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On the Fence

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On the Fence

Abstract

Over a hundred years ago, my great-great grandmother fled Germany by herself to come to the United States to escape the abuse of her father. She had no connections in this country and nowhere to go. That same century my ancestors from Ireland crossed the Atlantic to make a better life in America. They were discriminated against for their religion and for their nationality.

Ana* and her husband, two hardworking Mexicans, paid a [coyote](#) to help them cross the Rio Grande into the United States ten years ago. They saw no future for their two young girls in Mexico and could not make ends meet. The family has struggled with racial profiling and prejudices since they arrived.

On the surface there are no differences in these stories. With other opportunities exhausted, these determined people uprooted their lives and moved to an unknown country, where the language, religion, and customs are different and friends or family are limited. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, nationality, religion, freedom, immigrant, prejudice, racial profiling

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society | Inequality and Stratification | Latin American Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

ON THE FENCE

February 24, 2014

Over a hundred years ago, my great-great grandmother fled Germany by herself to come to the United States to escape the abuse of her father. She had no connections in this country and nowhere to go. That same century my ancestors from Ireland crossed the Atlantic to make a better life in America. They were discriminated against for their religion and for their nationality.



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I met Ana last month in El Paso, Texas on an Immersion Project about Immigration on the U.S./Mexico border. She bravely bared her soul to our group by sharing the heartwrenching story of her journey to this country and her experiences since. Even though she has faced intense racial and xenophobic discrimination here in the U.S., she feels blessed because both her daughters successfully made it through the American school system and are currently enrolled in universities with hopes of becoming nurses.

Listening to Ana's story, all I could think about was her bravery and her intense love for her family. It pains me to think that so many people in this country only see undocumented immigrants as "illegals" or criminals, and refuse to acknowledge the deep systemic issues that have led them to risk their lives to come to this country.

Immense poverty. Corruption. Violence. Faulty education systems. Sure, we can point out these evils in the United States, but not at the extreme levels that exists elsewhere. Take Mexico, for example—the home country of Ana and of almost 12 million other immigrants in our nation. Corruption and instability have been painful realities in Mexico recently, especially in border towns, due to drug-related violence. Many Americans have the misconception that Mexican policies alone have put the country in turmoil, when really the United States is very

much involved at the root of the issues. Mexico and the U.S. have a long trade relationship. Unfortunately, since NAFTA began in 1994, [jobs have been disappearing in Mexico](#) as small farms cannot compete with large corporations backed by U.S. government subsidies. As Mexican workers have been displaced, many have sought economic stability in the U.S. The majority of Mexican exports, both legal and illegal, head to the U.S. as their final destination. While the United States is officially part of the “war on drugs,” its citizens are those keeping the drug trade alive by consuming the majority of illegal substances that enter the country through Mexico. Our nation is essentially fuelling the drug trade and the violence that occurs from the cartels’ constant struggles for power, but we look down upon those who come to the U.S. seeking reprieve from unspeakable conditions.

Ciudad Juárez is one of the Mexican border cities most affected by the drug cartel violence. This city that shares a boundary with El Paso, TX is currently [the second most dangerous city in the world](#) and all of the cities on the top 10 list are located in Latin America. This is reflective of the [United States involvement in the region throughout the 20th century](#) and the damage that it caused by aiding corrupt totalitarian governments as well as our country’s current involvement in the drug wars. El Paso, however, has been considered [the safest city in the U.S.](#) for the past four years.

Extreme poverty is everywhere in Juárez. Ana and her family have an income of about \$10,000 per year in El Paso—putting them under the poverty line—yet, in Juárez their yearly family income would be around \$2,000. But, their expenses would probably be much lower in Juárez, right? Wrong. Even with the extreme difference in income from one side of the border to the other, the cost of living is roughly the same in both cities. In fact, some commodities and amenities are even cheaper in El Paso.

Education certainly is less expensive. While public school is free in the U.S., there is a matriculation fee for each student that enters the Mexican school system. Due to the level of poverty in Juárez, most families cannot afford for their children to go to school past the elementary level. Alternatives are limited. The [maquiladora industry](#) does generate jobs, albeit low-paying and difficult, but employees must be at least 18 years of age with a high school education. As a result, many school-age children are left trying to weigh the dangers against the economic opportunity that comes with working for the drug cartels.

These are the realities of just one city, not all of Mexico, and not all of the many countries from which people are migrating. But harsh conditions do exist, and they create deadly cycles from which people cannot escape. In many places, the ideas of a prosperous future or a successful career are not plausible concepts. Instead, people are concerned with avoiding violent conditions and simply surviving.

Fewer and fewer people are coming to this country as individuals looking for temporary work. They are migrating as families, hoping to settle down permanently and create stable lives for themselves. Parents want children to have the possibility to graduate high school, the chance to dream of a future.

I respect the need for national borders, security and a process for citizenship, but we must also acknowledge that the [push-and-pull factors](#) which draw families across the border are directly influenced by the policies created by the people we voted into power. We cannot ignore that. Let’s understand the influences and the circumstances clearly, so we can make change. Building a higher fence, [calling undocumented immigrants “illegals,”](#) or perpetuating discriminatory state policies are not the answers.

Let us not forget the words of poet Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” And imagine, if you lived in the conditions of a city such as Juárez, Mexico—a stone’s throw away from the prosperity and possibilities of the United States—would you not cross that

border for the sake of your children, your parents, your siblings? As a last resort to find happiness, peace, and security?

I think I would.

**Name changed*

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