

## Journey to Citizenship

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I was asked to write about the passage of an immigrant family to citizenship since, if one does not know a refugee or immigrant as an intimate part of one's life, it is easy to dismiss them or categorize them with broad strokes. However, each one has his/her own story. The account that follows is of an El Salvadoran brother and sister and their families' journeys to citizenship. They are dear to me, as they adopted me into their family and included me in their celebrations and their lives when I ministered to the Spanish speaking parishioners at St. Patrick in Sedalia, Missouri. Each year we spend a weekend together at Meadowlark, the C.P.P.S. Sister's vacation home. When they came to my 50 Jubilee, they rang the door bell and my Sister answered at Villa Theresa. They said: "We are Sr. Eileen's family and we are here for her Jubilee Mass". My Sister answered, "me too!". Thus, to my happiness, my two families met one another. I want to tell you their story in the hope that you will understand the journey of refugees and immigrants better and experience what they can add to our society.

Our Chapter commitment pledges us to a contemplative life that leads us to global awareness, which is, indeed, a challenge today. Our nation is divided on issues of immigration and our national relatedness to the global struggles of sustaining the life and wellbeing of the whole human family. We hear of particularly strong measures, on the part of our government, against those who desire to seek asylum here in order to escape life-threatening situations in their home countries. Attempts have been made to remove some of the most threatening situations from the list of asylum eligibility. For example, domestic violence and terrorism by gangs, which are situations experienced by many of the persons presently fleeing their homes, were banned by our president as reasons for asylum but later reinstated by the courts.. Today we see Americans desiring entrance into America. While all persons who are native to North, Central, and South America are Americans, only the United States claims the use of the term for itself. Today it is our neighbors who desperately seek refuge *en El Norte* (in the north). Space does not permit analysis of the role the United States has played, by past support of suppressive and totalitarian regimes, in creating economic and political upheaval and the rampant poverty in Central America. You can access the information on the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood website under the Immigrant and Refugee section and the sub-section education.

### Néstor Andrés Vanegas-Montenegro's Story

It was my privilege to be an intimate witness of the journey of a family, from entrance into the United States as persons seeking asylum, to citizenship. They are an example of the long journey many make to find home and to become assets in a new land. Theirs was accomplished by struggle, some mistakes, and by an immigration system that finally enabled their success after all of their difficulties.

Néstor Andrés Vanegas-Montenegro was caught up in the brutal civil war in El Salvador in 1989. He traveled to Modesto, California, where a sister and older brother, who were citizens of the U.S., lived. In 1990, a program of amnesty with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) including a work permit was offered to all El Salvadorans then currently within the United States borders. It was unsafe for any of them to go back due to the escalating crisis in El Salvador. Néstor applied and received TPS. However, in 1992, Néstor flew to El Salvador to

visit and check on his parents, unaware how this might affect his legal status in the United States. There are permanent residents who are free to stay in their home countries for a time as long as they renew their papers with Immigration every ten years. However, his residency was in a different category. He remained in El Salvador and, in 1995, married Sonia Virginia Hernandez-Magaña (known in marriage as Sonia Virginia Hernandez de Vanegas). Immigration officials erred in recording Néstor's surname mistakenly as simply Montenegro, his mother's surname. It follows the father's surname, Vanegas, as names are written in Spanish so his wife and children have the name Vanegas. Since all official records use his name in this form of Montenegro, he continues to use it. In 1996 their daughter, Virginia, was born in El Salvador. In 1994 the United States initiated a program for persons holding TPS status to apply for permanent residency. Néstor returned to the United States with his family expecting to enter legally and to apply for residency.

They went to Los Angeles for one month with his family and then to Emporia, Kansas, to Sonia's family. Both families had members who were permanent residents or naturalized citizens. Néstor discovered that his TPS had expired while he was out of the country and they found themselves in the country without documentation.

Sonia worked at the IBP plant and Néstor became *papa del casa* (house father) caring for baby Virginia. In 1998 they moved to Marshall, Missouri, which has a large El Salvadoran population. Sonia worked at the Tyson factory in Sedalia and, in 1999, they moved to Sedalia where Néstor worked in construction with a local builder. A treasured time that year was a trip to St. Louis to see Pope John Paul II. Their journey was typical of many immigrants in so far as they sought productive work and a safe community in which to live. Virginia was placed with an English-speaking baby sitter while her parents worked. It was an ideal situation for her to become bi-lingual. At age three she told me: "My papa speaks Spanish and a little English, my mama speaks only Spanish, and I speak both perfectly". She did, without an accent in either.

