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US citizen kids face the deportation of their immigrant parents

By Dianna Solis

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Adolfo Mejia had just dropped off his two oldest daughters at school when, about a mile away, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents stopped his car and took him into custody.

Mejia is in the U.S. unlawfully. He'd been living peacefully in the U.S. since 1992, working mostly as a house painter. He'd married and has a son and five daughters ranging in ages from 1 to 17 years old.

On Feb. 1, he was sent to a detention center to await possible deportation back to Mexico, and his wife and kids were suddenly without their main breadwinner.

ICE appears to have singled him out because nearly 25 years earlier, when he'd been stopped for running a stop sign near Houston, he panicked, got out of his vehicle, and took off running. The result was a conviction for evading arrest.

Mejia's six children are at the heart of an unfolding national drama: President Donald Trump's crackdown on immigration affects not only unlawful immigrants, but also the U.S. citizens who depend on them. Mejia's children were all born in the U.S.

Everyone from parents to school officials, medical personnel and parish priests are focusing on how to prepare these citizen children for the deportation of a parent not here lawfully. There are nearly 5 million children in the U.S with a parent who is here illegally, according to the Pew Research Center.

"It's the children who suffer," says Rev. Wilmer de Jesus Daza, the Mejia's parish priest at Nuestra Senora del Pilar Catholic Church.

They're filled with anxiety about their future. Where does the food on the table come from? How do you keep a roof over their heads? How do you prepare to lose a parent?



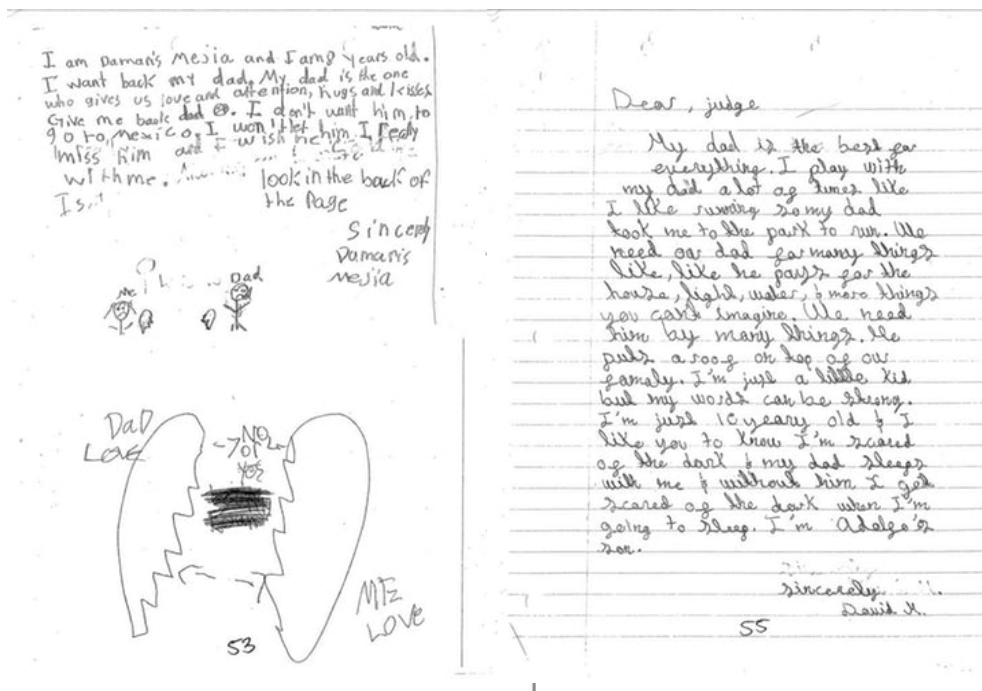
Lucia Mejia, carrying her 19-month-old daughter Teresa, is accompanied by Auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly (right) and other supporters from her parish as she enters the Earle Cabell Federal Building to watch a video feed of a court hearing for her husband, who was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. (Jeffrey McWhorter/Special Contributor)

The children

David and Damaris Mejia are children, but they write powerfully. In letters to a Dallas immigration judge, they plead that their 45-year-old father not be deported:

“Dear Judge,” writes 10-year-old David. “My dad is the best... We need our dad for many things like, like he pays for the house, lights, water and many things. He puts a roof on top of our family. I'm just a little kid but my words can be strong.”

Damaris weighed in with sketches of her sad face and a heart broken in two with jagged edges. “I am Damaris Mejia and I am 8 years old... My dad is the one who gives us love and attention, hugs and kisses, hugs and kisses. Give me back my dad. I don't want him to go to Mexico.”



Damaris Mejia pens a letter to a Dallas immigration judge begging that her father not be deported. (DianneSolis/Mejia Family)

The judge will have a complicated case to weigh: Presidents Trump and Barack Obama said they wanted ICE to prioritize the deportation of criminals. Mejia's long-ago arrest was for a class A misdemeanor. He was sentenced to 180 days in jail, but the sentence was suspended in exchange for one year of community supervision, which he successfully completed, his attorney said.

