

New face on an old debate; Colotl case spotlights illegal immigration saga in Cobb County.; Activism heats up on both sides of the issue.

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Body

The recent arrest of Jessica **Colotl** is more than just the story of one young woman who ran afoul of police and is paying for it.

The 21-year-**old** Kennesaw State University student, an **illegal** immigrant, has become a reluctant participant in a national **debate** that shows no sign of abating. **Cobb County** --- Georgia, too --- finds itself **on a** national stage where the **immigration saga** plays out in headlines and arrests.

It's a stage that for weeks has **spotlighted** Arizona's controversial get-tough-on-illegals law. Now it includes metro Atlanta --- specifically, **Cobb County**, where **illegal** immigrants and police have long had an uneasy relationship.

If **immigration** is a simmering caldron, **Cobb** is the pepper in the pot, a source of **heat**. The **county** is home to a tireless campaigner to tighten **immigration** laws and a sheriff who has made a career as a get-tough lawman. Opposite them is the president of KSU and thousands of **illegal** immigrants who have chosen to make **Cobb** home.

The **case** highlights how people can take the same facts and reach vastly different conclusions. Depending on whom you ask, **Colotl** is a victim of overzealous law enforcement, or a scofflaw who has taken advantage of the state's university system --- and taxpayers.

In the middle is **Colotl**, whose parents brought her here illegally when she was 10. She's not sure she will remain in school.

"I just hope for the best," **Colotl** said Friday at a rally held in her honor. "I hope something positive comes out of this because we really need reform."

Protests, statements

The facts are well documented. A KSU police officer on March 29 stopped **Colotl** for impeding traffic and discovered her **illegal** status. **Cobb** deputies handed her to U.S. **Immigration** and Customs Enforcement agents.

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They took her to a detention center in Alabama. On May 1, they released her, and ICE officials announced she could remain in this country until she finishes school next year.

On Friday, **Colotl** turned herself in to **Cobb** authorities, who had charged her with lying about her address **on a** jail-booking form when police arrested her weeks earlier. She posted \$2,500 bond.

None of this happened in a vacuum. Her sisters at Lambda Theta Alpha sorority demonstrated for **Colotl**'s release. The American Civil Liberties Union decried her arrest, claiming police abused the spirit of program 287(g). The federal program authorizes police to detain and arrest immigrants, especially those considered dangerous. A handful of agencies in Georgia, including the **Cobb** Sheriff's Office, are participants.

KSU President Daniel Papp pushed for her release from the Alabama facility. When it came, he responded with ebullience.

"This is great news for Ms. **Colotl**, her family and friends and for the KSU community," Papp said in a statement. "We are especially thrilled she will be allowed to continue her studies here at KSU."

Case closed? It blew wide- open instead.

Republican gubernatorial candidate Eric Johnson said the state needed to focus on "key priorities like educating legal residents." Editorials criticized a system that allowed **illegal** immigrants access to class and scholarships. Cable TV talkers had a **new** topic to hash out.

And, in **Cobb**, D.A. King turned to his computer.

"We suspect few **Cobb County** residents had any idea that it was so easy for those in this country illegally to enroll in our state's colleges," King, founder of the Dustin Inman Society, wrote on his blog. Created five years ago, the organization calls for stricter **immigration** laws.

"And we suspect," King continued, "few **Cobb** residents realized their tax dollars are going to help educate such people."

Regents blamed

In an interview, King held the Board of Regents, the panel that oversees the state's universities, responsible for the **Colotl** controversy.

"The Board of Regents is in violation of state and federal law for allowing illegals into our system," said King. "I think Jessica **Colotl** may have done the state of Georgia a favor by bringing this to the forefront."

John Millsaps, a spokesman for the Board of Regents, said the state's universities are not in the business of checking students' **immigration** status. Universities would have to check on the residency status of 300,000-plus students, or run the risk of racial profiling, he said. As a result, the universities don't know how many students may be **illegal**.

"What do we need to know about a student?" Millsaps asked. "We need to know whether to charge them in-state or out-of-state tuition."

In 2007, the Board of Regents changed policy so **illegal** immigrants at Georgia public universities could not receive in-state tuition. **Illegal** immigrants are charged at the higher, out-of-state rate.

Colotl, of Duluth, had enrolled a year earlier as a Georgia student, so KSU charged her in-state tuition.

"Now that we're aware of her out-of-state status, she will pay out-of-state tuition," Millsaps said. The tuition for in-state KSU students next fall is \$2,298; for out-of-staters, \$8,286.

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The Legislature four years ago passed a bill that ended state-paid benefits to illegal immigrants in several areas. It allowed the Board of Regents to develop its own policy toward illegal immigrants.

Now, with Colotl in the news, people who would be governor are taking notice. At least three gubernatorial candidates in this year's election say people like Colotl have no place in state universities.

Enforcement, harassment?

The Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials calls Cobb County Sheriff Neil Warren "Wild West Warren." The name, said GALEO executive director Jerry Gonzalez, is apt. "We have a rogue sheriff."

The Colotl case, he said, highlights what has been going on for years in Cobb.

"The violations of the law [in Colotl's case] are very minor," Gonzalez said. "She is not a criminal."

Warren has made no apologies for his department's dealings with illegal immigrants. "I value any tool that helps me enforce the law and remove violators from our community," he said in a written statement.

The sheriff's response, said KSU political science professor Kerwin Swint, was classic Warren, and a lot of residents appreciate his stance. "He's a no-nonsense, enforce-the-law person," said Swint, who moved to Cobb County more than 20 years ago.

Relations between illegal immigrants and the community have been tense for years. Marietta police have ticketed contractors who hire illegal laborers off city streets. The recent cooling of the economy, said Swint, has heightened competition for jobs --- and that could exacerbate relations that are hardly friendly.

The Colotl case highlights the need for the federal government to deal with illegal immigration, said Republican political strategist Heath Garrett. And it only further polarizes people who don't agree on the issue already.

"It brings out the strongest emotions of the average voter on both sides of the issue," said Garrett, who lives in Marietta. "It becomes very difficult for authorities ... to do anything other than go by the letter of the law."

At Kennesaw State, several students said they think Colotl deserves a break.

"This is her home, not Mexico," said senior Willie Myrick, 22, studying for a midterm exam in a student lounge. "At least she is here trying to do something productive."

"She should be allowed to stay," said sophomore Brittany Hill, 18. "She's got around in the system this long."

She's broken the law and needs to face the consequences, responded Seth Snyder. He was taking in the sun on a recent afternoon at Marietta Square.

"No question: At 10, she [Colotl] didn't make a choice to come here," said Snyder, 24 and a student. "But I can't feel bad if she's deported. ... It is hard to respect people when you assume they are breaking the most basic law of the land: being allowed entry."

The debate also has moved from campus and town squares to that global forum, Facebook. A page supporting Papp and Colotl debuted last week. By Friday afternoon, it had 272 members.

Another page, supporting Arizona's tough immigration stance, had 396.

Staff writers Rhonda Cook, Jim Galloway and Andria Simmons contributed to this article.

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