

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

In the Heart of Immigration Debate— Mercy is Sorely Missed

by Diana Tyutyunyk

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. In this issue, we feature the three prize-winning essays as the Margaret Chase Smith Essay. The 2015 essay prompt asked students to weigh in with their opinions about what current U.S. immigration policy should be in light of the historical backdrop of alternating cycles of welcome and wariness toward foreigners. First place prize winner Diana Tyutyunyk brings in her personal experiences as an immigrant from the Ukraine, raising the important question of mercy as America deals with the sometimes-divisive issues around immigration.

“Your tired, poor, huddled masses... yearning to breathe free... the wretched refuse”—these shrill adjectives describing foreigners landing on the shores of America in the late 1800s sound so damning, almost abhorrent and forbidding, until we hear the ensuing lulling, promising verbs of embrace and welcome from the Mother of Exiles: “Give me... Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, [for them] I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

The American immigrant story is still full of the poetry encapsulated in Emma Lazarus’s sonnet: on the one hand, a divorce from native lands that strangle the exiles’ aspirations of peaceful and prosperous lives, and on the other hand, a marriage into a new, grand family in which strangers are welcomed to a feast of hope and opportunity. But the prose of real life often has a different, less-idealistic narrative.

The American immigrant ethos is not complete without the story of the hosts—the Native Americans who

embraced and nourished the first European vagrants and who thereafter almost vanished from their ancestral lands under the influx of ever-new arrivals and their industry. We cannot forget the hostages—Africans abducted from their native shores and sold into slavery primarily to work in the cotton, tobacco, and sugar cane fields that laid the economic backbone of the South. The succession of immigrant waves upon American shores continued: the poor and hungry Irish immigrants fleeing the famine, who often found scorn, insult, and more poverty among their new Anglo-Saxon neighbors in Boston and other East Coast port cities. Chinese immigrants who built railroads and worked mines under the most trying conditions in the American West, Polish coal miners of Pennsylvania, Italian stonecutters of New York City, Scandinavian farmers of the Midwest, Mexican and Central American agricultural migrant laborers, and Vietnamese shrimp fishermen—all these, along with millions of

other dreamers, wove their cultural fibers into our country’s rich canvas. Each group sprinkled their ethnic spice over our national chop suey; they contributed their character to our “melting pot.”

As a first-generation American immigrant, I am well aware of the leap of faith associated with the decision to emigrate. Although I was only seven months old when I traveled across the ocean on my mother’s lap, I have witnessed my Ukrainian parents’ affirmations of joy, enthusiasm, and loyalty to our new country on an almost daily basis. It’s the American flags that adorn our house, my dad’s fascination with the Founding Fathers, my mom’s industry and her rewards as the family’s only breadwinner, the Fourth of July barbecues and potlucks with friends and neighbors who welcomed us as their peers. On the other hand, our family’s native roots are bearing fruit that are uniquely Ukrainian: cooking borsch and varenyky—culinary toils of love; wearing Ukrainian embroidered shirts on the Orthodox Easter day—a show of beautiful style; rooting for Dynamo Kiev soccer club—an act of solidarity with the city we all came from; and my grandparents’ dogged fight against Maine’s forbiddingly short growing season and heavy clay soils, yet they find a way to grow the most beautiful tomatoes and eggplants—just like those grown on the Ukrainian lusciously fertile steppes.

Our family’s gratitude to America has taught me citizenship that is based on the knowledge of differences between here and there, between free and fear, between plenty and scarce, between peace and war. I have responded to my deeply held trust in America’s promises through community service, scholastic achievements, and my ever-growing understanding of U.S. history. My participation in the American immigration conversation stems from, and is influenced by, my family’s background.

American immigration is the story of two paths—both arduous and fraught with multiple potholes, each path offering, to different degrees, a safe haven for dreamers of lives in a prosperous and free country. The legal vs undocumented immigration divide continues to tear at the national conscience in the heart of American soul: human rights vs legal stricture. It pleads for a resolution: are we wholeheartedly a country of immigrants, or are we strict adherents to wavering politics (dependent upon the political party in power at any given moment) and local interpretations of immigration laws? Can we be both?

What is the current immigration quota for legal immigration into the American Dream? The numbers are 226,000 family-based, 140,000 employment-based, and 55,000 diversity-based visas; plus 90,000 refugee, and 10,000 special immigrant visas; with a total limit of up to 675,000 green cards allocated by Congress annually. This number for yearly entry into a total U.S. population of 319 million is just 0.2 percent of the entire population. The huge demand for a piece of American pie vastly outpaces the supply.

The heated debate of how we deal with the current 11 million undocumented immigrants living in America is at a full burn. There is a merciful side to the debate: President Obama's executive order, presently halted by a challenge in the courts, invites an expanding group of immigrants to apply for a temporary delay of the possibility of deportation (DAPA), thus allowing a temporary halt of the division of families in which some members are citizens and others are undocumented. DAPA is an expansion of an existing two-year-old delayed-action program for young adults as undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children (DACA) and who have no memories of their countries of origin.

