

# LAS ABOGADAS

ATTORNEYS ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

A Film by Director: Victoria Bruce  
Producer: Laura Seltzer-Duny  
Executive Producer: Careen Shannon

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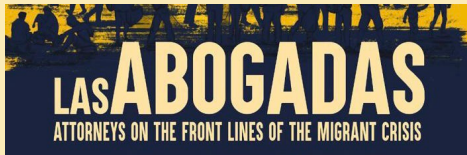
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# INTRODUCTION



# HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

**LAS ABOGADAS** raises some fundamental questions that are increasingly relevant today, including:

- What drives some people to become advocates for the rights of others?
- What are the social, political and economic factors that compel people to emigrate from their home countries?
- Should migration be a human right, or are borders an inherent attribute of national sovereignty?
- What are appropriate policies that receiving countries should enact in the face of increasing global migration?

This guide provides background material about the film – including brief biographies of both the lawyers and the asylum seekers featured in our story – as well as some conversation starters, FAQs, and suggestions for specific film scenes to use in the classroom. We also provide some suggested books for further reading (which can also be selections for book clubs to read in conjunction with a film screening).

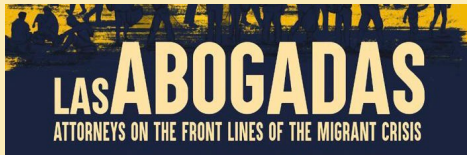
The film was made with an educational purpose, and we hope that **LAS ABOGADAS** will be viewed by students (in high schools, undergraduate colleges, law schools and graduate schools), lawyers, advocates, policy makers, and members of book clubs, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, and other local community-based organizations nationwide.

# TRAILER



Click [here](#) for the *LAS ABOGADAS* trailer.

# ABOUT THE FILM



# MESSAGE

**For a group of extraordinary women who practice immigration law, the refugee crisis is a call to action they can't ignore.**

Rebecca Eichler

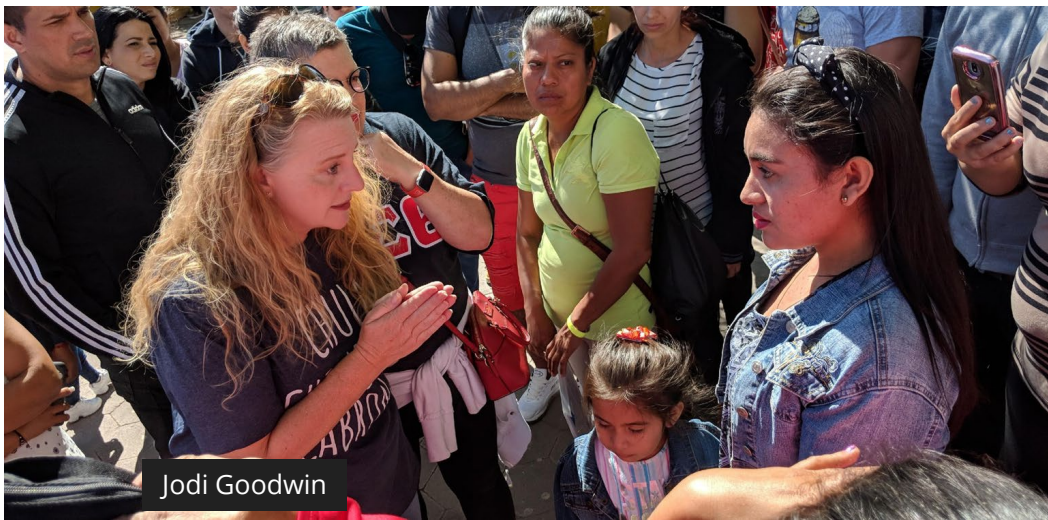




Mulu Alemayehu



Charlene D'Cruz



Jodi Goodwin

# OUR STORY

*LAS ABOGADAS* follows four immigration attorneys over a multi-year odyssey as the U.S. government under President Trump upends every law meant to protect those fleeing from persecution, violence and war.

Spoiler alert: things don't get much better once President Biden takes office.

From setting up a legal clinic in a Volkswagen bus in the middle of five thousand desperate migrants, to persuading border guards to follow the law and accept a blind woman into U.S. custody, to crossing the border to counsel African migrants stuck in Tijuana, to giving legal advice in the brutally hot Mexican sun to families desperate to see American soil — we watch our characters' surreal journeys to try and help.



