

# THE AMERICAN DREAM AT HOME

STORIES OF CIRCULAR MIGRANTS  
FROM GUATEMALA TO NORTH AMERICA

APRIL 2024



**ACTION  
AGAINST  
HUNGER**

## INTRODUCTION

The five stories that make up this document were collected between January and February 2024 in Sumpango and Santiago Sacatepéquez. Each of the people interviewed had the opportunity to migrate temporarily and regularly to the United States and Canada.

With affection and pride, they opened the doors of their homes to share their lives, challenges, difficulties and, above all, the moments of happiness and satisfaction that this type of migration has brought them.

The stories you are about to discover present an unexpected twist on the usual: they all begin and end well. No person disappeared in the desert while trying to cross a border, no woman was raped, no migrant was robbed, assaulted or kidnapped.

Like many Central Americans, the protagonists of these stories were forced to migrate to North America for economic reasons but were fortunate enough to do so safely through a temporary work visa.

In these stories, the visa appears as a magical character that guides the protagonist to success; with the temporary visa, the character has the power to come and go by plane without crossing a desert or a river, to save without falling into debt with coyotes, and to travel without risking his or her life.

At this point in history, we understand that granting a visa to a person means much more than a simple bureaucratic procedure. It is saving lives, dignifying work and helping to fulfill the universal dream of living a dignified life, free from poverty.

Below, Roselia, Juan, Vilma, Glenda and Arnoldo's own words will lead you to discover how the metaphor of the *American dream* is not necessarily found in North America. While the lack of decent work opportunities in their country drives them to seek employment in the United States or Canada, for the protagonists of these stories the real aspiration is to come and go. To work abroad for a while and live in Guatemala. This is how the dream exists but comes to life in their homes and in a country where they finally want to be.



**Simona Carnino**  
AUTHOR

*April 2024*





# ROSELIA, LAND AND EMBROIDERY

At the age of 21, Roselia immigrated to the United States on a temporary visa to work on a flower production ranch. In just four months, she saved enough money to buy land and financially support her family. The most significant thing for her was being able to travel safely by plane, without having to resort to a coyote to get to North America.





*My name is Roselia, I am 22 years old and I currently work in a celery and lettuce company here in Guatemala. Besides this, I am dedicated to embroidery, and I make my own huipiles (traditional garment worn by indigenous women).*

*In 2023 I went to the United States for 4 months to work with an H-2A agricultural visa in a floriculture company in South Dakota. This was all possible thanks to a farmer's organization to which I belong. They collaborate with a recruiting company that facilitates the process of sending farmers to work on crops in the U.S. with temporary labor visas.*

*I wanted to go to the United States because I wanted to better myself, since here it is impossible to save enough money to open a business or follow my personal dreams, so to speak.*

*I started working in a green bean exporter when I was 16 years old, earning just 2,100 quetzales a month [about \$270], which is barely enough to eat.*

*Normally it is the men who get the agricultural visa, but the employer in the U.S. chose me because I had experience in harvesting corn, as I have always worked in this field with my parents.*

*That's how I went to the United States for the first time at the age of 21 along with other workers.*

*I only paid 400 quetzales to get the passport [about \$50], as the employer covered the travel expenses, visa and accommodation. I would never have gone with a coyote because it is very dangerous: once a girl from here went and they killed her on the way. This affected us a lot. Oh no, definitely not the coyote thing.*





Roselia admiring one of her huipils that she was embroidering at the time of the interview



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*In the United States I earned a living wage, which allowed me to save money [...] I was also giving some money to my family and I was happy to be able to help my grandmother with her food expenses”*



*Roselia with her grandmother*

*The day I left I was very excited, because I had never traveled by plane before. When we arrived, we went to the ranch and started working. It was hard at first because we did not speak English and I also missed my family, which made me a little depressed, but I knew it was a great opportunity and I did not want to waste it.*

*In the United States I earned a living wage every 15 days, which allowed me to save enough money to make a good investment, taking away all the expenses of daily consumption of my family here in Guatemala. With that money I bought a piece of land where I am currently growing corn. After the harvest I take care of cleaning the land, eliminating the plants that are of no use. If I manage to go back to work in floriculture in the United States three or four times, I will surely be able to build a little house on my land and open my embroidery store.*

