

‘We are here illegally’: Texas Baptist family describes life as undocumented aliens_12405

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Texas Baptist family describes life as undocumented aliens

By Ken Camp

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AUSTIN-Ernesto serves as a deacon at a Hispanic Baptist church in Austin. His wife, Maria, works in various ministries at the church. And like 1.1 million other people in Texas and more than 9.3 million in the United States, they are in this country illegally.



U.S. Border Patrol Agent Ricardo Marin looks along the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Marin and his partner, U.S. Border Patrol agent Jesse Arellano, a 20-year veteran, patrol the river at different times of the day looking for illegals and drug smugglers. (Photo by Brad Doherty/Brownsville Herald)

Ernesto—who asked that his last name not be revealed—first left his home in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas more than seven years ago.

He and Maria could have scraped by on his 1,800-pesos-a-month pension, but their daughter dreamed of attending university in Monterrey and studying to become an orthodontist.

To make that dream a reality, he entered the United States on a tourist visa and started working in construction, lawn service—any job he could find where an employer demanded hard manual labor but didn't ask questions about legal residency.

"I needed to work," he said through an interpreter. "I thank the Lord he has given me the strength to do any kind of work."

Initially, he was able to travel readily back and forth between Texas and Mexico. But in 2000, his tourist visa was cancelled when authorities discovered he had a Texas driver's license.

To cross back into Texas, he enlisted the service of "coyotes"-smugglers who illegally transport undocumented aliens into the United States.

After paying a fee, the smuggler gave Ernesto the phone number of a contact whom he called when he reached Diaz Ordaz, across the border from Mission. That person helped him and several other people cross the Rio Grande in a large rubber raft.

Once they crossed the river, Ernesto and seven other Mexicans were led through a wooded area to a designated spot where they met their driver. He transported them an agreed-upon distance in the back of an 18-wheel tractor-trailer rig, and then they were transferred to smaller trucks for their journey to various upstate destinations.



Migrants loaded into Grupo Beta pickups that were to transport them to bus stations after walking across the Gateway International Bridge, from Brownsville to Matamoros, Mexico. Photo by Brad Doherty

That arduous trek in 2000 marked the first of several times Ernesto entered the United States as coyotes' human cargo.

"The problem is that it's important to have money, so when you want to move, you have the money to pay someone," he said. "If you have good money, you get good coyotes."

By the same token, he added, immigrants know if they use some less-expensive coyotes, they risk being treated less humanely.

Ernesto began a regular routine—sending part of each paycheck back to Mexico to support his family and saving part to pay a smuggler so he could re-enter the United States after his next visit home.

Sometimes, the high cost of coyotes and increased security along the border after the 9/11 terrorist attacks combined to make those visits infrequent. On one occasion, Ernesto and Maria did not see each other for two years.

"You miss your partner," he said. "When I did go home, I would use the money I had saved here, and we would take a vacation at the beach."

Finally, in February last year, Maria joined Ernesto in Austin. For the last four years, he has worked with the same company on a drywall construction crew.


Many undocumented workers in Texas enter the United States from Mexico legally, but they overstay their visas. Nationally, 25 to 40 percent of illegal aliens are believed to fit that category. Photo by Brad Doherty

Ernesto said it would be "wonderful" to have papers where he could travel freely back to Mexico. He lost his pension from his former employer in Mexico because he was not there to fill out the necessary paperwork. Ernesto and Maria see their daughter only when she can afford to come visit them.

"She can come to us, but we cannot go to her," he said. But for now, he said: "I feel calm about it. We're trusting in the Lord, and we're not afraid."

When asked what he would want Texas Baptists to know about him and his family, he responded simply: "We are here illegally. If we could obtain legal residency, it would be so much better. But we are here. And we are Texas Baptists, too."



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