



A Voice for the Voiceless

Betsabe Reyna

New Jersey

One day while she was cleaning her room, Betsabe Reyna opened up her journal from her first trip to Mexico, seven years earlier, and rediscovered this entry.

I will do whatever I can, even if I risk my life for the sake of others.

While she didn't remember writing it, when she read it, Betsabe felt an echo of her earlier conviction deep in her soul. And she started crying. "Wow, this is it," she thought. "This is what I want to do with my life."

Betsabe had grown up with a unique cultural perspective. Born in the United States with dual citizenship in Peru, she was raised in a small town in New Jersey. From a young age, her parents had instilled in her a strong work ethic, and morals that were guided by their Christian faith. Her family is a warm and loving one, and she was particularly close to her mother. "My mother had a very traditional upbringing," Betsabe says. "So she has a wealth of insight to offer."

But at school, Betsabe was more like an outcast. She didn't enjoy school very much, and she wasn't sure what she wanted to do when she grew up. And as the only Latina child in her class, she felt uncomfortable.

But all that changed at the age of 16 when she was offered the opportunity to travel to Mexico with 30 other kids. In the summer of 2012, Betsabe traveled to a small village in Mexico near Tijuana with her church's youth group to volunteer in an orphanage and work with the local community. There she witnessed a great deal of violence in the streets, and heard stories about domestic abuse. It was both shocking and scary for her to see this happening. The culture was so different than the one she'd grown up in. It opened her eyes to the fact that some people live in a very dangerous world, even in their own homes: and it instilled in her a passion to do what she could to protect them and do what she could to help.

Ever since that life-changing trip to Mexico, Betsabe has found ways to immerse herself in other cultures and other countries. And wherever she travels, she tries to use her voice to speak out against the inequalities, and the injustice, that makes the lives of so many people around the world so difficult.

In college, Betsabe studied theology and went on exchange in York, England. While she knew that she wanted to do good in the world, she was unsure of how to go about it. She had passion and drive, but she also needed direction, and guidance. Then, several of her professors nominated Betsabe to travel to Greece as a volunteer to help refugees. Along with five classmates, Betsabe spent three weeks in Athens.

When she arrived in Greece, the mood in the Olympic stadium in Athens was far different than the glorious fanfare of the summer games that had been held there almost 15 years earlier. Then it was a spirit of celebration: now the stadium was filled with thousands of desperate Afghani and Persian refugees who were passing through Greece. The resources needed to help these people survive, let alone build new lives, were just not available. All there was for them was an empty cement building, bleachers, and a playing field. To make it worse, three times a day, buses would unload more refugees at the stadium, sometimes hundreds of people at a time. So it was overwhelming, and very discouraging.

Betsabe was assigned to distribute food, offer basic medical care, and refer people to doctors and nurses when necessary. She and the other volunteers did the best they could to help. It was hard work, and it was disheartening to not be able to do more. But the people were really suffering and clearly needed her help, so she knew she couldn't just run away from the challenges. She dedicated herself completely to her work and tried not to focus on all that she couldn't do. Together, this small team of 11 people helped several thousand people. Betsabe continued her service for another 14 days at another refugee camp to help to manage the program's finances.

After graduating from college, Betsabe was trying to figure out what she should do next when a thought came to her to travel to Turkey. At this time, Turkey had the highest concentration of displaced persons and refugees in the world. She knew she was needed there.

At first, her mother wasn't so enthusiastic about her going to that part of the world. She was afraid that it could be dangerous. But she could see Betsabe's passionate desire for positive change, and she didn't want to stand in the way. So she reached out to a friend who did mission work in Turkey, and who could provide Betsabe with connections on the ground; and members of her church helped raise the money to pay her way.

When she got to Turkey, Betsabe traveled with five others in a small minivan, arriving at a refugee camp just a short walk away from the Syrian border. Due to the sensitivity of the mission, she had hardly any details about where she would be stationed or what she would be doing before she got there. She'd had to put her trust in God and in the organizing group. Now she discovered that she was on the front lines of the refugee crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were fleeing from Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime in Syria, and Turkey was often the first border they crossed.

She had to put a lot of faith in God to help her through this time. All the pain and suffering seemed unbearable to her otherwise. Regardless of their religion or culture, Betsabe saw the people staying in the refugee camp as her brothers and sisters. "Everyone fleeing violence and persecution is a human being," she says. "No one chooses to be a refugee."

One day, a group of five men drove up to the refugee camp in a pickup truck. They opened fire and shot several of the men in the camp. Betsabe and her coworkers hid in their minivan, hoping to stay safe. And it was while she was huddling inside the van that she had a crushing realization. Her ability to escape the gunfire and hide away gave her considerable privilege. Those staying in the camp did not have that option. Once again, she promised herself that she would do whatever she could to protect them.

These refugees were people who had been living normal lives before—people with families, and jobs, and pets, and romances, and favorite books, and aspirations. "I realized that at any moment, normal life can be taken away from anyone," she says. And with the problems caused by climate change creating an ever-increasing number of refugees in the world—by 2019 the UN reported there were 70.8 million refugees worldwide—Betsabe knows very well that this is a problem that is not going to just go away. In fact it is growing rapidly, even alarmingly. "As long as I can, I will continue to fight for those who are suffering, and not take anything for granted. Protecting the rights of people around the world is as important to me as protecting my own family," she says.

Now back in New Jersey, Betsabe is preparing for her future by studying political science at Rutgers University. She also works on helping people across the U.S. access clean power. Later, she plans to pursue a PhD in Middle East studies. Her goal is to be an advocate for the rights of refugees, Indigenous people, and people in need across the world.

In 2017, Betsabe was invited to serve as a delegate and representative for Pathways to Peace, an NGO at the United Nations. Founded in 1998 by Avon Mattison, this organization promotes peacebuilding and education around the world. As its delegate, Betsabe represents Pathways to Peace at UN meetings to raise awareness and propose solutions for religious conflicts. Avon coaches Betsabe to help design peaceful solutions to chaotic circumstances.

And it was through Pathways to Peace that Betsabe found in Avon Mattison the mentor she'd always longed for. Despite living across the country from each other, and being from two different cultures, the two grew close. Perhaps Avon reminds her of her own wise and loving mother. "I feel the warmth that she carries in her heart and soul whenever I speak to her," Betsabe says. "She is a woman of her word. She has never failed me in being a mentor, colleague, and friend."

As the refugee crisis in the world continues to become more dire every day, sometimes Betsabe gets discouraged. It is God that she turns to, to remember her purpose and her calling. And when she calls upon Avon, Avon listens to her express her pain and frustration; and then reminds her of how important her work is, and why it's important not to give up.

As the Pathways to Peace representative at the United Nations, Betsabe is honored to carry on Avon's legacy, and is determined to remain positive, encouraging, and courageous no matter what. Like Avon, Betsabe believes that intergenerational collaboration and conversation can spark new ideas and new ways of thinking. "Throughout my life, I have been inspired by the stories people have told me," she says. She believes that by listening to the stories of people from a diversity of backgrounds, professions, and communities, world change *will* become more feasible. "I am hopeful that through this exchange—by telling our stories, and by listening, truly listening to each other—we can build a more peaceful, equitable world."

*We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation
and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands
can make these humans any less our brothers and sisters.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Call to Action: The refugee crisis is real, and it is worldwide. Learn how you can help by visiting Pathways to Peace.
<https://pathwaystopace.org/>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com