



BONDS BEYOND BOUNDARIES: Mothers And Daughters Separated By Immigration

By Linda A. Firestone, Ph.D.

Doing what is necessary

Antonia Norma Medina (lovingly called Norma) is a 51-year-old mother of four, grandmother of three (soon to be four), who legally emigrated from Nicaragua in 1996. Life in Nicaragua was growing ever more desperate and she wanted to ensure a better future for her children. That meant educating them.

The year she left home to travel to the States, Norma's children were: Cassandra, 16, Katia, 17, Lucrecia, 18, and Leonardo, 19. They lived at home with their grandmother, Norma's mom. Leaving was profoundly difficult. "It was very sad. I missed everything, their birthdays, their high school graduations. I dealt with it the best I could. I spoke to them on the phone as often as I could. I didn't have a lot of money. My youngest daughter had a very difficult time. She became pregnant while

I was here. I felt guilty," she explains through an interpreter.

Norma, after an 11-year wait, finally received her legal residency and was able to visit her home and her children for the first time. "The world was full of tears," she reflects. Years later, her children are professionals. Cassandra and Lucrecia are both dentists, Katia is a lawyer and Leonardo is a businessman, but still they cannot support themselves in Nicaragua.

Norma remains close to her children, but the toll of all these years alone has left its mark. She feels angry at the loss, the sacrifice, and loneliness that have defined her life in America. Still, she states, "I did what I had to do."

Norma was lucky, it only took her 11 years to legalize her status. Documented, undocumented, many who come here live in the shadows of society, marginalized, separated from the world around them by fear. Deportation

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tion is always a possibility until legal residency papers are received.

Bonds strained

Looking back upon the last 12 years of her life, Lucrecia Quiroz, Norma's eldest daughter reflects, "Never in my wildest thoughts did it occur to me that so many years would pass. Within 6 months of my mother leaving, I lost my best friend (my mother), my father abandoned the family and went to make a life with other women, I became pregnant and gave birth early, my boyfriend left to find work, bills became impossible to pay. Still we, my brother and sisters, became professionals and yet it is difficult to make a living here. My mother is not contemplating her return. She lives a difficult life in solitude from her family and her grandchildren, desperate about the future, no health care insurance or pension for retirement." Trauma of this separation takes a profound toll.

Since 1989, Claudia Saul-Sadler, a Spanish-speaking immigrant from Argentina and a licensed mental health clinician, has been working with immigrant populations in New York City, Boston, Miami and now West Palm Beach. Helping those immigrants at risk (abused, neglected, abandoned)

here in the States, she also works with immigration attorneys writing psycho/social reports.

To describe the emotional realities of mothers and daughters, Ms. Saul-Sadler put forth two scenarios. In both scenarios, the mother can either have entered legally or illegally. In the first instance, like Norma's case, a mother decides to leave her children and come to America. She sacrifices her physical and emotional bond for the sake of her children's well-being. Among this group of women, Saul-Sadler has found "a tremendous sense of guilt. They feel judged as bad mothers: how can they love their children and leave them?" Without their children, Saul-Sadler continues, "The goal is to work, work, work, and that justifies the guilt." Money is regularly sent home but the pain and guilt are not eased.

"I worked with a mother and daughter who were separated for several years. The mother could not stand being apart from her daughter and wanted her here. The daughter was experiencing severe separation anxiety: nightmares, stomachaches, all the clinical symptoms. After 12 years of the daughter's arrival, the two of them still sleep together at night. The trauma of

that initial separation continues," Saul-Sadler adds.

In the second scenario, a mother brings her children with her or they are born in this country. She quickly finds herself in a marriage because she is scared and wants to feel safe. But many of these relationships become abusive. Fear, powerlessness, and low self-esteem dominate these women's lives. "They don't understand they have options. The children witness the violence. Their role model here is a woman with low self-esteem, depressed. The children become resentful of the mother for taking the abuse," explains Saul-Sadler. The woman stays because she fears deportation and is ignorant of her rights.

In general, the children of uneducated, non-English speaking immigrant mothers become "Parentified." Children assimilate easily. They help their mothers negotiate the world—they take on the parental role. But adjustment, Saul-Sadler believes, is also dependent upon culture, socio/economic status, and educational background.

What will become of the children

Aileen Josephs, a Spanish-speaking immigrant, an immigration attorney



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and an activist living in West Palm Beach says, “I deal with human beings who are suffering too much because immigration laws make it difficult for people to have normal lives. We have a lot of children who come here to work. They come when they are 13 or 14 years old. The sadness is too much.” One of her clients, now 24, suffers from alcoholism.

“We have child labor here.” There is a provision to help children at risk get their green cards. But since 911 everything has changed. Now, Ms. Josephs states, “In dependency court the judge states he will call Border Patrol. That is how we treat children in this country. When you give a green card to a child, when you welcome them into the country, it makes a huge difference. They go on to integrate,

speak English, and hold down positions of responsibility.”

Children desperate to be with their mothers attempt to cross into the country daily. Mothers risk everything to be reunited with their children – often women and girls are raped, kidnapped, or murdered during the crossing, Josephs explains.

Sister Rachel Sena, Director of the Maya Ministry and Pastoral Maya for the Diocese of Palm Beach County who works with a large Guatemalan/Mayan community, states calmly, “More children are making the journey here to the States because they long to be with their mother or father and they get lost or killed along the way. We had a mom who could not bare the separation from her daughter and went back to get her. All we know is that she was killed,” says Sister Rachel.

But what of the children born here? What of those young American citizens whose mothers are illegal (whether applications have been made or not)? The anxiety created by the potential separation of mother and daughter is palpable. “Once the child reaches 8 years of age, they begin to understand what is at stake,” explains Sister Rachel. “The anxiety of the child increases. They grow scared and have

nightmares. They were born here but the legal process (for the mom) takes years,” she states.

In reality, Sister Rachel explains, the authorities have no policy on what happens with these American children. “This deportation piece is hurting our families and the future of our country. Youth is about hope and idealism and these children know that if their mothers are deported they are going to have to start a new life. That is a tragedy. The system is broken.”

What defines our humanity?

Josephs argues that the problem with immigration reform is racism. “I regret to say it, but this is one of the ugly times in American history. I am sorry,” she adds, “but it is. I have heard that of the 12 million illegal immigrants 70% are Hispanic. It is not uncommon when there is a mass migration of a specific group of people that there is a negative reaction to it.”

Sister Rachel concurs with Josephs, “it is about xenophobia. We don’t like to name it, but it is. We do not like people who do not speak English. World migration is now a fact!”

Without arguing about racism, the system still fails. Papers are routinely lost and applicants must resubmit sometimes three or four times before action is taken. One of Sister Rachel’s staff members is 25 years old. She came to this country with her mother as an infant. Upon her 24th birthday she finally received her citizenship papers. Even Ms. Saul-Sadler indicates that her application for citizenship was lost for two years. One’s life is put on hold.

Our country, built by immigrants, is steeped in a tradition based upon family. Yet, we tear families apart sometimes permanently, sometimes for decades. Can we continue to speak about immigration only in terms of numbers? If we are hardened to the emotional realities of our future generation can we still consider ourselves a morally righteous society? The quality of our society and the expression of our humanity are reflected in our ability to deal with our immigrant population. Ultimately, we will all suffer the consequences. M&D