

How Whiteness, the Savior Complex, and Power Dynamics Affect the Sponsorship Experience

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The work that you are engaging in as a sponsor is important - your role is to provide support to a vulnerable group of people - whether they are fleeing violence, persecution for their identity, social or political circumstances impacting their well-being, or other reasons - and helping them to create a new life in the United States. While it may feel or seem imperative for you to impart all of your knowledge about social, cultural, and political systems here, it is more important to recognize that asylees have developed survival skills that have helped them through very difficult situations - situations that most of us have never had to confront. Asylees know exactly what is needed for them and their family to survive another day, and they must be fully entrusted and empowered to make decisions for themselves. Although they have limited resources such as financial, communication, and social services, this does not mean that they do not have the capacity to be agents of their lives. Asylees are resilient and resourceful. While we join them in their journey by providing basic guidance and support, we are put into the position of simultaneously acknowledging their independence and self-determination. **One of the biggest challenges for us as sponsors is to learn to lend a helping hand while at the same time not limiting the independence and free will of the asylees.** We must remember that they are capable of deciding for themselves how they want to move forward with their asylum case and in their new lives. Your role is to ensure that they are connected to the resources they need to achieve the life they hope to build here - not to determine for them what that should look like.

Expectations and Power Dynamics

There can be expectations on what the experience of serving as a sponsor to an asylee will look and feel like: rewarding, gratifying, and affirming of the sponsor's identity and benevolent character. Sponsors play a very important role in the asylee's journey and **it is true that you are very much needed**, especially in this time in history. However, there are no saviors here: we are human beings expressing our humanity by reaching out to those who have lived through truly traumatizing situations. We also come from a place of privilege in some form or another that enables us to perform this service, and while that service is appreciated, this work is a simple form of human decency and reparation.

As a result, we should not expect the asylees to be overcome with joy and gratitude at our service and generosity. The experience of sponsoring an asylee can be very exciting to undertake - you are likely happy to see them and you likely have grand plans and ideas for how you may be able to provide support to the asylee, but don't be disappointed if the asylee doesn't share your enthusiasm. Keep in mind that every person is different, the impacts of poverty and immigration can appear differently for different people, and the circumstances from which the asylee is escaping may result in a variety of coping mechanisms as they settle into their new life (see next section below). Some people may have a really hard time accepting or receiving invitations to social events or engaging in the world as they normally would. By the same token, some people may hold tightly onto everything they can get their hands on because they have come from a place of survival in which they had guaranteed access to nothing, and thus, add sentimental value to what others may seem as minimal. Some folks have never seen pictures of their parents as children and have no need to have their own picture taken. Others might only pick out a few items at the store when they had the option to get "anything" they wanted as they are accustomed to very few possessions and have no need to fill their closet immediately or they may be exploring a "new" identity. Yet others will want to buy everything they like because it's been a

long time that they were able to choose something for themselves; these are two very different responses to the same set of circumstances. Some folks are adventurous and love to try new foods, whereas for others eating out can be extremely stressful in terms of having to figure out what to eat from an unfamiliar menu. These are conversations about our own perceptions of memory and concepts of luxury that should be taken seriously.

In addition, we must be conscious of the power dynamics that influence the nature of the sponsor/asylee relationship. We as sponsors are ultimately the ones holding most of the power and knowledge of the society in which we live, and that power must be transferred over to the asylee we are welcoming. Just because the asylees are new to the country does not mean that they are children nor that they deserve to be treated as such. The healthiest way to navigate this relationship is to see them as roommates or friends who need just a bit of help in learning and navigating many complex systems intended to confuse or trip them up, including local and federal laws, but not as children that need parenting, protection, or discipline. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that sponsors hold the physical power over the residence, the financial power over resources, and the knowledge of local customs, laws, and social norms.

It is important to remember that both sponsors and asylees are adults sharing a time and space; some of these relationships will evolve into great everlasting friendships, others will just be a fond memory. Both are acceptable outcomes. Asylees must be able to conduct themselves and parent their children based on their own moral compass and judgment. Pretending to change or “fix” the person or their behavior is not conducive to a healthy outcome. We vary as individuals and the situations we encounter throughout our life experience mold us into the people we become. The asylee you are matched with might be an introvert that likes to stay home, watch movies, and read or they may be very outgoing and go out every day or night, talk with friends on the phone, and engage with new people all the time. It all depends on the personality of the asylee. Just because someone may make different life choices than you would does not make those choices wrong.

Trauma, Coping Mechanisms, and Boundaries

Another important concept to understand is that trauma shows up in different ways and healing from trauma also comes about in many different ways. Being flexible with the asylees’ coping mechanisms without judgment is the goal. Anxiety and depression as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common in asylum seekers. Such symptoms are normal reactions to the trauma and stress they have experienced and continue to experience in their reality, but they can interfere with normal feelings of well-being and with physical health.

