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My Life As an Illegal

You've heard enough from the politicians and the activists, the demagogues and the bleeding hearts. Here's my story. I only wish I could put my name on it. *By Immigrant X*

As told to [John Spong](#)

THE WORD WE USE WITH OURSELVES is *mojado*. It means "wetback." Or *inmigrante ilegal*. "Illegal immigrant." But usually we say "wetback." I don't think that's bad or good. That's what they used to call the people a long time ago who used to cross the river. I know those old people, ones who used to come to work here every year, for six months or seven months, and then go back. I even know some guys who are still doing it, old guys, every year. But I've been here for sixteen years now, since I was sixteen years old, and I have been illegal the whole time.

It has helped that I speak good English. When I got here, I knew words like "table" and "chicken," stuff like that, but when there was no chicken on the table, I was in trouble. You have to learn English if you want to communicate, to earn more money. I went to school, but not to learn English. Maybe I learned it watching TV, reading newspapers.

It also helped that I'm *güero*. I have clear skin and green eyes, like my four brothers. That's because my dad, who worked as a laborer in our village near Guadalajara until he retired, has green eyes. I think he has some Spanish in him. And my mom, who used to own a restaurant, I guess she's *pura mexicana*, but she has clear skin. Now, even my wife calls me *güero*.

My wife is illegal too, and we have been living in Austin for thirteen years. She thinks I'm okay here because I look white, but she gets scared that she might get sent back. She's got darker skin and her English is not as good and she's afraid the *migra* is going to catch her. There were some rumors a couple weeks ago about Immigration being in stores watching people, like at the H-E-B near our house. So for those days, it was me going to the grocery store because I was scared that something would happen to her. We have three kids who were all born here, who are all American citizens. Even if my wife and I are illegal, they have a right to be here. But if she gets thrown out, who's going to be with the kids? Who's going to be with me?

So we have to watch out, keep an eye out. And we have always tried to do everything right. I pay Social Security tax every week, and I pay income tax every year. I have a driver's license, and I always drive with insurance, inspection, and registration. I don't

want to do anything but to become legal and to work and to stay here with my kids. So I do everything right. That's all I want.

I FIRST CAME TO AMERICA when I was nine years old. My older brothers brought me to Los Angeles to go to school. Total, we are five brothers and five sisters, and three of my brothers and one sister are here. They all got amnesty in 1986, so everybody here is legal but me.

That first time I used one of my nephews' birth certificates to get across. I was just a kid, so they didn't ask me any questions or anything at the border. They just said, "Come on." I went to junior high in Los Angeles for a year or a year and a half, but things weren't really good. There were family problems, like always. I was not getting along with my brothers, and there were hard times, like no money for rent, things like that. So I went back to Mexico, and that's when I hung out there for five years.

When you're in Mexico like I was, it's always nice when you hear about somebody here. You always want to be here. First of all, you hear that you make money, that you wear nice clothes, have nice shoes. Back there, there's nothing. You see, when guys go from America back to Mexico, they always have big, nice trucks. It's hard to buy those back there. So everybody wants to come to America. They think it's like you pick up the money with shovels here, which is not true. You have to work hard for it.

So I came back when I was sixteen to work. I had been living with my parents and depending on them, and I was ready not to depend on anyone anymore. At that time, what you did was ride a bus to Tijuana, and once you were there, you would ask around for a coyote. Everybody knows a coyote, somebody who can get people across. But you have got to know the right guy, because there are some coyotes that can screw you. They take your money and don't pick you up, or they leave you someplace bad. I paid \$300 to a guy to show me where to go.

I was with a group of men, and for us, there was no river or anything. We just jumped a six-foot-tall fence and ran across a big field. Then we hid under the trees for, like, ten minutes until somebody said run again. Then we crossed a highway, twelve lanes, and after that, somebody else picked us up and took us to a house somewhere in San Diego. They kept us there in the house for, like, a day. That night there were at least fifty of us, all over the house. We were from all over Mexico or South America. Those people were all strangers, but none of them worried me, because I knew everybody in there had family over here waiting for them and that we all just wanted to make it across and start working.