# BACKGROUND

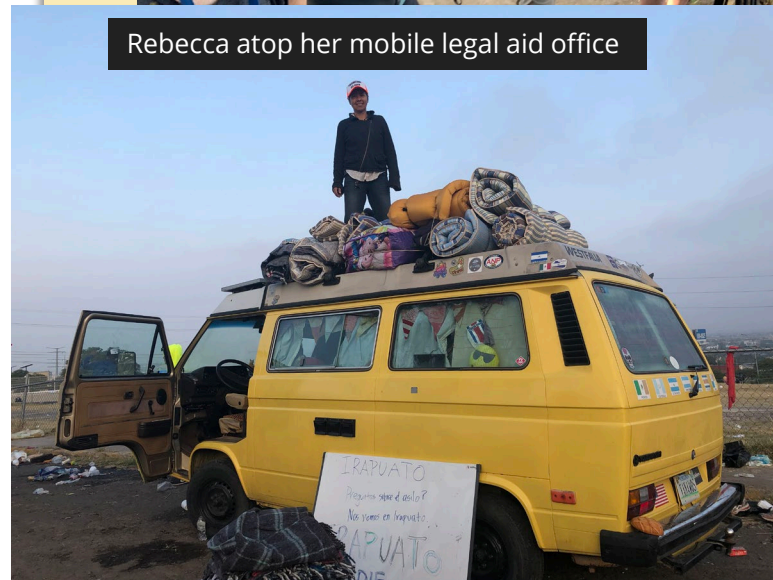
We began pre-production of this documentary in 2019, at a time when the rhetoric in Washington was increasing to a fever pitch around the subject of refugees coming to the southern border. It was important for director Victoria Bruce to be a part of bringing a humanitarian face to the crisis.

After learning that attorneys Rebecca Eichler and Charlene D’Cruz had driven a VW bus to intercept five thousand migrants in central Mexico in 2018, the protagonists for the documentary became clear. The narrative of **LAS ABOGADAS** centers around a small group of brilliant women attorneys, all of whom gave us access to their lives and their law practices. Among their clients, we were given permission to film heartbreaking and heartwarming refugee stories as well.

By centering the film around brave attorneys often working for non-profits or completely pro bono, we show true modern-day heroes standing up to insurmountable odds. Lawyers who were trained to use the law to protect the most vulnerable were having their tools systematically twisted, canceled, and pulled out from under their critical work.



Director Victoria Bruce and crew on the job



Rebecca atop her mobile legal aid office

# ATTORNEY HEROES

**REBECCA EICHLER**



Rebecca is a retired attorney and first-generation American of Chinese and German descent currently living in central Mexico.

Mulu is an Ethiopian-American who came to the U.S. as a political refugee and fulfilled her dream of studying law to help other victims of persecution.



**MULU ALEMAYEHU**

**CHARLENE D'CRUZ**



Charlene left India as a teenager to attend college in the U.S. and found she faced intense discrimination as a woman and immigrant, something that continues to this day.

Jodi is a Texas-based mother of four who created the first sidewalk legal clinic as migrant families were bottlenecked in the blazing Mexican sun.



**JODI GOODWIN**

# COURAGEOUS ASYLUM SEEKERS

**OSCAR**



Oscar fled Honduras to escape gang violence and government corruption. While living in the Matamoros refugee camp, he helped Charlene identify vulnerable migrants who should be allowed to enter the United States.

**NANCY & ANDREA**



After Nancy denounced the assassin who killed her husband in El Salvador, she fled the country with her daughter, Andrea, and her son, David (not pictured) to protect them from reprisals.

**YODALYS**



Yodalys, who fled Cuba in search of political asylum, was turned back from the U.S. border despite the fact that she was going blind from a parasite and in desperate need of medical treatment to save what remained of her sight.

Gisselle left Honduras to rejoin her mother, who had already fled to Mexico. In a tragic accident, both of Gisselle's legs were amputated when she fell from the top of a freight train known as La Bestia.



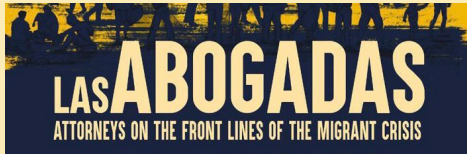
**GISELLE & SOFIA**

After fleeing persecution in Cameroon, Raisa and Martine (not related) flew to Ecuador, and then walked thousands of miles through several countries until they made it to Tijuana.



