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OUR NATION OF IMMIGRANTS: THE SEARCH FOR BELONGING

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KALAW: Even though my mother had been here for eleven years, she was still learning and grasping the English language. But a year and a half after my stepfather died—and I remember it was around this time that my mother was studying, I was helping her study for her U.S. citizenship exam because she was a permanent resident and she had answered all 99 out of 100 questions correct. We're so excited about the possibility of her becoming a U.S. citizen. And for her, the priority was if I become a citizen, I can bring all of my other children who were older than me from Congo because they're suffering there in war torn environments. Let me save them. Meanwhile, I have my daughter Martine, who's already here and is safe. Right? And that was part of her ignorance. And I think many, many parents, immigrant parents who have that sense of ignorance because they're trying to protect and protect themselves and their children and survive.

HUDAK: I'm John Hudak, senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. This is episode four of "Our Nation of Immigrants," a five-part series I'm hosting to explore the status of immigration policy in America. So far in this series I have examined the demographic background of immigrants themselves and talked to them about their experience with the system. I've also dispelled myths about what the U.S.-Mexico border is like and gained an understanding of border communities not as crime-infested places housing struggling Americans, but safe cities powered by cross-border cooperation.

In the last episode, I learned about the economics of immigration and how new and aspiring Americans are an important part of the economic engine of this country.

In this episode of "Our Nation of Immigrants," I'll delve deeper into the immigrant experience and the idea of *belonging*: what it means to uproot your life from one country and to try to build a new home in the United States. I will focus not just on those arriving in the United States from Latin America, but those from around the world.

First, we'll hear more from Martine Kalaw, an author and speaker, about her personal experience as a stateless, undocumented immigrant who faced deportation from the United States but had nowhere to return to.

Next, we'll hear from Saha, a student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who was born in the United States to two immigrant parents from Afghanistan.

I then speak with experts Clarissa Martinez de Castro and Carlos Guevara of UNIDOS US about how the immigration crisis impacts the U.S. Hispanic population.

At the end of the episode, I'll talk to Santiago, another student at UNLV who is now a naturalized U.S. citizen.

In 2018, Martine Kalaw published a book, *Illegal Among Us*, about her experience as a student who learns she is undocumented and then stateless as she tries to achieve citizenship. Martine began our conversation by sharing how happy her childhood in the U.S. was after immigrating from Zambia.

KALAW: I was born in Lusaka, Zambia. And my mother and my biological father were from Democratic Republic of Congo, which was formerly Zaire. I came with my mother in 1985 to the United States because she was pursuing the American dream. We came as visitors to Maryland, actually, because most of her family, her sisters and brothers, were already here. They were established. Some of them were permanent residents and some of them were American citizens.

And I like to emphasize the fact that we came as visitors, not because it really should make a difference in whether or not there are rights for individuals like myself, unauthorized people to remain in the U.S. But because I think people don't realize the number one driver of the unauthorized or the undocumented population are actually people who overstay their visas.

My first years in the U.S. were wonderful. I mean, I look back at some of my report cards in school where it says, Martine's learning to grasp the English language. She's so excited about her understanding of the English language that she just can't stop talking, which was indicative of where I would be in my future. But I had a normal and happy childhood. I had friends here.

My mother probably came here, like I said, to pursue the American dream. Her siblings were here. Certainly there was civil unrest and has been in DRC, Democratic Republic of Congo, for over close to three decades at this point. And, I'm sure the rationale was to also escape from that and for economic advancement and opportunities. So those were some of the reasons.

My mother remarried an American born citizen and I had a relatively normal childhood, had a mom stepdad who was very much my father. Everything was relatively normal until things changed and the first shoe dropped in my life when my stepfather died.

HUDAK: Martine's American stepfather passed away, and her mother worked as a seamstress to support the family. Martine's mother had been in the U.S. for eleven years, with the status of a permanent resident, but was still working to grasp the English language.

Despite this, Martine's mother scored a 99 out of 100 on a practice citizenship exam.

KALAWL Around that time in a year and a half after my stepfather died, my mom became gravely ill and she passed away. So I was 15 years old. In that moment, it was like the rug had been pulled from under me. I no longer had a mother. I no longer have a father. I no longer had the familial framework that people need to survive. I felt like I was in some sort of abyss, not really understanding how I would navigate through the next steps in life. And it was really about survival at that point.

