

Walking a mile in an immigrant's moccasins

Ben Reed was once a conservative shock jock in his native Idaho. But meeting and falling in love with a Mexican national brought about a change in philosophy. They now live in Mexico.

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The wedding was all set. The bride would travel from Mexico City to Rexburg, Idaho, where she would walk down the aisle of the Mormon temple in her white dress. She would marry that crazy guy from the radio who had been courting her.

Then it all fell apart, here in Los Angeles, in the bowels of the Tom Bradley International Terminal at LAX.

The bride had to go through immigration in L.A. before catching her connecting flight to Idaho. She thought her papers were in order. So when the immigration agent asked her the purpose of her visit to the United States, she responded truthfully, "I'm going to get married."

Before she knew it, she had been deported and was on the next plane back to Mexico.

Deyanira Escalona's Idaho wedding had to be canceled. This pushed her fiance, the already excitable Benjamin Reed, nearly over the edge.

"They treated her very poorly," Reed said of the agents at LAX. Among other things, he said, they took wedding invitations they found in her purse and handled them as if they were evidence of a criminal conspiracy. "They treated her like a dog."

I first met Ben Reed, a veteran Idaho radio DJ, while reporting a story for The Times nine years ago. Ben is not someone you easily forget. He's a former Mormon missionary and fluent Spanish speaker who used to be a conservative talk show host. Among Spanish radio listeners in southern Idaho he's known by his on-air persona as "*El Chupacabras*," or the goat vampire.

Reed once was a devout Reagan Republican. Then his corner of southern Idaho filled up with Spanish-speaking people. He fell in love with his new neighbors. They were emotional people who always seemed ready to hug him. He became addicted to their music and their food. And he fell hard for Deyanira too.

All of this has led him to put on "the moccasins of the immigrant," Ben told me. Now nothing looks quite as simple as it used to. Love and empathy will do that, which is why some people think love and empathy are as dangerous to America as the swine flu.

"I've been radicalized by this whole experience," Ben told me.

Before his wedding, he had consulted with attorneys and immigration officials in Idaho. "I was doing everything according to the letter of the law," he told me. "I was told that since she had lived in the U.S. legally, and since she had a tourist visa, we wouldn't have any problems fixing up her papers."

Don't feel bad, Ben -- no one can make sense of our immigration bureaucracy. It's a cruel machine of contradictory rules and arbitrary decision-making that routinely tears marriages and families apart.

You can serve your country in battle and still find yourself shafted by the system. That's what's happening to Jack Barrios, the Iraq war veteran profiled last month by my colleague Teresa Watanabe, whose wife faces deportation because her parents brought her to the U.S. illegally from Guatemala when she was 6.

Then there's Nicole Hernandez, a white, U.S.-born mother of four, who recently packed up her Ohio family's belongings in a horse trailer and moved with her kids to rural Mexico. You can see her saying goodbye to the U.S. in a series of [videos](#) on the Internet.

Nicole's husband, Alec, the father of her children, applied for legal residency but was denied despite being married to Nicole for nine years. They too hired a lawyer, filled out reams of paperwork and followed the instructions of immigration officials. "This is bull," Nicole's cousin Courtney declares on one video. "He's a great man. A great provider."

Greatness, hard work and following the rules won't necessarily save you from the cruelty of the immigration bureaucracy.

Ben Reed learned this the hard way. Eventually, he was forced, like Nicole Hernandez, to choose between his fiance and his country.

"I'll always love my *chiquita*," he said. "She is my life. Living separate was never an option. We were going to find a way to be together."

Over the years, love has often changed the way Ben sees things.

When I first met Ben Reed in 2000, he was railing against the Clinton administration on an English-language radio station in Rupert, Idaho.

He grew up in Idaho with solid Republican values. Catching a glimpse of Ronald Reagan at the Idaho Falls airport in 1980 was one of the highlights of his childhood.

In Rupert, he juggled his English and Spanish radio gigs for a while. Then he got to know the immigrant working people of southern Idaho. When he got sick, he said, only his Spanish-speaking listeners showed up at his bedside.

"I started to ask myself, 'Who am I?' " Ben told me over the phone last week. "And the answer was I'd much rather be *El Chupacabras* than be Ben Reed the conservative shock jock -- that wasn't me."

Ben changed, and so did his radio style.

When immigration authorities conducted local raids, he confronted them on the air. When a local high school gym teacher confiscated a student's Mexican flag on Cinco de Mayo, he organized a protest. He told his listeners to wear the colors of Mexico's flag to school. "I nearly lost my job over that," he said.

Ben, now 39, met Deyanira when she was an exchange student at Brigham Young University-Idaho in Rexburg.

Before their scheduled wedding in 2007, she returned to Mexico to see her family. At LAX, she was told that returning for her wedding without having obtained a "fiance visa" constituted fraud. She was deported and her tourist visa revoked. Ben tried for a year to get her papers sorted out. Then he moved to Mexico.

"He gave up everything to be with me," Deyanira, 34, told me over the phone from Queretaro, Mexico.

Ben and Deyanira were married in December in the picturesque town of San Miguel de Allende. These days, like Nicole Hernandez and others, Ben is an American living with a Mexican spouse in immigration exile.

He says he's never been happier. His old Spanish-speaking friends still listen to him every day in Idaho's Magic Valley, because he still hosts his Rupert radio show via the Internet.

He applied for, and quickly received, Mexico's equivalent of a green card.

"Now, I'm an immigrant too," he told me over the phone. "Frankly, it's an experience more *gabachos* should have," he added, using Mexican slang for white Americans.

Ben has those immigrant moccasins firmly on his feet now. Sometimes I wish I had a pair or two I could lend out.