Although they appear scheming to many, most of the 11 million undocumented immigrants who arrived in America without invitation, or who overstayed their visas, did so because of pressing economic desperation or personal safety reasons in their native countries—just like the ancestors of most of the U.S. population living today. Yes, they broke the rules when they eloped with the country they loved and believed in. Unbearable pressures at home and the prospect of fulfilling America's unmet demands for low-paying workers enticed many to leap to safety and freedom in a desperate act of legal self-abasement.

Is this the first time America has faced moral and legal dilemmas of inclusion and banishment? Many merciful conductors chose contributing roles in slavery's Underground Railroad, and during the whole decade of the 1980s, the sanctuary movement, initiated by religious congregations and lawyers all across America, provided sanctuary to Central American refugees, eventually winning legal change that allowed the refugees to apply for permanent residence. Americans are again called to judgment of immigrants already living in our midst.

I believe we dishonor our country's unique heritage unless we presume and believe that all human beings who want to call America their home are capable of becoming assets, rather than liabilities, by living on the fruits of their labor, rather than on the dole, by sailing for achievement, rather than anchoring (with "anchor babies") for the mere pittance of someone's charity. The entire story of America is the story of successive waves of immigrant contributions. Today, immigrant labor enables middle-class Americans to buy a roasted chicken and prewashed salad at the supermarket or to check a box and have their holiday presents arrive at their door already gift-

wrapped. Upper-income Americans live easier and more efficient lives thanks to millions of low-paid immigrant workers they never see and whose names they never know. Immigration even prods less-affluent natives from immigrant-dominated economic niches to find new work that pays better (Isbister 1996). According to the Center for American Progress, legalizing the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States would add a cumulative \$1.5 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product—the largest measure of economic growth—over 10 years (<https://www.americanprogress.org>).

How can America better deal with expanded legalization of immigration? Beyond these economic benefits of immigrant labor as the backbone of today's American lifestyle and labor-supported economy, the simple fact that so many employers seek immigrant labor demands that the United States takes a different approach to immigration policies. By giving individual states the power to select immigrants according to local economic demand (similar to what is done in Canada), and having the federal government admit them into the country based on the states' needs, the burden of supporting an immigrant population is disbursed beyond today's immigrant pockets. Local communities, Rotary Clubs, and chambers of commerce are best equipped to decide on the needs of their economies. Employment-based quotas must expand to accommodate economic growth. The federal government will have the last, but lenient, word in the admission process. But the American legal tradition must never forget its roots in the Mosaic Biblical laws—the basis of which is mercy. There is always room for compassion in enacting law.

I have been intently immersed in the U.S. immigration discourse since I was startled to learn, at age 12, that I am

not an American. I am officially an undocumented immigrant of 17 years, and now a DACA recipient. On one fateful autumn night in 2009, my father revealed to me that I couldn't go on a French class trip to Québec because I was a *nelehal* (an illegal in Ukrainian). I had always been cognizant of my foreign origins. Since early childhood, I held dear the story of my flight to America over the vast blue Atlantic. My Ukrainian parents' vivid descriptions of the trip are etched in my conscience as if it was I, at seven months of age, who spotted those "polar bears nodding hello" to our plane as we flew over Greenland or spotted the lighted torch of Lady Liberty as we descended into New York City. Previous to the night I learned the word *nelehal*, I had always held my American presence at its face value: the poetry of liberty, opportunity, and equality in the face of law.

As an undocumented immigrant, I appreciate my America, loving her as both a native and an outsider. It is the mercy, compassion, and inclusion of my fellow Americans that has made the United States my home, the only one I have ever known. It is the occasional lack of those virtues directed at my brothers-and sisters-in-grief that causes me to feel the pain of exclusion. Congressman Steve King, a self-proclaimed conservative, refers to immigrants as "a slow-motion terrorist attack on the United States." Mr. King verbally profiled, in the U.S. House of Representatives, the majority of undocumented kids with these words: "For every one who's a valedictorian, there's another hundred out there who weigh a hundred and thirty pounds—and they've got calves the size of cantaloupes because they're hauling seventy-five pounds of marijuana across the desert." Yes, I am in the top 10 percent of my class, a recipient of a Dream.US Scholarship, and have been admitted to a top private U.S. college

that is offering mercy for my circumstances, and providing me hope for eventual full citizenship. But, no! My calves are toned from hours on the soccer field that led to being named the MVP of Eastern Maine's all-league high school soccer invitational. How should I respond to such merciless slander of my fellow Dreamers?

I'd rather recall Senator Margaret Chase Smith's bold stance as a freshman senator during another generation's infamous bigotry and defamation against "un-Americans" who were perceived to be threats during the McCarthy hearings of the early 1950s. Maine's senator singly and courageously called Americans to a higher justice in her "Declaration of Conscience," rejecting the Four Horsemen of Calumny—Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry and Smear."

America is once more called to a new Declaration of Conscience. Leviticus still urges "the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you...." America, I personally beg for your mercy, as one worthy representative of 11 million other undocumented residents. Allow me to be at home in the only home I have ever known. 🐾

REFERENCES

- Isbister, John. 1996. "Are Immigration Controls Ethical?" *Social Justice* 23(3): 54–67.



First place winner, **Diana Tyutyunnyk** of Orono High School, was born in the Ukraine and thus, had some interesting insight into the

topic of this essay contest, immigration policy. She has been an active player on the high school soccer, ski, and track teams and her educational interests focus on biology and math. She is attending Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota.