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The Heartache of an Immigrant Family

By SONIA NAZARIO

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LOS ANGELES — WHEN we talk about immigration to America, we tell a hopeful story about courage and sacrifice. But that story obscures the fact that, especially for the poor, immigration is often a traumatizing event, one that tears families apart.

Consider the experience of one family, originally from Honduras. In 1989, Lourdes Pineda was the single mother of a 5-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl. She sold tortillas, plantains and used clothes door to door, but barely earned enough to feed her children, and feared not being able to send them to school past the sixth grade. So she made the painful decision to leave them behind in Honduras, and found work in the United States as a nanny, taking care of other people’s children.

Her daughter went to live with her maternal grandmother, her son — Luis Enrique Motiño Pineda — with his paternal grandmother. Enrique, whose story I followed for a book, was devastated. He was passed from relative to relative, left wondering, didn’t his mother love him enough to be with him? In 2000, when he was 16, he set off to find her. It took him eight attempts to cross through Mexico and into the United States — a journey of 122 days and 12,000 miles.

Enrique had left behind someone of his own: a girlfriend, María Isabel Carias Durón, whom he later learned was pregnant. She followed Enrique north a few years later, leaving their daughter, Katerin Jasmín, behind. Enrique was determined that his daughter not endure the long separation he had faced, so when Jasmín was 4, he sent for her to come to Jacksonville, Fla., where the family had established a home.

In the decade after Enrique came to the United States, more migrants arrived than at any time in the nation’s history, fueling a backlash. From 2005 to 2010, nearly a thousand laws were passed by State Legislatures addressing illegal immigration. In 2008, the federal government told all police departments to turn over any unlawful migrants they arrested to federal immigration authorities, a program called Secure Communities. A result: deportations nearly doubled between fiscal 2006 and 2012 to more than 409,000 a year.

And so immigrant families are being separated again, this time in reverse. Parents are being deported to Mexico and Central America, away from United-States-born children.

About 200,000 parents of children who are American citizens were deported between 2010 and 2012, and 5,000 parentless children are now in foster care because their mother or father was detained or deported. An analysis by the Applied Research Center estimates that more than 15,000 children would join them by 2016 if record numbers of deportations continued.

On Dec. 26, 2011, Enrique was partying with friends at a motel when police officers arrived. He had an outstanding arrest warrant for not paying a ticket for driving without a license. (All but 11 states prohibit unlawful immigrants from obtaining a driver’s license.) Enrique was arrested and handed over to federal immigration authorities to be deported. María Isabel was three months pregnant with their second child.

On a Sunday afternoon nearly a year later, Enrique’s mother, Lourdes, arrived at the jail with her grandchildren: Jasmín, then 11 years old, and the 3-month-old baby, Daniel Enrique. I sat with them before video screen No. 9 in a cinder-block visitation stall. The image of Enrique in an orange jumpsuit appeared on the screen.

Jasmín scooted her chair closer, and picked up the receiver to talk. Lourdes lifted Daniel Enrique, with chubby cheeks and tufts of black hair, up to the screen. “Say ‘Hello, Papi,’ ” Jasmín said to her brother. Enrique smiled at his son. “I am your father,” he said. “How is my boy?” Enrique had never been allowed to cradle his son. Later, Enrique told me that when he thought about him, he could feel his arms ache. If he were deported, he agonized, would both his children grow up without their father?

There are huge benefits to migration: mothers who go north are able to send money home so their children can eat and go to school. But there are consequences, too: many of these children deeply resent their mothers for leaving. They feel abandoned, and disproportionately join gangs or get pregnant, searching for the love they feel they missed.

The United States is spending billions on walls that don’t really keep migrants out (a University of California, San Diego, study showed that 97 percent of migrants who want to cross the border eventually get through), and on locking up and deporting people, many of whom return. Border enforcement, guest worker programs and pathways to citizenship haven’t addressed the problem. Instead they have sealed in many migrants who would have preferred to circle back home, attracted temporary workers who never left, and legalized migrants who then brought relatives illegally, causing the number of unlawful migrants to grow.

We can prevent this pain, and slow the flow of migrants permanently, only by addressing the “push” factors that propel migrants, especially women, to leave in the first place — and by helping families like Enrique’s avoid the heartache that his mother’s exodus began a quarter-century ago.

We can start by creating opportunities for women in just four countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, which send three-quarters of all undocumented migrants here. The United States could increase aid to those countries to improve education for girls, which would lower birthrates. It could finance or promote microloans to help women start job-generating businesses. It could gear trade policies to give clear preferences to goods from these four countries. And it could work with hometown associations — groups of immigrants in the United States who want to help the towns they came from — to coordinate a percentage of the tens of billions of dollars that immigrants send home to Latin America each year toward investing in job-creating enterprises. (One Mexican hometown association helped build a factory in Oaxaca, which has employed many would-be immigrants.)

This targeted economic development would cost much less than the billions — $18 billion each year — we currently dole out for immigration enforcement.

For too long, American immigration policy has ensured access to cheap, compliant workers. This has helped spur our economy, but has come at a great cost to taxpayers, as well to the immigrants themselves. We must demand a different approach, one in line with the goal of keeping families intact.

In August, after a total of 14 months in jail, Enrique received a miracle: a visa to stay in the United States legally, thanks to two lawyers, Sui Chung and Michael Vastine, who agreed to represent him pro bono and tirelessly fought his case. Jasmín and María Isabel obtained similar visas two months earlier. Enrique will not be torn from his family.

But imagine the suffering they would have been spared, if Lourdes had never had to come here in the first place.