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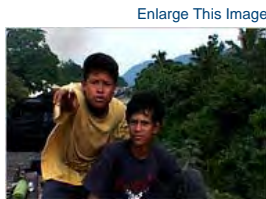
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A Risky Trip Leads to Stardom and Sanctuary

By JULIA PRESTON
Published: February 21, 2011

A Honduran teenager gained fame as the star of a documentary film that showed the dangers faced by children who ride across Mexico atop freight trains to cross illegally to the United States. But the boy, Kevin Casasola, rode the trains again, and now he has been granted asylum in the United States, his lawyer said on Monday.



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HBO Documentary Films

At 14, Kevin Casasola, left, was featured with other Central American children in "Which Way Home," an HBO documentary.

The documentary, ["Which Way Home,"](#) directed by [Rebecca Cammisa,](#) won an Emmy award for [HBO](#) last year and was nominated for an Oscar. Ms. Cammisa took her cameras onto the lurching trains, filming a cohort of children riding north as they dodged tunnels, trees and criminal predators, fighting loneliness and hunger. It tells of several children who died or disappeared along the way.

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Kevin, who was 14 in the film, was its most appealing protagonist, with his daring clowning on freight car roofs and his determination to make it to the United States to find work so he could send money back to his mother. During the filming he was detained by American border agents and deported to [Honduras.](#) The documentary showed the desolation and need that drove him to leave his home village in the first place.

The documentary drew an outpouring of concern for the children to [its Facebook page.](#) Some Americans offered to adopt Kevin, although his mother figured prominently in the film and in his motives for riding the trains.

In Mexico, the impact was even greater, and Kevin became something of a legend. Ms. Cammisa sent the film to rural villages as a warning to restless teenagers that they should not attempt a similar trip. The country's first lady, Margarita Zavala, helped distribute it, and during a state visit to Washington last May, she said that Mexican babies were being named Kevin as a result of its popularity.

Ms. Cammisa said she tried to persuade Kevin to stay in Honduras, using donations raised by the film to pay for him to take a course in mobile phone repair.

But last July, she said in an interview, Kevin called her from a detention center in California. After a two-month journey on the trains, he had crossed the border and was doing farm work near El Centro. He had been arrested by the local police, who suspected

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he was an illegal immigrant.

Contacted by Ms. Cammisa, the [U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants](#), a private charity, found a volunteer lawyer, Raed Gonzalez of Houston. An asylum petition he presented for Kevin was granted by an [immigration](#) judge in January.

Since asylum proceedings are confidential, Mr. Gonzalez said he could not reveal the threat that was the basis for Kevin's claim that he could not safely return to Honduras. The film provides a possible clue, showing a violent stepfather who spoke bluntly of his loathing for the boy.

Kevin, now 17, is in a shelter for minors in Houston, Mr. Gonzalez said, happy to be living legally in the United States. He is studying English and will go back to school, and eventually he will be placed in [foster care](#). He has had a haircut, Mr. Gonzalez said, newly mindful of his image. Shelter authorities declined to allow him to be interviewed.

[Border Patrol](#) figures show that agents detained about 18,000 unaccompanied children crossing illegally into the United States in 2009. Most were sent back. Mr. Gonzalez said successful asylum claims like Kevin Casasola's were rare.

Ms. Cammisa said that Kevin's story showed the magnetic lure of the United States for many Mexican and Central American children. "Kevin was raised with an inner dialogue about coming to the U.S.," she said. "His mother urged him to help his family."

A version of this article appeared in print on February 22, 2011, on page A13 of the New York edition.

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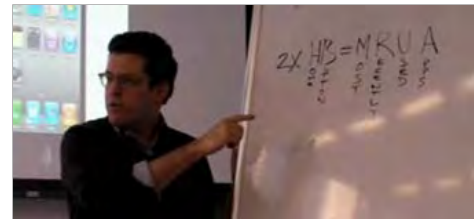
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