

War Vet's New Battle: His Wife's Deportation

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A disabled war veteran who deployed four times -- three times to Iraq and once to Korea -- and nearly lost his life serving the United States is now fighting a different battle altogether at home in Las Vegas.

James Courtney's wife, Sharon, is an undocumented Mexican immigrant who faces possible deportation. Sharon came to the United States from Juarez, Mexico, as a teenager and the two have been married for more than a dozen years. They have three young sons.

The couple recently joined immigration activists in Washington, D.C., to tell their story and urge lawmakers to take action to prevent the separation of families like theirs.

Sharon was awarded a one-year work visa in the early 2000s, then denied a green card based on a false claim of citizenship.

But James, who suffered a traumatic brain injury during his second deployment to Iraq that resulted in short-term memory loss and other difficulties, disputes that claim and said it has been "the kiss of death."

James said Sharon was returning to the United States from a trip to Mexico when she was 19 to see her mother and brother. She spoke very little English and the border patrol spoke very little Spanish, so communication was difficult. As Sharon recalls, she told them she was born in Juarez and that her city of residence was El Paso, Texas, where she lived at the time. But the border patrol agents marked that she claimed to be a citizen.

Sharon said she was then thrown into a nightmarish nine-hour ordeal in which she was laughed at and not allowed access to a phone to make a local call.

"I didn't say I was a U.S. citizen," she recalled. "I didn't! Whether they help me now or not, this was wrong."

U.S. Customs and Border Protection did not respond to a request for comment.

James was discharged from the military last year following a post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, an emotional situation made even more difficult by Sharon's undocumented status. She has no work permit and is unable to help support the family, which now depends on her husband's army retirement and disability benefits.

Sharon has received a voluntary deportation order and James said that now that he's no longer overseas he has more time to focus on fighting it.

"I just hope something gets done where she can get a green card where she can work legally and help with the finances," James said.

The idea of returning to Mexico as a family is unrealistic, James said. Juarez has been plagued by drug-fueled violence in recent decades, and Sharon is the only member of the family who speaks Spanish.

"I'm paid by U.S. tax dollar money," James added. "Why in the hell would I want to go spend it in Mexico?"

The couple spoke in Washington about their fear of being torn apart at the invitation of Nevada Rep. Steven Horsford, where their story caught the attention of lawmakers.

James said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) expressed sympathy and that Rep. Joe Heck (R-Nevada) seemed particularly eager to help.

Requests for comment were not returned by either lawmaker's office.

James and Sharon don't think that the pathway to citizenship being discussed as part of a comprehensive immigration reform package will come to fruition, but hope that something can be done to keep families together.

"If it passes, it's going to be a miracle," Sharon said. "We don't need to suffer. This is cruel, very cruel, especially for our kids."

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