

One of the pilgrims to WYD was **Johny Figueroa**, the unaccompanied migrant who features in the documentary *Posada*. The documentary was launched at the MAGiS08 Youth Festival and is produced by a Jesuit, Fr Mark McGregor SJ. At a pre-launch panel discussion, Johny (pictured left with fellow panel member and Sudanese refugee Akuol Diing) shared his experience of leaving his native Honduras at the age of 15 for a better life in the United States.

First of all I would like to say thank you, all of you, for being here. This is a journey that we need to be aware of, and to understand why all of these people are out there, leaving behind everything – their friends, their home, their family – for a better future.

I was born and raised in Honduras, in Central America. I was 15 years old when I left Honduras because of poverty, violence, and my family was having a lot of problems trying to find food for us.

I also wanted to see my mother's grave, so I decided to start a journey, and to emigrate to the United States.

We crossed three countries, and in each and every one of them there was a lot of difficult moments that I went through.

I took a bus from Honduras to Guatemala, then I took another bus from Guatemala to the border of Mexico and Guatemala, and from there I started travelling on trains. Freight trains. We travelled on top of the trains, which was really, really dangerous. I saw people falling out of the trains.

It was really hard for me, because I was fifteen years old, and the things that I saw... were just really scary. But I felt that something was looking out for me, and that gave me more of a strength to go forward in my journey.

One night I was in this train going between two cities in Mexico, and it was so cold, it was raining. I didn't have a jacket with me, because I'd just been robbed by two men. They took my shoes, they took my jacket, all the money that I had. All I had was my shirt.

It was so cold, I was about to die. Then the train just split up. It was heading through the mountains, and the back half couldn't get through. So I was left, on the back half, by myself, for three hours or four hours. I thought I was about to die.

Then I saw somebody who told me to go to the back of the train, that there was a place where you can rest and get warm. I went with him to the back of the train, and there was an open fire there. It was then that I realised that God was looking out for me. Because I don't know where this guy came from, he was just there looking out for me. When I got on the train, there wasn't anybody, but then there was this guy who said let's make a fire.

So then after five hours the train came back and we moved on. Afterwards, we took another train, and it continued raining hard. This guy just fell off the train and the train cut off his legs. And I didn't know what to do. He could speak, and he just told me, 'go on... go. Just leave me here.' And I couldn't move. He was just dying there in the middle of nowhere. Practically dying in my arms. After he'd saved me from the cold, I couldn't leave him there. He wanted me to go on with my journey and be brave. I stayed with him until another train came, and then I took my shirt and waved to them so they could stop. They took him to the next city, where they could take him to the consulate – he was from El Salvador, his name was Juan.

The only thing I remember is he told me, 'go Johny, go. You have to go see your mom's grave.' After that he was on my mind all the time. Every time I was suffering, I was hungry... I couldn't go back to my country because of all the violence and poverty. I had to be strong enough to go and just remember the words that he told me. He gave me the strength to go on with my journey.

So I spent six months in Mexico, trying to cross the border to the US. I tried, like, 20 times, and I was deported back to Mexico. Until I was able to cross the border, and I was homeless for a few days in the city of San Diego, California, where I was begging for money, food, just a labour job, where I could do a few hours work for food. I was able to get a job as a gardener, and I was able to get enough money to buy a train ticket from San Diego to Los Angeles to go see my mom's grave. Because that was the first thing I wanted to do.

So I arrived in Los Angeles, but I didn't have any of my family's numbers so I had no way to contact them to ask for their address. Then I had no money, so I was homeless again in another city. So I worked at a carwash and earned \$50 for a day. I was really disappointed because I couldn't find my family or see my mom's grave. I bought a ticket back to San Diego, because the guy who gave me work as a gardener said I could go back if I wanted to. But I got arrested at the station.

They said I was too young to travel alone, and they took me to Juvenile Hall, which is a detention centre. The police didn't know what to do with me because I didn't have any papers. They didn't know my name, my age, so they just turned my case over to immigration. Immigration put me in juvenile hall, where I was with other guys who were criminals. I was locked up just because I was an immigrant.

That's where I met Densi. He was from Honduras as well. Almost the same story. After six months or seven months living in Juvenile Hall I was able to get out, thanks to JRS. They provided me with attorneys so I could try my case, because I couldn't go back to Honduras because of the gangs.

After I left Honduras they killed my uncle, because they wanted me to be in the gang but I didn't want to and my uncle didn't want to either. So they killed him because I left. So I said I can't go back to Honduras because they will kill me. If I can't stay here, can they send me somewhere else. But then [refugee support worker] Amalia said, 'you have to

fight your case.' So I stayed in jail, trying to fight my case. Thank God I finally got out and went to stay with my uncle, and went to high school for a year, then I had a problem with my uncle and went out on the street again and was homeless. So I [was] tutored and went to college. And now I'm here with you guys. I'm a college student, and have my green card. I'll be applying for citizenship next year and hopefully will become a citizen.

Postscript: Johnny is currently studying sociology; he hopes also to study criminal law so that he can become a lawyer and work with immigrants.