A van came and got some of us a little bit at a time. We all had to hide in the van. You have to sit on the floor in a line so your back is against the chest of the guy behind you, and somebody else's back is against your chest in front of you. And you have your legs bent so that your knees are by the shoulders of the guy in front of you. You sit like that from San Diego all the way to L.A., so once you get to L.A., your legs are numb. You can barely move. That's where they catch people, because they can't run.

When my family picked me up in L.A., they paid \$300 more, and then I went to live with one of my brothers. At first I went to school, but it was just a bunch of gangsters there. Most of them were legal, born and raised in East L.A. I tried to stay away from all that. My parents had told me not to be a gangster, because everybody thinks

they're on drugs and because they're always doing something wrong. And I don't like the way those guys dress and the way they lead their lives, always being against something. I always wanted to have a family, and I think a gang's not going to take me anywhere but to jail.

One of my brothers was a foreman with a construction company, and I started working with him, making about \$6 or \$7 an hour. I needed a Social Security number, and in California, there were a bunch of places where you could get one. I went to a place called Huntington Park, a neighborhood where you could get just about anything: Social Security cards, passports, maybe even birth certificates. There is a Hispanic community there, and they sell them just like selling bread or anything. You say you need a card, and then they deal with you on how much you pay. Sometimes \$50, sometimes \$100. Then they say, "You just wait here, and in fifteen minutes you will be legal." So I got a fake Social Security number, and it is the same one I have been using ever since.

But things still were not great living with my brother, and I started thinking I might have to move back to Mexico. But I had one sister living in Austin, and she asked me to move here before I went back again. She said to try Texas. I liked it here and stayed.

I MARRIED MY WIFE right after I came to Texas. I met Maria (all names in this story have been changed) in Guadalajara when we were both thirteen. It was at my aunt's birthday party, and we started dating on and off. Then, when I was in Texas, she got a visa to come to L.A., so I went back and we got married at the courthouse by a judge. He didn't ask questions like "Are you legal?" It was just, "Do you want to get married?" That's all they want.

Before we got married, Maria worked in L.A. for a company that made bulletproof vests for six and a half months. But when I brought her to Austin, she didn't get a job. At first we lived with my sister, and Maria babysat my sister's daughter. Then she took care of our own kids when we started having them. We had our first child a year after we got here, in 1993. The government paid for everything. She knew she was pregnant right away and started going to a clinic at two months. She filled out a form for Medicaid, which you can get as an illegal. They started giving her vitamins and saying, "You have to be here at this time so we can check you out." Then my first child was born right here at Brackenridge Hospital, just like my other two children.

At the time, I was working in restaurants as a busboy, a food prep, a cook, and then a manager, at an Indian food place, a hamburger place, a barbecue place, and then a big restaurant, where I ran everything. I made the food orders and the work schedules. I always had two jobs at a time, eight hours in the day at one and then five more hours at night at another, almost every day. When my wife had the kids, I only had one morning off and another afternoon off to see them. It was hard, but you have to work if you want to pay the rent. I was only twenty years old, but I had to pay \$600 a month for our apartment and \$200 a month for our car. And I always send \$100 a month home to my parents.

But I needed a job that gave me better money and more time with my family. I had always been like a handyman, done a little bit of everything, and I started doing work for somebody here in town that needed a handyman. He referred me to the guy I work

for now, Brian, and I started doing electrical work. That was eight years ago. I'd changed a switch before, but never big jobs like wiring a whole house myself. But I picked it up real fast, in, like, six months, and in about one year of working with Brian, I was also doing side jobs on my own. Somebody would ask me to do something for them and I would do it.

When I started working for Brian, I was still doing part-time in a restaurant. I'd work for Brian from eight until two and then go from four until close in a restaurant. Then Brian asked if I would work for him full-time. He said, "I hate it when you go to work over there and I still have work here. So how much you want for staying here?" I told him the only reason I was working at the restaurant was because if there was any rain and he didn't need me, I would still always have work and a free meal at the restaurant. So he said he would give me forty hours a week no matter what, and now I've been with him eight years.

