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Life in The Shadows

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Maximiliano Trejo was still sleeping in his home at dawn this summer when his sons Max and Marcos were startled awake by the sound of fists pounding on the front door. More than a dozen men were walking around the outside of the house. Inside, a platoon of images of Catholic saints hung above the main entryway like silent guards. The boys huddled in the early morning's violet light. They refused to open the door. The men left; the tension broke.

But the following morning, it was a different story. As the 48-year-old Trejo left his home outside Dallas and headed off to his job as a roofer, three vehicles followed. He was soon pulled over and the questions began:

“What’s your name?”

“Maximiliano Trejo.”

One of the men smiled. He told Trejo that he was with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

“Do you have documents to be in the United States?”

Maximiliano — he goes by Max — recalled that he made sure to tell the truth. But that honesty was no shield. He was shackled on the spot with metal handcuffs.

The \$18-an-hour roofer had fled poverty in central Mexico more than two decades earlier. After his apprehension, he spent time in federal detention. Today, he’s out on an immigration bond, fighting deportation with the help of an attorney.

His wife fears the worst kind of ending to this story: a fractured family if Max is deported.

“They are taking the bread from this family,” she said as she sank into the family’s grey sofa the day her Max was taken. “He’s not a criminal.”

She asked that her name not be published because, like her husband, she is undocumented.

Her family and friends know what’s going on, though. On the day Max was picked up, family surrounded her. Brothers-in-law, nephews and godmothers visited the house, bearing food and prayers. In front of a family altar are pictures, statues and candles bearing the images of Catholic saints. Their Catholic pastor called six times that day.

That day, her youngest son, 11-year-old Marcos, described his dad with simple words. “He is everything to me.”

Then, Marcos, a slim boy with mountains of wavy black hair, choked up and stopped talking. Sixteen-year-old Max drew closer to his younger brother.

They soaked up the stress, worried their father might not come home to the little house on a quiet cul-de-sac where neighbors look out for each other, mow each other's lawns and even fill in for child-care support. The boys were worried that the day the government men came knocking, the day the house with the cheery red door felt more like a military bunker under siege, would mark the end of their time as a normal family.

Max's detention took place in the geographic heart of the United States, in a part of North Texas where the economy pulsates with construction, corporate expansion and an enviable jobless rate hovering around 3 percent. Yet the irony is that immigration detentions in this same region lead the nation. Twin realities underscore the bipolar nature of the national immigration debate: The harshest crackdown on suspected unauthorized immigrants in recent history is hitting hardest, splitting families, where the economy seems the strongest.

Add to this an intensifying stress brought on by an increase in racist rhetoric aimed at those perceived to be Mexican immigrants. In early August, it went beyond words, when 22 people were killed in El Paso by a man from the Dallas area who said he was targeting Mexicans.

All this is playing out during a presidential campaign season that continues to expose deep and challenging ideological rifts over the country's immigration policies.

Getting through the first days

A relative helped guide the family through the beginning of Max Trejo's detention. They found him through the government's electronic locator system at a private detention center in Alvarado, about an hour south of Dallas. Marcos and Max Jr. paid visits but left upset by their father's tears and his weight loss.

For Max's wife, there was more to worry about than just the fate of her husband. She needed to find a way to put food on the table. She took a job at a restaurant where workers could take home for free the day's leftovers of nopales, frijoles or beef guisados. Then she stopped, as fatigue set in.

Her friends at the Catholic church called her as well and paid visits.

"They are my sanity in the insanity," she told a friend.

As more friends and family brought vases of yellow chrysanthemums and marigolds in the following days, the family altar swelled in size.

August 30, 2019 A shrine inside the Trejo family home grows in size. ICE came knocking but the family didn't open their doors. Max Trejo was picked up in the neighborhood a day later by ICE and was later released. The family is praying he will be able to stay in Texas, where he has lived for more than 20 years. (Kael Alford | Panos Pictures)

Today, lit candles with a light-skinned Jesus image fan out on the white-tiled floor in front of the altar. Above them, two images of a brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe peer out. And there is now a special feature: A plastic virgin called Rosa la Mistica. She has special powers for those with cancer, or for those in prison, Max's wife said.

Neighbors, the family priest and Max's sons wrote letters to an immigration judge, pleading for his release. Eleven-year-old Marco's letter is written in blue ink, in careful block letters and with the straight-up attitude of a pre-teen Texan.

"Y'all should not deport him because he is my dad," Marco pleaded. "He is a good person. He always works. He serves me food to eat... This past week have been the worst week."

Like Marcos, Max Jr. was born in the United States. His letter to the judge was equally direct.

"I'm 16 years old and right now without him, I'm suffering so much. I have too much pain while hearing him through the phone... I am pleading to you, please, please, as a son, to not separate my dad from me, my mom and my little brother because without his presence this family wouldn't function. We love him so much."

Another letter, from neighbor Jennifer Cimaglia, spoke of how Trejo always took time to greet her 4-year-old twin girls. Cimaglia praised Trejo for mowing her family's lawn, without her having to ask, after her husband had back surgery.

