



IMMIGRATION REFORM AT LAST?

Five Immigrants Share Their Struggles, Hopes, and Dreams

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Just hours after his inauguration, President Biden sent a comprehensive immigration reform bill to Congress that re-imagines a broken immigration system that has torn apart hundreds of thousands of families and fails to serve the needs of our economy. One of the bill's most important provisions creates a clear process for the almost 11 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the U.S. today to legalize their status and eventually earn citizenship.¹

I asked five friends, all undocumented immigrants from Central America and Mexico, their thoughts on the proposed legislation, life in the U.S., and what would change if they were finally freed of the burden of living undocumented. I share their responses below.²

PLANS IF ABLE TO LEGALIZE STATUS

Like two-thirds of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.³ today, all five of my interviewees have lived in the U.S. for more than ten years and have deep roots here. Oscar came to the U.S. 17 years ago, married an undocumented woman, and together they are raising their two U.S. born sons, ages eight and nine. Born into extreme poverty in Honduras, Oscar had to start working to support his family when he was six years-

old. He was 14 before he owned a pair of shoes. In the U.S. he learned to read and write, speak English, and has worked for many years as a roofer. His wife started a small cleaning business, and they are in the process of buying a house. Oscar did not hesitate when asked what he will do first if he is able to legalize his status. "I will RUN to Honduras to see my mom. I miss my mom—maybe she will die. It is very hard... I dream every day for my papers."

Sonia, a 59-year-old grandmother to four U.S. citizen children, came to New Orleans from Honduras after Hurricane Katrina to rejoin her husband who was working alongside tens of thousands of other immigrant workers in rebuilding the region.⁴ Like Oscar, the first thing Sonia would do after legalizing her status is visit her mother.

Carlos is a star student in the ESL program I co-direct at a Mid-City New Orleans Catholic church. He has not seen his parents in over 12 years. Carlos would also immediately visit his parents who live in Oaxaca. 38 years old and single, Carlos calls his parents four times a week. Because he finds seeing them via a computer screen "too emotional," he prefers phone conversations.

Ana and Marta are fortunate that their mothers were able to obtain tourist visas in recent years to visit their daughters. Marta, a 42-year-old wife and mother from Central America, is fully bilingual and often interprets for Latino families. She would return to school and become certified to teach special education. Ana, who came to the U.S. from Honduras 15 years ago when she was 21 years old, will apply for a driver's license as soon as she has "papers." A vivacious young woman with a love of fashion, Ana would then get the training she needs to open a beauty salon. Oscar and Carlos would also like to open their own businesses—a roofing company and a restaurant, respectively.⁵

VIEWS ON LIFE IN THE U.S.

Honduras has one of the highest murder rates in the world.⁶ When asked what they liked best about the U.S., my three friends from Honduras emphasized how much they appreciate the safety and security they feel here. Sonia said, "In Honduras I went to bed afraid and would wake up every morning afraid." Her only son was killed by someone intent on stealing the shoes he was wearing. Ana's niece was beheaded by gang members. A man tried to rob and kill Oscar and in the process cut Oscar's hand with a machete.

I asked my friends what they liked least about life in the U.S., and Oscar could think of nothing because he loves "everything" about life here. He explained, "If you work—you live good. You make good money. Every day is a blessing for me. Life is so hard in Honduras." The other four interviewees said what they liked least about the U.S. was the racism they often experienced in their everyday lives from both white and Black Americans. While working in housekeeping in a hotel, Ana was pushed and shoved by coworkers. Sonia said she could not remember all the times she has experienced racism in the U.S., but one vivid example occurred at a small Mid-City grocery store when an American exclaimed, "What are all the wetbacks doing here?" Marta feels that during the Trump administration Americans "got permission" to speak negatively about Latinos. She was bewildered recently when two American women criticized her for speaking Spanish while she was interpreting for a friend.

