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## Trump says Central Americans are a threat. My son is proof he's wrong.

Gary Gately

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I fell in love with my favorite Guatemalan before I ever met him. When he was an infant, Pablo Josue Lopez's eyes danced, mischievous, playful - and yet somehow solemn, too. His cheeks puffed in that chubby, cherubic face. His tiny fingers reached, for something. The red letters "Babe Magnet" adorned his baby-blue T-shirt inside the Guatemala City clinic with drab green walls.

The infant in the photo is my son now, Paul Joshua Gately, adopted from Guatemala in 2007. When I see the footage and photos of the Central Americans trudging thousands of miles to pursue their legal right to seek asylum in America, I can't help but think Paulie could have been among them but for grace, timing and circumstance. His birth mother or his birth father or his foster mother - or her five children or the other three foster children with whom Paulie lived during his first nine months in a ramshackle shack in Guatemala City - could be among those in the caravan, too.

President Donald Trump, the chief executive of Paulie's adopted country, calls people in the caravan gang members, rapists, murderers, drug dealers and, most recently, terrorists. He portrays them as foreign invaders, even the children, the ones he has said U.S. Border Patrol agents should shoot at should one of the kids throw a rock. In his State of the Union address, Trump stoked anti-immigrant sentiment again, saying, "Now is the time for Congress to show the world that America is committed to ending illegal immigration and putting the ruthless coyotes, cartels, drug dealers and human traffickers out of business."

Paulie, I might remind the president, left a native city where skyscrapers border shantytowns and the murder rate stood among the world's highest, where many children subsisted on food they scavenged from garbage dumps, in a country where one in four people 15 and over is illiterate. My son left a homeland where corrupt police routinely abused citizens with impunity. In Guatemala City today, children who are 12, like Paulie, are sometimes killed for refusing to join gangs. Guatemala and neighboring El Salvador and Honduras remain impoverished, violent and dangerous.

But I can't begin to fathom how to explain to my son that our president calls those people in the caravan foreign invaders threatening the fabric of American democracy by bringing in crime, disease, drugs. A reality check: The Cato Institute reported in June that undocumented immigrants were 47 percent less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans in 2016, and legal immigrants 78 percent less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans. And a

March 2018 study in the journal *Criminology* revealed violent crime is actually lower in communities with high concentrations of undocumented immigrants.

In some ways, Trump is just continuing a shameful U.S. tradition of discriminating against Central Americans. U.S. administrations have supported dictators and despots responsible for the mass murder of Central American citizens for decades. From the early 20th century, the United States has staunchly supported authoritarian rulers in that region, often backing right-wing "banana republic" dictatorships. In Guatemala, a 1954 CIA-led coup deposed democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz, plunging the Tennessee-sized nation into four decades of chaos and terror, leaving as many as 200,000 civilians dead, as right-wing dictators committed genocide against the Mayans, destabilized the nation's economy and enriched the entrenched elites.

U.S. support for the military-led government of El Salvador led Salvadorans to flee the brutal civil war there, and some of the illegal immigrants facing hostility in Southern California formed what became the violent MS-13 gang. Its U.S. presence has grown, but not nearly to the extent Trump suggests, and gang violence in Central America remains much more prevalent than here, prompting many of those in the caravan to seek asylum in the United States.

More recently, two children from Guatemala - an 8-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl - died in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection within a three-week span in December. Since January 2010, at least 83 people have died as the result of an encounter with U.S. border agents - including 55 shot to death, according to the Southern Border Communities Coalition, comprising 60 immigration-rights groups. Many more have been brutalized, in some cases causing disabling injuries.

How do I discuss all this with Paulie? How do I explain the U.S. government's bloody history of murdering people from his native Central America? How do I reconcile the America he learns about in seventh grade - the country whose laws are supposed to grant the right to seek asylum - turning people away, separating babies from mothers for months, even U.S. Border Patrol agents fatally shooting teens from across the border? Not foreign invaders, but children who should be playing baseball, like Paulie, the little guy out of Guatemala who threw two complete games in the 12-and-under travel baseball tournament in Cooperstown Village, N.Y., last summer.

It could have been Paulie, shot dead by a Border Patrol agent or dying in the custody of the United States government, or his kin, or the foster brothers and sisters he lived with in Guatemala City. It could have been Paulie tear-gassed in November, Paulie, my son, the computer whiz in the robotics club, the natural storyteller, the kid with the quick smile lighting up his whole face and the well-honed sense of humor.

However groundless these attempts to stoke anti-immigrant fervor, they diminish Paulie in the eyes of an alarming proportion of Americans. Maybe some of them are teachers or cops or CEOs or hiring managers - and maybe some of them will one day believe he's a criminal, a rapist, a drug dealer or murderer because he is a brown native of Central America. It's not easy to talk to Paulie about this, but it's too important not to. "It makes me sad that people from the country

where I was born are treated like this when they're just trying to find a better life in America," he tells me.

The other night, I bolted awake, shaking and sweating. I had a stark vision of the migrant mother running from the smoking tear gas canister by the barbed-wire fence in that searing image captured by a Reuters photographer in Tijuana in late November. From the moment I saw the photo, which went viral across the globe, I thought how much the mother resembled Paulie's birth mother. In my dream, instead of the migrant mother clutching the arms of her twin daughters, it is Paulie's birth mother, and Paulie was the one running alongside her, terrified. And but for grace and circumstance, I know my favorite Guatemalan, my son, could be that scared boy in the great mass of migrants seeking a better life in America.



