



# SAFE in the NEST

**In Tijuana, Mexico, a first-of-its-kind preschool serves the toddlers and babies of women seeking refuge in the U.S.**

BY ROXANA POPESCU

**T**HE NEST, AN UNCONVENTIONAL PRESCHOOL in Tijuana, Mexico, doesn't have many rules: Take turns. Be safe. Don't destroy things. You, not a grown-up, must decide if you'll release scarves in a wind tunnel or drop balls down rubber ramps or make breakfast in the tot-size kitchen. This is your space, your time. Every toy and every jar of paint here exists for you.

For the adults in the room: No cell phones allowed and do not talk in front of the children about why you're here. The extortion. The narcos. The men on the motorcycle who threatened you. The things that were done to you. Do not talk about the journey. Saying good-bye to your village, your family, your river. Hours by plane or bus, a few essentials stuffed into a suitcase, wondering what you'll find at the edge of Mexico and the United States. Leave all those stories outside in the tangled, ugly world that spawned them. Keep the Nest as it was intended, as the rare safe space available to a group of children who are connected by one thread: Their parents or caregivers are all hoping to obtain asylum in the U.S. So they traveled to

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Clockwise from opposite page: Asylum-seekers in Tijuana wait in limbo as the U.S. government makes it harder for them to enter the country; the Nest relies on volunteers—teachers and other educators who stay for at least a week, along with teenagers and adults from the shelter across the street who are trained as teacher’s aides; cofounder Alise Shafer Ivey (right) with Leticia Herrera Hernández, who runs the neighboring shelter



Tijuana, to a shelter on a sloping street in a residential neighborhood that might seem quiet to some and bustling to others—who knows what their “before” was like—across the street from this preschool, the Nest.

The school, which opened in September 2019 in northern Tijuana, is unusual because its students and their parents are as well. It is a first-of-its-kind early childhood center in Mexico that serves the children of asylum-seekers waiting for permission to enter the United States. Open to several dozen children ages 1 through 6—toddlers come with their parents; children 2 and older attend on their own—Nest Tijuana serves an otherwise neglected population in the asylum ecosystem.

These children, in the words of Monika Langarica, an immigration rights attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, have sustained “layers of trauma on trauma.” First, there is the underlying trauma that grew from whatever conditions drove their parents to emigrate: violence, corruption, fear. Then there’s the trauma of an abrupt departure, followed by the shock of arrival and the uncertainty of limbo in conditions that are far from reassuring. Though the children may not comprehend the savage realities that led to the uprooting of their short lives, they can pick up on words their parents say in phone calls back home. They can sense a mother’s anxiety. For the children of asylum-seekers to have a place like the Nest, Langarica says, is vital.

It is so vital, in fact, that the preschool has earned the attention of UNICEF, as well as of donors, volunteer teachers and researchers from the U.S., Canada and Europe. Run by a nonprofit called the Pedagogical Institute of Los Angeles, Nest Tijuana is the creation of Alise Shafer

Ivey, an early childhood specialist, education consultant and retired preschool director, and Lindsay Feldman Weissert, a reporter turned nonprofit board chair and immigration and education activist who met Ivey through the preschool her children attend. That school, in Los Angeles, serves as the model for a chain of Nests that Ivey and her husband, Tom, have launched in places where children’s educational needs are vastly underserved: in the Democratic Republic of Congo and near refugee camps in Greece.

Nest’s board had wanted to open a preschool in Tijuana. Weissert also noticed that the number of asylum-seekers in the border metropolis was surging, which made her want to focus on the children immediately. “I was so concerned for them, because I know that they can’t go back to the countries they’re leaving. They’ll be killed,” she says. President Donald Trump’s immigration policy has made it harder for applicants to go through the asylum process and resulted in thousands of children getting separated from their parents while in detention.

Ivey and Weissert launched Nest Tijuana in a “dilapidated” house, as Ivey puts it, that 50 volunteers from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border tidied up from head to toe—literally, from sweeping the upstairs deck to replacing the flooring—during one action-packed week in August. “It was very intense,” Ivey says, noting that the school opened a few days later in September. “We’re fast. We operate with a sense of urgency always.”

Weissert adds, “As a mom with a 3- and a 5-year-old, every day means so much to me, and I don’t want to think of those children spending one hour in a shelter when they could be having this experience—especially in light of what they’ve already been through.”

The Nest opened just in time for Yasmín\* and her daughter. One morning in November, they were eating a delicious breakfast at the Nest’s upstairs kitchen. If the eggs came out a little dry, it was to be expected: They were made of wood. Two-year-old Isabella\* pretended to cook, and her mother pretend-

*\*To help ensure their safety while they reside in Mexico, the names of all asylum-seekers interviewed for this article have been changed.*

Nest Tijuana has very few of the usual toys you might find at a more traditional daycare or preschool; instead, its play zones might be familiar to anyone who's been to a children's museum: There's a sand table, a wind tunnel, magnetic ramps and other stations that stimulate problem solving and curiosity. The curriculum is based on an educational theory that views learning as an active and social process. There are no "adult-led crafts projects. The kids have agency," says cofounder Lindsay Feldman Weissert.



ed to delight in her meal, in a sliver of continuity in two lives that were brutally shoved off course on Sept. 8, when Yasmín received a demand for 30,000 pesos. It was a *cuota*, a tax, levied by an organized crime group. "It was a lot of money for me to get," Yasmín says—roughly the amount she makes in a year selling the chicken and pork tamales she makes with her trademark spice mix. Some cloves, some cumin, some garlic, she says, lowering her voice. On a good day she used to earn up to 500 Mexican pesos, around \$26.

Her grandmother's counsel: "The decision is yours. Do what's best for you." Yasmín, who is separated from her husband, tossed a few essentials into a pink-and-black suitcase and left with her daughter the next day. It was that or become a collaborator, she says. "If you can't pay, it's understood that you'll have to join them, and sell drugs or demand the tax from other people." As Ivey puts it, "Either you're with them or you're a target."

With her daughter to think of, collaboration was, Yasmín says, unthinkable: "She's all I have."

A 48-hour bus journey from their tiny village in the southern state of Mexico, near Guerrero, put them in dizzying Tijuana a few days after the Nest opened. Eight weeks later, they were living in a shelter—which fits almost as many people as there were in their hometown of 200—waiting for their turn to approach the U.S. border and ask for asylum.

Yasmín says it's disorienting starting at the Nest. "It's very different from my town," she says. "We don't have anything like this." She noticed her daughter has become "more alert. She's learning a lot at the Nest, to play, to share. She loves it when I read her stories. I finish and she says, 'Mami, otra vez.'" Again, Mommy.

While Isabella played downstairs in the toddler room, upstairs, babies dozed on their mothers—and one father—in soft, squishy mounds. Outside, the school's buzzing front patio evoked the Persian root of the word *paradise*: a protected, enclosed garden. A girl and boy painted while listening to music with a sublime touch: Bach's Prelude in C and the second movement from Mozart's Flute and Harp Concerto. A few girls clustered with books inside a white tepee tent. They looked through books and giggled, and at one point a volunteer teacher reminded them not to tug on the poles. Safety first. For



kindergartners, more or less, the mechanics of tension rods weren't exactly second nature yet.

The Nest runs on the time and contributions of volunteers and foundations, with donations as small as \$25 to a \$25,000 foundation grant. People gift items through an Amazon

wish list and they give their time: Teachers and other educators can become “Nesters,” meaning they volunteer for at least a week, renting a guest room on the property. The program also trains teenage and adult volunteers from the shelter across the street to act as teacher’s aides—doling out paints and reading stories, but also learning about child development, observing the children and participating in staff meetings. It’s helped motivate the volunteers at a time when they might be feeling particularly unmoored, Ivey says.

