

Illegal Immigrant Family Praying U.S. One Day Will Take Them into its Embrace

14 Years into New Life: 'This Is Our Home'

By PATTY REINERT

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Somewhere in the desert scrub between Mexicali, Mexico, and Calexico, Calif., 19-year-old Maria Pineda lost her shoes.

"We just ran and ran and ran, and the migra didn't catch us," she said. "My husband had our 3-year-old daughter, and I was carrying my little son, who was 2. I never looked back."

Not then and not now, 14 years after that desperate dash across the border and into a new life picking grapes and oranges in California's San Joaquin Valley.

"We have nothing in Mexico. We don't know Mexico," Pineda said in Spanish. "My husband died here. I have four children who were born here. My youngest doesn't even speak Spanish. This is our home now."

While her younger children are U.S. citizens, Pineda, now 33, and her two Mexican-born children are living in the United States illegally. Like many of their countrymen, they are praying that if they stand their ground long enough, the United States eventually will embrace them.

A year ago, those hopes seemed unreasonable. But that was before President Bush, anxious to court the Hispanic vote and build a foreign-policy reputation with his southern neighbor, began broadcasting his weekly radio address in Spanish, celebrated Cinco de Mayo at the White House and hinted at a legalization plan.

It was before Mexican President Vicente Fox flew to California and shook Pineda's hand at a rally organized by the United Farm Workers union.

"He called us heroes," Pineda said. "He said he would help us."

This week, the Mexican president travels to Washington, D.C., to be guest of honor at Bush's first state dinner. Both presidents have spent the past few weeks trying to hold down expectations, replacing the "A-word," amnesty, with the more vague "regularization."

Whatever they want to call it, an estimated 3 million undocumented immigrants from Mexico and millions more from around the globe are hoping for an eventual agreement making their presence in the United States legal.

"There will be no blanket amnesty for illegals. I have said that point-blank. I will say it as many times as I need to say it," an exasperated Bush said recently.

While Bush said no major changes in immigration policy will be announced this week, he will discuss the issue with Fox. Administration officials are pondering how to set up some sort of guest worker program that would continue to supply U.S. businesses with cheap labor while allowing Mexicans to come here safely and legally for a limited time to earn dollars and take them home to Mexico.

Fox's team has other ideas. Its members have been touring the United States all summer, laying out their demands and making promises to the throngs of Mexican immigrants who turn out to greet them.

Fox's foreign minister, Jorge Castaneda, warned earlier that Mexican officials would not discuss a guest worker plan without the promise of legalization for Mexicans already living in the United States. "It's the whole enchilada or nothing," he said.

But after preliminary meetings in Washington with Secretary of State Colin Powell and Attorney General John Ashcroft last month, even Castaneda was backpedaling. "There is no hurry," he said. For Maria Pineda, though, there is.

Her daughter is 17, at the top of her high school class in Woodville, Calif., and hoping to get into a California university on scholarship next year. She wants to be a doctor.

"My son is right behind her," Pineda said. "He wants to be a policeman. They can't even get their driver's licenses, let alone go to college, without papers."

In recent years, immigrant advocates, lawmakers and even unions, which traditionally opposed legalization on grounds that it would depress wages and benefits for poor U.S.-born workers, have taken up the cause of immigrants like Pineda.

But there also has been a backlash from groups that oppose more open borders and fear that an influx of poor immigrants will threaten jobs and overwhelm public health care and education services.

"It's hard to tell who's calling the shots here -- the Mexican government or the American people," said Dan Stein of the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "We're now embarking on some hysterical, wild immigration policy without any idea of the consequences," he said.

Bush has responded to the criticism by warning his allies against overpromising, and the president said Friday that there will be no big announcement while Fox is in town.

But Arturo Rodriguez, national president of the United Farm Workers of America and a native of San Antonio, said that regardless of what Fox and Bush say this week, "the momentum is already there."

"There is enough pressure now that the administration needs to take leadership," he said. "Everybody realizes the immigration laws of our country need to be fixed. We can't continue sitting in limbo like we are."

Maria Pineda agrees.

"We have worked hard in this country, and we have made sacrifices," she said, explaining how her husband was killed in a work accident when he fell into an irrigation ditch and drowned.

"We've been here all this time," she said. "I have a job and a house. My children are in school, learning English. I can give my kids a better life here.

"I don't know if Fox or Bush will help us, but we're not leaving."

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