



The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Torpy at Large: Shattered families, broken hearts — America on ICE

‘Immigration fugitives’ in Marietta arrested

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July 5, 2017

Candidate Trump vowed to sweep up the “bad hombres” here in America, the illegal aliens peddling drugs or waging mayhem on our native population.

It makes sense. Who wants to import pistoleros, criminales and “hombres mals?” We have enough of our own.

Julio Moran and his wife, Anna Escobar, fit none of those descriptions. Moran, a native of El Salvador, is a church deacon; his wife, also from that country, teaches Sunday school. Both work, pay taxes and have been here two decades.

They even accomplished the American Dream, buying a home in Marietta and moving in just last month.

But to federal immigration authorities they’re low-hanging fruit. They weren’t trying to hide. They were desperately trying to become legal and reported dutifully to the feds. On June 13, Julio and Anna, arrived at the immigration offices in Atlanta as they had done for several years. They were called into a room and never left.

Anna sent a few frantic texts to her 17-year-old daughter, Tania, before falling silent. She was taken to the detention center in Ocilla, 190 miles southeast of Atlanta. Julio was taken to the Stewart Detention Facility in Lumpkin, 140 miles to the southeast.

Last Friday, at 2:30 a.m. agents entered his cell and dragged him from his bed and he clung to a post screaming, saying that an attorney was working on the case. He was handcuffed and given a one-way ticket to a country he hadn’t seen in 21 years.

It’s a tactic increasingly employed by ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, but “ICE” sounds more badass). Instead of having to go out and round up the bad hombres, who are adept at making themselves scarce, ICE agents increasingly wait for deacons and Sunday school teachers to come to them so they can cuff ‘em and drive up their numbers.

In Trump’s first 100 days, ICE has arrested 41,000 people suspected of being here illegally, a 38 percent increase from the same time last year (30,000). Embedded in that number is a 157 percent increase in the arrests of non-criminals — from 4,200 to 10,800, according to ICE numbers.

(While we're talking numbers, the libertarian Cato Institute this year determined that Americans are three times as likely to be locked up for real crimes when compared to foreigners, even the illegal variety.)

When asked about ICE's new strategy, attorney Dustin Baxter, who represents the family, said, "Everyone is getting detained. It's all detention, no discretion, no mercy."

The couple leaves behind daughter Tania, who was born here and is heading into her senior year of high school, and two other children now in their early 20s who came here when they were small.

Julio and Anna's story is not uncommon.

In 1996, Julio came to Atlanta from El Salvador, a violent and poor country that had recently finished a bloody civil war. A year later, Anna arrived, leaving behind a baby daughter and toddler son to be reared by family members.

It's a wrenching thing to do — leaving behind children to be raised by others on the off-chance life will improve. It's the kind of sacrifice that desperate poor people make all the time.

After saving money for eight years, they were able to get their children to the U.S., said Tania. The couple tried to get amnesty in the late 1990s but were turned down.

Her father has worked at car dealerships as an auto detailer, being so meticulous that he usually focuses on only high-end vehicles.

Her mother has worked as a cook and cared for elderly people suffering from cancer, Alzheimer's and other age-related issues.

'They were contributing to society'

I met with Tania at the Sandy Springs home of Ashley Newman. Anna took care of Ashley's mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's, for two years. "She was the most extraordinary, loving and amazing woman," she said.

She also took care of Luz Marti before she died. Dick Marti, her husband, is angry about the arrests.

"She did not deserve this," he said. "They had jobs. They bought a house. They were contributing to society. They weren't criminals. They weren't drug dealers. They weren't on welfare.

"Once the word gets out about these kinds of arrests, they'll say, 'Don't show up.' It will be an incentive not to cooperate."

Bryan D. Cox, spokesman for ICE's regional office, wrote in an email: "Both individuals had their day in court and both were ordered removed from the United States by a federal immigration judge in 1998. They subsequently remained illegally in the country as immigration fugitives for more than 15 years until being encountered by ICE.

"While ICE does consider parental status when making custody and removal decisions as to whether to exercise discretion, our record shows three children, all of whom are now legal adults — and therefore are not children."

He said that as of June 3, the ICE field office in Atlanta has removed 7,984 people in FY17, 62 percent of them convicted criminals. He said the national average is 55 percent.

Tania Moran's two older siblings remain in a netherworld. One qualified for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a program that cuts children of illegal immigrants some slack. In fact, with more than 11 million illegal immigrants in the country, polls show that Americans — Democrats, Republicans and independents alike — support some path to citizenship.

'I'll finish high school and go'

Tania said her sister is setting up plans to rent the family's home if mom is deported. (The attorney has filed a stay of deportation.) At least that way, the family can make the \$1,100-a-month mortgage.

But ultimately, her father does not want to sneak back in to the U.S. and her heartbroken mother most certainly will want to return to El Salvador to be with him.

Where does this leave you, I asked.

"I'll finish high school and go," Tania said.

Go where?

"To El Salvador," she said. It's a country she's never seen.

What about your life here?

"What is life without your family?"

It's a question being asked all over America.