I was passed around from one relative to another, my mother's siblings. And in some homes I experienced neglect. In some homes I experienced abuse. And in other homes, it was

just other family members were complicit to the abuse that I was experiencing in other homes, in other households.

So, it was to the point where I remember at 16 years old, I was working, I was taken out of school to work in my aunt's consignment store on Georgia Avenue. And I remember a murder having taken place right across the street. I mean, this was years ago, things have changed since then in the area. But just remembering how scared I was, because here I am, I'm 16, I am managing and manning the cash register. I'm in this store by myself. I have the keys. Anyone could come in and hurt me. And I'm not in school, which in education was really the one thing that I was holding on to to give me access to freedom.

And I like to also emphasize this point. It took one stranger walking in the store, one random act of kindness. And I think people always think that kindness has to come in these big, overwhelming acts, acts. But sometimes it could be something really small. For me and in that moment, that stranger exercised an act of kindness through asking me one question—and I talk about that question in my books, I won't reveal it here. But she asked me this one question that literally changed my entire life, the whole trajectory of my life changed in that moment through her random act of kindness.

I ended up going to boarding school and got a benefactor who paid my way through boarding school. And then went to Hamilton College in upstate New York, a small liberal arts college. And after that pursued my master's degree at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University with a focus on immigration law and policy.

HUDAK: Despite incredible odds, Martine went to college and worked in the Dean of Faculty’s office. But one day, in 2001, her life changed yet again when the college indicated that she needed to change her status on her Social Security card so they could pay her. The card had

been issued to her as a “non-working” Social Security card because she had arrived in the U.S. as a visitor when she was very young.

KALAW: It would never have dawned on me that there was something issue with my status. It never came up. It was never a question in the past. And so we went to the Social Security Administration. Me, myself, and a college administrator, to adjust my Social Security card. And in that moment, it felt like a moment—it was probably a few hours that I was processed in Immigration Naturalization Services. And then I was immediately redirected to go to a judge in Buffalo. And I was placed in removal proceedings. And that is now the euphemism that we use for what was then known as deportation proceedings. So that's really what began the onset of what I call my immigration nightmare.

HUDALK: Martine then spent years in deportation proceedings—no longer secure in the U.S. but with no home to return to either. Martine was what is known as “stateless.”

KALAW: I was born in Zambia. But according to their constitution, I should have claimed citizenship when I was 18. I wouldn't have known that. So I didn't. I could have claimed citizenship of DR Congo potentially, but it would have been difficult. One, because I wasn't born there, my parents were. So I would have had to prove that they were my parents. That's one. Two, because the constitution changed when the country changed from Zaire to DR Congo. So I wasn't recognized in DR Congo; they didn't want me. Zambia didn't want me. The United States didn't want me.

And so when you're undocumented, typically it's this effort to get rid of you and send you where you belong, where you come from, Right? Home, because you're not considered part of the home of that current establishment. When you're stateless, there is no home to send you to. Nobody wants you. And so the reality for me and for many stateless people is that if they if they

end up in detention or if they end up in deportation proceedings, they can end up in detention indefinitely. Right? Because there are no laws or no processes, even within the context of immigration law. There really aren't any laws for stateless individuals. DACA doesn't support or is not going to have any positive effect on a stateless person because they don't even fit within the confines of those laws and regulations.

The analogy I use is if being undocumented is being in a nightmare, which—that's how I feel—being stateless is being trapped in the nightmare because there's no way out. So in essence, there are over 250,000 stateless individuals or persons in the United States today. They're 12 million stateless people in the world. And according to the UNHCR, the statistic is that every 10 minutes a stateless child is born. So think about how daunting that is. And with the preponderance of climate change and people having to move, having to move locations, and moving homes and removed from their spaces, their natural habitats, we are going to have more stateless people in the world.

HUDAK: Martine's story is a powerful tale of survival—she grew up in the U.S. unaware that she was undocumented and then had no place to go. Today, I am happy to share that Martine is a naturalized U.S. citizen who speaks regularly about her experience and advocates for immigrants.

For Saha, a student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, her identity is very connected to her experience as a Muslim-American woman born in the United States to immigrant parents. Her parents came to the United States, separately, as refugees fleeing Afghanistan because of the deadly Soviet occupation of that country in the 1980s and 1990s.

