This family smashes that stereotype

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Body

For many immigrants, few things represent the American dream like a home of their own. So it was a proud day for a Thai immigrant and her three adult children when they pooled their resources to buy a five-bedroom, two-story home in Sacramento last August.

But their success story is in jeopardy. Two of her children -- college graduates who gave up promising careers in their homeland -- are illegal immigrants at risk of deportation.

The ***family***'s story illustrates an often overlooked reality about immigration. A common perception is that illegal immigrants are uneducated laborers with few opportunities at home who gratefully take menial jobs in America. Yet, a quarter of undocumented immigrants have at least some college education, with 15 percent holding a bachelor's degree or better, according to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center.

Their story also debunks another common assumption about undocumented immigrants: The Thai ***family*** didn't cross the border illegally, but entered the country with valid visas, like almost half of the nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. A full 90 percent of illegal immigrants who are not from Mexico or Central America are visitors who have overstayed their visas, according to another Pew report.

Different backgrounds

Immigrants who enter with visas often don't have the same backgrounds as those jumping the border, said Jeff Passel of the center.

``To get a tourist or student visa, you have to have assets and education and look middle-class,'' he said.

Some who advocate curbing immigration, such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform, favor scrutinizing education and other ``merits'' of would-be immigrants. But when it comes to illegal immigrants, a FAIR spokesman said all should be discouraged to stay and deported if caught.

``You shouldn't get a free pass if you've got a Ph.D.,'' said Ira Mehlman of FAIR.

The Thai ***family*** members, who requested anonymity and are identified by their nicknames, think America might be more welcoming if people know how eager and able they are to make a contribution in their adopted home.

While the mother, Pini, and her youngest daughter are legal residents, her son and older daughter are not.

``I know I can do so much for this country,'' said Linda, 29. ``We just want America to give us a chance.''

She and her brother, Nick, 31, are among an estimated 1.5 million Asians living illegally in the United States.

Undocumented Asian immigrants -- most of whom come from China, the Philippines and India -- are rarely visible. They tend not to gather outside Home Depot stores offering their labor, or to take orders at the counters of a fast-food restaurant. Instead, many disappear into their ethnic enclaves, working in kitchens or small businesses.

The Thai ***family***'s predicament underscores a deep problem in U.S. immigration policy. Reuniting ***families*** is the foremost priority, with nearly 60 percent of ``green cards'' going to relatives of U.S. citizens or permanent residents in 2005. But legally reuniting with ***family*** members in the United States can take decades. ***Families*** from Asia have the longest waits of any region -- up to 23 years for the Philippines, because of demand and visa limits assigned to each country.

For Pini, eager to reunite with her children, her ***family*** is intact, but two of her children are lawbreakers relegated to menial jobs despite their education and skills.

The ***family*** didn't consider moving to America until 1998, when the Asian financial crisis that crippled Southeast Asia ruined a once-thriving ***family*** import business.

Pini, who is estranged from the father of her children, married a Thai-American living in Bangkok. She came to California with him, but they have since divorced. She filed immigration paperwork for Nina to immigrate, and her daughter soon joined her. The application received priority because Nina was under 21 at the time.

Pini found work as a preschool teacher in Richmond and planned to bring Nick and Linda to the United States. She consulted an immigration lawyer and received what she now knows is bad advice -- that her kids could arrive on a tourist visa, and then file petitions to stay permanently.

Nick and Linda arrived at San Francisco's International Airport in 2001 on tourist visas valid for six months. By the time they realized their immigration lawyer had led them astray, they said, they had already broken the law by overstaying their visas. Pini has since filed paperwork to request permanent residency for Nick and Linda.

Low-paying jobs

Although they lacked work permits, they found jobs at Bay Area restaurants owned by Asian immigrants. Their base pay was well beneath the minimum wage. Since moving to Sacramento from the Bay Area two years ago, they've had a salary increase: $50 for a 10-hour day.

All four ***family*** members work in restaurants. Despite the meager pay, they pool their earnings to achieve ***family*** goals. Last year, they bought their $405,000 home.

Money is tight, and everyone contributes equally to pay the mortgage and bills. But they also enjoy a few comforts that are classically American: a big, flat-screen Panasonic television that hangs in a living room with modern decor, and new kitchen appliances -- all purchased on credit.

Now, the ***family*** is scouting Sacramento for locations to open a restaurant. ``We are working so hard, we might as well do it for ourselves,'' Linda said.

Price of success

But their success comes at a price. Linda, who earned a bachelor's degree in business and wants to start an interior decorating business, said she and her brother detest their jobs.

``Every day when I wipe a table or pick up money or clean someone's dishes, I think `What am I doing with my life?' '' she said, her voice cracking.

The immigration debate fills them with both hope and fear. A House bill would make illegal immigrants felons, and aiding them a crime. Many worry that even ***family*** members could be prosecuted for sheltering undocumented relatives. So once a month, Nick methodically checks the headlights of the ***family***'s cars to make sure they function properly.

``I'm scared always,'' said Nick, who had worked as a translator for a Japanese firm in Thailand. ``I don't like living like a criminal.''

The one thing that keeps him and Linda here is their ***family***. ``Asian people, our ***family*** is everything,'' said Nick. ``I have to take care of my mom. That's my duty.''

Despite his filial obligations, Nick said he will return to Thailand next year if his immigration status doesn't change.

But if Nick and Linda leave, the ***family*** faces another dilemma. Pini and Nina wouldn't be able to afford their home. The responsibilities weigh heavily on Nina, the youngest. She's the only sibling with a green card, and will become a U.S. citizen next year. At 23, she still studies at a community college, between working the lunch and dinner shifts.

Initially, the ***family*** pressured her to drop her art major and study something ``that makes money, like nursing,'' she said. Her ***family*** has eased off, yet she feels the guilt. ``If I could, I would give Linda my green card,'' she said. ``She's smart. She's the smartest one.''

They say they want to make America home because they're no longer as Thai as they used to be. Nick is a 49ers fan who dreams of joining the U.S. Navy.

``I think more like an American than a Thai person,'' Nick said. ``When I'm at the mall, people assume I'm American. I like that. I wish that can be true.''

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