

The family separation bill is just more of the same cruel system

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As 2020 came, many of us counted down with hopes that the New Year would new experiences and new ways forward. Despite the calendar telling us it was 2020, Frankfort's calendar still said 1990. On the first day of the legislative session, the Kentucky Senate announced as their top priority an anti-immigration bill, Senate Bill 1, that, if passed, will ultimately lead to family separations across the Commonwealth. The bill will force public employees to act as immigration agents, forcing counties to keep ICE detainers which violate the constitution according to some courts, and create an environment of fear and intimidation for foreign-born Kentuckians and those who love us. We have had this discussion across the country over the years in California, Arizona, Alabama, and Georgia. No matter where these undocumented immigrant "crack down" laws were enacted, the result was always the same: failure in the economic relief promised, failure in safety it would bring, and failure in humanity.

Immigrants wish to be valued in their communities because they are human not just because they are "useful." When these debates began, immigrants' rights activists played that game of "the good immigrant" legislators wanted. Immigrants talked about how the laws mentioned before failed because at the end of the day the supposed "wave of crime" immigrants bring and the accusation that they are a "drain on our tax dollars" are all lies. Even the conservative Cato Institute admits that immigrants have a lower crime rate than their native-born counterparts and bring in more in taxes than they take. Activists showed how the narrative that immigrants do not assimilate has historically been used a racist excuse not accept immigrants into the country. But that did not matter to politicians. No matter how many studies were cited or how immigrants tried to "prove" that they were "useful," legislators shrugged.

We are arguing the same thing today with Senate Bill 1. I wrote an op-ed last year talking about the struggles of running away from violence in El Salvador, only to be threatened to be deported back to the dangerous region. I am only a 24-year-old DACA recipient and I have had this battle of trying to stay in the country since I was a child. I and others have fought off versions of Senate Bill 1 for years here in Kentucky.

As I've met with legislators over the years that have supported anti-immigrant legislation, we do the same little dance. I tell them how the bill will affect Kentuckians who are undocumented. That usually elicits the "we are just following the law" response. I tell them if they follow the law it would cause economic problems in Kentucky. They seem to not believe it. I tell them my personal story of running from violence and that there is a credible fear that many fellow immigrants and I will die if we are denied protection. I even tell them stories of immigrants who

have died after they were deported from this country. I usually get a version of "well the system is broken, and I am sorry, but we have to enforce the law." I do not let it show in the meetings, but that is the most hurtful part. The death and suffering of my family and I, along with that of several immigrants, their neighbors, is okay as long as it is politically convenient. It is something you will see even in the comment section of this op-ed once it is published.

I do not wish to be portrayed as a cynic. If anything, I am optimistic. I know that this anti-immigrant mentality is not my Kentucky home. I have helped many people who have been caught up in the deportation machine. Do you know what happens in most of those situations? The community rallies. People come together to raise bail, help take care of children, and provide food. They tell me the same things about the migrant: I did not know, they were my neighbor, they prayed next to me in church, I get coffee at their diner every morning, they took care of my kids, they are my doctor, etc. At those moments, Kentuckians see fellow Kentuckians hurting and they helped because that's who we are. Political ideology, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, it did not matter. There was only one thing there: love. I ask Kentuckians to rise to the occasion. Show the legislature that this is not who we are. Oppose Senate Bill 1, prevent families from being separated in our Kentucky home.