SAHA: My parents are both Afghan immigrants, meaning that they are from Afghanistan. And they came here—I think my dad came here around the 80s and then my mom

around the 90s. So they came here after the Soviet war that happened in Afghanistan. And they came here to find refuge from the war. And their story about how the turmoil that they had to go through in order to come here and how much they respect this country and sort of take it as their new home, I always think of it as like a real estate game. Right? I sort of hit the jackpot with where I was born, you know, because I was born here and given the opportunity under the 14th Amendment to have equal opportunities. And that's something that I always hear from them that they did not have there. So it's always an eye opener and always humbling to hear their story.

With my parents, both of them being immigrants of that country and coming to this country, they value the American dream, that American sort of democracy, everything that this country offers, they value it to an extent that sometimes it even surprises me. Because me being born here, I know my rights and I know what is equal, what is not. And I like to sort of argue with the democracy that we have, and sort of understand that, okay, this is wrong that the politicians are saying. Right?

But they and their mindset, because they value this country so much, it is more of a sense of like we're grateful to even be here. So that argument, that sort of rhetoric that's going on, they take it upon themselves to sort of be the better person, be the bigger person. If they say these things about the Muslim-Americans or Afghan-Americans, like, we will be the bigger person, we will sort of be humbled and try to make them understand rather than pick a fight, if that makes sense.

So me growing up, I always sort of had that idea as well. And I never really wanted to argue with anyone who had different viewpoints as me or someone who, even though they did give me that opportunity to have my voice, I just definitely felt the need to just back off from whatever they're saying.

But now that I've been in the world of policy and trying to understand the way our government works, I understand that it's as equal as our rights as it is theirs to have a say, you know. And so that I see with after 9/11, it's definitely been harder on us because being Muslim-Americans it's better to keep quiet than to start an argument. That's our policy. I'd rather not tell someone that I'm of the Muslim faith than have an argument with them of, like, why they feel like I could be a terrorist, if that makes sense.

And one of the one of the moments that will always stick with me is in elementary school. One of my professors, he was a social studies teacher and he had he was talking about religion. And he told the entire class how many students are Christian, and most of the students raised their hand. And he was like, How many students are Jewish? A little less, but still a couple people raised their hand. And I was like, so scared because I was like, don't ask if anyone's Muslim. Because I knew I was only one. And he asked, how many are Muslim? And I was really reluctant to raise my hand. And he was like, nobody, nobody this year? And when I raised my hand, the entire class looked at me. And it was that feeling of like, I could tell their judgment because of the rhetoric that was already going around in society. I didn't want them to judge me off of that before even getting to know me.

But as I grew up and as I understood the laws of this country bestows on its citizens, and being able to understand that I am a member of this country, and as much as I am different, it only brings a more unique perspective to the table. Right? And that uniqueness was something that I definitely didn't like when I was younger. But now I take it as such a gift and use it to my strength, not necessarily my weakness anymore. So definitely being able to see things and being able to be confident in the decisions and the choices that I make and making sure that people understand that, yeah, it's different, but it can also work.

HUDAK: I asked Saha if immigration actions by the Trump administration, particularly the executive orders limiting immigration from Muslim majority countries, were challenging for her personally.

SAHA: If it wasn't for President Trump's campaign, I don't think that I would have been as involved as I am now, because he picked and prodded at groups that genuinely just apply to me. Right? And so hearing those things, I felt like I needed to raise my voice. And the first action that he took was Executive Order 13769, which was a infringement on seven Muslim countries, major Muslim countries. And looking at those kinds of laws being acted upon in our country, it kind of reminded me of a ghost of *Korematsu v. US*—

HUDAK: —Saha is referring to the 1944 United States Supreme Court case *Korematsu vs. United States* in which the Court, by a 6-3 decision, upheld the government's use of internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. This decision, at the time, made it legal for the government to discriminate *and* take action against individuals solely on the basis of national origin, while the government argued that such targeting was necessary because the risks a people posed was powerful enough to discriminate against anyone with specific traits.

SAHA: —seven Muslim majority countries that were in turmoil, they needed to find refuge somehow, you know. And being able to get that chance to come out of that country to have shelter here in America. My parents went through that, you know. And they're working-class citizens, they have their own small business, they genuinely are so grateful to be in this country.