**RAISA & MARTINE**

# DISCUSSION GUIDE



# CONVERSATION STARTERS



*[Geared toward high school age and above]*

Changes in U.S. immigration policies implemented in 2018 under President Trump and continuing under President Biden have forced thousands of people trying to enter the U.S. in search of safety to wait on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border. **LAS ABOGADAS** follows a group of U.S. immigration lawyers and their clients from around the world — all of whom have landed in migrant shelters and refugee encampments in Mexico — as they navigate a changing legal landscape.

1. What are your top two takeaways after watching **LAS ABOGADAS**?
2. In the film, two lawyers (“*abogadas*” in Spanish) provided legal aid to thousands of migrants traveling through Mexico in 2018. Had you heard of the migrant caravans before watching this film? If so, what did you know? If not, what did you learn?
3. There are tens of thousands of people living in temporary living conditions at the U.S.-Mexico border. Have you heard of the migrant camps at the border? If so, what did you know? If not, what did you learn?

# CONVERSATION STARTERS (*con't*)

4. People say that migrants should enter the U.S. “the right way.” Are asylum seekers at the border “doing it the right way”?
- a. In **LAS ABOGADAS** the group of Cameroonians in Tijuana crossed the border without permission in order to access the U.S. asylum system. What do you think about how they entered the U.S.? Would you do the same?
  - b. Many migrants travel through Mexico on the train called *La Bestia* (“The Beast”). In **LAS ABOGADAS**, Gisselle — the Honduran girl seeking to join her mother — lost her legs after falling from the train. What circumstances do you think drives migrants to undertake such a dangerous journey? Do you think you would do it? Why or why not?
  - c. Should a disabled person like Yodalys, the blind Cuban woman, be given special treatment to enter the U.S.? Why or why not?

# CONVERSATION STARTERS *(con't)*

5. The lawyers in the film help one person at a time.
  - a. What are ways you have helped someone in the past?
  - b. How are you inspired to help now?

Here is a link to our [HOW TO HELP](#) page for ideas for how you and your family/friends can get involved.

6. How has the film impacted your impression of immigrants in the U.S.?
7. Do you know any asylum seekers or refugees?
8. If your family migrated to the U.S., where did they come from and do you know their story?
9. Describe one thing that you didn't know before watching the film.
10. After watching **LAS ABOGADAS**, what do you think of how the U.S. government is treating asylum seekers? How do you think the U.S. government should treat them?

# SELECTED FILM SCENES



Below are some specific scenes from ***LAS ABOGADAS*** that can be used in the classroom to discuss what motivates some lawyers to devote their careers to defending the rights of others.

- Charlene discusses her parents' experience living in India under the British Empire. *[0:23:03 – 0:23:51]*
- Jodi talks about how Trump's family separation policy motivated her to start offering legal workshops to migrants in the streets of Matamoros and on the bridge between Matamoros, Mexico and Brownsville, Texas. *[0:33:45 – 0:36:11]*
- Mulu explains how the persecution her family experienced in Ethiopia influenced her to want to help other people seeking refuge and safety. *[0:42:40 – 0:43:49]*
- Rebecca discusses her parents' immigration history and how being the only person in her family who was born in the U.S. inspired her to want to "give back." *[0:59:21 – 1:00:55]*



# SELECTED FILM SCENES *(con't)*

Below are some specific scenes from *LAS ABOGADAS* that can be used in the classroom to illustrate the actual work that immigration lawyers do.

- An attorney from Los Angeles counsels asylum seekers in Tijuana over Zoom about how to explain their credible fear to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers. *[0:23:51 – 0:26:16 and 0:43:49 – 0:45:30]*
- An attorney does a group prep with clients in removal proceedings about what questions to expect in immigration court. *[0:33:09 – 0:33:43 and 0:36:12 – 0:38:29]*
- An attorney prepares an asylum application and goes over it with a client. *[0:14:30 – 0:15:44]*
- An attorney tells a migrant that she is unlikely to qualify for asylum in the United States. *[0:15:45 – 0:18:44]*
- An attorney gets the press involved to help advocate for a disabled client who had repeatedly been turned away at the border. *[0:20:11 – 0:22:25 and 0:38:50 – 0:39:36]*

# SELECTED FILM SCENES (*con't*)

Below are some specific scenes from *LAS ABOGADAS* that can be used in the classroom to illustrate why people choose to leave their country and start from scratch in a foreign land.

