

IMMIGRANT IS AMNESTY SUCCESS STORY

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Body

Fifteen years ago, amnesty for illegal immigrants was the last thing on Rosalino Pedres' mind. He was young and strong, able to run across the Mexican border with ease. Who needed amnesty? Not this fleet-footed border jumper.

"It seems so long ago I could go across and come back any time I wanted," Pedres said this week in his San Jose office. "A lot changed. You get older, and the border isn't so easy to cross anymore. You begin to want a better, stable life and greater opportunities."

Today he's a U.S. citizen, union man, homeowner and father of an American-born daughter. And he's living proof that amnesty, which is in the news again, works for deserving immigrants.

The new, open-border president of Mexico recently suggested legalizing undocumented Mexicans working in the United States. The new, free-market president of America is listening. Another amnesty is coming sooner or later. You can bet your overpriced Silicon Valley house on it. Just don't pay attention to the rationalizations from Washington.

The first amnesty was part of the misnamed Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which was supposed to reduce illegal migration to a trickle. The truth is it couldn't stop an overbooked inner-tube on the Rio Grande.

Granting amnesty to illegal immigrants is like putting the proverbial cart before the horse. We suddenly notice all these people doing grunt work that Americans need done but won't do themselves. We see them paying taxes, going to church and not complaining much. Gee, they're not so bad after all, so let's legalize them.

True needs

The real question is why didn't we recruit them from Mexico in the first place? The only answer is that we Americans haven't admitted our true need for cheap labor or our special relationship with Mexico. When we finally do, we'll grant more visas to Mexican workers like Rosalino Pedres.

He's a short, slightly built man with jet-black hair and a quiet determination. At age 15, he found himself with few choices in Mata de Cana, a poor village outside of Veracruz with no high school or college. He could grow corn on his father's farm or study bookkeeping in Mexico City.

The trip to Mexico City paid off for a short time; he was laid off from his first bookkeeping job. All signs pointed north for the teenager. Another mass migration to the United States had begun in the early 1980s. His brother, who was already picking fruit near Stockton, persuaded Pedres to sneak across the border as he had done.

"OK," Pedres remembered saying. "I'll go, but only for about two years. Then I'm coming back home."

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He joined other relatives in San Jose after one harvest season.

"They told me I could be a manager in San Jose," he said. "When I got there they found a job for me in a restaurant. They showed me the dishwashing machine and said, 'There, you get to manage that.' "

A janitor's job after that turned out to be a stroke of luck. Organized labor was rethinking its traditional rejection of illegal **immigrant** workers. He joined the Service Employees International Union and impressed the leadership enough to become an organizer himself. Ten years ago, he helped the union develop the "Justice for Janitors" campaign in Silicon Valley, which grew into an influential national movement for economic justice.

Although he was studying English and American labor law, Pedres still wasn't compelled to become a legal resident until his brother nagged him into it.

Ease of travel

"I agreed, mostly because the border was becoming too expensive and dangerous to cross," he recalls.

The green card came, granting him the ease of travel he wished, but his transformation wasn't finished. U.S. citizenship, another alien thought to him, crept steadily into the picture.

"As a union organizer, I was always telling **immigrant** janitors that they had to vote to protect their rights," he said, "and you have to become a citizen to vote. I thought it was time to live up to my own words."

He's now married with an 11-year-old, American-born daughter and another child on the way. On a combined income of less than \$50,000, his family has bought a modest house in San Jose's East Side. They participate in school and community affairs.

Pedres favors another **amnesty**, but not just for Mexican workers.

"What about the Asian undocumented, and those from Latin America and Africa? To be just, **amnesty** must be for them too."

Always looking out for the other guy. What's more American than that?

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