

These accounts are taken from [Voices of Immigration](#), a campaign of [Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform](#) (CCIR) aimed at highlighting the stories of immigrants in our country. Believing that every person is made in the image of God, we seek to restore the human element to the conversation around immigration reform.

[www.faithandimmigration.org](http://www.faithandimmigration.org)



## Family Values Without Borders

Norma comes from a small town in Nicaragua, where she had to end her education after the third grade. She is the second oldest of six children and worked since she was very young helping to sell the tamales her mother made in the streets. “My father was very abusive and would beat my mother very often,” she said. “My little brothers and sisters never had enough to eat so I would often miss school in order to sell the tamales or other food that my mother would make just to help keep us afloat.” When Norma was 11 her mother became very sick and wasn’t able to work. “That’s when I contacted our friends and family for help and they let me stay with them in the city and work for two years until I was 13 years old.” At that point Norma and her family had raised enough money for her trip to America.

During the trip across the border, Norma remembers breaking one of her ankles after jumping the fence. “The people I was with kept running, and I was getting behind, so they finally just left me there. I didn’t know what else to do so I remained in the desert until a border patrol showed up. I was very thirsty and felt like fainting.” Norma had been stranded there for a day until immigration officials took her to a hospital for treatment. Fortunately, Norma’s uncle living in America was contacted and she was released into his custody.

“My family life is much better now although I don’t speak English. I’m often very worried because I know that the police can come and pick me up at any time. My faith and my commitment to helping my family back home have kept me going, since I know that my siblings and mother still need me. I haven’t been able to see them for over four years now, although I’m very happy when they call me. I understand that if I can’t learn English then my future is limited to what I have right now, and I won’t be able to get a better job. I would love to see my family have a house of their own and not have to worry where their next meal is coming from. I also want my mom taken care of medically, because even though she doesn’t complain, I know she’s very sick. I hope that my adopted country realizes that we aren’t delinquents, but are here to help and give the very best of our lives in an honest way.”

**Juan Daniel Espitia** is a pastor in Solana Beach, California.

## A Pastor’s Testimony of Redemption May End in Deportation

Pastor Walter is experiencing firsthand the effects of a broken immigration system. Walter migrated to the United States from Colombia when he was young, petitioned by his parents, who were Lawful Permanent Residents. Walter’s parents wanted for their son to enjoy the opportunities that the United States had to offer.

As a young man, though, Walter fell into the wrong crowd of friends. On one occasion, in 1992, a friend offered Walter what he should have known was too good to be true: a large sum of money for himself if he’d make a discreet commercial exchange with a stranger in downtown Chicago. Walter made a bad decision — and he ended up convicted of a crime and imprisoned for two years. After serving his time and being released from jail, though, Walter’s life experienced a radical turn-around. Drawn to a local church by a particularly notable girl in the choir — Andrea, now his wife — Walter realized his own need for redemption. Walter accepted Christ in 1995, putting his past behind him. “Thanks to God and his mercy, I am now a new creation,” Walter says, citing the apostle Paul. In 2007, Walter and Andrea started a church on the north side of Chicago, and it has grown steadily as it ministers to Spanish-speaking people from throughout the region. Given his own testimony, Walter counts it a privilege to be able to share with others — especially those who have lost their way — the hope that he has found in Christ. “I am a witness that Christ changes lives,” Walter testifies. While he has walked through immigration challenges with members of his church — a few years ago, a good friend was deported and separated from his family — Walter never imagined that he would have to experience these trials himself. After all, he had come to the United States lawfully, with a green card, and his wife and children, as well as his parents and siblings, are all citizens. Last October, however, Walter traveled to his home country of Colombia for a vacation. Upon his return to the U.S. in November, Walter presented his green card and his passport, eager to be at home in Chicago with Andrea and his two children, Johanan (12) and Faith (10). The

immigration agents at the airport in Miami, however, informed him that there was a problem: His crime, committed in 1992, for which he had satisfactorily served his criminal sentence, rendered him deportable.

After several hours of detention, Walter was allowed to return to Chicago, but the authorities kept his green card — and informed him that he would need to report to immigration court in Chicago in January, where a judge will determine if he would be allowed to stay or required to leave.