"That is how he raises his family, to care for others regardless of their differences," her letter read. "Our lives are better with Maximiliano Trejo in it, our street would not be the same without him and his caring spirit, friendly wave, amazing smile and servant's heart."

In his letter urging leniency, Trejo's pastor, Luis Arraiza, began with, "To Whom It May Concern: Peace and All Goodness! ... Removing him from his wife and two young children will create unnecessary pain and stress to his family."

Amid all this, Max Jr. began showing that stress. His neck muscles had tensed so much that one ear swelled up. A medical exam showed he had no infection, his mother said. Doctors said anxiety was the cause.

A precarious reprieve

On July 18, Max Jr. and family friends filed into a small immigration courtroom for his bond hearing. The black-robed judge sat in a 10th-floor immigration court at the federal courthouse in downtown Dallas. Trejo appeared on a TV screen from a detention center in Alvarado, an hour south of Dallas. He wore a yellow T-shirt, slacks and a medallion around his neck. He approached a gray table and looked into a video camera from inside a conference room.

"Did you understand your rights in your removal situation?" Judge James Nugent asked him.

If you bond out, the judge said, you still need to show up for the rest of the hearing process.

"OK that's fine... many thanks," Max told the judge.

His oldest son sat in a wooden pew, tensely watching his father on the screen. The neighbor Cimaglia, her husband and her mother-in-law joined other Trejo family and friends and sat with the skinny teenager, whose hair had begun to show flecks of gray.

Bond was set at \$6,500, a high sum for this family, but they had passed the hat. They paid the *fianza* the next day. In the United States' immigration system, families of detainees must pay the full amount, not the roughly 10 percent common throughout the nation's criminal justice system.

August 30, 2019 Max Trejo recounts the story of his detention by ICE to Socorro Perales, an organizer with Dallas Area Interfaith. Trejo has been released from detention and is awaiting a court hearing to determine if he will be deported. (Kael Alford | Panos Pictures)

Max Jr. walked out into the sunlight outside the courthouse. Jennifer Cimaglia began to cry, happy that Max Sr. would be freed. Her mother-in-law, Patricia Cimaglia, praised the elder Max: “Max is so clean-cut, and we were surprised when they picked him up.”

This all meant that Max would — at least temporarily — be back with his family.

Fuel for the economy

Max is awaiting his next round of court appearances. A backlog of more than 1 million deportation cases means Max won't have his crucial merits hearing to fight for the right to stay in this country until early January 2022.

He's a working man, uncomfortable with too much time sitting on a couch.

He's part of the reason the North Texas economy is booming.

Phil Crone says immigrants have helped propel the area's economic surge. At the Dallas Builders Association, the executive director is scrambling for solutions to a persistent worker shortage. He wants high schools to bring back the old-school shop classes. He's working with several area schools on such an initiative. He hammers away at the importance of “middle-skilled” jobs like those in the well-paid construction trades. Success doesn't have to be defined by a college degree, he says.

Crone fumes about the intense competition between employers for workers, telling stories where builders have had subcontractors come to the job sites and “pilfer” them away with higher wages. He estimates builders need at least 20,000 workers in commercial and residential construction. In North Texas, “It is as bad as any region in the country,” Crone said.

Going into 2018, Robert Dietz, chief economist at the National Association of Home Builders, predicted that, “while the labor shortage wouldn't get better, it would stop getting worse.” He was wrong.

Nationally, it would take a construction crew the size of the population of Tampa or New Orleans to fill the need. This past July, the U.S. building industry was short 370,000 construction workers, up from 314,000 a year earlier.

Construction wages have increased some 25 percent over the last five years, according to the U.S. Labor Department. In the past, such pay hikes have usually attracted new workers to construction trades. But these aren't usual times. “It isn't a matter of how much we can pay people,” Crone said. “It's just that there aren't enough people and therein lies the frustration with our immigration and education systems.”

Crone would like legislation that provides visas specifically for the construction industry. Construction labor is often by nature transient: Workers need to be able to easily move from job to job. Crone backs a program that would be structured so that workers can move from employer to employer with ease. That would make it distinct from work visas today, such as the H2B, where mobility is restricted and legal workers become something of a captive labor force.

“That is a huge problem,” said Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. “It is not a good wage environment.

“You would want to have a visa for the industry that hires illegal immigrants so that they don’t have to anymore,” Nowrasteh said.

Efforts have been made to establish such visas. A small program was included in 2013 federal legislation aimed at a comprehensive overhaul of the nation’s immigration system. That measure failed. In 2015 in the Texas Legislature, a measure was proposed to create a state guest worker program. It, too, failed. In the interim, there’s more chaos in the construction job market and more math trouble ahead.

The U.S. economy had 7.3 million job openings in June, for example, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There were about 6 million people looking for jobs. Even if all 6 million were qualified for those jobs, there would still be jobs open.

“That happens during boom times,” Nowrasteh said. “Basically that means we are at full employment.”

