

The other side of immigration raids

By Evelyn G. Aleman

As news reports of immigration raids throughout the country continue to make headlines and fuel the immigration debate, I am confronted with my own story and that of my mother – an emigrant from El Salvador.

In 1967, my mother entered the U.S. on a tourist visa. The oldest daughter of a middle-class family from San Salvador, she'd successfully convinced her parents to sponsor her visit to the United States, which – she'd assured them – would be brief. Unlike other undocumented immigrants who cross the border under perilous conditions, my mother arrived at LAX and was greeted by fellow Salvadorans. Like many undocumented immigrants, she truly believed that her desire to remain in this country of great opportunity - albeit illegally – coupled with a strong work ethic would outweigh any risks of deportation.

However, she would soon discover that integration meant more than a desire to work hard and prosper. Three years later, I was born in Hollywood, and six months later my mother's embroidery factory was raided.

As a young child living in Los Angeles, there was never any question of my nationality. My father emphasized the fact that my sisters and I were Americans and that they were naturalized citizens. My father would often say, "You have just as much right as anyone else to call yourself an American," and I strongly believed this.

I remember the excitement my parents felt when they were finally naturalized, but I also remember sitting in front of the television set and watching news about immigration raids and deportation. I remember my mother's mood change from her bubbly, rosy demeanor to one of anger and hurt. When I'd question her about this change, she'd push me away and tell me that I didn't need to know. I couldn't really make sense of this, and didn't learn of her experience until I was a teenager. I stored the story somewhere deep in my psyche for a time when I knew I would better understand the pain of her experience.

Back in December of 1970, my mother was caught working at the factory – along with several other women – in an INS raid. Only 6 months old, I was at home with my aunt, my mom's younger sister, who cared for me while Mom was away at work.

My mother later told me how during the raid she pleaded with immigration officers to allow her to return home for her baby, but that they did not seem to care. She was sent to what she described at the time as a detention center in downtown Los Angeles, and was subsequently moved to a detention center in Tijuana, Mexico, where she remained for a week, while my father desperately tried to locate her. When my mother finally found her, she was pale and had lost weight. My mother never forgot that experience, and although she went to become first a U.S. resident, then a naturalized citizen and an active voter, I

always got the impression that her feelings were mixed about this country, her host country, and ultimately, the country where she and her husband would someday be buried.

As for her children, my sister and I went on to graduate from college. I earned a postgraduate degree and established my own business. My sister went on to work in local government. We are both deeply involved in public service.

The raids I now read about remind me of my mother, and how much she sacrificed to ensure that we, as well as her family back home, would have better opportunities. I think about those mothers and fathers who are now being whisked away from their places of work, not knowing if they will see their children or who will care for them and about the great anxiety that they may feel. As a parent, my heart breaks to know that this is happening to our society, and, more importantly, that we allow such undemocratic, inhumane, and un-American policies under our watch.

I also think about the young men and women in our current education system who are talented and wish to make a positive impact in our communities, but cannot attend college because of their legal status. I often wonder when we will acknowledge their talent and courage, and help them achieve their dreams.

I think of all immigrants who have struggled in various ways to make the United States of America a strong country, a role model of unity for the world to follow – *E Pluribus Unum* – and how quickly we have forgotten the lessons that they have taught us throughout our history.

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