While Walter has a strong faith in God's provision, he is naturally anxious about his upcoming court date. He has spent thousands of dollars to hire an immigration attorney, but there is no guarantee that he will be successful. If deported, his wife and kids will face a terrible decision: leave their homeland, and the kids' schools, and their church, to go to an entirely foreign country, or face indefinite separation from their husband and father. The growing church, likewise, will be without its pastor.

Walter recognizes that he made a serious mistake 15 years ago, but he knows that God has forgiven him, and he served his time. Unfortunately, Walter is one of thousands who have found that the U.S. immigration system is neither forgiving nor sensible. As one of many evangelical Christians in the United States who faces separation from his family under the current system, Walter yearns to see the church in the U.S. "raise its voice" in favor of just, compassionate, and sensible reforms to the U.S. immigration system.

**Matthew Soerens** is the co-author of [Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, & Truth in the Immigration Debate](#) (InterVarsity Press, 2009). He lives in suburban Chicago in an intentional community called [Parkside](#).

## Border Fence Limbo

My friend Dan and I walked along Avenida Internacional, the four-lane highway that runs along the border between Tijuana and San Diego, on our way to get a view of the [DHS border fence construction](#) from the Tijuana side.

Avenida Internacional ascends to the top of a high mesa. From this vantage point we could see the original staging area—Area 5—for the construction of this last segment of the triple fence, slashing an 800-foot-wide scar into the land for 4.5 miles from here to the Pacific Ocean. Down below, we saw a bright yellow tanker truck bearing the Keiwi Corporation logo, a mining company out of Omaha, Nebraska, awarded a \$48.6 million contract this year to complete the construction. That's a little more than \$10 million per mile, not including cost overruns.

Up ahead was a massive drainage culvert where winter rains bring toxic runoff, trash, and silt under the road to drain into the Tijuana estuary's coastal sage scrub. Climbing down, I saw two young men, then four, then five, lurking in the shadow of the massive concrete retaining wall. Two men ducked into the long tunnel as we arrived, while a teenager wearing a bright red soccer jersey watched us descend. These men lived here, directly under the rusty barrier wall, trapped in between the U.S. and Mexico. Without papers, these migrant workers can end up in limbo for months, neither welcome to return to jobs and communities in the United States, nor able to enter Mexico.

Fearful at first, the men warmed up to us as Dan sat down on a beat-up metal computer case, opened his laptop to record his interview with the men, and began chatting.

"How long have you guys been waiting down here?"

A man, stretched out in the shade on a grey urethane auto upholstery cushion, answered,

"Pasé dos días en la cárcel, y un mes aquí." *One month, after being in jail for two days.* Today he was waiting for the sun to go down so he could make another attempt to cross back into the U.S.

Another man, wearing a windbreaker, layered t-shirts, and a baseball cap, told us, with some hesitation, that his name was Jose. He reached up and put his hands above him on the border fence. "Ni de aquí, ni de allá." *We're neither here nor there.*

The man on the cushion explained that in Mexico, police patrol the area around the culvert, harassing and often arresting the men for vagrancy. Crossing back into Mexico is fraught with risk, and without friends in Tijuana, you can't make it. He told us his name was Francisco, and that he had lived for eight years in Seattle, working as a roofer until last month, when he was deported to Ciudad Juarez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas. He just wanted to go back to Seattle.

Another man, who sat leaning against the far wall, responded with a similar story. He had been stuck here for four months now, but previously had worked in Escondido, in northern San Diego County. Four months earlier he had been deported—and they took him all the way to Nogales, on the Arizona-Sonora border.

“Es muy caliente cruzar in Nogales,” he explained. *It’s really too hot to cross in Nogales.*

Indeed, one of the effects of Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego and Operation Hold the Line in El Paso, efforts begun in 1994 and which focused on reinforced border fencing and increased border patrol in the San Diego-Tijuana and Juarez-El Paso areas, has been to push immigrants into more treacherous routes, through high desert with temperatures reaching upwards of 127 degrees and rugged mountain passes where immigrants easily get lost and freeze to death.