And then with DACA laws, not even allowing children from the southern border to come any more from countries like Honduras and Guatemala that are having horrible circumstances in their countries. And that being said, it's just honestly been such an infringement on all those

people, and it's only allowed me to raise my voice more because I know that those people, those stories are the same. Those stories are very similar. And we are all on the same page of being so grateful to be in this country. And I look at my parents every day and I thank them truly, because in that way I wouldn't have been the person that I am today if it wasn't for their decisions that they made to come here.

HUDAK: I also asked Saha about empathy and shared experiences among immigrants. I wanted to know whether her parents coming from Afghanistan made it harder or easier to relate to immigrants coming from other parts of the world.

SAHA: I don't think that they silo themselves with their experiences, because, I'll give you an example. With the Middle East, right, when turmoil happened, most of these populations of people—it's not just my parents' story, but I know a lot of family, a lot of distant members that also had to go through the same story where they had to flee the country on foot. They had to go walk three, four, five days with all of their luggage, everything that they own on their backs. And they had to trek to a different country. Also knowing that there's no food there is on this journey, there's no shelter, there's nothing that's certain. And they're still making this trek because it's survival. There's no other choice that they have. And they have to carry everything on their back, either if it's their two-year-old son or the one that's just born or their entire family. They have to do this, because if they don't, they will lose their life.

And I hear that same story at the border where from Honduras, from Guatemala, from Venezuela, they will literally travel all the way to Mexico, all the way through that, because they have to. There is no other choice. And when they come to the border, it's still uncertain. They don't know that they're going to seek asylum into the United States, but they still make that journey because they have no other choice.

And that sort of connection goes around the world, and being able to sort of feel that empathy towards them. I have never been to Latin America and I have never sort of experienced that. But I understand that those children of those immigrants, I have that similar story with my parents. And that's why I feel like when it comes to immigrants, we do connect on that level with each other because one way or the other, we face turmoil the same way and we respect this country at the same way.

HUDAK: I had the opportunity to speak with two experts from UNIDOS US, formerly National Council of La Raza—the nation's largest organization dedicated to issues impacting the Latino community—about the impacts of the immigration crisis on children. Clarissa Martinez de Castro is the Deputy Vice President for Public Policy and Advocacy, and Carlos Guevara is the Associate Director of Immigration Initiatives. They began our conversation by talking about misperceptions of the Latino community, as well as the immigrant and undocumented populations.

MARTINEZ**:** One of the things that we have seen either as a result or as a consequence of the way that the immigration debate has devolved is that, erroneously, many of our fellow Americans believe that the majority of Latinos in the United States are immigrant and also undocumented. And the reality is that in our country today, eight out of 10 Latinos are United States citizens. And of the remaining two, roughly one is a legal permanent resident. And the last one is undocumented. But whenever you talk about that data, it is very interesting to see people experiencing cognitive dissonance because they have been led to believe, given the debate in how Latinos are intertwined in that debate, that the majority of Latinos are not indeed their fellow Americans, which they are.

GUEVARA: And what I may add to that about the one in 10 that are remaining that are undocumented and the broader undocumented population as we know it today, that roughly depending on the estimate that 11 million individuals are in the country who are undocumented in 2017. And what we know is that they are increasingly, and they have been for a while, intricately woven into our communities. It's striking that, and I think a lot of folks don't fully appreciate this, that the majority of them, over 60 percent of them, have been in this country for well over a decade. Which when you start to think about that a lot of life that happens in 10 years. Of course, folks are making significant contributions to the American fabric, to our economy. And from where we sit in a constituency that is very important to us, is their kids. Nearly six million American children, as we sit here, live with at least one undocumented loved one, which includes folks that have protections under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program and temporary protected status. So, we know that the community is increasingly part of the American fabric and in many ways in all but paper.

MARTINEZ: I think it's also very hard for many of us who don't interact with the immigration system to grasp just how difficult it is for people who actually want to be here with legal status to be able to do that. And so everybody a lot of times here, says get back in the line, get in the back of the line. And what the work of UNIDOS has really been dedicated to is that, yes, that country deserves an immigration system we can be proud of. And we want to make sure that that line that people can get into is actually real, because if it is real, people will get in that line.

