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Unsung heroes in SA and beyond help immigrants find hope

By Erica B. Schommer, For the Express-News

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Photo: Mark Ralston /Getty Images

A crowd in Los Angeles protests forced family separations on the border. The cruel policy galvanized Americans.

Since the 2016 campaign, President Donald Trump has insisted on the need for a border wall in the face of a “crisis” at our southern border. Until recently, the numbers indicated we were nowhere near a crisis; the number of immigrants crossing the border was quite low compared to previous years.

Recently, the numbers have spiked, including the number of families. However, even at the current levels, they do not approach those seen in the early 2000s. In response, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, or CBP, changed course from detaining as many families as possible to releasing families at the border to appear in court in the future.

As we recently learned, the president has advocated for busing recently arrived migrants to “sanctuary cities,” those deemed to be welcoming to immigrants and/or hostile to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement. It certainly raises the possibility that the release of large numbers of families on the border is intended to provoke backlash from the communities that have fought the crisis narrative.

Those striving daily to help the migrants provide a vital dose of hope during trying times.

It is important to note that numbers don't tell the whole story. The families entering the United States are not trying to evade detection. They are entering in plain sight of CBP and turning themselves in because that is the only alternative to waiting for days, weeks or even months in Mexico to be processed at the port of entry for asylum.

With the recent departure of Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen from the Department of Homeland Security and Ron Vitiello from Immigration and Customs Enforcement, we are braced for another crackdown as both reportedly left because they were not tough enough on immigration and border enforcement.

Being an immigration lawyer in the age of Trump is challenging. It is filled with uncertainty, frustration, injustice and rapid change. While I know that more bad policy awaits, I have managed to find hope because my fellow immigration lawyers and activists are not fighting these policies alone. The reactions of average Americans give me hope because I see that they value the contributions immigrants make in our country. No matter the rhetoric or who is in power, the response to harsh policies and inhumane treatment shows that there is little support for these policies outside the minority of the president's base.

When the travel ban was enacted and travelers were stuck in airports or prohibited from boarding U.S.-bound flights, protesters and lawyers showed up at airports, courts intervened and the president was forced to revise the ban, greatly diminishing the number of those impacted. After the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a revised version of the travel ban, Congress introduced legislation seeking to repeal it.

When children were ripped from their parents' arms, the outcry was immediate and sustained by lawyers, physicians, mental health professionals and, most important, Americans with no unique knowledge or experience, driven by the sheer inhumanity of the actions. Nearly a year later, grassroots efforts to support reunited families with travel funds, housing and legal representation continue across the country.

When asylum-seekers were illegally made to wait in Mexico, sometimes for months, to apply for asylum, again Americans (and many Mexicans) responded by organizing, gathering donations and providing the humanitarian aid that should be the responsibility of the government or the international aid community, like the U.N. high commissioner for refugees.

From San Diego to Brownsville, Americans from all walks of life have responded with open arms and so much more. From the Angry Tías & Abuelas group organizing at bus stations in the Rio Grande Valley to the underground network of volunteers who provide food and shelter to

released migrants in Arizona, Americans are demonstrating that we are still a nation of immigrants, a nation that embraces “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free” — those who seek safety here.

We are the people who will step up to provide help where it is needed when our government fails to do so. Citizens have donated millions of dollars to support bond funds to help people leave detention and to organizations fighting anti-immigrant policies in court.

Should it be this way? Should it fall on the rest of us to make up for the cruelty of our elected officials? Certainly not, but the fact that at each turn there is resistance, sometimes outspoken and other times peaceful and almost unnoticed, suggests that this cruelty, too, shall pass.

Where immigration officials bring inhumanity, San Antonio shines. The Interfaith Welcome Coalition, San Antonio Sanctuary Network, Catholic Charities, American Gateways, Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, or RAICES, San Antonio Mennonite Church, Travis Park Church and, most important, people from all walks of life have shown over and over again that we will not be complacent in the face of injustice.

We will find ways, formal and informal, to help. Students from elementary school to law school have organized blanket and backpack drives to make sure that migrant families have some comforts for their long journeys.

As border cities and even San Antonio have seen large numbers of families released from CBP custody, they have stepped up to provide emergency services. San Antonio’s resource center is just one example of city officials providing support to local nonprofits whose capacities have been stretched to the limits.

Despite the Trump administration’s efforts to find new ways to limit immigration, each initiative has been met with resistance that demonstrates that most Americans want us to be that beacon of hope for those fleeing harm. The restrictionists are vocal, but they are not the majority.

There will be countless challenges ahead as new political appointees seek to implement the president’s anti-immigration agenda, but I believe the actions of the American people will speak louder than the words of those who demonize immigrants.

The recently arrived migrants have long and difficult roads ahead. Navigating the bureaucracy that is stacked against them is daunting. Attaining their American dream will be fraught with hardship. But for a moment, when they were weary, strangers welcomed them. Strangers fed them. Strangers sheltered them.

Most important, these unsung heroes living among us treated them with the dignity and respect that all people deserve. That is what makes American great.

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