Natalia,\* one of the volunteers, says the Nest changes them. “It’s a very different approach from what we’re used to,” she says. Then a switch flips. The attitude goes from “What am I going to do?” to “I can do whatever I want!” As parents, too, they start to cut back on saying no. Natalia, an asylum-seeker from Michoacán state in Mexico who was studying to be a clothing designer, has the elocution of a stage actor. She left to escape her ex-husband, who raped and physically and psychologically abused her and suggested he would turn his attention to their baby daughter as soon as she grew older (after expressing doubts that the baby was even his because of her skin color). The authorities were callous, Natalia says: “The laws there: ‘He’s your husband. We can’t do anything.’” At the Nest, Natalia has learned a new way to parent. And her daughter has learned a new way to play. When they used to read stories before bed, “she would just follow along and look at the pictures. Now she says, ‘No, Mama. I will read to you.’ She can’t read, but she pieces a story together using her imagination.”

Along with Natalia and her daughter, tens of thousands of other migrants have traveled to Tijuana in recent months, planning to request asylum in the United States. They are part of a broader trend of increasing numbers of migrants seeking asylum in the U.S., adding to an already overburdened immigration court backlog. At the end of fiscal 2019, there were a total of around 987,000 immigration cases pending in the Justice Department’s Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), up from 796,000 at the end of fiscal 2018. Those numbers have increased every year since 2008, when roughly 186,000 immigration cases were pending at EOIR. Concurrently, U.S. immigration policy under President Trump has been described by Human Rights Watch as engaging in “a steady regression in the protection of human rights.”

The administration’s immigration policies have been the subject of numerous legal challenges. Among the contested practices and policies: overturning precedent to deny asylum to women and children fleeing gang violence or domestic abuse from countries such as Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala; ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy, which was litigated before the Supreme Court in November; forcibly separating children from their parents at the border in a move that Trump administration officials said aims to deter people from seeking asylum, and then, according to one complaint, harming the children “physically, mentally and/or emotionally”; detaining migrants in inhumane conditions, lacking proper food, hygiene products and medical care; requiring asylum-seekers from countries other than Mexico to remain in Mexico while they await their immigration cases’ adjudication. The administration has also dramatically slashed the number of refugees it admits through annual caps, narrowing the list of countries from which refugees can be admitted and, this past fall, putting a temporary but complete moratorium

on admissions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in a statement, called the trend of curbing admissions “troubling.”

The administration has argued that its policies are lawful. In the case of family separation, Kevin McAleenan, former acting secretary for Homeland Security, told a U.S. House of Representatives committee that separations were done “in the interest of the child” and said the government has “made significant strides in its effort to secure the border and help and protect migrants in our custody.” McAleenan also said the influx has “challenged and overwhelmed every aspect of our border and immigration enforcement system.”

Langarica, with the ACLU, views the Nest within a broader context, in which basic needs of asylum-seekers, such as safety, are unmet, let alone less primordial needs such as education and art. “Access to these kinds of resources is important; that cannot be overstated, but we don’t want people to lose sight of the fact that there would not be a need for this if the government would restore these processes that are bound by law,” she says.

Amid this somber landscape, Ivey and Weissert hope the Nest offers a glimmer of light that extends beyond those brief hours and weeks or months of relief and exploration. Ivey views it as a foundation for the future. As she teaches parents: “Learning the ABCs isn’t the end-all. Being autonomous and making choices and encountering one another and working out their conflicts is of paramount importance. ... The soft skills are really going to determine whether these children are going to do well when they get to the United States.”

Ivey rises from a table designed for people half her size and rushes to the patio, to the children. It’s snack time. She is needed. ■

ROXANA POPESCU is an award-winning journalist in San Diego covering politics, immigration, sex trafficking and more.

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—LINDSAY FELDMAN WEISSERT