Bittersweet American dream

In the evenings, in the bedroom the Trejo boys share, Marcos sometimes breaks down into tears. The fourth-grader is turning into a fine athlete; he’s filling a shelf with trophies for his participation in *fútbol Americano*. Max Jr. tells Marcos, with his oval face and wide-set eyes, not to cry. Their father is a good man, and there’s a chance that he’ll win permission to stay legally in the U.S.

“He’s done nothing wrong,” Max says.

The boys didn’t want their mother to work that second job, fearing she might not return at all because she now feels exposed in the community when she’s away from the protection of their home. After Max Sr. was released on bond, the younger Max said they all felt a sense of relief at home. “We function so much better with him,” he said.

Around the nation, psychologists and child advocates worry that children of immigrants face persistent stress they call toxic. It’s not just immigration advocates warning of the damage to a generation of Latinos. The stress of potential deportations can lead to “perpetual outsider-hood,” researchers from Harvard and New York University found in a 2011 study.

Nationally, there are about **5.9 million children under 18** who are U.S. citizens with at least one family member who is unauthorized, according to the University of Southern California’s Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration. More than 16.7 million people have at least one unauthorized immigrant in the household.

Children are resilient, said Wendy Cervantes, immigration director at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Law and Social Policy. But “we are really destabilizing families pretty much from every angle. ... I have never seen this type of strain.”

Cervantes seemed shaken after a recent visit to North Texas. She interviewed parents and children impacted by a factory raid in April in Allen, about 25 miles north of Dallas. About 280 workers were apprehended at a business that refurbished cell phones. Many were women who were later released on humanitarian grounds because they were their households’ sole caregivers.

Those deportation cases continue to wind their way through the immigration courts. Cervantes described one of those on the deportation hook: “She is teaching her daughters how to cook and clean so if they are left behind, they are not a burden on the families that take them in. The children are 6 and 7 years old,” Cervantes said. “The mother cries as she teaches them.”

Another family has a 6-year-old son who wakes up multiple times in the night crying and wondering if his father is still there, she said.

Well-televised raids in Mississippi food processing plants resulted in nearly 700 workers being taken away in early August. That, too, caused a fresh wave of trauma as children worried whether their families could be next, Cervantes said.

Jenifer Williams, a Dallas-area psychologist who has worked with immigrants, said separation from parents or fear of separation can impact a child’s brain, making it a struggle to focus.

Educational development becomes difficult. Some children become depressed and have crying bouts.

“The research shows clearly that there is an increased risk for a lifetime of PTSD and even for cancer, heart disease and diabetes,” Williams said.

Other children may move into a state of “hypervigilance,” she said. “It is an exasperated sense of danger or need for safety. It is very common.”

“It is toxic stress. It has an effect on brain development. Neurodevelopment continues in the teens and early 20s. It is not specific to only young children.”

Pulled over

Trejo’s wife says he had a beer after work on March 3, 2017. He got behind the wheel of his vehicle and was pulled over by police in Irving. A drunken driving conviction followed. Trejo had no idea it would potentially lead to his deportation. He paid a fine. But the conviction put him on the ICE radar screen, his Dallas lawyer Michael Canton believes.

By the time of Trejo’s drunken driving episode, President Donald Trump had been in the White House for six weeks. Life for immigrants, whether in the U.S. lawfully or unlawfully, has grown steadily more difficult: Trump has, among other things, issued a travel ban for people from countries with Muslim majorities, stripped children from migrating parents who claimed asylum until courts intervened and attempted to rescind the DACA program that allows the children of some migrants to remain and work in the U.S.

Canton, Trejo’s attorney, seeks to end his client’s deportation process with a “cancellation of removal.” It’s a difficult path, but it’s one of a few that remain open to immigrants who are in deportation proceedings and who have been in the U.S. for more than a decade, among other requirements.

His attorney must prove Trejo’s good moral character and that the deportation would be an “exceptional and extremely unusual” hardship on his U.S. citizen children. If Canton succeeds, Max Sr. might even get a green card, cementing his legal residency.

Canton views the hardship test as the most difficult in this process. “It has to be exceptional and extreme beyond what a normal family would go through.”

In the interim, the family is living as normal a life as possible, given the huge obstacles ahead. There are the all-American breakfasts with pink and yellow Fruit Loops cereal, and the Mexican suppers of cheese tamales steamed inside in corn husks.

And, for a time, Friday nights were all about football—as Texan as you can get.

Max Jr. played tuba in his high school band. Football games were his time to shine. The teen would lift the huge silver tuba, fill his lungs, puff out his brown cheeks and blow out a feel-good tune.

This is Texas normal.

But while Max Jr. played, his parents watched from the fence, where they could only glimpse their son marching under the Friday night lights. With so many bills and an insecure future, the parents decided against paying \$16 for a pair of game-night tickets. There was also some \$200 needed to pay Max Jr.'s band uniform fee.

Within days of that balmy Friday night, Max Jr. dropped band to save them that \$200. He loved the tuba. But he loved his parents more.