

Award-winning journalist Sonia Nazario '82 on her desire to write about social issues and to take herself, and others, to places they might not otherwise go—



# t h e i n v i s i b l e worlds

For me, a girl raised in Kansas and Argentina, Williams was a big adjustment. Back then it was pretty homogenous; there were a handful of Hispanics. I was here on a need-based scholarship. I was sure I was among the 10 percent Williams used to admit based on something other than academic credentials. I never wrote a paper before my first semester here.

Still, Williams was magical. The students were whip-smart. The professors (on the whole) loved teaching. Classes were small. Professors turned back papers with gobs of notes in the margins, detailing how, exactly, you had screwed up. You could read thick books and think big. Williams' isolation allowed me and others to safely find ourselves, to focus on learning.

I appreciated this calm berth perhaps more than most. When I was 14, after my father died, my mother decided to return our family to Argentina. It was the mid-1970s, during the so-called Dirty War, when tens of thousands of Argentines were arrested and "disappeared" by the military regime. Some of my friends were

tortured to death. One had the bones in his face broken.

We burned the family's books in the backyard—anything the military might deem radical. Freud. *Alice in Wonderland*. I locked in on a career in journalism when I saw bloodstains on the sidewalk in my Buenos Aires neighborhood. There, two neighbors—journalists—had been killed. They were trying to tell the truth about the atrocities being committed.

Williamstown was wonderfully removed from all that.

Although I appreciated and enjoyed life at Williams, I was always struck by how many aspects of life were absent here. There was little opportunity to understand how most Americans—much less most people in the world—live.

It seemed a strange dichotomy: people came to this place to open their minds, for a liberal arts education. Yet their time here, and lives afterwards, were spent in a comfortable bubble, often so apart and unaware of the rest. In that way, Williams fueled my desire to write about

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social issues and take myself—and other people—to places they might not otherwise go.

The invisible worlds.

The journey hasn't always been comfortable. It has taken me inside some dark places—some of them near my home in Los Angeles, others thousands of miles away.

In 1994, I journeyed into the world of Los Angeles classrooms. There are 30 million people—12 million children—in America who do not get enough to eat. To many, their plight is invisible. But it can be seen quite publicly in places like Edgewood Middle School.

By 10 o'clock many mornings there is a long line outside the nurse's door at the suburban West Covina, Calif., school. Some children clutch their stomachs. Others grasp their heads. In this mostly middle-class bedroom community, these children share a common ailment. They are hungry.

One boy came into assistant principal Amelia Esposito's office and confessed to stealing food from a 7-Eleven store. "Every night I go to bed hungry," the 13-year-old told her, bowing his head.



"There isn't enough food." One in four children at Edgewood comes to class undernourished. A quarter of all low-income children in America are anemic.

Parents, most of them with full-time jobs but poverty wages, talked about choosing between paying for rent or buying food. Children talked about eating once a day, about going to friends' houses to play in the hopes they might be fed.

Teachers like Ernie Sanchez were left to pick up the slack. Sanchez spent the first period each morning as a second-grade teacher making cheese sandwiches for every student. Once, he brought apples to his school, where 99 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals. "All these little hands reached out toward me," says Sanchez, who—faced with the crush of children—



Photographer unknown

struggled to regain control of his class. "I'll take that image to my grave. I didn't think I would ever see that in America."

In 1997, I delved into the world of children who are raised by parents addicted to drugs or alcohol. Federal surveys show at least one in five children will spend some part of their youth being raised by a parent who is an alcoholic or drug addict. They, too, grow up in a world most people never see.

For weeks, I tagged along with 3-year-old Tamika Triggs. One day, her mother, Theodora, took Tamika into the drenching heat of a clapboard shed. There, her mother and a friend smoked crack. Theodora slammed heroin into an arm marbled with track marks. Then, intent on smoking the last crumbs of crack, she gently lowered her sleeping girl onto a mattress moist with urine and semen. As her mother inhaled, Tamika slept, her pink and white sundress absorbing the fluids of unknown grown-ups.

Like most children of addicts, Tamika got love in brief moments, when her mother was not zoned out or so consumed by her body's convulsive cry for



heroin that she could think of nothing else. I watched as she was left alone in the apartment when her mother went out to score drugs. I saw how she adapted to living in a world devoid of lasting affection and friendship. I watched how she would play patty cake alone, how she had become her own best playmate, how she watched the person dearest to her self-destruct. It is here, in millions of homes, where victimized children grow up to victimize others—a generational cycle that costs taxpayers \$200 billion

annually in criminal justice costs, health care and social programs.