*I was also giving some money to my family and to the elderly people in my village who really need it very much. Most of all, I was happy to be able to help my grandmother with her food expenses.*

*Going with a temporary labor visa is nice because you can go and come back safely. For this reason, it would be important to give more opportunities to women, as traveling in the desert with the coyote can be very dangerous for us.*



*Roselia in the field she managed to buy with her savings*



# ROSELIA MARISOL CANEL TEJAXUN

Rancho Alegre,  
Sumpango, Guatemala







# JUAN, THE HOUSE AND THE SNOW PEAS

Since the early 2000s, Juan has experienced circular migration, first to Canada and now to the United States. Thanks to remittances, he has been able to finance his children's education, build his own house and purchase a plot of land on which he grows snow peas, which provides employment for the community during the harvest season.





Juan working with his wife in the snow peas field

My name is Juan, I am 52 years old, and I work in agriculture with my wife. We grow snow peas for export to the United States.

In 2003, I went to Canada for the first time with all my papers in order, thanks to an organization that recruited specialized farmers to work with Canadian agricultural employers. I left out of pure economic necessity. The truth is that it was not easy to leave the family and the land, but here in Guatemala I could not earn enough to have a decent life. In addition, in recent years, climate change has begun to affect our land. When it does not rain, the crops dry up, and if it rains too much, the plants get sick. So, this problem pushed me even more to look for an opportunity abroad.

I was in Quebec three times. The first time I worked on a farm cutting lettuce for five months. Then, in 2006 and 2007, I worked in a potato packing plant. While working in Canada benefited my economy, I also experienced mistreatment. At the potato plant, we were forced to sleep in an unheated basement. We complained to the employer, but she did not pay much attention to us. At the end of the contract, we did not have the opportunity to return. I think this happened not because of bad work, but because we asked for our workers' rights, so they preferred not to hire us again.



Juan shows the U.S. visa in his passport

Upon returning from Canada, I joined the Association of Guatemalans United for Our Rights, which helped us relocate to the United States. That was how in 2018 I went to Richmond, Virginia, on an H-2B visa, working as a gardener for 6 months. At the end of the contract, the employer offered us to stay longer without a temporary work visa, but I did not accept, because I did not want to commit a crime.





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*My house is the mere fruit of 20 years of regular work in Canada and the United States. I also achieved my dream of buying a piece of land [...] After the first trip, I invested the remittances in my children's education”*

*Juan with his guajolitos, production that he was able to expand with his remittances*



*Juan and his wife fumigating. The remittances allowed him to buy useful tools for his farm*



For me, traveling to Canada or the United States is nice as long as we have all our papers in order. I mean, being undocumented is not a worthy option in life, is it, because you always have to hide from the police, you have no rights, and you can be deported at any moment.

My last migratory experience was in 2023 in a flower farm in South Dakota. In 4 months, I earned around 10 thousand dollars. This experience was the best of my life, and I am about to return for a second contract now in 2024. The employer treated us magnificently. Every day he asked us how we were doing and was a pleasure to work with.

My house is the mere fruit of 20 years of regular work in Canada and the United States. Both the house and everything inside were acquired with my remittances. I also achieved my dream of buying a piece of land where I grow snow peas and guicoyitos (squash). After the first trip, I invested the remittances in my children's education. Today, I invest everything I earn in land, fertilizers, seeds to produce more and to generate employment in my village. During the harvest season, I hire women from the community to work with me to cut peas. I strongly believe that money should be reinvested in an economic circle that benefits everyone, especially those who did not have the opportunity to travel like me.

Guatemalan authorities should consider that people want to leave here to work abroad. Therefore, they should facilitate the hiring process in Canada and the United States, allowing those who decide to migrate to do so in a safe and lawful way. We want to live here, in this country that we are building with our remittances, and we ask that our rights as migrant workers be respected.





# JUAN PACACHE ASTURIAS

Sumpango, Guatemala





# ARNOLDO CHILE RECOPACHI

Santiago Sacatepéquez,  
Guatemala

Watch "**Atrás de las Moras**" to discover the story of Arnoldo Chile Recopachi, who has been working temporarily in the United States since 2016 thanks to the circular temporary migration program promoted by the Cuatro Pinos de Santiago Sacatepéquez Cooperative.