At the same time, because of the way that our economy has attracted immigrants, we have this population of people who are undocumented, but who have been become part of our

communities, of our families, and who actually the American people would like them to become legalized.

HUDAK: Even though the vast majority of Latinos are citizens or legal residents, the rhetoric and vilification of undocumented individuals still affects the Latino community and has a deep impact on how Latinos view and trust government. Clarissa explains the dynamic and its consequences within and for our society.

MARTINEZ: This is part of the reason why immigration packs such a powerful punch with Latino voters. So, again, the majority of Latinos are United States citizens, but more than half of Latino voters know someone who is undocumented, either a member of their family, a friend or a coworker. So, they experience directly and or through loved ones the impact of the lack of solutions in action on this issue. But at the same time, what the community has experienced is that regardless of immigration status, when the immigration debate has gone toxic—and one would say it's been nothing but for at least the last 10 years—all Latinos, regardless of immigration status, see their civil rights and civil liberties threatened.

HUDAK: Those feelings of being threatened—driven by candidates' views on immigration policy—have transformed the way Latinos see American politics and how they vote. For example, President George W. Bush, who spoke openly about comprehensive immigration reform and compassionately about immigrants, won 44 percent of the Latino vote in 2004. Twelve years later, Donald Trump won only 28 percent of the Latino vote. Presidential and presidential candidate rhetoric matters to Latinos at the ballot box. In the 2020 election, President Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden have starkly different views on immigration issues and other issues important to the Latino communities around the country. And this November, voters will show us the impact of those positions.

MARTINEZ: And this is not anecdotal. There is a notable case of Arizona under Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who actually was indicted for discriminatory harassment and behavior against Latinos, including U.S. citizens. We have numerous stories of Latino citizens being harassed because they dare have a conversation in Spanish with a friend, or simply because of what they look like, are asked to produce documents that the rest of our fellow Americans would be appalled if they were subjected to that kind of treatment. So we see the increase of that.

We have seen an increase in hate crimes by people motivated by this narrative of antagonism and division. And tragically, that has resulted in death, as we saw in the tragedy in El Paso.

So, many Latinos are increasingly alarmed and concerned about the level of the tone in which Latinos and immigrants are talked about, and the fact that of how that is impacting the daily lives of this community.

HUDAK: Here, Clarissa focuses on two important moments with deep impacts on the Latino community, but also ones that demonstrate how some in society view Latinos and how those behaviors send signals to other Americans.

The 2019 El Paso shooting—which the city's mayor discussed in episode 2—was an effort to target Latinos regardless of their status. The effort was simply to murder.

In another instance, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio defied a federal judge's order to stop profiling and harassing people—even U.S. citizens—simply for looking Latino. He was held in contempt of court and found guilty of that charge. In August 2017, President Trump pardoned Sheriff Arpaio for this crime.

These instances signal the normalization of contempt for the Latino community specifically, and for immigrants generally. Clarissa explains what that impact looks like.

MARTINEZ: I think the great sadness is that that story can be multiplied by many thousands. And I think what happens sometimes in the immigration debate is that there is a sense that immigrants live in isolation and what is done to immigrants will only impact those who are undocumented. And the reality is very far from that. The reality is that undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, are part of our families. They're part of the people who go to church, they're a part of the folks that our kids go to school with.

And we are looking at least six million U.S. citizen kids being directly impacted by the immigration policies we're having right now. We are actively destabilizing the present and future of those kids. And that doesn't even take into account the ancillary effects that they have on classmates and teachers and others they interact with, because there are also many stories of classmates' concern about what's going to happen to their friend, who is afraid that their parents are going to be lost. And so, in some ways, our country had an opportunity to very clearly see the impact of immigration policies that are in the context of the border, and that righteous indignation that people have felt.

What we are trying to make sure that folks understand in what is often a fact-free zone when we talk about immigration is that, sadly, those impacts, those family separations, are happening in every community across America. But sometimes we don't see it. And so that righteous indignation needs to be magnified. And we have seen when stories come up, even from voters who support President Trump, when they see the type of people who are being deported, we actually are hearing even from those folks saying, "wait a minute, these are not the folks we thought were going to be impacted." But that's exactly who's being gone after.

