A Mother Deported, and a Child Left Behind

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Body

In April of last year, when her ***mother*** dropped by federal immigration headquarters in Manhattan to complete some paperwork, 8-year-old Virginia Feliz became part of a growing tribe of American ***children*** who have lost a parent to ***deportation***.

Her ***mother***, Berly, 47, who migrated to the United States illegally a decade ago, went to the immigration office on a routine visit to renew her work authorization. But because an old ***deportation*** order had resurfaced, she was quickly clapped into handcuffs, and within hours placed on a plane to her native Honduras, unable to say goodbye to her husband and little girl.

"I'm not happy; I'm sad," said Virginia, who lives in a small Bronx apartment. "Because it's not fair that everybody else has their mom except me." She dropped onto a couch next to her disabled father, Carlos Feliz, an American citizen who was born in the Dominican Republic, declaring that she hates her last name, which means happy in Spanish.

No one keeps track of exactly how many American ***children*** were ***left behind*** by the record 186,000 noncitizens expelled from the United States last year, or the 887,000 others required to make a "voluntary departure." But immigration experts say there are tens of thousands of ***children*** every year who lose a parent to ***deportation***. As the debate over immigration policy heats up, such broken families are troubling people on all sides, and challenging schools and mental health clinics in immigrant neighborhoods.

Officials at the Department of Homeland Security say they are simply enforcing laws adopted in 1996, which all but eliminated the discretion of immigration officers to consider family ties before enforcing an old order of removal.

"There are millions of people who are illegally in the United States, and it's unfortunate, when they're caught, seeing a family split up," said William Strassberger, a spokesman for federal immigration services. "But the person has to be answerable for their actions."

Federal officials said they leave time for parents to make arrangements for their ***children***, and refer them to a social service agency if necessary. Many parents arrange to leave American-born ***children*** with relatives or friends; others, especially those who have no one to assume responsibility for a ***child***, take the ***children*** along when they are expelled.

"People refer to that as a Sophie's choice situation," he said. "Where the ***child*** is going to be is ***left*** up to the parent."

As a practical matter, arrangements for a ***child left behind*** may be hasty at best, said Janet Sabel, who directs the immigration law unit of the Legal Aid Society. One ***mother*** about to be ***deported*** to Nicaragua last year was told to leave her four ***children*** with her husband, Ms. Sabel said. But the husband was an abusive drug user, and finally

the ***mother*** persuaded the immigration officer to give her a few days to make other arrangements. A priest referred her to Legal Aid, which reopened the case, stopping the ***deportation***.

"There's a happy ending to this story," Ms. Sabel said, "but the fact is, there was total luck in her finding her way to us."

By all reports Virginia Feliz had been a happy 6-year-old before her ***mother***'s expulsion. Two months later, doctors at the ***Child*** and Adolescent Mental Health Program of Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center found that she had a major depressive disorder marked by hyperactivity, nightmares, bed-wetting, frequent crying and fights at school. Now, medical records show, she takes antidepressant drugs and sees a therapist, but the problems persist.

In a letter to the Department of Homeland Security last year, Dr. Victor Sierra, the clinic's director, made no bones about the underlying problem: "Absent ***mother***, secondary to ***deportation***." Another six to eight months may pass before the American Embassy in Honduras even processes her ***mother***'s application to return, officials say.

In Brooklyn, similar cases cause concern for Birdette Gardiner-Parkinson, the clinical director at the Caribbean Community Mental Health program at Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center. In one, she said, an outgoing, academically gifted 12-year-old began failing classes, mutilating herself and having suicidal thoughts after her Colombian father disappeared into removal proceedings. In another case, nightmares and school failure plague the youngest of six ***children*** whose father, a cabdriver with 20 years' residence in the United States, was ***deported*** to Nigeria six hours after he reported for a green card interview, seemingly for unpaid traffic fines, Ms. Gardiner-Parkinson said.

"The impact is very devastating," Ms. Gardiner-Parkinson said. "When ***children*** lose a family member this way, even though they may have a phone conversation with them, the physical separation feels like death."