The current ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement) strategy—deporting Mexican migrants to regions far from their communities in the U.S.—draws upon a long legacy of outrageous and unjust U.S. immigration policy. In the 1950s, under Eisenhower’s “Operation Wetback,” municipal, county, and state authorities, working together with the border patrol, performed sweeps of agricultural areas and Latino neighborhoods, setting target goals of 1,000 arrests per day. They picked up US and Mexican citizens alike, then transported them deep into Mexico before freeing them. Many were put aboard ships and transported from Port Isabel, Texas, to Veracruz.

The only difference today is that ICE is deporting migrants to even more dangerous border cities with rough, hostile terrain. Not only do the migrants have no family, friends, or support network when they are dropped off in a strange, new city, they also arrive with no papers to prove their Mexican citizenship, and, as Francisco explained, they find that it is better to cross back into the U.S. than to try to make their way in Mexico.

While fence supporters crow that the border fence has reduced the numbers of migrants who cross into the U.S. to find work, statistics show that migrants are merely crossing elsewhere. Six years after the establishment of Operation Gatekeeper, the other nine sectors of the 2,000-mile border reported a 20 percent increase in the number of migrant apprehensions, while crossings in San Diego and El Paso dropped to less than one-third of earlier levels. An extremely high percentage of migrants succeed in crossing. According to a study by Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at The University of California, San Diego, 92 percent of Mexican migrants trying to enter the U.S. illegally eventually succeed.

Thousands are dying now, from heat exposure, hypothermia, and car accidents caused when border patrol agents engage in high-speed chase with fleeing vehicles. A San Diego group called [Border Angels](#) has been working to put water tanks in the desert to help rescue lost migrants, but estimates are that between 4,000 and 11,000 migrants have died trying to cross the desert since the beginning of Operation Gatekeeper.

And even those few who do cross in San Diego County face violence from border patrol agents.

“La migra nos tiran como conejos,” Jose explained. *They shoot at us like rabbits.* He removed his windbreaker and pulled back the sleeve of his t-shirt to show me a bruise on his shoulder.

Dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and running shoes, clutching a 2-liter bottle of Sprite, Francisco looked prepared for the journey. His face still shielded by a straw cowboy hat, he gently asked us if we had any money.

“No uso drogas,” Jose assured me. *I don’t use drugs or anything.* “We are just trying to work.” Dan and I left them with five bucks, enough to get them a meal for the evening, but not much else. And with that, we climbed back out of the culvert and returned to the road.

**Jill Holstin** lives in San Diego, California.

## God is Going to Change Hard Hearts

Erica grew up in San Salvador and had to work with her parents since the age of five to help earn an income to survive on. “It was very difficult for us to even make enough to buy bread for our family of five.” Having lived in poverty all of their lives, Erica’s parents decided to send her to the United States at the age of 16 to help financially support her family back home. “The cost of the trip was a fortune for us, but with a lot of effort we were able to get together \$2,300.” In order to come up with the money, her family had to sell many of their possessions, including their only cow, with the rest being obtained through loans by close family members. Erica was forced to abandon her studies in school.

“There were many problems along the journey, but at the same time I knew God was with me and he took care of me each day.” The people transporting the group of immigrants that Erica was traveling with asked for money beyond what was originally agreed upon. The Mexican immigration border patrol also demanded money, although Erica had none left to give. During the trip, one night Erica awoke to one of the men trying to touch her. “But God helped me in that situation and nothing more happened. When we got to the border, I realized that I was in a completely unknown place and alone. It’s only God that saved me.”

One of the fellow travelers had family members living in the U.S. and agreed to house Erica once they arrived. “When I came to the United States I had a lot of expectations and many illusions of what my new world would be like.” The language barrier was a struggle for Erica at first, although the family she was living with helped her learn English over time. “When I made the decision to come to the

United States, I was determined to learn English and get a good job.” Erica wanted to attend high school but had to work in order to help repay the loans that enabled her to come to America.