Eventually I needed to get an electrician's license. I went to a class to know the codes, but there was a program that they called "grandfathering." I had been doing electrician work for eight years, and they said, "If you have that much experience, we will just give you a license." So I showed them my Social Security card and that was it.

That's the same number Brian uses for my withholding on my paycheck. But I have a taxpayer ID number that I use to pay income tax. I got it at the Social Security office in North Austin. I just filled out the form, and they gave it to me. It's made for people who are not U.S. citizens so you don't use someone else's number. I turn both numbers in with my taxes, the fake one and the real one, but they only look at the real one. And I don't worry about them seeing the fake one and coming looking for me because Social Security doesn't have anything to do with immigration. Nothing.

Some guys that are here illegally don't want to do all this because they are afraid something bad is going to happen. But if somebody says, "Have you been doing your taxes?" we want to be able to show them we have. And I do it also because they send you money back. My refund this year was \$3,500.

We're always aware that we don't have a legal card, so we do all of these things to stay out of trouble, but also to lead a normal life. We take the kids to church every Sunday, because that's the way we grew up. The kids like school, and we go with them when they are in a show or make a presentation. We just try to live normal.

THE PEOPLE WHERE I'M from in Mexico who move to America all go to Indianapolis. One of my godfathers has been there for years, and he said that the first time he came to America, he went all the way there because he heard there was a lot of work. He says now that if you see somebody Hispanic in the street in Indianapolis they are from our hometown. I've been there and it's a nice place, but I don't know why they like it. It's cold in the winter. I call them and they tell me how many inches of snow there are or that it's 5 degrees out. I like Texas.

I went back to visit my little town in Mexico more often when I was single. But since I got married I have only been twice. The last time I went was the winter before 9/11 happened. It was easy then. When I was coming back, I just walked across the border and said I was a U.S. citizen and they let me back in. But I decided it's not a good idea for me to go anymore. Basically, I am the support of my family, and I need to work

and pay bills, and I am afraid maybe I couldn't get back across or I could be put in jail.

Maria took the kids to try to live in Mexico a few years ago to see how it would work, just in case something happens. They didn't like it. Maria said the schools were not good. There were fifty kids in a classroom with one teacher, and first graders and sixth graders were going outside to play at the same time. The smaller kids were being picked on.

And I don't think there were any schools there for my son. He has special needs. He's smart, but he has speech problems. He does not communicate all that well. So he's in a special program here. And even though my wife and I speak Spanish, he speaks it very little. He speaks much more English. If you ask if he wants to go back to Mexico, he will say no and start crying.

We don't really have a plan if one of us gets deported except to come back as quick as we can. When I lived with my sister, I saw other illegals leave money with somebody they knew well, like a cousin or a friend, somebody who you know is not going to spend it. Leave, like, \$1,000 or \$2,000 and say, "If something happens, just send this down to me in Mexico." Then the friend would send a MoneyGram from the Money Box store and sometimes it would go to a bank or sometimes you would pick it up. And then you would be back here in a week.

My wife and I have each other for that. And I tell her to keep some money in her wallet to get a hotel or to eat in case she gets thrown out, and then just try to get back. If she cannot, I'll send the kids to her and stay here and work. But we don't want to do that. That's something we don't like to think about, really. It's depressing.

THERE IS A GUY on one of Austin's all-Spanish radio stations who everybody listens to called El Chulo. That's where we hear a lot about the immigration protests. Chulo is on early in the morning, from five-thirty to ten, and I hear him when I'm at work. It's like a talk show, not much music, and it's also on in Dallas and San Antonio.

