



IMMIGRATION REFORM THROUGH GREEN CARD STORIES

Posted on February 13, 2012 by Cyrus Mehta

By [Cyrus D. Mehta](#)*

[Green Card Stories](#) is a gem of a book, and I feel inspired to write about it. Written by award winning journalist, Sandra Amrhein, with stunning photographs by award winning photographer, Ariana Lindquist, the book puts a human face on immigration through the journeys of 50 individuals who got their green cards. My good friends, Laura Danielson and Steve Yale-Loehr, produced the book with a lot of dedication and tenacity. Hopefully, their hard work will reap rewards resulting in more rational and humane immigration laws.



Most Americans, whatever their view on immigration may be, tend to see immigrants whom they may know with a different lens, especially if they are co-workers, friends, neighbors or parents in the same school community. Even if immigrants may be demonized in the current political climate, especially those who are undocumented, when one gets to actually know this person, you may probably not view him or her with the same bias. This is what Green Card Stories tries to do. One gets to like the immigrants portrayed in the book even if

you do not know them in person. In fact, they all magically come alive when you read their stories and the photographs also reveal facets that no amount of words will ever tell.

Take the example of Francis Price, who is photographed as a successful person meditating on his journey in his well appointed home adorned with tasteful art. He came to the US from Jamaica with \$25 to become a businessman in the United States who also served as a trustee of the University of Rochester, his alma mater. Somewhere along the way after he received his green card and built businesses employing hundreds of people, he was put into deportation when applying for citizenship because of the mistake of his lawyer in Jamaica who had not finalized his divorce to his former wife. It was thus discovered after several years that he wrongfully entered as the single son of a sponsoring parent when he was actually married. Fortunately, while in deportation, his current US citizen wife again sponsored him for a green card, while he applied for a waiver to forgive the past violation, and the Immigration Judge again granted him the green card.

Or Gulnihar Alam, whom I represented pro bono, who escaped a horrific domestic violence situation in Bangladesh, only to find herself working grueling domestic jobs for families in the New York area. She applied for political asylum and won, being one of the first to assert that domestic violence constituted a form of persecution. Today, she is a well known advocate on behalf of immigrant domestic workers, won several awards, and works for a diabetes education project among minorities at New York University.

There is also the amazing story of Mikel Murga from Spain, who now teaches at MIT, and who got his green card three times. He abandoned his first green card after returning to his country, but gave up the second green card, so that his minor son could accompany him as a derivative under the third green card. While most immigrants are lucky to be able to get green cards just once, Murga is quoted while looking quite the professor in his portrait, "That's what makes America unique. Not how rich it is, they say there are many opportunities, but the most important opportunity is the opportunity to reinvent yourself." There are 47 other equally inspiring and poignant stories, including one on Jerry Yang who went on to found Yahoo. Read them.

Putting a human face to immigration is the best way to convince others about who they are and the benefits they bring to this country through their struggles, inspiration, ambition and successes. It is also an effective way to counter the lies about immigrants espoused by a loud and vocal minority. The canard against immigrants is an old one. This is what the first Select Committee of the House of Representatives to study immigration concluded in the 1850s:

that the number of emigrants from foreign countries into the United States is increasing with such rapidity as to jeopardize the peace and tranquility of our citizens, if not the permanency of the civil, religious, and political institutions of the United States. Many of them are the outcasts of foreign countries; paupers, vagrants, and malefactors. sent hither at the expense of foreign governments, to relieve them from the burden of their maintenance.

One would have thought that this kind of sentiment would have ended by the second decade of the 21st century, but don't we hear the same things about immigrants today? Today, it is fashionable in some quarters even by Presidential candidates, members of Congress and state officials to espouse [attrition by enforcement](#), which is a policy to make life so harsh, brutish and unbearable for undocumented immigrants that they will ~~T~~self deport themselves. Acknowledging that it would be very costly, if not impossible, to deport the millions of undocumented immigrants, a [May 2005 report of Center of Immigration Studies](#), an anti-immigration organization, writes this in support of attrition:

But there is a third way that rejects this false choice, and it is the only approach that can actually work: Shrink the illegal population through consistent, across-the-board enforcement of the immigration law. By deterring the settlement of new illegals, by increasing deportations to the extent possible, and, most importantly, by increasing the number of illegals already here who give up and deport themselves, the United States can bring about an annual decrease in the illegal-alien population, rather than allowing it to continually increase. The point, in other words, is not merely to curtail illegal immigration, but rather to bring about a steady reduction in the total number of illegal immigrants who are living in the United States. The result would be a shrinking of the illegal population to a manageable nuisance, rather than today's looming crisis.

This is analogous to the approach a corporation might take to downsizing a bloated workforce: a hiring freeze, some layoffs, plus new incentives to encourage excess workers to leave on their own.

This attrition by enforcement policy has spawned draconian anti-immigration laws such as Arizona's SB 1070 and Alabama's HB 56, which aim to banish undocumented immigrants from the state even though they may be pursuing legal status under federal law or legitimately defending themselves in federal removal proceedings. Their goal is to make it a crime if it is suspected that a person is in the state unlawfully (even though under federal law some may remain in the US), for not carrying documentation, and for harboring and transporting unauthorized immigrants. HB 56 goes further by requiring children to provide proof of immigration status prior to enrollment in public schools, and restricting unauthorized immigrants from engaging in contracts and business transactions. Many of these nasty provisions have been temporarily blocked for now, but they can gain a new lease of life if the US Supreme Court upholds the constitutionality of such laws later this year.

Tellingly, many of the people profiled in Green Card Stories could have been snared under these draconian state laws or stricter federal laws prior to getting their green cards. Their stories also show how terribly complex our immigration laws can be, and how easily someone can fall through the cracks. Even while there may be anti-immigrant sentiment, what is most touching in many of the stories is how they were helped by the kindness of strangers in America, which has left a lasting impression on them. The more stories we tell about immigrants desiring to do well in America for themselves and their children, the less scope will there be for politicians and hate groups to dehumanize them in the abstract. After all, immigrants are people, like everyone else, with the same dreams, aspirations, vulnerabilities and frailties. The policies of attrition and self-deportation view undocumented immigrants as vermin that can be quietly driven away notwithstanding the fact that they have loved ones here and have set down strong roots. However, this is less likely to happen if Americans get to know them more from their stories. It is only then that more Americans will come to realize that the better solution is to reform our broken immigration system that would be able to tap into the industry and aspirations of immigrants of all stripes, such as the ones in Green Card Stories, rather than to deport them - and everyone will be better off.

This article originally appeared on the Insightful Immigration Blog on February 10, 2012,

<http://blog.cyrusmehta.com/2012/02/immigration-reform-through-green-card.html>

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