

Opinion: Immigration law's unrelenting heartbreak

By Rebekah Rodriguez-Lynn

On Nov. 20, 2014, President Obama gave a historic speech on immigration. Despite how profoundly personal this issue is to me, I didn't watch. For the past decade, I have avoided any mention of immigration reform – hearing or reading about it causes my stomach to churn.

The topic brings me back to a window in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in 2004. The five minutes I spent there damaged my life irrevocably. With the swipe of a pen, a blank-faced clerk denied my husband's application for a marriage visa and shattered our family.

We had met four years earlier, working at a Mexican restaurant in a small town in Southern California. We fell in love, spending hours talking after the restaurant closed. He told me about how his mother had died when he was young, and his father descended into alcoholism. He and his nine brothers and sisters had to fend for themselves. He arrived in the U.S. at 17, finished high school, and got three jobs to support his younger siblings in Mexico. And because he had entered the country illegally, he did all this without documents.

We got married in 2002, then moved to Cambridge, Mass., so I could earn a master's degree at Harvard University. We had a beautiful baby boy. On the weekends, we'd go to the park and I would watch my husband do cartwheels for our giggling baby. At night, we would pile into the cheap black futon in our one-bedroom apartment. We were happy.

But we knew we couldn't build a stable life for our son without regularizing my husband's immigration status. So we applied for a marriage visa and, one year later, got an

appointment at the American Consulate in Ciudad Juarez on April 17, 2004. At the time, anyone applying for a visa needed legal standing to receive an appointment inside the U.S.

So we flew to California, left our son with family, and hopped a bus to Ciudad Juarez. The morning of our appointment we found the waiting room of the American Consulate filled with couples like us.

The clerk called us to the window. My husband raised his right hand and promised to tell the truth. She only asked one question: Have you ever crossed illegally besides your initial entrance? Yes, he answered. He had returned to visit his ailing grandmother. The clerk informed us that my husband was barred from entering the United States for life. Can we appeal? No. She called the next couple.

I couldn't care for a toddler alone while studying and working two jobs, so I left my son in Mexico, too. I returned home to an empty crib and an empty bed. I felt as though my limbs had been torn from my body. My family was gone. I found a top immigration lawyer who agreed to see me pro bono. He told me there was absolutely nothing he could do.

My husband had not broken any criminal laws. By visiting his grandmother, he had violated immigration regulations. For that, he was given a life sentence with no parole. My marriage seemed worthless in the eyes of the law – a law that left my innocent son with parents broken apart against their will.

Our justice system is weighted toward keeping families together. Children are often sent back to abusive homes on the principle of the sanctity of family. But this was not the case with my family. In my son's eyes, his father is a superhero. Yet for over a decade now, my government has thrown up roadblock after roadblock to keep them apart.

Months later, I finally read Obama's speech on immigration. His executive order prevents people from being deported if

they have American children. It's designed to protect kids like my son until Congress passes something more permanent. But a federal judge in Texas has put the executive order on hold; an appeals court heard oral arguments on April 17 and will rule soon, but the case may eventually go to the Supreme Court. In the meantime, I pray for a ruling that will keep other families from suffering as we have.

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