

I Am Undocumented: A Face of Legal Immigration Gone Wrong

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Yes, I am white. Yes, I am highly educated with a successful business. And yes, I, too, am now an undocumented immigrant.

In July 2001, before the Sept. 11th attacks, my family left our home country of South Africa and came to the United States to open a branch of our international training company. Since my husband and I have advanced degrees, extensive business experience and were able to make a substantial financial investment in America, we were both granted what's called "L1 visas."

Our company, specializing in advanced reading & information management training skills, was a mature 25-year-old business that had clients in the banking, transport, education and government sectors. We soon discovered that average reading skills in America are less than competitive with other developed countries, and this strengthened our resolve to make a difference. Volunteering at our children's schools and at many non-profit organizations in our chosen city of Charlotte, North Carolina, became our new way of life. We totally immersed ourselves in our community, making lifelong friends and feeling more and more like Americans every day.

We established fundraising programs for community shelters and for the arts in Charlotte. We developed multinational cultural understanding and reconciliation awareness programs and programs to support AIDS awareness. And at the same time, we developed a specialist intelligence data analysis training course for the U.S. military and were soon commissioned to present this training at the Pentagon, NASA, Defense Intelligence Agency, US Air Force, Navy SEALs and the intelligence battalions of the US Marine Corps. This unique and exclusive proprietary intelligence data analysis program became essential to the defense of the nation and was described as saving American lives on the battlefield. My husband was awarded a 0205-Tactical Intelligence Officer "plank" by the Warrant Officers of the Marine Corps for his "contribution to the enhancement of the intelligence analysis capabilities of the USMC." Navy SEAL teams also benefited from this training and went on to terminate the nation's greatest enemy, Osama bin Laden, and to stage a series of daring and successful rescues around the world.

Yet today, after 10 years of living legally in America, we have become overstays -- "illegal immigrants" in the common derogatory vernacular. After building a successful business, buying a home, immersing ourselves in the community and educating our children to become contributing members of American society, we have been denied permanent residence and the U.S. military has been instructed to terminate our training because we are "illegal." We have become victims of a dysfunctional legal immigration system that is badly in need of reform.

Mine is the story of a family who did not flee their home country for a better life in the US. Neither are we refugees or destitute, but rather a family of privileged, educated, skilled individuals with two gifted children who believed they could contribute to the American Dream with their advanced reading skills training company and offer their own children a first world educational experience.

Instead, we've become victims of a legal immigration horror story of deception, criminal fraud, financial ruin, discrimination, pain, uncertainty, insecurity and devastating implications -- not only for this family's future, but for the future of legal immigration itself.

I am at a loss as to why this country would choose to stop this training, deemed "essential to the analytic capabilities of the US military" and which "is saving lives on the battlefield" rather than simply correcting an

immigration injustice. Or why, after 10 years of us paying taxes, buying a home and being exemplary citizens in every conceivable way, we are deemed unsuitable for permanent residence. It can only be described as a spectacular failure of an immigration system that is both dysfunctional and inhumane and in serious and urgent need of complete overhaul reform. And our story is not unique. There are thousands of entrepreneurial families in this predicament today. Many have chosen to slink away into the shadows and self-deport, leaving who knows how many U.S. citizens to join the ranks of the unemployed.

What kind of nation tolerates a 4.0-GPA high school student, identified as "talented" by the Duke Talent Identification Program, to be ripped out of a senior year at high school, or a gifted Dean's-list college senior to be forced into abandoning the last year of university without graduating? Yet after 10 years of education in the American education system, at taxpayer expense (yes, mine and yours!), this is the position both my children find themselves in. What sane nation pays to educate people before expelling them?

What humane country asks that a family lose their home, their livelihood, abandon their life-changing business activities and income to support and educate their children, and walk away from everything they've invested here over 10 years? One would think that the most difficult step should be to get into the U.S. in the first place and that permanent residence for contributing, tax-paying, property-owning and business-owning immigrants would be a natural follow-through. Yet it appears to be easier to enter America on a visa than to stay here with permanent residence. Is it a case of fleecing immigrants of their expertise and investment and then rejecting them once they have lesser "value" to the country?

A few months ago, I learned of the story of Jose Antonio Vargas and his media campaign, [Define American](#), which seeks to elevate how we talk about immigration. Elevation and conversation is sorely needed.

Even though I am now an undocumented-documented-immigrant, or if you prefer, an illegal-legal-immigrant, I love this country. It is my home. And I will not stand by and watch an immigration system destroy lives and families. While I still have an ounce of breath in me, it will be to see comprehensive immigration reform in this country -- that a more humane and functional system of immigration be introduced to benefit not only the country as a whole, but all immigrants at every level, of all racial and economic backgrounds.

Am I the face of a failed legal immigration system? Or perhaps the reason so many choose to come to AMERICA without papers?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dianne-e-stewart/immigration-reform-undocumented-immigrants_b_1435199.html