THOUGHTS ON POSSIBILITY THAT CITIZENSHIP BILL WILL PASS

News about the U.S. Citizenship Act has been covered widely in Spanish language media. My friends' thoughts on the chances of the Biden Administration passing a law that would legalize their status and lead to citizenship varied wildly. Sonia thought there was an 80 percent probability, while Carlos gave it a five percent chance. Marta, who has been a vocal advocate for immigrants in her community for many years, was deeply pessimistic. She said there was "[Z]ero chance of [The U.S. Citizenship Act] passing... The country is too polarized... Look at what happened to the Republicans who voted to convict Trump... This is just showboating."

Marta believes, given the hyper-partisan nature of U.S. politics today, that supporters of the bill are expecting too much by

including a path to citizenship. She implored, "I have seen so many families devastated. I cry about it all the time... We just want a work permit... People just want a break... We are like birds with our wings clipped."

CONCLUSION

Despite the backlash that seven Republican senators, including Louisiana's Bill Cassidy, received from their party's leaders for their vote to convict former President Trump, many Americans were heartened by those senators' integrity and courage. Whether Congress is able to come together to pass immigration reform, which large majorities of voters in both parties support,⁷ will be a major test of our political system's ability to serve the common good. Passage also would be a strong affirmation of the kind of politics envisioned by Pope Francis: politics as "a lofty vocation, and one of the highest forms for charity," grounded in fraternity, solidarity, and relentless commitment to protecting the dignity of each human person.⁸

ENDNOTES

- 1 The U.S. Citizenship Act will allow Dreamers, TPS holders, and some farmworkers to apply for legal permanent residence (i.e. "green cards") immediately and for citizenship after three years. All other undocumented immigrants in the U.S. as of January 1, 2021, who pass background checks and come up-to-date on taxes can apply for temporary legal status that will last for five years and includes work authorization. Applicants could then apply for legal permanent residence. After a three year wait, one can then apply for citizenship. See White House. (2021, January 20). *FACT SHEET: President Biden Sends Immigration Bill to Congress as Part of His Commitment to Modernize our Immigration System*, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/20/fact-sheet-president-biden-sends-immigration-bill-to-congress-as-part-of-his-commitment-to-modernize-our-immigration-system/>.
- 2 To protect respondents' anonymity, I have changed their names.
- 3 Krogstad, J.M., Passel, J.S., and Cohn, D. (2019, June 12). Pew Research. *5 facts about illegal immigration in the U.S.* at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>
- 4 International Human Rights Law Clinic and the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley collaborated with the Payson Center for International Development and Technology Transfer of Tulane University to conduct a population-based study of the situation of construction workers in New Orleans in March 2006. Researchers found that 70 percent of the workers were U.S. citizens or permanent residents, five percent were foreigners with a work visa, and 25 percent were undocumented workers. See Fletcher, L., Phan, P., Stover, E., & Vinck, P. (2006, June). *Rebuilding after Katrina: A population-based study of labor and human rights in New Orleans*, at https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jc0909m#article_abstract.
- 5 After the passage of the last major immigration reform legislation in 1986—the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)—the socio-economic status of IRCA immigrants improved substantially as evidenced in higher wages, higher rates of home ownership, increased educational attainment, and dramatically reduced rates of poverty. See Paral, R., Wijewardena, M., & Ewing, W. (2009, November). *Economic progress via legalization: Lessons from the last legalization program*, Immigration Policy Center, at <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/economic-progress-legalization-lessons-last-legalization-program>.
- 6 Human Rights Watch. (2019, October 24). Honduras: Events of 2019. At <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/honduras>
- 7 Balara, V. (2017, September 28). *Fox News poll: 83 percent support pathway to citizenship for illegal [sic] immigrants*. At <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/fox-news-poll-83-percent-support-pathway-to-citizenship-for-illegal-immigrants>.
- 8 Pope Francis. (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium: On the joy of the Gospel*, 205.