In 2001, an earthquake devastated El Salvador and the U.S. government, once again, offered TPS to El Salvadorans. Néstor and his family applied and, when it came through, Virginia, at 10 years old, also received her work permission card along with her TPS card! Permission to work was to be renewed after 18 months. Each application to Immigration costs hundreds of dollars in fees as does each visit to an immigration lawyer. Meanwhile, immigrants who work, with documented or undocumented status, pay taxes and pay into social security, the same as all other employees. If they fail to become residents or citizens, the social security paid in will never be available as benefits to them. In 2002 a lawyer in Sedalia successfully assisted them to apply for temporary residency, which still included renewal of permission to work every year but provided them with stability. In 2008, when they renewed their application for temporary residency, Mr. Ted Garcia, an Immigration Lawyer in Kansas City, informed them that they would be eligible to apply for permanent residency, through Néstor's sister, in 2011. In 2012, Néstor, Sonia, and Virginia became permanent residents. With this new designation, they were able to visit family in El Salvador, after a fourteen-year absence, without fear of losing their status. After completion of the citizenship test and interviews, they became naturalized citizens of the United States on April 13, 2017 and registered to vote.

As they wound their way through the immigration system that, at times, classified them in a category of "documented residents" or in a category of "undocumented residents", they became an asset to their community. They worked hard, educated their children in Catholic

School (Virginia and her siblings, Veronica and Andres, who were born to them in these years), and purchased a home. They were active and served as leaders in the parish of St. Patrick. Their family and friends formed the first choir for the Spanish Mass and later the children and their cousins and friends formed a children's choir which even traveled to parishes which did not have musicians to play and sing at Spanish masses. The children all sang and/or played a variety of instruments. They played and sang at diocesan-wide Spanish Masses with the Bishop. Néstor and Sonia introduced Cursillo to the Latino parishioners, who were predominantly Mexican in origin. Once established, they remained active but passed the leadership of the group to others. They lead the Stations of the Cross during Lent and the novena to Our Lady of Guadalupe in December. Sonia serves as communion minister. They frequently participate in retreats and prayer times with the community. Virginia, who had complete fluency in both English and Spanish translated the pastor's English language homilies into Spanish so he could read them at the Spanish Mass. The two youngest are involved in activities in both church and school. Néstor and Sonia earned the respect of others in the community and factory. They preserved their culture and shared their special El Salvadoran foods and customs while participating in the culture and customs of their new country.

In April, 2019, Néstor anticipates his ordination as a Deacon in the Jefferson City Diocese. Virginia graduated from Rockhurst University in Kansas City and is serving a year of internship in a lawyer's office in Warrensburg, earning money toward her graduate studies. She has said she hopes to major in family law and was inspired by the woman lawyer in Sedalia whom her family had consulted. Veronica and Andres are still in school and continue to offer their musical talents to the Church. The journey was long and winding but the prize of citizenship is cherished and the country has gained a family capable of adding richly and productively to their new country and to society

#### Aracely's Story, Sister of Néstor

In 1997 Aracely de los santos Vanegas-Montenegro arrived with her brother, Néstor, in Modesto, California, and lived there with family members for two years. In April, 1999, she moved to Sedalia, Missouri, to live with Néstor and Sonia and, in 1999-2000, worked at Tyson. In 2001 she received TPS and her work permit, as did Nestor and his family. On May 17, 2001, her son, Daniel, was born. Part of my ministry was medical interpretation and I was with her in the delivery room. After the delivery, she required the doctor's complete attention and Daniel was placed in my arms, only a few moments old. I stayed with her in the hospital to assist with Daniel as she recovered and had the privilege to place him in the arms of his grandfather, Angel, as he came to visit in the hospital. Aracely moved to live with her father, a permanent resident. She returned to work at Tyson on August 27, 2001, and worked at the same job there until the present. In 1997, her father had applied for her permanent residency under his sponsorship. With long waiting lists, it took until March, 2011, for her to become a permanent resident. In April, 2017, she had her interview with Immigration and passed the citizenship test in English. In June she celebrated the ceremony of citizenship.

