

“I was so scared”: Huron student whose undocumented father was deported tells her story

By Kaitlyn Sabb and Julie Heng

315,943 immigrants were deported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2015.

One of them was the father of a Huron student.

It happened the summer before the student’s freshman year. She and her brothers were building a new treehouse in the backyard. Her dad was heading to Home Depot to get some more wood when he returned to the house suddenly—with a plainclothes stranger.

“My dad tells me, go call your mom and put her on the phone, and without hesitation I call my mom and put her on the phone,” she said. Her mom, like her and her two siblings, was a U.S. citizen, but her father was undocumented.

A couple minutes later, a police car pulled up, and a woman with short pink hair stepped out, speaking Spanish.

“They said his tail light was out,” the Huron student said. “My dad was starting to get a little upset [and] they put him in handcuffs. Everything happened so fast. I didn't have time to process what was going on, even though I knew, in the very back of my head, [that] this could be it.”

Her father was brought to the Monroe County Jail.

“The way they [took him into custody] was in a super dirty way,” she said. “They said they had a deportation order, [but] the lawyer didn’t find a deportation order until one came in the mail a week and a half later...And when we went back to check the car, the tail lights were working perfectly fine.”

Her family tried to secure his release and clear his record. Working with an immigration and criminal defense lawyer, they worked to remove multiple charges, including identity theft, crossing the border multiple times and drug trafficking.

But after three weeks, they ran out of time and money to afford a lawyer. Her father was deported back to Mexico soon after.

Not the only one

Vox reported in February that daily arrests and detainee populations have increased since Trump took office in 2016. Recent ICE reports indicate that 158,581 administrative arrests (arrests of an alien for a civil violation of U.S. immigration laws) were made in the 2018 fiscal year. That's about 434 each day—the highest number since 2014. The report states that 66 percent of those arrested were convicted criminals and 21 percent were pending criminal charges.

Local policies in Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County

In 2017, Washtenaw County's Board of Commissioners wrote "A Resolution Asserting Washtenaw County's Support for Our Immigrant Community," seeking to "proactively counter the negative effects of a hostile immigration enforcement environment by ensuring that families are more stable, civil rights are protected, and all residents have equitable access to public services."

Washtenaw County "[r]oad patrol does not ask for immigration status or papers," according to Derick Jackson, Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office Director for Community Information. Local law enforcement does not ask about immigration or enforce immigration laws.

A 2014 report from the ACLU states that "civil immigration arrests, just like criminal arrests, must comply with the Fourth Amendment." That means that the only time ICE officers can enter or check houses is if they have a court-issued warrant.

However, Jackson did add that when someone is in jail, if a warrant is present, local police will detain a suspect until ICE arrives.

"They ripped open our mattresses"

The first time this Huron student had a confrontation with ICE, the officers did have a warrant, though they did not reveal it immediately. It was back when she lived in Detroit. She was five years old at the time, about to watch a movie with her younger brothers, when someone started banging insistently on the door.

“In a matter of seconds they busted my door open,” she said. “It was almost like a war was happening at my house—there were these huge guns, guys with big helmets, heavy armor, bulletproof vests. First three, then five, then two of them. I was on my knees and the man put a gun to me, my mother, and my brother...in his baby carriage.”

Through the window, she caught a glimpse of her father being pushed against a car hood, handcuffed.

“We heard them literally knock down the dresser,” she said. “They broke the walls wherever the [police] dogs sniffed something. They checked everything, looked through everything...Then they showed my mom the warrant...My mom didn’t understand English so they were yelling. People [were] coming out from the auto shop [next door]. I remember my dogs barking. Everything was so, so loud.”

Rights for undocumented migrants

That first time her father was arrested and detained, her mother was able to secure his release using citizenship processing documents as proof.

Monica Andrade-Fannon, attorney and legal fellow for Michigan’s ACLU branch, said that immigrants in Michigan can learn about their rights in a variety of ways.

“[O]ne way is through our local partners at MIRC who currently have a preparedness guide for families,” Andrade-Fannon said. “The guide describes what families can do during a raid, if immigration officials come to their home, work, or if they are approached in a public place. The guide also includes documents that immigrant family members should have ready in case of an emergency.”

The crimes and civil penalties of entering and staying undocumented

Living in the U.S. undocumented is technically not a crime, but crossing the border by avoiding or misleading immigration officials. U.S. Code § 1325 describes entry without inspection (EWI) as a federal misdemeanor.

Of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S., most enter the country with legal visas but stay past their visa deadlines. A study by the Center for Migration Studies of New York concludes that visa overstays “significantly exceeded illegal border crossings during each of the last seven years.” 62 percent were overstays and 38 percent were EWIs.

Risking it all for family

Her father was an EWI.

“My dad had a lot of dreams,” she said. Her father was the middle child of 12 siblings. “My dad would always tell me that it made him mad that [in Mexico] he’d work sunrise to sunset for nothing. Sometimes they were lucky if they had enough meat for everybody.”

So her father paid a “coyote,” a person who helps smuggle migrants from Mexico, who dropped him off near the border. From there, he carried his few possessions through the extreme heat and cold of the desert. Swam through a river. Made his way to LA.

“When a regular teenage student gets a minimum wage of \$10 an hour, works three days a week from 4 to 10 p.m. and gets their paycheck every two weeks, they receive roughly \$360,” she said. “That’s enough to feed a family of 3-4 [in Mexico] for a month.”

Once her father saved up enough money, “he helped the rest of his siblings cross.”

“It’s not just feelings of sadness”

“I couldn’t [tell his story] without crying, at first,” the student said. “My mom started the [citizenship] process with my dad since before I was born I am turning 18 in March. Four years ago he was deported, and he still continues to be in process.”

A brief note on our immigration feature

At Huron, a spectrum of students represent different immigration statuses: natural-born citizens, permanent residents, citizens with undocumented parents, new citizens... The Ann Arbor Public Schools enroll students regardless of their immigration status. The main purpose of this immigration feature is to objectively reflect how this issue is both multidimensional and close to us.