

## **Mail gets interesting in immigrant's case**

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### **Body**

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The longer they keep Martin Lopez locked up, the more interesting the mail about him gets.

Held in an Alabama detention center since a few days after Christmas, Lopez awaits deportation for a crime he committed --- and paid for --- in Texas before he became a respected resident of Gainesville nine years ago.

"(He) was a damn dope dealer," a reader e-mailed in response to my column outlining his story. "They ought to deport him and his whole damn family."  
AJC

Early this week, someone claiming to be an INS employee sent me a defensive letter (under the clever pen name Ima LaMigra) saying that if I'd asked the right questions I might have learned something that would justify Lopez's treatment.

Meanwhile, a reader has urged me to appeal for donations to a trust fund for Lopez's wife and toddler. (Anyone who ever took a toké and got away with it before 1990, he wrote, certainly should contribute).

In case you missed the column, here's a recap:

Lopez, a legal immigrant, got caught with two pounds of marijuana in Texas in 1990. He pleaded guilty to a charge of simple possession, paid a \$ 25 fine and served 24 days in jail.

Then he moved to Gainesville, went to work in a poultry plant, got married, joined the church and became a dad.

In late December, he went to INS offices in Atlanta to present himself as an eager candidate for citizenship.

Citing the Texas offense and provisions of the Immigration Reform Act of 1996 --- which provides for the deportation of legal immigrants convicted of crimes that could've drawn a sentence of more than a year --- officials there handcuffed Lopez and took him to Gadsden for confinement.

Lopez's friends and prominent Hall countians who knew him ---including his employer, church officials, a bank vice president and a college administrator --- promptly wrote dozens of letters in his behalf.

Gainesville lawyer Jed Carter, saying he was morally outraged, volunteered to represent Lopez for free.

Since January, Carter --- who has never met Lopez --- has spent more than \$ 15,000 worth of his time trying to free him.

Lopez has not seen his wife and their little boy, now nearly 2, since he has been confined (at a projected cost to taxpayers, Carter told me, of roughly \$ 30,000 a year --- just about what Lopez made at the chicken plant where he worked).

## Mail gets interesting in immigrant's case

So, what do you think --- tough break, just deserts or egregious injustice?

Here's what I think: Lopez, having been a loyal worker, a devoted family man and an active member of his church for nearly a decade in Gainesville, deserves to be freed and allowed to pursue citizenship, period.

If he's not the kind of person we want and need in this country, who is?

Dope dealer? I don't know, and don't care. It was nine years ago, and if the great state of Texas wasn't all that offended --- 25 bucks and 24 days --- then neither am I. What should matter is that he paid his fine and did his time, and went straight.

If I'd dug deeper, as "Ima" says I should've, might I have uncovered something that would convince me that what has happened to Lopez is fair? No. Legal, maybe --- but not right.

As for helping his family, follow your conscience.

The reader whose idea it is suggests a donation of at least \$ 25, and Carter says checks made out to the Lopez Family Trust Fund can be mailed to him at his office (736 Green St. in Gainesville, 30501).

Feelin' anything besides free and brave?

Our Gwinnett columnist

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