Now at the age of 31, after being in America for 15 years, Erica owns a home and two cars. “We are very comfortable and my life is very beautiful, thanks be to God. He has blessed us with children and even though sometimes we find difficulty in finding a job, God has always been faithful and kept us afloat.” Since working in America, Erica has been paying into America’s tax system. “What depresses me and saddens me the most is that I have been here for 15 years paying taxes, yet without the opportunity to get any proper documentation.” Erica hasn’t been able to see her parents during her time in America and hopes that one day her children can meet their grandparents.

“My dream for the United States would be to build a better country filled with peace and where we can communicate as brothers and sisters without being judged on the color of our skin. I have faith that God is going to change hard hearts and that he will transform them into being kind and full of compassion for all the different people that come to this wonderful country. When God formed the earth, he formed it for all of us, and he was not saying put borders here and borders there or huge walls so that nobody can come through. He said that we should love each other the way that he loves us. May God bless this nation and may he bless everyone living in this country with love and the ability to share it with all the immigrants of the earth. Remember that those of us who work here do it to obtain money in an honest way for our families.”

**Juan Daniel Espitia** lives in Solana Beach, California.

## 50,000 Pesos for Jorge

It’s after dinner at Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, Mexico. With so many people moving about, the shelter feels alive. The 150 or so beds are nearly full, but more and more men arrive each night. Most have been deported from the United States and know nothing about Tijuana. They come to Casa for free room and board for two weeks. Here they have a chance to save enough money to travel back home, whether home is across the border in the U.S., down in southern Mexico, or back in Honduras.

As a white American volunteer at Casa del Migrante, I approach my presence here as a learning opportunity. The shelter will provide hospitality whether I am here or not. Of course, I hope to contribute to this hospitality, particularly in small moments of everyday service. One of the most sacred pieces of this welcoming is the sharing of stories.

Jorge, a migrant I met three days ago, approaches me in the dark shadow underneath the stairs. Originally, he was from Zacatecas, Mexico; he sports a bald head and has blue eyes. A paycheck still waits for him at Panda Express in Escondido, California, where he was employed as a cook. ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) picked him up before he had a chance to get his money. He told me how he is trying to make enough money here in Tijuana so that he can cross to the U.S. and get his old job back.

He motions for me to come closer. Unfolding a crumpled bill from his pocket, he says, “Look what they gave me.” He shows me 50,000 Mexican pesos. In a story that switches between Spanish and English, he explains how for the past week and a half he has been working on a construction site near the big plaza. His foreman finally gave him his pay today: the 50,000 pesos. He could not believe it. He was so excited. Until he found out by speaking with the priest and a few of the employees at the shelter that the 50,000-peso note has been discontinued and that it is almost worthless. The peso was revalued on January 1, 1993; pesos dated before then are 1,000 times less valuable than the new Mexican peso. His 50,000-peso bill is really worth only 50 pesos, just under \$5.

Jorge’s anger and sadness is overwhelming. This is the pain of possibilities lost. This is the constant battle that is played out every night at Casa del Migrante; it is war, all the time, between opportunities lost and chances to start again. Tonight, despair wins and tears crawl down his face. He repeats over and over again, “Those f\*\*\*ing guys. Those f\*\*\*ing guys.”

Unfortunately, such exploitation is common on both sides of the border. Numerous examples of exploitive labor conditions in the U.S. come to mind, as well as numerous accounts of police robbing and beating migrants in Tijuana. Two migrants showed up this morning telling how they were arrested by the police and held at the station since they did not have any money to bribe the officers.

I cuss with Jorge and do my best to comfort him. Jorge hands me the 50,000 pesos. I try to turn it down but he insists, “Take it. Remember this.”

Tonight I consider our roles in all of this. Where will Jorge go from here? As a white Christian of privilege, what will my response be? Where will I take this anger, and how can I legitimately be about love and change? These questions remain unresolved, but it all seems to start with remembering stories. In stories, the dignity of migrants is affirmed.

In sharing this, I hope to mourn in solidarity with Jorge. Although I do not own the tears, I can listen to him. Cuss along with him. And in the dynamic and terrible hope of our faith, I can strive to cross borders and welcome the stranger.

— **Rob Neighbours**, Santa Cruz, CA