May 1 was Mexican Labor Day, and there was a protest in Austin that day. For that protest, Chulo was telling us, "Don't go to work. Don't do this, don't do that. Don't buy food at McDonald's or Jack in the Box, nothing. Stay home. Don't watch TV. Don't do anything that day." That's how he is. He always talks about real life. Some guys don't like him because he talks about sex a lot and girls call in and he flirts with them. But sometimes people call in with crazy stories, like about girls being raped by the Border Patrol or about people coming from Mexico and having all their money taken away. Every day there is a subject, like immigration or coyotes. He helps people. When Immigration was here after the protest, some guys called and said the *migra* was at H-E-B. Chulo told us about it and said not to go there.

I heard there were a lot of raids in Austin after the protest, but I didn't see them. I was at work one Monday morning, and I went to lunch, and when I got back, some guy said, "Hey, Immigration came by." Everybody had run away. Some of the guys were from San Antonio, and they got all their stuff and left and never came back to the job. But I don't know anybody close to me who was deported, and I have many close friends who work construction. So maybe it happened, but who knows? Even if it did, I think the protests were good. Everybody wants to get legal somehow, so we do this protest in as nice and positive a way as we can.

My kids don't know we are illegal. Sometimes kids talk to other kids at school, and the other kids talk to their parents. We try not to tell everybody that we're not legal because you never know. Like my neighbor here, he doesn't know. He always talks about wetbacks, and he doesn't know he's got one next door.

So we just tell the kids that we don't have passports. Maria took two of them with her to a protest in Austin before the Labor Day protest, and they asked her why they were going. She told them everyone was going because they wanted to get papers. When it was over, they asked her, "Mom, why didn't you get your papers?" She said, "Maybe it will take a little longer. Maybe a few more protests. Maybe we'll have to walk to Washington."

I couldn't go because I was busy with work. And I didn't want her to go. But she said she wanted to go because it is an important time. And when it was finished, she said she felt like she had freed herself. Everybody was there together, feeling the same way as her, whether they were illegal or American citizens trying to do something to help somebody else.

I WANT TO START by being a legal resident, and then I'd like to be a U.S. citizen. They could change the law like that. You start with a permit to work, and then if you don't get in any trouble, they give you the citizenship to stay here and go in and out of America legally. Maybe after eighteen years of the permit, you could get citizenship.

I know they have a test you take now. You have to learn to read and write English good to pass the test. Some guys tell me it's hard, but sometimes they just don't know much. One guy told me that they ask how many states America has and what are the colors of the flag. And they ask you to write something in English. That guy failed the test because he couldn't write the word "yellow," which is funny, because he is a painter.

There's a lot of people that don't like us to be here, but the thing is, *we are here*. Those people might be mad with guys doing something wrong, like bringing drugs. I agree with them on that. It's okay to be mad at those dudes, but don't be mad at everybody. It's like the way they look at everybody who has brown skin and is dressed like a cowboy and say, "He must be a Mexican," even if the guy is from El Salvador. We can tell somebody's not from Mexico by the way they talk, by their face. But here everybody thinks, "That's a Mexican."

I heard about the three-year guest-worker program. That has been on the news a lot. I think I would like to do that because it's the first step to be legal. But I need to see what's going to happen after three years. If you have to leave after that, then no, I don't think that will work for me. Three years go fast.

I could go talk to an attorney, but sometimes you are afraid to do that. Nobody is looking for us right now. But if we start getting into this process and they look for more information, that might be when they say, "Okay, here they are," and then we get deported.

I want to be legal. I want to buy a house, like a bigger house with more rooms. But because we are illegal, they would ask for too much interest on it. And I would like to

be able to take my kids home to see where I grew up and maybe see my old friends. We are not far from Guadalajara. It is only a sixteen-hour drive. I would like to be able to get in our own car and drive there for a couple weeks and then come back.

I guess there's hope when my son turns 21. Then he can apply for citizenship for me. It's too late for me to do like some guys who get married to a U.S. citizen, because I'm already married. Who knows, maybe I'll win the lottery. I bet they would give me citizenship then.

But until then we will just keep doing everything right and waiting.

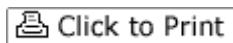
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