the past seven years. In that time, we have fostered 25 children, ranging in age from 2 to 17. In March 2020, we accepted a placement for two sisters who were 15 and 17 at the time. With their permission, I would like to tell you a bit about them and their experiences.

When they were 11 and 13, they were asked if they wanted to go live with their biological father in America. Neither girl had any memory of him. But as a palm oil plantation laborer who had her first baby at 14 years old, their mom knew firsthand what broken dreams looked like. They had an uncle, who was in the military, that was beheaded. The family was threatened with death if they reported it to the authorities. The femicide rate along with rampant physical and sexual violence in their country was a huge factor in their mother’s difficult decision to arrange for the girls to travel to the United States. Their mom saw sending her children to the United States as an opportunity to protect and even save her children from an uncertain future. And so, a family member agreed to escort the girls to the US border where they could eventually reunite with their father.

The journey was long. They were escorted by a trusted family member to a place where they could turn themselves over to authorities and safely come into the US. Originally, the girls were separated when they were taken into custody by Customs and Border Protection. My younger daughter described how she cried for hours, terrified she would never see her sister again. Because one was a teenager, she was put into a room with other teens. They were given thin silver blankets, which weren’t enough to stave off the cold. They could hear the other children crying, often well into the night. No one told them what was happening, which made them more fearful that something bad would happen. They had their father’s phone number and address, but the older girl struggled to get anyone to listen to her.

Eventually, the two sisters were reunited once they were put into the care of a child welfare agency and moved to a children’s home, but they weren’t given a lot of information there either. The children’s home had a lot of kids. Hundreds it seemed. They didn’t count but described it as “soooo many kids.” Some of the children had been there for two and three years. This worried them. At least there they had beds, food, games, movie nights, and school. There were a lot of rules, but it was made easier by having friends. While they were allowed to see each other, they still didn’t sleep in the same room. Generally, they think of this time as stressful, but not too bad.

Still, leaving their home and mother behind for a new country was extremely traumatic for them and they both worried about their safety and future. They were in a different country, didn't speak the language, didn't know what was happening, weren't together, and were worried that they would be like the kids who had been stuck there for years. There was no one to reassure them and the adults felt more like minders with their list of rules and regulations. After six weeks total in U.S. government custody, they were eventually flown to their biological father.

The girls had no way of knowing that this family reunion that they dreamed of would eventually turn sour. The better life their mother wanted for them, slowly turned into something like a Cinderella story, marked with deeply controlling behavior and physical abuse. Eventually, the girls disclosed the abuse to an Aunt and school counselor who helped them report it to the authorities. Once the abuse was reported, the system functioned as it should have. The allegations were taken seriously. As their father could no longer take care of the girls, the Durham County Department of Social Services stepped in and removed the girls from their home, first to a family friend and then, a few weeks later, to us. As most cases in foster care go, justice was slow and it took nearly two and a half years before their father was convicted and sentenced to prison. But justice did come.

When our daughters came to live with us in March 2020, we had no idea what we had signed up for. Beyond being on COVID lockdown with strangers, both of our girls had a lot of healing to do. The younger one had nightmares to the point that she had to take over-the-counter sleep aid. The older girl struggled with parentification, which is when a child is forced to take on a parental role that they are ill-equipped for emotionally and psychologically. They struggled with trust, anger, resentment, independence, and guilt. Their social and emotional development were stunted. They were like little mice in our home, afraid to make a noise, afraid to ask to do anything, and afraid of what we would say if they didn't help us around the house.

The trauma they have endured has altered their brains permanently. It took a lot of time to build a connection with them, to get them to a place where they could properly heal and even dream for the first time. I asked my daughter once what she used to dream she would be when she grew up. Most children will tell you, a firefighter, a ballerina, or a teacher. "We didn't have dreams," is what she told me. "It's hard to dream when you don't see a future for yourself."

In May, our oldest daughter got her Cosmetology license. She said she wanted to help people feel beautiful. It took her two years, but she is now officially licensed and, at the time of writing this, has two job offers at salons and three more interviews to go. She hopes to own her own salon one day, one that has stylists who speak several

languages and a diverse clientele. She lives independently in her own apartment, although it isn't uncommon for her to ask me a lot of questions throughout the week.

Our younger daughter graduated high school this Monday and will be attending a 4-year college in the fall, and has already accrued 22 credit hours from our local community college. She is still an undecided major, but is leaning towards business and real estate. It isn't uncommon to see her scrolling through Zillow, just looking at the houses and dreaming. Kinesiology is also on the table as she has developed an interest in physical fitness and athletes. They are the first in their family to graduate high school, go to college, or be certified in anything. Because both girls became adults before we could adopt, we are now in the process of two adult adoptions, which should be finalized by the end of the summer. While their legal status won't change, it will officially make us family.

Before you think they both girls have had a completely happy ending, I want to tell you the obstacles that are still in their way.

Neither girl has a green card. Despite receiving Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, having the authorization to work in the US, social security cards, and submitted green card applications...they are ineligible for many of the services that other young people trying to plan for their future have access to because they are trapped in a years-long visa backlog preventing them from getting their permanent residence. They are ineligible for FAFSA, so no federal aid, loans, or grants. I have no idea how we are going to pay for her college. Right now the plan is for her to live at home, commute an hour to school, and we will find a way to pay a monthly bill out-of-pocket. It's certainly not what we were promised and not something we had saved for either. The foster care system, which usually helps young people as they become adults, also will not help without that green card. So the services like price matching for a car, independent living stipend, insurance assistance, college tuition assistance, and more, are not a possibility for them and certainly aren't helping them as they move into adulthood.

I know there are a lot of kids who don't get these things. But my kids, and other unaccompanied children like them, through no fault of their own, ended up in the United States without a parent or guardian to care for them. These children are already vulnerable based on the situations they have come from. When we add the lack of support they often get in the United States, it creates opportunities for people to exploit them and barriers to their future.

My girls were lucky. They have us. A lot of kids who end up in the foster care system find themselves in a legal limbo that never gets better. It is worse for immigrant children. Children who have been found by a court to be abused, abandoned, or neglected by a parent can apply for a green card, but the green card process is years long at this point

given the visa backlog. We were told it would take 3-8 years to get the green card *after* submitting the application. That's after waiting years for their visa number to come up so they could apply for green cards.

These days, anytime we go to sign up for something, the first question my girls ask is, "Am I eligible?" I can see the disappointment in my daughter's eyes when her university spoke about studying abroad and she knew she couldn't. Or the realization that she was ineligible for any funding and many scholarships. Obtaining a driver's license, a typical right of passage for many teenagers, was a logistical nightmare and one we have to repeat with every EAD card renewal, which is every two years. These are kids, and now adults, who have hopes and dreams. They are brought here with the hopes that they will have a life better than what they left behind. Investing in these kids is investing in their stability, mental & physical health, and ultimately, their dreams. My girls are just one story out of many, but they hope that by hearing what they have been through, other kids will be able to find the help and stability they need. Thank you.