In 2002, I explored the world of immigrant children through one boy named Enrique. Enrique was part of a small army of children—48,000 each year—who head north alone, without either parent, from Central America and Mexico to the United States.

Some come to work, others to escape abusive families; most come to reunify with a mother. Their mothers faced a choice. They could stay in their country—Honduras, El Salvador or Guatemala—and only feed their children once or twice a day, maybe only a glass of sugar water for dinner, and see them forced to quit their studies after the third grade. Or they could go north, leave their children behind, and make money to ensure their children had a better future.

The mothers thought they would be separated from their children for one or two years. Typically, the separations last five or 10 years.

Many of these children despair of ever seeing their mother again. They set out on their own to find them. With little money, they traverse Mexico on top of freight trains. It is an epic journey. They brave armed gangsters, who control the tops of the trains. They must elude bandits, who hunt down migrants along the tracks. Corrupt cops all along the way are out to rob and then deport them. The children must get on and off the trains when they are moving, to avoid the police. Often, they fall and the wheels tear them apart. They call the train *El Tren de la Muerte*. The Train of Death. The youngest on the trains are 7 years old.

Enrique set out from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, when he was 16. He had not seen his mother in 11 years. To retrace Enrique's journey, I rode the length of Mexico on top of these trains. There was a world unknown to me on top of those trains, one of great cruelty and of amazing acts of human kindness.

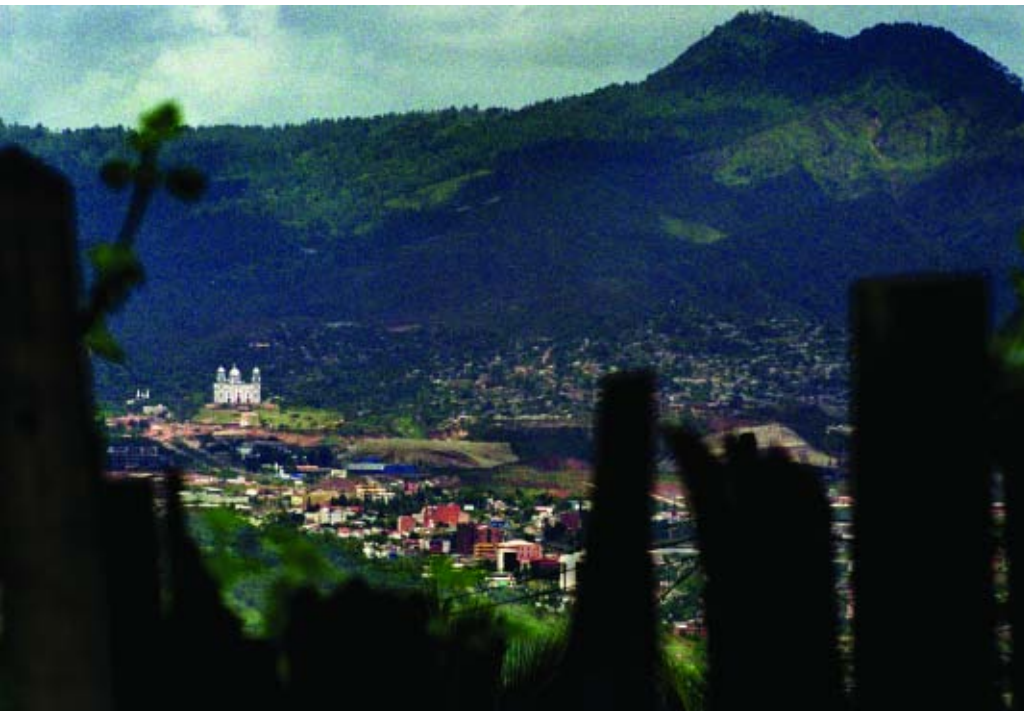
Enrique left Honduras with \$57 in his pocket, a slip of paper with his mother's phone number and the hope of reaching her in North Carolina someday. Seven times, he was deported by Mexico back to Guatemala. Each time, he started again.

One night he was nearly beaten to death by six men on top of a train in southern Mexico. He saved himself by hurling himself off the train.