Each person has their own way of coping. Some take long walks at night, some sleep in late, some listen to music on headphones during family events or send text messages during important conversations. These are all normal coping mechanisms that the sponsor needs to respond to with understanding and flexibility, rather than being judgmental or trying to “fix” the behavior. It is important to reiterate once again this is not a parent/child relationship. Sponsors are providing the necessary support in terms of basic necessities such as shelter, food, and support with resources, without judgments or corrections. What the asylee needs most is to heal from their trauma in their own way, and that way must be respected. As mentioned in the Transgender Ally Guide from PFLAG, “true allies know that all aspects of...expression are important, effective, and should be valued equally, whether public or personal.” In other words, the expression of healing as selected by the asylee - which includes responses to cultural expectations and more - needs to be honored even if it would be handled differently by the sponsor.

In speaking about this, we must also acknowledge that there are cultural differences in how we heal from trauma. In the United States it is common to pursue therapy (in a variety of forms) to work through trauma, but therapy is less useful to individuals from different cultural backgrounds. While it may be helpful to offer therapeutic resources to the asylee, please do not feel alarmed if they turn those resources down. Going to church, watching tv, or engaging in the world in a way that supports their mental health may be the best option for them. Sponsors must trust the asylee to know what they need to heal from the trauma they've experienced.

This discussion is not intended to diminish the sponsor's sense of concern when the asylee's way of coping is by taking long walks at night or decides to stay at a friends house for days at a time. Neither is it intended to diminish the fact that the sponsor might feel ignored when the asylee is listening to music with the headphones on or is texting while the sponsor is trying communicate important information. Those feelings are important and valid however they are the feelings of the sponsor and should not be an added burden on the asylee. That is to say, it is not the asylee's responsibility to change their behavior to match expectations placed on them by the sponsor; the asylee's responsibility is to take care of themselves and to heal from trauma induced by their lived experiences, and they are the only ones who can determine exactly what that looks like. This responsibility takes precedence over their need to initiate their new lives, including working - time and space for healing must come first. That said, your feelings as a sponsor are important in conducting this service, and you need to be able to take care of yourself, including your mental, emotional, and physical well-being. The truth of this experience is that it requires coming terms with (to again cite the PFLAG document) "The Great Unknown". Encountering barriers or misunderstandings does not make you a bad person or a subpar ally. However, those issues must be resolved outside of your relationship with the asylee unless it has to do with meeting expectations around boundaries. Please do not hesitate to turn to your community to receive support and to process your feelings - whether that is your church, your therapist, other sponsors, your family, friends, or other organizations. It truly does take a village - not just for the asylee, but for you too. Self-care is encouraged in order to prevent burnout!

The most surefire way to protect yourself and the asylee from misunderstanding and emotional difficulty in conducting this service is by setting boundaries and clear expectations, both of which are fully supported in interacting with the asylee. Ensuring that these boundaries and expectations are set is the surest mechanism for long term success. Boundaries are not the equivalent or reminiscent of parenting; these are the types of boundaries that would be set in any adult relationship. Clear expectations let the asylee know what is expected of them and what they can expect from the sponsors, making it a two-way commitment. Sponsors should not feel like they are "hosting" and therefore attend to the asylee incessantly. It is not necessary to walk on eggshells around them, and it is important to assert your needs. A refusal to make expectations clear is not beneficial to either party and its unsustainable in the long run, resulting in misunderstanding, resentment, and hard feelings

A few examples of boundaries you may be interested in setting and thinking about prior to sponsoring an asylee include:

- If the asylee may invite people into the house, and if so how many and how they should communicate with you around that
- Overnight guests (is the sponsor's family comfortable with romantic partners spending the night? How about friends spending the night?)
- Expectations around ability to provide financial support (for example, the asylee has [X] amount of money to spend every two weeks and they must determine how to use that money)
- How to share common spaces such as the kitchen or living room

- Ability to provide transportation
- Expectations around security of the home, including: how to lock the different doors, which ones should be locked at all times, and how many locks need to be used.

Definitions of Success and Variance in Lived Experiences

Success is defined by the individual and is often informed by lived experiences and cultural background. For some, success might just mean having a safe place to live and providing for themselves and their family. This may be different from the “American dream” of working oneself into wealth and prosperity appearing in the form of material luxury or access to increasingly ambitious opportunities. The experiences of asylees vary: some did not have the opportunity to attend school but that does not mean they are developmentally delayed or that they don’t stand a chance in this country. We cannot afford to lose sight of what living really means, and there is nothing wrong with allowing each person to define success in their own way - a way that is meaningful to them. Asylees are fully formed individuals with their own ideas of what they want their life to be like. Just as many asylees come to this country with identities that you are unable to change, you are unable to similarly change their vision of the future. It is your job to accept and respect those identities and definitions of success regardless of whether it makes sense to you or not. Even if all they want is a job washing dishes, farm work, or housekeeping work - despite having opportunities to pursue higher education or something bigger - that is enough. It generally takes a minimum of six months after the asylum application is submitted to obtain a work permit, but when possible, some people do start to work and create their own vision of a successful life . Sponsors can advise the asylee of the risks and realities they may experience in this country, but not prohibit them from working. Sponsors are not gatekeepers and asylees are not meant to live out the sponsor’s vision of success