Immigrants in the journey toward citizenship, through the application of immediate family members, must remain single. As the process takes many years, many couples move together and start their family without the benefit of marriage. I know one man who has been in process for 35 years from the first application his citizen father made for him. He is from Mexico, which has a very long waiting list of persons in the process.

Aracely and Osmaro Alfredo De León formed a family with her son, Daniel Soto, who had the surname of his biological father. Later they had two sons, Lennyn, and Diego. In 2012, they were civilly married and, in 2013, their marriage was blessed with a wedding in St. Patrick Church. Aracely chose to use the custom here and uses her husband's name so she is Aracely de los Santos De León (Aracely of the angels DeLeón).

#### Osmaro's Story, Husband of Aracely

Osmaro was only father Daniel knew and, while he carried the surname of his biological father, he longed to have the name of his genuine father, his mother and his brothers. Osmaro had known and cherished Daniel from the time he returned home from the hospital after his birth. To Daniel's and the family's great joy a lawyer in Sedalia paved the way for Osmaro to adopt Daniel. On the day of his adoption, Daniel insisted on going to Jefferson City immediately to correct his birth certificate and list Osmaro as his father. We all went to the bureau of vital statistics and then had a celebratory dinner for Daniel De León and his family.

Osmaro's journey was complicated. In July 1999 he joined his Mother, a citizen of the U.S., in Milan, Missouri. He was undocumented and, in August, he moved to Sedalia to begin work at Tyson. He lived in a nearby motel and cleaned the rooms there as well. He did not know anyone in the area which was very difficult for a person from a culture oriented to extended family and community. He became acquainted with the person with whom he had a ride to work but it was a difficult time for him. In October, he bought his first car but had a minor accident on Walmart's parking lot in November.

In 2000, he attended the local community college to study English as a second language. In that same year he began to attend the Catholic Church although he had been raised without religion. In 2002, he was baptized and, in the same year, became Aracely's *novio*, boyfriend, and started to form a family with her in 2003.

Osmaro faced some difficult times. In 2001, he drove intoxicated and caused an accident. He spent two weeks in jail in Marshall, MO and was charged with a felony. He was banned from applying for TPS because of this and was assigned a parole officer. In 2003, the parole officer reported him to Immigration, which arrested him as undocumented, and he spent two weeks in jail. He paid bond and attended his assigned court date in Kansas City Immigration Court. As he did not choose voluntary deportation, he was directed to report to Immigration in north Kansas City each month and to report to the court in person every three months. In 2006, as he had been compliant, the Judge gave permission for a one-year trial period for him to prove himself in order to be released from charges and restrictions, which he completed without problem. In 2007, Osmaro passed his GED exam and also, in 2007, he was granted permanent residency through sponsorship by his mother, a citizen. At that time, he was finally able to visit family and friends in El Salvador. In October 2012 he passed the citizenship test and interview and became a citizen. Osmaro had a daughter in El Salvador, Myelin, and was eventually able, as a citizen, to bring her to the United States to join the family.

In recent years, Osmaro has worked in maintenance for the public schools. He has received the honor of most valued associate of the Sedalia School District 200, and, following his citizenship pledge, he led his whole school with the pledge of allegiance as they celebrated his accomplishment. His is respected in the community and is in charge of baptismal preparation for the Spanish-speaking in St. Patrick Parish. Aracely and her boys sing in the choir. Daniel, Lennyn, and Diego are musicians, lecturers, and servers at St. Patrick in the Spanish

Mass. They often perform such services at the English-speaking Mass since the attendees are mainly Senior Citizens. They all are on award winning soccer teams and the family follows their games. Lennyn and Diego are involved in activities in their respective schools with the youth at church. Daniel will graduate from High School this Spring and is already registered to enter the Air Force after graduation. They also preserve the best of their culture, customs, and foods and participate in the culture of their new country.

As with so many United States families, these families retain a deep love of the country of their origin, and often display the flag of El Salvador and/or its blue and white colors but they are faithful and dedicated citizens of the United States and that is all the more important to them for the suffering and sacrifices they have made to achieve citizenship.

Three new citizens!

