



Wedding shows why US should welcome immigrants

Trudy Rubin

September 22, 2018

Last weekend, I attended a wedding in Atlanta between a brilliant Afghan writer and an equally brilliant young Chinese American doctoral student.

Their stories and their wedding are a graphic illustration of the vital contribution immigrants make to American society. They also illustrate the illogic of current White House efforts to slash the number of legal immigrants admitted to the United States.

I met Qais Akbar Omar over a decade ago in Kabul where he ran the family's carpet business. But he was also writing a memoir, in English, about his tumultuous childhood during the Afghan civil war and Taliban rule. At that time, I could never have imagined I would attend his wedding where Americans of many ethnic backgrounds danced to Afghan and Western music – and gorged on a fabulous Chinese buffet.

But Qais' memoir was so gripping that Farrar, Straus & Giroux eventually published it as *A Fort of Nine Towers*; the young Afghan writer was subsequently invited to do a master's degree in creative writing at Boston University. In his program, Qais met Mai Wang, a naturalized citizen who came here from Beijing as a child and is now pursuing a doctorate at Stanford University, while writing her own novel.

Mai's father, a professor of philosophy at a top Beijing university, immigrated to the United States and became a successful software engineer. Her mother, an expert in ancient Chinese calligraphy, took waitressing jobs until she could open up a small printing business and work as a Chinese-English translator.

Theirs is the quintessential immigrant story: strivers who take a chance for a better life in a new country, contribute to the U.S. workforce, and pay taxes that outstrip any benefits they may have received. They often arrive with high skill levels that complement rather than compete with U.S. workers, and they add to overall economic growth.

The current, poisonous debate over immigration has totally defaced the actual portrait of legal immigrants. For example: How many Americans realize that legal immigrants are often as, or better educated than Americans?

Nearly half of those arriving between 2012 and 2016 had a college degree, according to the Migration Policy Institute. "The United States has creamed the best and the brightest of the world's emigrants for decades," says the Council on Foreign Relations' Edward Alden, an immigration expert. "Overall, they are an enormous net positive for the economy. But we're doing everything we can to discourage this."

Yes indeed. The Trump administration is trying to cut back legal immigration in myriad ways, capping refugee admissions at a record low, narrowing who is eligible for asylum and shrinking the number of visas for high-skilled workers. Mountains of new bureaucratic hurdles are being imposed to shrink the numbers who qualify for permanent residency or citizenship.

Even worse, the image of all immigrants is being blackened by conflating illegals with legal immigrants, and implying that most newcomers are criminals. This is simply untrue.

Poll after reputable poll has shown that foreign-born individuals exhibit remarkably low levels of involvement in crime, whether documented or undocumented. And legal immigrants pay much more in taxes over their lifetimes than any benefits they may receive.

Moreover, illegal immigrants make up only a small portion of overall immigration. "The vast majority of immigrants are legal," says David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington. Since 2007, he adds, illegal immigration has been declining.

And contrary to popular myth, the biggest group of new, legal foreign-born U.S. residents since 2010 are Asians, not Latin Americans.

You'd never get this picture, of course, from the scary imagery on partisan websites or propagated by President Trump and his administration. But the true face of immigration was on display at this wonderful wedding last weekend.

And this multicultural wedding was moving in ways that went beyond statistics.

For one thing, the parents of both Qais and Mai (with Qais' father beamed in from Kabul on FaceTime) were incredibly welcoming to the new couple, despite their ethnic differences. They demonstrated an inclusiveness that was once the hallmark of the United States.

For another thing, Qais' younger brother, whose life was threatened because he worked as a translator for the U.S. military in Afghanistan, was there with his family, having received a visa in a special program for such translators – a program that is now, shamefully, frozen.

And Qais, who just finished a novel, is safe in America, although his life would be threatened back in Kabul because of his writings. He has applied for asylum and hopes to teach creative writing. But his request is still pending, although he is exactly the kind of immigrant America should be welcoming.

In Atlanta, I saw the best of America, brought to us from abroad.