

## ‘Resilient and Amazing’



UMCOR supports programs that help meet the needs of migrant children. Photo: David Farley

### **Migrant children aren’t just numbers**

*By Susan Kim\**

September 15, 2015—At 14 years old, Carmen, carrying her three-month-old daughter, did what many immigrants do when they are determined to survive: she made an arduous journey to the U.S.: riding on top of trains, living on the streets, evading gangs, and walking through the desert.

The journey took eight months, and ended in Austin, Texas, where Carmen was reunited with her uncle. She needed legal representation to file for status as a Special Immigrant Juvenile. For Carmen, returning home — where an abusive boyfriend threatened her and her daughter to the point where Carmen was afraid to leave the house — was simply not an option.

She found the help she needed through the [United Methodist Committee on Relief \(UMCOR\)](#) and its partner [National Justice For Our Neighbors \(NJFON\)](#). NJFON operates a project in Austin called “Representing Unaccompanied Children in Urgent Need of Pro Bono Legal Assistance.”

Thanks to an UMCOR emergency grant for the project, Carmen, her daughter, and others like them have the possibility of a safe, productive life. Now, Carmen is not afraid to dream: she wants to finish high school, study computer science and, most of all, create a safe, happy home for her daughter.

### **Not Just Numbers**



Carmen and Carla celebrate a victory at state court with volunteer interpreter Zel Saccani, Julie Flanders, Carmen's uncle, and Rebecca Rosenberg. Photo courtesy of Julie Flanders.

It might be easy for Carmen to become another number, another headline, but at Austin JFON, she is something far beyond that. “It’s hard to convey how resilient and amazing these children are,” said Julie Flanders, an attorney who is also the program manager. “People sometimes make the assumption — consciously or unconsciously — that immigrants are lazy or just different. What keeps us going in our work is how impressive these kids are.”

A grant from UMCOR is enabling Flanders and her colleagues to help 40 unaccompanied minors navigate the legal road to obtain freedom from deportation and get on the path to U.S. citizenship.

“The average child we meet with has accomplished and learned so much in their short life. And they are so wise,” added Flanders.

Many months ago, when news of unaccompanied migrant children made national headlines, people were thinking about their plight as a humanitarian crisis. Flanders wishes people would sustain their sense of compassion. “The process is a several-year process,” she said.

## Consider Root Causes

**As we consider the needs of migrant children and others who are desperately trying to leave their home countries, we should also consider addressing — as a nation and as a church community — the root cause of why they are leaving their homes,** said David Farley, director of Justice and Compassion Ministries for the California-Pacific Annual (regional) Conference.

“People who have their basic needs and basic security don’t grab their children and take dangerous journeys

across land and sea to enter some other country. There are reasons for it,” he pointed out. “If we don’t organize to take a stand to change things, there will continue to be terrible wounds — physical wounds, psychological wounds, and wounds to the soul.”

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*\*Susan Kim is a journalist and a regular contributor to [www.umcor.org](http://www.umcor.org).*