

An Illegal Immigrant Tells His Self-Deportation Story

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SUMMARY

The conversation centers on a Colombian immigrant's journey to the United States, highlighting the challenges faced due to undocumented status and the eventual path to citizenship. The speaker reflects on their American experience with gratitude, emphasizing how adversity shaped their perspective and approach to life.

- The speaker was born in Colombia and immigrated to the U.S. at age one, living initially in a basement in Queens.*
- They faced challenges as an undocumented immigrant, despite their parents becoming citizens through Reagan's amnesty.*
- The speaker had to self-deport to Colombia to obtain a green card, highlighting the complexities of immigration status.*
- They express gratitude for their American experience, viewing it as unique and transformative.*
- Adversity has taught them resilience, allowing them to view challenges as minor inconveniences.*
- The speaker aims to instill a sense of internal control and resilience in youth through their work.*
- They contrast their immigrant experience with the perception of America as oppressive, advocating for a broader understanding of opportunity.*

- I wanted to take the last part of our conversation, especially in talking about America and talk about your American experience. We've been talking about America and about the Declaration of Independence or dependence or safety, but your American story is pretty interesting, so share a little bit about where you're coming from. - So I may not look it, but I am Colombian. I was born in Colombia as were many generations before me, and my father left a year before my mother and I arrived to the American dream.

I was 1-year-old and he arrived in New York with nothing and started to try to make a life for us. We arrived a year later and I remember living in the basement of a house in Queens, New York, in one room, and it wasn't easy. And we were on a tourist visa and that expired at some point and then we stayed as many immigrants too.

So at that point, I was two and I remember trying to, a few years later, register

for elementary school and they wouldn't let me register because we didn't have any documentation. - So you were technically from age two an undocumented immigrant, an illegal immigrant. - That's right, my parents were able to become citizens through Reagan's amnesty, but I guess there was a... Didn't apply to kids. And so I was in a strange situation of being an undocumented illegal alien in a family of citizens.

- Yeah, that's really weird. - So at that point, I didn't really have a lot of options other than to just continue my... I was able to register for elementary school, but at some point, as college got closer, I was not gonna be able to register for school and so I had to try to get a green card. You can't get a green card in the United States if you are there illegally. And so, as Mitt Romney once suggested, I self-deported.

So I went back to Colombia and I stood on line outside the US Embassy in Bogota, along with lots of Colombians who were correctly living in Colombia and wanted to come to the United States. And so I walked in for my interview and my New York Mets cap, and this was 1986, so it was a good time to be a New York Mets fan. Hunter High School jacket, perfect English, and the border agents all started laughing 'cause they knew what was going on.

And so they gave me a green card and that was a really important moment in my life because if they had said no, I would've had to stay in a country I hadn't lived in in 15 years without my family. - Without getting into the politics of immigration, which I'm sure for our viewers cuts in a lot of directions, how do you think about this country through the lens of that family experience because I think one of the things that's so strange is these anxious teens that go on to be anxious college students, one of the messages they get is that America is the most oppressive country that we are...

The empire of oppression. And man, the quickest way to get exposed to an alternative to that, in my experience, has been talked to a first generation immigrant to this country. So how do you think about it? - Yeah, in my job, we are trained to not be judgmental and to always understand that there's a really good reason for any belief or behavior that anyone has. I can just say that when I think about this country, the first thing I think about is gratitude.

Where else could my story be true? I mean, I'm here talking to you and I was a poor kid living in a one room basement with no immigration status. But it also helps me understand

the value of adversity because you might look at my story and feel badly that I had to go through that, but I wouldn't change that.

And I know a lot of people say that I would never change anything. I have no regrets, but that experience affects me every single day. Whenever any problem comes up, any adversity, it is really easy for me to categorize that in terms of the worst thing ever to happen to anybody or a minor inconvenience and most things end up being a minor inconvenience that they're probably solutions for. And most kids don't have that adversity.

And so my independence treatment is trying to give them a taste of some difficult things that they actually want to do that are fun, to help them get some of that message that when things don't go your way, you have the power, you have the internal locus of control as we talked about last time to do something about it. So I don't know if that directly addresses America to you, but what a place to explore adversity and taking risks.

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