The distress of ***children*** ***left*** ***behind*** in the United States echoes that of ***children*** ***left*** on the southern side of the border, say scholars of transnational migration like Leah Schmalzbauer, a social anthropologist who recently conducted a two-year research project on families split between Honduras and the United States.

The numbers are expected to swell, added Ms. Schmalzbauer, now an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at Montana State University. Families in poor countries like Honduras can no longer manage without remittances from the United States, and women are beginning to replace men as the primary migrants, filling growing demands here for low-cost elder care, domestic work and other service jobs.

"There's no protection for that undocumented labor, and even though we speak of family values, there's also no protection for the ***children***," she said. "The research shows the emotional impacts are huge, whether they're separated from parents on this side or on the other side of the border."

To advocates of greater restriction on immigration, such families illustrate the painful consequences of poor enforcement in the past, and point to the perils of guest worker programs like one proposed by President Bush.

"Once you let the person stay in the United States, it becomes extremely difficult in our society to make them go," said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington. "How are you going to keep them from falling in love, getting married and having U.S.-born ***children***?"

To critics of the sterner laws adopted in 1996, such cases show that more systematic enforcement since Sept. 11, 2001, is compounding the laws' contradictions and loss of discretion.

"The cornerstone, the bedrock of immigration law is family unity," said Jeffrey A. Feinbloom, an immigration lawyer who has been working for Mrs. Feliz's return since her ***deportation*** and has been frustrated by delays in processing. "The interest of the government in removing this woman pales in comparison with her suffering and her family's. And this ***child*** is a citizen, this husband is a citizen. What about their rights?"

In a telephone interview from Honduras, Mrs. Feliz acknowledged entering the United States illegally in 1994. She said she made the dangerous journey through Mexico because she could no longer afford to buy clothes, food and school supplies for her son, then 13.

Caught within hours of crossing the border, she was soon released on bond and fled to New York. When she failed to show up in a Texas immigration court, she was ordered ***deported*** in absentia. But like the great majority of such orders, it was not pursued for years, and Mrs. Feliz went to work, first as a live-in housekeeper, then in low-wage factory jobs.

After her 1996 marriage, when she applied for a green card, federal immigration officials not only issued her an official work authorization several times, but also allowed her husband, as an American citizen and new stepfather, to sponsor the teenage son she had ***left*** in Honduras.

Now that son, Cesar, is 24 and a lawful permanent resident with his own American ***child***, while his ***mother*** is back where she began, without a job or her ***children***.

"I don't have peace because I'm not with my little girl," she said in Spanish, breaking down. "I don't eat. I don't sleep. I can't be without her -- I have no life."

The hardest part, she said, is that in telephone calls her daughter sometimes tells her, "You didn't take me with you; you're a bad person."

"I can't handle that," she said.

In the Bronx, Mr. Feliz, 48, who was disabled by a back injury in a workplace accident four years ago, said he was struggling to support Virginia without his wife's earnings and was also being treated for depression. He did not have the heart to tell Virginia her ***mother*** had been ***deported***, he added. Instead, he initially told Virginia that her ***mother*** was caring for a sick relative in Honduras, a story her ***mother*** has repeated in telephone calls.

Such lies are commonplace as shaken parents try to shield young ***children*** from the reality of ***deportation***, counselors said. But the deception may only increase feelings of abandonment, anger and insecurity as the ***children*** hunt for reasons they were ***left behind***.

When the visitor remarked that she was pretty, Virginia, a doe-eyed ***child*** with a caramel complexion, loudly disagreed. "I'm ugly!" she insisted. "I want to be white, white, white."

Asked about her ***mother***'s departure, she said: "I was really mad. How come she didn't take me?"

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Graphic

Photos: Carlos Feliz has struggled to support his daughter, Virginia, since his wife was ***deported*** last year. (Photo by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)(pg. A1)

Carlos, Berly and Virginia Feliz when Virginia was about 2 years old. Virginia, now 8, has been told that Mrs. Feliz is caring for a sick relative.

Mr. Feliz, who was injured four years ago, must rely on workers' compensation to provide for Virginia. Both are struggling with depression. (Photo by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)(pg. B4)

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