

# Casa Marianella Lends Newly Arrived Immigrants a Helping Hand

By Ashley Gatewood

---

Imagine arriving in Texas after a long, dangerous journey from your homeland. You are thousands of miles away from your family, do not speak English, and have nowhere to stay. Without any money or contacts, you are truly on your own. Many newly arrived immigrants from Mexico and Central America face this predicament. One Austin-based non-profit, Casa Marianella, works to aid those trying to find their way in a foreign land. I spoke with the organization's director, Jennifer Long, about Casa Marianella and the people it serves.

Opened in 1986, Casa Marianella, which receives funding from the City of Austin, originally aided refugees from war-torn El Salvador and Guatemala. Quickly, the organization expanded to also serve economic refugees. Today, people in both situations live at the house, but political refugees receive priority and are allowed to stay beyond the 30-day maximum if they are applying for asylum. High-priority is also given to people with injuries.

The *casa* is a one-floor house in a residential neighborhood providing shelter, food, and support to its residents. It has twenty-five beds, which are usually full. The majority of the residents are men and there is one room allocated for women. Women in general don't as often immigrate by themselves, said Long. That's why we don't see very many women here. A woman just by herself, she doesn't do what a guy does--just show up in Austin with no plan.



Long explained that most of the residents initially hear about Casa Marianella by word of mouth. People within the immigrant community often help one another out and many of their referrals come from former residents. People are also referred to the organization by local churches.

Often, the residents do not speak any English when they arrive. To help them learn the language, Casa Marianella offers beginner and intermediate level classes four nights a week at a nearby elementary school. The language barrier is a very difficult obstacle for many people to overcome. Without gaining proficiency in English, immigrants will be unable to find better work and making a decent living becomes a greater challenge.

Residents do not have to pay any rent while staying at Casa Marianella, although they are asked to provide a \$10 donation per week if they are able. To stay in the house, residents must follow several rules, which include not drinking or using drugs. Long says that rule is among the harder ones for people to follow. She elaborated, [Substance abuse] is everywhere, but I think in the immigrant population it is probably worse. There are all these guys who have left home, left their country, come here, feel rather alienated, working really hard, and don't really have a home. This situation makes immigrants especially vulnerable to drinking and using drugs.

Two years ago Casa Marianella started a second house, Posada Esperanza. It grew out of our recognition that we needed a really different kind of a space for children. [To be] an immigrant single mom with kids is a pretty difficult position to be in. It is hard enough to be a single mom, but to be homeless, a recently arrived immigrant and have children is extremely difficult. We wanted a place that would support the moms to really be able to be moms as opposed to pushing them out the door and saying go get a job, figure out your situation, Long explained. We want it to be a place [where there is] active parenting going on and the kids are able to play. When people are in emergency shelter their children suffer tremendously because the parents are so stressed out. Residents of Posada Esperanza typically come from broken relationships. Long said that the women usually find jobs performing domestic work.

Long has been active within the immigrant population for nearly twenty years. Initially, she became involved in this line of work because she was concerned about the situation in Central America. While her children were young, Long and her husband worked out of their home on behalf of immigrants. She then served on the board of Casa Marianella for three years before becoming Director in 1999.

When asked what the future holds for Casa Marianella, Long answered that there will always be a need for this kind of social service. My vision of what would happen in the next ten years is that we would have two more houses by then. We would really like to have a house that specifically serves youth. We see a lot of kids like teenagers who come up here all by themselves. They have real specific needs and those are not met very well. [Also,] it would be really great to have a house for people who are trying to overcome substance abuse.

As the immigrant population in Austin grows, so will the need for organizations to help recently arrived people get on their feet. After meeting several of the residents at Casa Marianella it is apparent that the organization is performing vital work that is having a positive impact on many people's lives. If it was not for Casa Marianella, most of these immigrants would be homeless and living in conditions worse than the ones they left in their homelands. By providing these newly arrived people with accommodation, it helps them avoid the plight of homelessness while giving them the opportunity to make a safe, healthy transition to the United States. Visit [www.casamarianella.org](http://www.casamarianella.org) to learn more.