- A Cameroonian woman fled her country after being raped and threatened with death by government soldiers for having boycotted a patriotic government parade. [0:45:56 – 0:47:14]
- A woman from El Salvador whose husband was killed by a gang leader fled the country when gang members threatened to kill her children in retaliation for her having reported the alleged killer to the police. [0:11:34 – 0:13:50]
- A man fled Cameroon after his father was killed by soldiers looking for him (the son) in the mistaken belief that the son was financing separatist rebels. [0:26:17 – 0:27:52 and 0:32:06 – 0:33:08]
- A man from Honduras says he can't go back to his country for fear of persecution by both organized crime and corrupt government officials. [1:09:22 – 1:10:05]

# FURTHER READING



Below are just a few of many wonderful books (both fiction and nonfiction) about the migration experience. These books could be appropriate both for the classroom and for book clubs that want to pair a viewing of **LAS ABOGADAS** with a book on the issue of migration.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, [\*Americanah\*](#).

Edwidge Danticat, [\*Brother, I'm Dying\*](#).

Reyna Grande, [\*The Distance Between Us\*](#).

Patrick Radden Keefe, [\*The Snakehead\*](#).

Chang-rae Lee, [\*Native Speaker\*](#).

Roberto Lovato, [\*Unforgetting\*](#).

Valeria Luiselli, [\*Tell Me How It Ends\*](#) and [\*Lost Children Archive\*](#).

Óscar Martínez, [\*The Beast\*](#).

Anna Lekas Miller, [\*Love Across Borders: Passports, Papers, and Romance in a Divided World\*](#).

Sonia Nazario, [\*Enrique's Journey\*](#).

Luis Alberto Urrea, [\*The Devil's Highway\*](#), [\*Into the Beautiful North\*](#), [\*By the Lake of Sleeping Children\*](#) and [\*The House of Broken Angels\*](#), among many others.

Javier Zamora, [\*Solito: A Memoir\*](#).

# IMMIGRATION FAQs

## **What is Asylum?**

Asylum is a form of humanitarian protection that can be granted to a person who has left their country and is seeking refuge from persecution or serious human rights violations. Under U.S. law, people who flee their countries because they fear persecution can apply for asylum in the United States. A grant of asylum allows the individual to remain in the United States instead of being removed (deported) to a country where they fear persecution or harm.

## **On What Basis Can a Person Qualify for Asylum in the United States?**

To qualify for asylum in the United States, a person must show that they are unable or unwilling to return to their home country, or country of last residence, based on a well-founded fear of being persecuted (or by showing that they were persecuted in the past) on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

# IMMIGRATION FAQs *(con't)*

## **How Can a Person Apply for Asylum in the United States?**

Contrary to popular belief, there is no asylum visa for which a person can apply in their home country. The only way to apply for asylum in the United States is either to appear at an official port of entry (such as an airport or an official land crossing), or to already be in the United States. Foreign nationals who cross the border without permission are legally permitted to apply for asylum under U.S. law.

## **What is MPP?**

Colloquially known as “Remain in Mexico,” the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) program was implemented by the Trump Administration in January 2019. It required asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border to wait in Mexico for the duration of their U.S. immigration proceedings. The Biden Administration twice tried to cancel the program, but was prevented from doing so by the Supreme Court. In August 2022, however, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that, because a federal court had lifted an injunction against the program, DHS was finally terminating MPP.

# IMMIGRATION FAQs *(con't)*

## **What is Title 42?**

Enacted as part of the Public Health Service Act of 1944, Title 42 grants the U.S. government the ability to take emergency action to prohibit migrants from entering the country in order to prevent the “introduction of communicable diseases.” In March 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) under President Donald Trump invoked Title 42 as a means of shutting down the U.S.-Mexico border. The Biden Administration announced on April 1, 2022, that it planned to end the use of Title 42 in May, but a federal judge issued an injunction — later upheld by the Supreme Court — to prevent the policy from ending. When President Biden lifted the COVID-related public health emergency on May 11, 2023, Title 42 was also lifted.

## **What is Humanitarian Parole?**

Humanitarian parole allows an individual who may be inadmissible or otherwise ineligible for admission into the United States to enter the United States for a temporary period for urgent humanitarian reasons or a significant public benefit.

Title 42 specifically included a humanitarian exemption for anyone the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) determines should be allowed into the United States on “consideration of significant law enforcement, officer and public safety, humanitarian, and public health interests.”

# INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT *LAS ABOGADAS*

1. The *LAS ABOGADAS* film features people speaking several different languages, including English, Spanish, French, Amharic and Kamtok (Cameroonian Pidgin English).
2. The film's Director, [Victoria Bruce](#), was originally trained as a geologist, and once narrated a documentary from the mouth of an [active volcano](#).
3. Several years ago, one of the film's featured abogadas, [Rebecca Eichler](#), took a year-long, 15,000-mile [road trip](#) through Mexico and Central America in a Volkswagen Westfalia [van](#) (nicknamed "Wesley") with her husband and two young children. Then they left their home, jobs and schools and moved to Mexico. This is the same van in which Rebecca and Charlene later drove into the middle of a 5,000-person migrant caravan in 2018.
4. When COVID-19 hit, the Director reached out to her subjects and asked them to record what was happening in their lives and with their work with migrants. For this reason, a large part of the film was shot on iPhones.
5. [Charlene D'Cruz](#) was a key member of the team that founded the [Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project](#). She has also run several marathons — barefoot.

# INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT *LAS ABOGADAS*

6. The film's Executive Producer, [Careen Shannon](#), is also an immigration lawyer, and has made multiple trips to provide pro bono legal counsel to immigrant families held in detention camps near the border in New Mexico and Texas.
7. [Meritxell Calderón Vargas](#), a Mexican human rights lawyer who appears in the film, calls herself an “abogada galáctica” (galactic lawyer) and sports several fabulous tattoos.
8. [Albergue ABBA](#), a migrant shelter in Mexico that is featured in the film, is the only shelter in Mexico that treats amputees — people who have lost limbs after falling from *La Bestia*, the infamous freight train on top of which many indigent migrants ride in their journey to the U.S. border.
9. Two of the film's four featured *abogadas* are immigrants and one is a first-generation American.
10. [Jodi Goodwin](#) has been honored for her pro bono work by both the Texas State Bar and the American Immigration Lawyers Association.
11. The film's editor, [Simon Efoko](#), was himself an asylum seeker, and met the Director in Tijuana when he was receiving advice from *abogada* [Mulu Alemayehu](#). He is now a cameraman and film editor in Washington DC, and part of the Director's family.



# LAS ABOGADAS

ATTORNEYS ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

*Running Time:* **92 minutes**  
*Director:* **Victoria Bruce**  
*Producer & Impact Director:* **Laura Seltzer-Duny**  
*Executive Producer:* **Careen Shannon**  
*Subject Matter Producer:* **Rebecca Eichler**  
*Supervising Producer:* **Kristin Schrecker**  
*Production Manager:* **Yasemin Jamison**  
*Film Editor:* **Simon Efokoa**  
*Director of Photography:* **Bryan Litt**  
*Original music by:* **Dan Radlauer**  
*Original song "Far Away" by:* **Liah Alonso & Carl Cane**  
*Production Company:* **Boom Boom Media**  
*Distributed by:* **New Day Films**

Contact us at [info@lasabogadasfilm.com](mailto:info@lasabogadasfilm.com)



Left: Laura Seltzer-Duny; right: Victoria Bruce

# LAS ABOGADAS

ATTORNEYS ON THE FRONT LINES  
OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

DIRECTOR: VICTORIA BRUCE

PRODUCER: LAURA SELTZER-DUNY

EXECUTIVE PROD: CAREEN SHANNON



WINNER  
BEST DOCUMENTARY  
Vail Film  
Festival  
2023

WINNER  
BEST DOCUMENTARY  
ONE Country ONE  
Film International  
Festival  
2023

WINNER  
Best Documentary  
Vancouver  
International  
Women in Film  
2023

WINNER  
Cannes Eye International Award  
6th International  
Women Filmmakers  
Festival  
2023

WINNER  
2023 | BEST DIRECTOR  
Global Cinema Film  
Festival of Boston  
Victoria Bruce LAS ABOGADAS ATTORNEYS  
ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

WINNER  
2023 | BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE FILM  
Global Cinema Film  
Festival of Boston  
LAS ABOGADAS ATTORNEYS ON THE FRONT  
LINES OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS

WINNER  
2023 | BEST DOCUMENTARY  
ARIZONA  
International Film  
Festival  
2023

Best Documentary  
Awareness  
Festival  
2022

WINNER  
Best of Women's Voices  
Portland  
Film Festival  
2022

WINNER  
BEST SOCIAL JUSTICE  
DOCUMENTARY  
Queen City Film  
Festival (QCF)F  
2022

WINNER  
BEST DOCUMENTARY  
Pembroke  
Taparelli Arts  
and Film Festival  
2022

WINNER  
Best Documentary  
LA Independent  
Women Film  
Awards  
2022

WINNER  
BEST IN FEST  
Valkyrie  
International Film  
Festival  
2023

WINNER  
Best Feature  
Vancouver  
International  
Women in Film  
2023