HERE THE FULL VIDEO 





A woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant, multi-colored patterned short-sleeved shirt, is leaning over a wooden table. She is sorting through a large, bright pink plastic basket filled with dark red beans. Her hands are positioned over the basket, and she appears to be carefully selecting or cleaning the beans. The background shows a textured, light-colored wall and a wooden cabinet. The overall scene is brightly lit, highlighting the colors of her shirt and the beans.

# VILMA, DEBTS AND THE STORE

After being a victim of fraudulent visa, Vilma has returned to trust in regular migration. After working as a temporary migrant in the United States, she managed to pay off her debts and rent a store where she sells fruits and vegetables in Santiago Sacatepéquez.





Vilma hanging laundry  
and cooking with her  
niece Melissa at her home



Vilma from the  
window of her home



My name is Vilma Estela Lemus Chavac, I am 45 years old, and I am a single mother of 3 boys between 5 and 26 years old. I live here in Santiago Sacatepéquez with my children, my mother María and my niece Melissa. Her mother went to the United States, so I am taking care of her. We also share a little shop where I sell a little bit of everything and Melissa makes her knitting roses that she sells for birthdays and different occasions.

I have a long history of migration to Canada and the United States. Years ago, my father went to the U.S. first on a regular visa for a few seasons and then with a coyote. The latter experience was horrible. He sold the land we had in order to pay for the passage and from then on, he never had the economic capacity to buy land here, because he became heavily indebted. The truth is that he regretted that experience very much, but in the end, no way. My brothers and I were forced to rent land to grow our own food and sell in the market.

Since we were little, we have always been working in agriculture, but now climate change is affecting a lot, and we see that the land no longer prospers as it should. I always wanted to build my own house and have my own land, so in 2003 I had the opportunity to go to Canada thanks to a non-governmental organization that facilitated the intermediation between Guatemala and that northern country. That is how I went to work in Quebec cutting strawberries for three seasons, each one lasting about four months a year, until 2006. During that time, I managed to save enough money to build a room in the house and buy a small piece of land.



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Our household is made up of single women and sometimes life is hard. In March I am going to go to the United States again for four or five months and with the money I will be saving I want to improve my house and build at least one more room, since I still sleep with my two youngest children”




Vilma with her son in the store



Vilma with her niece sorting vegetables in her store





After a few years, in 2008, my sister and I heard about an organization that was sending people to work in agriculture in the United States with the H-2A visa and that was asking for around 10,000 quetzales [about \$1,300] each person to cover the processing costs and all the necessary paperwork. So, I sold the land to be able to pay for the paperwork for me and my sister, but it turned out to be a scam and I lost all the money, plus my land, and we never made it to the United States. That was a shame, because one trusts, but in the end, it turns out that it is better not to trust, right?

For a while I did not try to go to the United States, and I went to work in a packing machine for three years and then I went to work in the fields with my brothers.

Finally, thanks to the Association of Guatemalans United for their Rights, I met another intermediary entity that sends workers to the United States. They told me that I could apply to go to South Dakota to work in a flower farm with a regular visa. In this case, I only had to pay 400 Quetzales for the passport, while all other expenses were already covered by the employer in the United States.

So, I applied and had the opportunity to go there for 4 months. In the end, I managed to save about \$20,000, which I used to pay off the many debts I had accumulated over the years.

Before this trip to the United States there were times when we went without food, so I had to borrow money for basic expenses. The good thing is that I no longer have that outstanding debt and I still had a little money to rent a store and sell vegetables, fruit and traditional costumes.

Our household is made up of single women and sometimes life is hard, isn't it?

But in March I am going to go to the United States again for four or five months and with the money I will be saving I want to improve my house and build at least one more room, since I still sleep with my two youngest children.



**VILMA ESTELA  
LEMUS CHAVAC**  
Santiago Sacatepéquez,  
Guatemala







# GLEND A, EVERYDAY LIFE, MOTORCYCLES AND SCHOOL

In 2023, Glenda had her first experience of temporary labor migration to the United States. Although it was difficult to leave her home for four months, with the remittances she was able to invest in education expenses for her daughter, buy a motorcycle to take her to school, install windows in her house and improve the quality of food for her family.





Glenda dreams of opening a costume store in Sumpango

My name is Glenda Maribel Chiquitó Xicón and I am 27 years old. I live here in Sumpango with my daughter Angeli, 8 years old. I am currently a housewife and do sewing work upon request.

