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Fall 12-15-2017

### A Guatemalan Trans Woman Navigates New York City in Hopes of a Better Future

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## A Guatemalan Trans Woman Navigates New York City in Hopes of a Better Future

By: Manolo Morales

It's the first snow day in New York City. The streets are cold. Cars and trees are covered in flakes like white cotton. This is Jamileeth's first time experiencing winter in the Big Apple. Jamileeth, who asked to not give her full because she's an asylum seeker, has come a long way from the hot summer days in Guatemala, where she was born and raised. Using her small electronic phone, she takes plenty of selfies on the streets of Harlem to share them on Facebook with her friends.

Just around this time last year, Jan. 7, Jamileeth stuffed her backpack with a few t-shirts, undergarments and jeans, wore her most comfortable sneakers to head towards Mexico with a friend.

"This was a crazy trip," says Jamileeth in Spanish, 25, as she giggles. "I had been drinking for weeks."

Jamileeth doesn't remember the exact details of the trip. What she recalls is waking up in Tapachula, a city in the state of Chiapas in Mexico, near the Guatemalan border. Her friend decided to go back to Escuintla, Guatemala where she resided. But Jamileeth wasn't determined to not go back to Guatemala.

Jamileeth is a trans woman. She was raised by her aunt and uncle, who she consider them as her adoptive parents, in a rural town of Guatemala. At six years old, she saw her biological mother die from cancer slowly.

"The last thing I remember my mother telling me was 'son, love your parents very much,'" says Jamileeth as tears ran down her eyes.

She knows very little of who her father is. Her adoptive parents provided her with an home and education but things weren't always great with her.

A neighbor of her started to sexually abuse her when she was 13 years old. He threaten to kill her parents if she spoke to anyone about the abuse, she says. The abuse went on for several years. And there was nothing that she could do about it.

She came out to her parents when she turned 17. At that age she knew she wanted to transition as woman. But she wasn't welcomed with open arms. Her parents kicked her out of the house. She looked for her younger sister for help, who worked at a local bar. She was offered a job as a cashier by the owner of the bar and took it. Until she found out that the owner was involved in drug trafficking.

Guatemala lacks protections for LGBTQ people. There is no legal recognition of same sex marriage or domestic partnership. Transgender citizens in the country are allowed to change

their name but not their gender on their birth certificates. Serious cases of violence and discrimination have been highlighted in Guatemala in many occasions. Transgender Europe, a nonprofit working towards equality trans community in Europe, has tracked 40 deaths in 2016 of trans women in Guatemala.

Now Jamileth is seeking asylum and looking for a new opportunity in the U.S to change her life for the better.

“I came here to leave the life I had back in Guatemala. I am escaping the discrimination and the mistreatment I received from family members and strangers alike. I am leaving everything behind,” says Jamileth.

Before coming to New York, she spent 26 days in a detention center in Cibola, New Mexico.

Jamileth formed part of a caravan of 17 transgender women and gay men from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. They were one of the first groups Diversity Without Borders, an non-profit dedicated to help migrants in Mexico, organized to help them reach their destination to the U.S.

From state to state in Mexico, they marched carrying a huge banner with neon letters saying “1er Caravana Trans Gay Migrante 2017.” Which translates in English to the first caravan of 2017 by trans women and gay migrants.

Near the end of July, they arrived to Nogales, Sonora in Mexico. They turned themselves to immigration officials to seek asylum in the United States.

Jamileth was one of the first ones to be released from Cibola County Detention Center.

“That’s a living hell I wouldn’t like to go back to,” said Jamileth, remembering the detention center. “When we were in the bus heading towards Cibola, we were chained from our feet, hands and stomach like if we were dogs.”

The bus ride from Nogales to Cibola was more than 10 hours - they got no food and water by immigration agents. Throughout the trip they were trapped in a freezing automobile, without allowing them to use the bathroom, she says.

She remembers the cold nights she spent in a cell box with two beds and nothing else. One bed belonged to another trans woman from Honduras, whose name Jamileth can’t recall. The thin blanket she was given wasn’t good enough to keep her warm at night.

The food wasn’t appetizing. The bread was hard as a stone, she says. And the stew she was served reminded her of vomit.

There are four uniform colors - red, orange, beige and light blue - to identify each detainee. Red stands for the most dangerous. Jamileeth wore the light blue one, meaning that she was the least dangerous, according to the detention bylines.

Each detainee gets paid \$1 for their labor. Jamileeth was assigned cleaning duty during her stay. She cleaned the bathrooms, kitchen floors, etc.

“My number was 2009816815,” said Jamileeth. “I remember because that’s the number they asked you if you went to get your commission, receive a visit, go to the doctor, everything.”

She payed a visit to the doctor three times. She woke up high fevers and occasionally vomited. When she was taken to the nurses, she was chained to her feet and hands. They never removed the cuffs off her. Jamileeth is HIV positive. She wasn't receiving any of her medication or the proper care.

“This chronic condition has marked my life forever, but thank God I keep fighting every day,” said Jamileeth.

With the help of more LGBTQ nonprofit organizations in the US, like Queer Detainee Empowerment Project, Jamileeth was sponsored to come to New York. They found her housing right between Washington Heights and Harlem across the Bronx.

She has a bedroom all to herself in Saint Nicholas Hotel. The room is big enough for one person. She keeps one small refrigidatre filled with food cans and boxes, some with old expiration dates, in the corner of her room. Next to the frigid is a fold-in table with more food boxes that she collects from pantries in her neighborhood. Her window edge is cluttered with makeup brushes, eye shadow pallets, color pencils and lips sticks. The kitchen stove and one bathroom is shared by all the tenants in the floor.

Jordan Weiner, a student of the CUNY School of Law, met Jamileeth in mid-October after reaching out to organizers of the caravan on their Facebook page. As a student practicing immigrant rights, Weiner offered to help Jamileeth as a friend. On their first night meeting, they went out to have dumplings in Chinatown. It took Jamileeth more than one hour to find Weiner, as she kept sending her GPS locations to Weiner. But so far it hasn't been easy for Weiner to communicate with her.

“I have trouble understanding her Spanish,” says Weiner, who can't find a connection with Jamileeth. Weiner doesn't want to open Jamileeth's old wounds of the past because she knows how much pain she's been through. Regardless of the language barrier, Weiner checks up on her once in a while to see how she's doing.

That language barrier, that Jamileeth also has, is one of the many reasons why she is having a hard time navigating in the city.

“I can’t deal with this language anymore,” says Jamileeth.

She’s offered group support in LGBTQ organizations, but stops going when she can’t understand anyone and there’s no one for her to speak Spanish with.

Without a birth certificate or an ID, she keeps a stack of papers in an orange enveloped with all of her information, including her parole paperwork.

With some help of the government, she receives food stamps and health insurance. But what she desperately wants more than anything is a job, she says. She will accept anything as long as she’s making money.