His immigration lawyer will argue that he should get special consideration because he's not technically a criminal of the caliber that ICE should prioritize for deportation: He cites a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision and immigration law that an immigrant not sentenced to a term in excess of six months allows for special discretion from prosecution.

Mejia's deportation case will likely drag on at least a year in a court system sagging from nearly 700,000 cases nationwide.

Outside a Dallas immigration court on a bond hearing for her husband, Lucia Mejia, with the priest at her side for support, explained how the family is coping with the fact that they may lose their father.

"My children are having anxiety attacks over all this," says the mother, 39 and a lawful permanent resident of the U.S.. "You don't know what will happen or where we will live."

Three days earlier, she had a miscarriage. She was two months pregnant.

She says Damaris' grades are crashing. She doesn't want to go to school. The oldest daughter, 17-year-old Yesica, cries frequently, her mother says. The second oldest daughter, 15-year-old Areli, is increasingly withdrawn and wants to avoid church because she says she's no longer certain of God's existence, the mother says

'Perpetual outsider-hood'

It's unclear exactly why Mejia was picked up nearly 25 years after his original encounter with police, or how ICE agents were able to find Mejia. But the Dallas region has become the nation's busiest for immigration arrests. ICE acting Director Thomas Homan has repeatedly said "there is no population off the table" when it comes to immigration enforcement. But, in general, ICE makes detention decisions that take into consideration whether the immigrant is a parent or legal guardian of a U.S. citizen or of any minor, said ICE spokesman Carl Rusnok.

"ICE is committed to ensuring that the agency's immigration enforcement activities, including detention and removal, do not unnecessarily disrupt the parental rights of alien parents and legal guardians of minor children," Rusnok said in a written statement.

Behavioral researchers and social scientists have become increasingly alarmed about the impact of deportations on children.

Dr. Lisseth Rojas-Flores, a professor and clinical psychologist at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, was one of the first to document symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress



Lucia Mejia, wife of Adolfo Mejia (center), holds her 19-month-old daughter, Teresa Mejia, as she is surrounded by friends and supporters (from left) Auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly; godfather to Teresa Mejia, Daniel Casiamano; friends Horacio and Maura Ortega, holding their son Emmanuel and daughter Genesis. (Jeffrey McWhorter/Special Contributor)

Disorder in children of detained or deported parents after comparing them them with children who have immigrant parents that are here legally.

She says a child's development and trust in others can be damaged when a parent is taken away.

"They think, 'No one can protect me. Not my mother or dad and not even God,'" Rojas-Flores said.

Children can also confuse immigration enforcement officers with local police, causing them to distrust the very people who are charged with keeping them safe, she said.

"We just created a kid who has a very bleak idea of what the world is about," Rojas-Flores said. "We are going to have a big bomb on our hands. We are creating children who don't trust a system that is supposed to be protecting them."

A 2011 study by Harvard and New York University researchers said the stress of potential deportations could lead to "perpetual outsider-hood."

In Texas and around the nation, community organizers and lawyers have rolled out what-if plans for families fearful of a deportation. Those plans can be as simple as having enough money to cover two or three months of living expenses. Others call for arranging for a guardian, either informally or through a legal document.

They say planning ahead, and cementing community bonds, are critical.

"This is not a time for isolation," said Socorro Perales, an organizer with Dallas Area Interfaith, who went to immigration court with the mother. "This is a time to build relationships. It is not over yet."

'I ask God to fix his papers'

Lucia Mejia and her family have repeatedly relied on a godfather to her youngest child for support. He shows up at court hearings, as do other friends from her Catholic church. The parish priest called Dallas Area Interfaith organizers, who then called auxiliary Bishop Greg Kelly. Both priests have shown up at different court hearings.



*Lucia Mejia and her children await the outcome of Adolfo Mejia's deportation case. The children are U.S. citizens, and the mother is a legal resident.
(Dianne Solis/Staff)*

Mejia has been reunited with his family, at least temporarily. He was released on March 20 on a \$10,000 bond.

When her husband returned to their simple brick house in Duncanville, the children swarmed him with hugs. Damaris “has joy again,” David “has his security back,” his mother says.

But the littlest, Teresita, cries when her father leaves the house on errands.

“I ask God to fix his papers so that he doesn’t go back to Mexico,” Lucia Mejia says.

Areli also frets about the future. The slim, poised teen speaks English flawlessly. She has plans for college and a career in some medical field.

She said she’s scared about the outcome of her father’s immigration case.

She worries that she and her older sister Yesica will have to become surrogate parents to their four younger siblings if their father is deported. Their mother would have to get a job to support the family. That assumes the family wouldn’t move to Mexico together.

“I really don’t know what will happen. I don’t know if we will have to go to Mexico with him,” she said.

As Yesica sits in the family living room with its warm wood floors and decorations of religious icons, she watches her two youngest sisters, Pilar and Teresa, play.

“I just want to be close to my parents,” Yesica says. “Families should be together loving each other. This is not fair.”