



# INSIDE AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY

SARAH KALLIS, managing editor

**H**IES Upper School Spanish teacher Ethel Zuniga clearly remembers the day she walked through the University of Georgia campus during a protest against immigration.

"There was people showing up with signs saying, 'Go home, you're taking our jobs' and 'Go back to Mexico,'" she recalls, "It was shocking for me. I felt scared that day."

Although Zuniga is from El Salvador and went through an extensive immigration process that required her to prove a unique set of skills, she still felt threatened. Reminiscing on yet another time she felt fearful in her new home, Zuniga recalls moving to the United States two days before 9/11.

"It scared me because I thought that I was coming to the safest place on Earth... it seemed very vulnerable," said Zuniga.

In El Salvador, Zuniga worked with the United States Embassy, where the United States was often portrayed as one of the most powerful nations on earth. Many El Salvadorans were sent to the states for military training and college. While in the United States, Zuniga studied her Master's degree on the Fulbright Scholarship, and then was required to return to El Salvador for two years. She was working at a British School in El Salvador when she saw an ad for a teaching position at the Atlanta International School (AIS).

At the time, Zuniga explains, "I had a good job, my husband had a good job, but we also wanted something more for our kids, and I think coming here was a good decision because they have more opportunities here," she continued, "I wanted them to be bilingual, and to me, there's nothing like immersion. If you don't speak the language, you will not learn it."

She applied for the job at AIS; however, in order to earn this position, Zuniga had to prove that she had a unique set of skills.

"If there's somebody that can teach the way that I teach, and lives here, in the States, they will not give me the job," said Zuniga.

Zuniga did get the job, moved to the United States with her family, and was issued a visa that she had to renew annually after six years. In order to renew their visas, Zuniga's family had to pay a fee of \$1,200 per person - a total of \$4,800

Soon after, Zuniga and her family decided to enter the Green Card Process, which would allow the family to live and work in the United States permanently. The process involves background checks, interviews, and hefty fees.

"That was lengthy and painful because you had to do a lot of paperwork. But compared to what other people had to do, it's nothing," said Zuniga.

In total, it was a 3-and-a-half year process that cost her family \$17,000. Furthermore, she could not return home for a period of time for the risk of losing her progress.

"So, if somebody passed away back home, I couldn't leave, or I would jeopardize my process," said Zuniga, "If they had said no, we would have had six months to pack our stuff, get our kids, and

go back home."

Although she had job offers in other countries, and contemplated dropping the process altogether, Zuniga followed through and received her Green Card, continuing to teach in the United States.

After working at AIS, Zuniga moved to Macon, Georgia to teach at Stratford Academy, where she was shocked by the lack of diversity.

"Atlanta was more open. That's the beautiful thing about Atlanta. In Atlanta, you feel like the horizons extend, and you see a lot of people, so it's like a mountain point." Zuniga continues, "It was like an hour and a half south, but it felt like going years back in history."

Although she assumed racism was long gone in the United States, she experienced it first-hand while in Macon. Whether comments from strangers in the grocery store and students in school were intended to be offensive or not, they still made her and her children uncomfortable.

"My daughter used to come home crying because... they told her that she was Chinese. And she said, 'I'm not Chinese, I'm from El Salvador,' and they would say, 'What is that?' And they would make fun of her," said Zuniga. Being proud of her heritage and family roots, these attacks as a result of ignorance hurt her. Moving to the United States for the benefit of their children, the Zunigas found it painful to see the children suffering. Because experiencing a diverse population is important to Zuniga, the family moved back to the Atlanta area.

However, something the Zuniga's cannot escape, no matter their geographic location, is the negative portrayal of immigrants in the media.

"It's hard for people to accept you. I have been to places, visited places, where first off, you feel it. You feel that they are like 'Oh my gosh, it's another Mexican,' or something." Zuniga continues, "I'm educated. So, I can think. I can respond, I can answer, I respect, I listen."

That level of discrimination has seeped over in her past work environments, as she explains "For us to earn our place as respected teachers, it was very hard. We had to work very hard."

While immigration policies are being heavily debated during this election cycle, the media often demonizes immigrants, forgetting to portray them as human beings. Immigrants are often depicted as an inconvenient statistic, rather than individuals with families and emotions that are greatly impacted within the immigration system. Although many generalizations are made about the immigrant population, Zuniga has a positive outlook on the situation.

"[I am] the one that had to prove them wrong. You will not change that by attacking the magazine or newspaper." she continues, "There's a lot of people who have come to the country, and they have figured out the system, and they play the system. And, they're immigrants. And, that really gets me so upset when I see people that I know are using the system to their own advantage. And that's really sad, because there are a lot of people who are not doing that. I've paid taxes all my life."

Currently, the country is quite divided on the issue of immigration policy. Donald Trump (R) has made immigration one of his only

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detailed policy plans, with plans to build a physical barrier in between the United States and Mexico, boasting he would make Mexico pay for it. He also intends to end birthright citizenship, which allows anyone born in the United States to immediately become a legal citizen. Furthermore, Trump wants to create a hiatus, where foreign workers abroad would not obtain Green Cards until companies hired unemployed people in the United States. Trump also wants to impose criminal charges on immigrants who let their visas expire, deport an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants, and enforce large-scale deportation raids. Finally, he does not want to let Syrian refugees into the United States.

Hillary Clinton (D) intends to let some Syrian refugees into the United States, and create a path that allows undocumented immigrants to

obtain citizenship. She does not support deportation raids, unlike Trump. She also plans to end private immigration detention centers, three-and-10 year bans, and expand affordable healthcare access to all families, regardless of their immigration status. Clinton will also try to prevent separating families, and plans to defend Obama's action against partisan attacks.

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Zuniga continues to be hopeful for the United States, and the people within it.

“I pray for this country a lot. Something about the States, that's why I enjoy working here; I like your culture. I respect it. I don't agree with everything, but I embrace it. I think everybody has something

good to bring.” said Zuniga. 🌐

# MYTHS ABOUT IMMIGRATION

**DEBUNKED**

**1.**

**Myth:** All immigrants are here illegally.

**Truth:** Out of 41 million immigrants in the United States, 30 are documented, and 40 percent of undocumented immigrants entered legally and allowed their visas expire.

**2.**

**Myth:** Illegal immigration is increasing.

**Truth:** Illegal immigration is decreasing. Illegal immigrants currently make up 3.5 percent of the population, down from 4 percent in 2007.

**3.**

**Myth:** Everyone has the ability to immigrate legally.

**Truth:** Unless an immigrant is highly trained in a skill, escaping political persecution, joining immediate relatives, or a winner of the Green Card lottery, it is very difficult to enter the United States.

**4.**

**Myth:** Undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes.

**Truth:** Every time an undocumented immigrant buys a product, they pay sales tax. They also pay property taxes when they purchase land or a home. According to a 2013 Social Security Administration, undocumented immigrants paid \$12 billion in taxes.

**5.**

**Myth:** Immigrants take jobs from Americans.

**Truth:** Documented immigrants have to prove a unique set of skills in order to obtain a high-level job. Undocumented immigrants are often hired for low-paying jobs that Americans are unwilling to take. Unfortunately, many employers take advantage of them and do not pay them sufficient wages or give them benefits.