We have spoken a fair amount about the lived traumas and realities asylees may have experienced. However, people’s experiences are their own, and there is no expectation for them to share their stories with us as sponsors. This should not be a condition of your sponsorship. If the asylee decides to open up to you about their experience, don’t allow the way you treat them to be colored by the narrative you’ve been told or that you’ve told yourself. Remember that as difficult as it may be for you to hear their story, it is not your place to project your horror onto them; it’s still the story that they lived and survived. Listen intently and respectfully acknowledge their valor and resilience. Express hope for the future and the life they have the opportunity to build. The way each individual survives is as varied as each person. Sponsors - who are ideally allies in solidarity with the lived experiences of marginalized groups - “are people who might have to grapple with some barriers to being openly and actively in support of people” who identify differently from themselves, whether that’s regarding cultural identity, socioeconomic class, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, and a number of other parts of their background (PFLAG, Transgender Ally Guide). It is not expected that you will understand, but it is expected that you will accept who the asylee is or has become as a result of challenging circumstances. It means that you are willing to take on this challenge.

As an example, as part of sharing their story the asylee may casually tell you that they have done sex work in the past. It's important to be able to hear and process the information without judgment. If the asylee confides in you survival stories of sexual assault or other forms of violence, it is extremely important to control our reactions and not show pity toward the asylee; shock and pity do not serve them. In addition, by reacting in ways that are overly expressive, you may inadvertently turn the attention back to yourself or retrigger some of the trauma the asylee has experienced. Remember it is their experience and they are sharing it with you. No matter what you have read or heard, this is their

reality - and ultimately, it is not about you. Feeling uncomfortable is a normal part of engaging in something new and different from your own reality - and there may be multiple layers of uncertainty or discomfort with regard to the asylee's sexual orientation, gender identity, cultural upbringing, language, religion, and other differences.

Doing radical hosting can be something that, for sponsors, helps us "save" or redefine American values, but at the end of the day we must imagine how mortifying it would be to hear certain types of comments, marginalizing language, assumptions, or reactions for someone who was directly affected by American imperialism and conquest, homophobia, religious missions, and other forms of violence against their identity. Consider how terminology that may be acceptable to you might have an informal meaning that is used to marginalize a group of people and how that will affect the asylee. Similar to what you learned as an ally to transgender folks, there is a unique power through language to send the message that inclusion and equality are not just things that people in an affected group want; it must be reflected in your actions, behaviors, and communication. Therefore, understanding the role that the United States has played in the instability, violence, and poverty that is real in Latin American countries today, specifically Central America, is of utmost importance. Most of the "Latinx" culture in the United States tends to be taken over by white Mexican culture, infused by values asserted by a system that is unfair to minorities. It is important for sponsors not to become involved in commentary about people's home country without an actual understanding of the culture - and learning about that culture should come from those who have lived in it directly. Sponsors should be earnest in learning, listening, and absorbing, but should think twice about offering an opinion or comment unless it's steeped in actual knowledge the sponsor has.

Final Notes

At the end of your experience as a sponsor, you may have provided a home and basic necessities to an individual experiencing what seems to be insurmountable odds as they build a life for themselves in this country. However, you are more likely to learn more about yourself, your privileges, your values, and the ways you have been conditioned in a country that values the experiences of some over others. Being open to understanding these differences and learning from them is ultimately the primary work that you will be doing as a sponsor. Hopefully the experience will be rewarding and you will earn a new friend as a result, but that is not to say that there will not be challenging moments that will make you question everything you know. It is okay for this experience to be challenging, and it is okay to struggle with parts of it. Becoming a supportive sponsor is a process, meaning that mistakes will be made, you will likely trip up, and feeling a little lost is relatively normal. It is important to recognize that this is a shared experience between two adults - and whatever you are struggling with is probably reflected in similar ways by the asylee. Remember to set your expectations and boundaries to let the asylee know what to expect, be aware of power dynamics inherent in your relationship, and provided the much-needed safe space for the asylee to care for themselves in the ways they determine best. And finally, remember the ally journey as you engage with individuals different from yourself, which aligns closely with the sponsorship journey along multiple dimensions.

If you are interested in doing more work to dismantle your privilege and learn more about engaging interculturally, there are a myriad of resources available. One great place to start is with Layla F. Saad's workbook entitled "Me and White Supremacy" (you can download it for free for a limited time here: <https://www.meandwhitesupremacybook.com>). Please be sure to compensate Layla F. Saad on Patreon if you do download her workbook!

Once you are done reading all the materials in preparing for this enriching journey of being a sponsor consider watching Trevor Noah: Son of Patricia. With comedy Trevor addresses the experience of being an immigrant, the stressors of eating at new place, degrading words, and even differences in taking a vacation.