

# Los Angeles Times

STEVE LOPEZ: POINTS WEST

## “Years are Lost but a Family’s Hope Lives”

By: Steve Lopez

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She sat down, stood up, made the sign of the cross. She tapped her hands, then her feet.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Ana, who fled Uganda five years ago after being repeatedly tortured, hadn't seen her children in six long, agonizing years. But their plane was on the ground at Los Angeles International, Ellis Island of the West, and this last bit of waiting was testing her nerves.

An hour went by, then two, and Ana watched hundreds of travelers emerge from customs. All seven of her offspring, who range in age from 25 to 15, had been granted political asylum, so she figured they were being delayed by paperwork.

There were times, years ago, when Ana thought she would never see this day.

"You must leave the country," Ana's parents insisted when she was still in Uganda, hiding out after being tortured by government agents.

"I can never leave my children," Ana replied.

"If you don't leave," her parents told her, "you will never see them again, because you will be killed."

Ana is a Catholic and her husband is a Muslim, so they were outcasts from the moment they fell in love at a Ugandan university in 1979. They finally overcame their families' opposition only to be confronted with an even bigger crisis.

Ana's husband, a government official, was accused of sponsoring rebel attacks in the perpetually unsettled country, where millions have been slaughtered or displaced in recent decades. He denied the accusations, but their home was ransacked by marauding late-night visitors, and he was finally arrested and tortured in 1997.

He managed to escape and went into hiding outside Uganda, but Ana's nightmare only grew worse. The police would come at night, drag her away from her home and take her to some barracks that were known as torture chambers.

"They would tie me like this," she says, putting her hands behind her neck and explaining how they were hogtied to her feet.

They beat her with guns, batons, boots and fists, demanding to know where her husband was. She said she didn't know and they beat her some more, stripped her, violated her, then dumped her on village streets.

They did it once, twice, a third time.

"I was certain they would kill me the next time," she says.

Should she flee to save her life?

Could she live with herself if she did?

Ana left her children with her parents and went into hiding. A year later, she made the hardest decision of her life. She was escorted out of Uganda under an arrangement made by her husband. She landed in Los Angeles, where another Ugandan refugee — a man she didn't know — met her at the airport and offered her a temporary room at his house in Chatsworth.

Otherwise, she was on her own, and she felt empty, lost and alone.

"I was suicidal," says Ana. "I had no job, no home, no family. I wanted to die."

A friend referred her to the Program for Torture Victims, a Los Angeles nonprofit started in 1980 by political refugees Jose Quiroga of Chile and Ana Deutsch of Argentina. Their shattered clients arrive by the dozens each year, a parade of ghosts from all corners of the globe.

They come bearing scars seen and unseen, bringing nothing with them but the will to survive. Los Angeles, the great second chance city, takes them in as it does everyone else, the shattered and the broken, offering promise but no guarantees.

Ana found a measure of relief in telling her story to therapists, but that didn't put an end to the horror. Her eldest son was arrested back home and beaten by police, and Ugandan agents descended on her

brother's home, demanding that he give up the whereabouts of Ana's husband. When he refused, he was beaten to death.

Today, Ana doesn't know whether her husband is alive. Ana, by the way, is a name she's adopted to protect his identity and the rest of her family's as well. She last spoke to her husband in 2003.

And yet despite these burdens, Ana has made her way in Los Angeles, scratching, hoping and praying. She knows the city's flaws and its challenges, and she expects a kind of suffering here, too, but not the kind she has known. Here, there's rule of law and at least the premise of equal opportunity. For her, for her children, and for theirs, as well.

The Ugandan college graduate, who was a real estate appraiser back home, earned minimum wage working with disabled children, then found a better job in elder care. Each month, she sent money to her parents in Uganda to keep her children in boarding schools.

Along the way, she worked to arrange for their political asylum. When the possibility became real, the Program for Torture Victims put out an emergency appeal to its donors, and roughly \$10,000 was raised — most of it from one anonymous donor — to fly Ana's children to Los Angeles by way of London.

Ana had warned her children that it will be rough going in Los Angeles, at least for a while. She has been working as a home healthcare aide for an older couple in Northern California, but has begun looking for a job in Los Angeles, where she thinks her children have a better chance of feeling comfortable.

Last week, she found a two-bedroom San Fernando Valley apartment — \$1,300 a month — for her family of eight, although the apartment has no furniture. Ana's first and only purchase was several air mattresses for everyone to sleep on.

"But I will have my family," she said at the airport, where she stood, sat, paced.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Her eldest daughter, now 25, was 19 when Ana last saw her. The youngest, twin boys now 15, were 9.

The years are lost forever, but Ana was only thinking about this moment, and beginning to worry that maybe her children had missed their flight.

After three hours, the first one appeared, then another, then the rest.

Ana leaped to her feet.

"My God!" she screamed, sobbing as she stood at the railing and proudly watched her brood walk up the ramp.

One daughter was beaming; the other was so overwhelmed she was barely able to look at Ana.

"They're so tall," Ana said of her youngest sons, her eyes wide with amazement. "I don't have babies anymore."

One by one, she hugged them all, half laughing and half drenching them in tears. Then she introduced them to several staffers from the Program for Torture Victims.

"These are my friends," Ana said, and her children took turns shaking everyone's hands and offering thanks.

Two of the boys said they want to be doctors, another wants to be a lawyer. They occasionally watched the Lakers on TV in Uganda, they said, and they were excited about being in the same town as Kobe Bryant.

One son, 17, confessed that it was difficult to leave Uganda despite the messy political situation.

"I miss my country," he said, overcome at the sight of Ana. "But I am with my mom. I'm home now."

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*To make a donation to the Program for Torture Victims please visit [www.ptvla.org](http://www.ptvla.org).*

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