I decided to go to the United States mainly to help our home and open our own business. I am dedicated to sewing and hand embroidery and I want to open my own little clothing store. In the future we would also like to open a mechanic shop for my husband.

Then I went to the United States for the first time in March 2023 on an H-2A visa and worked as a day laborer on a ranch in South Dakota for almost 3 months. Before traveling, at home we had no washing machine, no refrigerator, no bedroom windows, and no motorcycle that I have now bought with the money I managed to save. Our plan for the future is to build an additional room for our daughter, since now we only have one room and a kitchen.

I always wanted to go to the United States, but I would never have done it with the coyote, since I have heard many stories of violence, and all this made me very afraid. However, my father-in-law, who had already

been working seasonally in the United States for years, told me about this possibility of leaving safely and I decided to take advantage of it.

When I left, I felt sad to leave my daughter with her grandmother, but I knew I had the joy of having a visa and so I did not think about anything and went to work. Every night I would call my daughter on WhatsApp and that is how I managed to keep in daily contact.







After only one trip to the United States on a regular basis, Glenda was able to invest in consumer spending and improve her life



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I managed to save enough to also invest in my daughter's education and cover her school needs [...] I was also able to buy a motorcycle to take her to and from school, which is far away from our home”

Glenda calls her husband, who is a regular migrant in Canada, every day



In the United States, I used to earn very well every 15 days, while now here I earn at most 500 quetzales a month [about US\$65]. During the three months I was on the ranch, I managed to save enough to also invest in my daughter's education and cover her school needs. I was also able to buy a motorcycle to take her to and from school, which is far away from our home.

The truth is that in a short time I earned more than my husband earns in Canada. He has been working there for several seasons cutting strawberries, raspberries and blueberries, but normally he does not manage to save more than 40,000 quetzales [about \$5,000] in 6 months. Now he has a one-year contract and hopefully he can earn more. For now, he sends us a few quetzales for our consumption needs and the rest he is saving so that he can invest it in work on the house when he returns.

In March 2024 I will return to the United States again for a few months. We women can work as well as men, even faster. The employer in the United States recognized that we women did an excellent job and treated us with respect. For example, they provided us with safe housing separate from the men, which made us feel comfortable and protected. So, I think it would be important for women to have more similar opportunities to go to work with the temporary labor visas.

Glenda has invested in a motorcycle to make it easier for her to get around her community



# GLENDAMARIBEL CHIQUITÓ XICÓN

Sumpango, Guatemala





A person is considered an international migrant when he or she resides in a country other than the one in which he or she was born. This is the situation of 235 million people worldwide, in addition to 35 million with refugee status. Although the media often publish news on different aspects of the migration issue every day, the fact is that the percentage of migrants over the last century has remained stable at around 3% of the world's population. More figures: in 2023 only 10% of the people who had been forcibly displaced from their homes were settled in rich countries, 40% settled in a neighboring poor country, while half of these displaced people continued to live in another less insecure region or city, but in their own country. Also in 2023, along the 3,500 km border separating the U.S. and Mexico, more than 2 million people of different nationalities were detained while trying to cross northward. Among them were 220,000 Guatemalans. In that same period of time 9,000 Guatemalan workers traveled to the U.S. on temporary work visas. Among the latter were Roselia, Juan, Vilma, Glenda and Arnoldo, who have just shared their experiences in this document. They traveled by plane, with a work contract, under conditions that were controlled, without paying intermediaries, without putting their lives at risk, without saying goodbye to their family and not seeing them again for a decade. Their testimonies reflect the reasons that lead people everywhere to emigrate, their hopes and fears, their difficulties and their rewards... and provide the perspective of a form of emigration that should be the norm, not the exception. Emigration is a constant that has accompanied humanity since its beginning; humanizing emigration is the challenge that still lies ahead of us.

## Miguel Ángel García-Arias

DIRECTOR OF ACTION AGAINST HUNGER IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The publication "**The American Dream at Home**" has been produced within the framework of the Migration and Development Program of Action Against Hunger in Central America. It was produced with the invaluable support of CIERTO GLOBAL and the Cuatro Pinos Cooperative.







# **THE AMERICAN DREAM AT HOME**

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