

Obama Immigration Order Comes Too Late for Some

Published June 17, 2012

Associated Press

Tegucigalpa, Honduras – Marlon Roberto Cortes was stocking shelves in the frozen food section of a suburban Boston supermarket when he was summoned to the back office.

An immigration officer was waiting for him and asked to see his ID, which he didn't have. The 20-year-old Honduran was told there was an order to deport him, and agents handcuffed and hauled him to a holding center. He was sent back to his native country in March without being able to say goodbye to his family.

Cortes missed by three months President Barack Obama's decision last week to allow hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants no older than 30 with high school degrees and no criminal history a chance to stay and work in the country. The president has said that as many as 800,000 young undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. could benefit from the change.

From Guatemala to Argentina, recently deported young people who had dreamed of becoming U.S. citizens reacted to Friday's announcement with a mix of frustration and sadness, but also relief that siblings left behind might now be able to stay without fear of deportation.

"I am a person who studied and I wish I could aspire to far greater things," said Cortes. "I'm sad."

"The country in which I could have had the chance to get ahead is the United States," he added. "I did everything I had to do to get that and I don't understand why they wouldn't let me ... I feel more American than Honduran."

Yannick Grijalba, an 18-year-old Guatemalan with fluent English who was deported on Wednesday after living 11 years in Northern California, was equally frustrated.

"When I was watching the news today and heard, I just couldn't believe it," he said last week in Guatemala City. "I had to turn the TV off."

It's unclear how many deported immigrants just missed their chance like Cortes because there are no statistics that classify them by age or education. The United States deported 390,000 people in 2010, the last recorded year. But one can spot the young and recently deported on Latin America's streets, where they sometimes fumble with their Spanish and have trouble fitting in.

To Cortes, it was like being thrown a life preserver too late and he says his future looks bleak.

On his first day back in Tegucigalpa, the young man with braces and hair gelled straight back had to wake up before 5 a.m. to work with his grandparents selling baleadas, wheat tortillas stuffed with beans and meat, outside a hospital.

He said he has been stopped a couple of times by men on the streets of Honduras, which has a gang problem and among the world's highest homicide rates. "I don't even know the words, the rules and the signals they make," he said. "I am afraid to be on the streets alone. And if someone says I am a gringo, it is very dangerous for me because they will think I have money and will assault me."

Cortes noted that he graduated from a Chelsea, Massachusetts high school and would have met all the criteria of the new U.S. policy, which says that the immigrant must have been brought to the U.S. before they turned 16, be no older than 30 and have been in the country for at least five continuous years.

Now back in Honduras, Cortes calls his mother's cellphone every week or so to talk with her and her younger sister in the United States, and tries to keep in touch with them and others on Facebook.

"I keep up with all of my high school friends through Facebook," said Cortes. "We miss each other very much. I don't know if we are ever going to see each other again."

In Grijalba's case, his family flew from Guatemala to New York City with tourist visas in 2000.

The family later moved to Fairfield, California where Grijalba became an honor-roll student and competed on the wrestling team at a local high school. Halfway through his junior year, he got into a fist fight with a boy from school over a girl. It led to an assault charge in juvenile court.

Maibe Casalins, a Miami-based immigration attorney, said that someone like Grijalba could still qualify because juvenile records are not considered a criminal conviction under immigration laws. U.S. immigration courts give wide leeway to prosecutors and agents in determining whether an individual has the right to stay.

Grijalba kept on studying at the juvenile detention center and was hoping to graduate so he could go to a community college and earn a degree as a mechanic. Like some of the other deported young Latin Americans, Grijalba believes that the chance for a good education is among the most important things he has lost.

"I would then get a job, save and go on to a university and study architecture," Grijalba said of his earlier plans.

Instead, immigration officers deported him weeks before he finished his classes.

Jobless and with no money, Grijalba is now back in Guatemala City, a place he barely recognizes, living downtown with an aunt, two uncles and a cousin.

"Everything is just really different here," he said. "My uncle took me around the city and everything here looks rundown with cracks on the walls and the dogs are so skinny."

"There are also guards with shotguns everywhere," he added. "Yesterday I had to go get Guatemalan documents, there were even guys with shotguns there. You just don't see that in a DMV in California," said Grijalba, referring to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Grijalba was noticeably awkward in what is now a foreign country for him from the moment he stepped off the plane at a Guatemalan Air Force base. As the other deportees scrambled off the aircraft, Grijalba had the measured saunter of a high school kid in his baggy pants and Air Jordans as pre-recorded marimba music blasted from airport speakers. Foreign Ministry officials then gave him and the other deportees their first meal back home: a bread roll and a paste of refried black beans, along with a juice box and a speech about how they will always be welcome in their native Guatemala.

Grijalba said he can't pursue a college degree in the country of his birth because he needs to work. His best bet, he said, is to apply for a job at a call center because English is his main language.

In Argentina, 22-year-old Nahuel Tedesco wishes Obama's decision would have come two years ago when he was studying in Florida.

His family came to the United States after Argentina defaulted on its debt and its currency devaluated in late 2001 and early 2002. The economic crisis caused a spike in violent crime and Tedesco's father lost his job with postal service, so the family decided it was time to leave.

They settled in Miami, where his father and his brother worked in construction and restaurants, and his mother earned money as a nanny. Nahuel was 12.

"It was a great time. Those were the best years of my life," Tedesco said.

His other family members were all deported back to Argentina in 2009. Enrolled at Miami Dade College, Tedesco chose to stay and continue with his classes.

But months later, Tedesco received a notice from immigration officials ordering him to appear in court for deportation proceedings. He was only able to extend his stay a couple of weeks longer to complete his degree in computer software engineering before leaving the country in May 2010.

"I would have liked for things to have turned out differently, for the benefits to have been implemented earlier," he said.

Back in Buenos Aires, Tedesco said it was difficult to adapt to a place where he hadn't lived since he was 12. He worked at a call center where he was eventually laid off after it closed. "It took me several months to realize what was going on," he said.

Like Tedesco and other recently deported immigrants who spent much of their childhood in the United States, Stephany Ramírez also sought work at a call center because of her English skills.

Although she had lived in San Diego since the sixth grade, Ramírez voluntarily returned to Mexico last year and settled in Tijuana to earn some money. She said she was tired of living with the fear of deportation and didn't qualify for financial aid to pay for tuition at an American college.

Still, she'd hoped to return to San Diego later to rejoin her family and continue her education. "It's extremely hard to be here by myself," Ramírez said.

If Ramírez had stayed north of the border she could have benefited from the new rules, but because she wasn't in the United States when Obama made the announcement on Friday she no longer qualifies.

"It would have been a lot easier to continue my studies and be with my family," she said.

A disappointed Ramirez however said she was happy that her younger sister, 18-year-old Montserrat Ramírez, stayed in San Diego and may benefit from the new policy.

"I am happy there is some hope for her," she said.

In Honduras, Cortes said he was confused when he heard the news last week about the new U.S. policy. He initially thought he could go back to the U.S. and apply, but was then told that was not the case.

His sadness was tempered, however, by relief that his younger sister and others could benefit from the new policy.

"They don't have to go through the ordeal I have," he said. "It could have saved me."

Reported by Adriana Gomez Licon and Alberto Arce of the Associated Press.

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