Eventually people along the tracks, particularly in the state of Veracruz, began to bring food out to the trains, often where they slowed for curves or bad tracks. Those who had no food brought plastic bottles of tap water.

These are unlikely places for people to be giving food to strangers. Roughly 43 percent of Mexico's 100 million



He survived by begging, going without food, sleeping in tall clumps of grass by the tracks, clinging to the top of a train for days at a time. After 122 days and 12,000 miles, he finally made it to his mother on his eighth attempt.

Along the route in Mexico, wherever the trains stopped, the immigrants went, gaunt and dirty, to front doors to beg. Occasionally one would fall off a train, weak with hunger.

people live on \$2 or less a day. In rural areas, 30 percent of children 5 and younger eat so little that their growth is stunted, and the people who live in humble houses along the rails are often the poorest.

Yet in many places where the train slows 20 or 30 people stream out of their homes along the rails and toward the train. They wave. They smile, they shout and then throw food.

Families throw sweaters, tortillas, bread and plastic bottles filled with

lemonade. A baker, his hands coated with flour, throws his extra loaves. A seamstress throws bags filled with sandwiches. A stooped woman, Maria Luisa Mora Martin, more than 100 years old, who was reduced to eating the bark of her plantain tree during the Mexican Revolution, forces her knotted hands to fill bags with tortillas, beans and salsa so



her daughter, Soledad Vasquez, 70, can run down a rocky slope and heave them onto a train.

"If I have one tortilla, I give half away," one of the food throwers says. "I know God will bring me more."

Another: "I don't like to feel that I have eaten and they haven't."

Still another: "God says, when I saw you naked, I clothed you. When I saw you hungry, I gave you food. That is what God teaches."

In Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas, Olga Sanchez Martinez helps the many immigrants left deeply wounded by the train. Some have lost nearly half their bodies. One 20-year-old Salvadoran woman lost both legs and both buttocks. Olga buys blood and medicine so immigrants won't die. At her Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd she nurses them until they can be taken back home. Olga says, "No one tells me something can't be done. Everything can be cured. Nothing is impossible."

At the local public hospital, almost all the wounded migrants tell Olga they wish the train would have killed them rather than leave them like this. They seethe. They curse God. They curse Olga and push her away. Some try to hang themselves.

She perches on a corner of their hospital bed, strokes their hair, and tells them God has spared them for a reason. "If he wanted, he could have killed you. But he didn't. He left your eyes open," she says. "God has a plan for you," she says. "You will learn to live—in a different way."

She tells them how she was sick most of her life. How at 18, she temporarily went blind and mute, had boils on her arms and spent 38 days in a coma—66 pounds of skin and bones. How a year later, when she was well enough to work at a tortilla factory, a machine tore two fingertips off her left hand. She tells them she tried to slit her wrists.

Then, a doctor told her she had cancer and months left to live. She had two small children who would be left to an alcoholic husband. She wasn't very religious but

went to church that day. She kneeled. She prayed. "They say there is a God. Why don't you cure me? Let me see my children grow, if only a little bit?" She made a pact: Heal me, and I will help others.

She began visiting patients at a local public hospital. One year later, she saw a 13-year-old Salvadoran boy who had lost both legs trying to board a train. The hospital pushed the penniless migrant out before he was healed. Olga brought the



boy to recuperate at her humble home. Three days later, there was another young Salvadoran at the hospital who had lost both arms. "Don't feel alone. I will help you," she told him. She brought him home, too.

Soon, she had 24 migrants at home, so many she could barely open her front door. Olga begged money for food, medicine, wheelchairs and to get migrants home. In 1999, she opened a shelter for injured migrants in a tiny former tortilla

factory someone lent her. She works for free, seven days a week, from dawn until late at night. She sells donated clothes, pork rinds, tacos and bread in front of the hospital. She begs for money, car to car, in traffic lines, all to pay for medicines, blood and prostheses. Every day, she goes to the shelter and cleanses the migrants' stumps and wounds. Slowly, they heal. She has treated 1,500 migrants since the shelter opened.

She has never had serious health problems since she made her pledge in church that day.

"God," she tells desperate migrants, "has never left me alone." ■

*Adapted from Sonia Nazario's '82 convocation speech at Williams, Sept. 11. Her six-part series "Enrique's Journey," published in the Los Angeles Times in 2003, won more than a dozen prizes, including a Pulitzer.*