So here the issue is that it would be bad enough if in our name, the name of the American people, we were seeing the inaction in overhauling the system. But when on top of that you add

the very real human consequences that are being generated, the magnitude of that tragedy deserves to be stopped and we need to demand it.

HUDAK: UNIDOS US has studied the emotional toll of the immigration crisis on the broader Hispanic population, and also researched the impacts on immigrant children separated from their families. Carlos talked to me about their findings.

GUEVARA: We were united with many in the country aghast at what we saw on the border playing out with the family separation crisis. We joined many folks calling that out. But we also noted a bit of an imbalance from our perspective in the way the issues were covered on holistically on immigration. So much so that we wrote a report called "Beyond the Border: Immigration Enforcement under the Trump era," which looked at the impact of the environment that we're living in right now and historical precedent for it. Fortunately, and precisely the impacts that we have on the broader community, but specifically on children, on American children, many in our community across many measures, including their economic achievement measures, health measures, and their possibilities of succeeding in this economy.

And what we conclude there is that our current trajectory on immigration, the current rhetoric, the political landscape, the policies across many issues are all conspiring to create a situation right now whereby we are putting an entire generation of Americans, the same American kids that we are depending on to be our future voters, workers, health care providers and the like.

HUDAK: I asked Carlos and Clarissa to talk specifically about DACA and the Trump administration's changes in that policy.

GUEVARA: So, DACA or the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy, is a high-level policy instituted in 2012 that allowed many young people to come out of the shadows for

the first time, provided they meet a number of requirements, including background checks, and had been here for a certain amount of time.

In fact, we know from the research that's out there that the majority of folks who have received DACA, the average age that they've came to the United States was seven years old. Where about a third of them, according to our friends at the Center for American Progress, arrived before they were five.

So, for many folks, this is indeed the only country they know. They've never been to, whether it's Mexico or South Korea, Guatemala, whatever the case may be. And in that way, they are part of our communities, our families, contributors in many, many ways, economically, socially, culturally.

So when this administration decides in September of 2017 to callously end that program, we see, we talk about a generation of kids or a grouping of kids, rather, that when folks think about this, this is really jarring and tugging out their insides. Right? Because this is really at its core about who we are as a country and the basic fairness and foundations that we hold, and many of us hold so true. It's about basic issues of basic fairness.

So that, I think, is why for many folks, the idea that people have been here for a very long time, making contributions to the country in many, many facets resonated. And outraged, correctly outraged folks. For many people who are in the weeds of this stuff, as we are in the day to day, we are anticipating a court decision, the Supreme Court decision, later this year. We don't know what's going to happen, to be very clear. We are encouraging folks who have the opportunity to renew to do so at this time. And that's been our call to action, if you will, for individuals who have that. And we do hope and are advocating and in fact insist that our

lawmakers do what's right and pass the American Dream and Promise Act to finally provide some stability to the population.

HUDAK: Since my interview with Carlos and Clarissa, the Supreme Court ruled on this case. In June, the Court issued a decision in *The Department of Homeland Security v. Regents of the University of California*, holding that the Trump administration violated the laws set forth for administrative procedures in nullifying the DACA program. This decision, at least temporarily, preserves the Obama-era program.

MARTINEZ: I certainly think that when we keep changing the rules that we've set out for people to engage, it definitely creates a disincentive that goes against our own interest. The American public wants immigrants to be legal. And what we're seeing as a result of these policies is not only that we are actually making legal immigration more difficult. So rather than encouraging people to go through this system, the current policies are forcing people to go around it, which is what Americans don't want.

HUDAK: I will leave this conversation with Clarissa and Carlos on this important note. The unintended consequences of public policy choices often hamper the government's ability to achieve the outcomes it wants. Rather than thinking through how a policy will impact the choices individuals make, elected officials and others make choices that will garner headlines, generate talking points, and signal to voters that they have their interests at heart. The reality of those choices can often create problems not simply for the administration of government. It can create uncertainty that has a real human toll.

SANTIAGO: My name is Santiago Gudiño-Rosales. I'm a fifth-year student studying biology here at UNLV. I serve as student body vice president and will hopefully one day be a practicing physician here in the Valley. My family's shares a mixed status, meaning some of us

have full documentation. Others are in the process, and some of them don't have a pathway towards doing that. And because of that, our experiences have been very different.

HUDAK: Santiago came to the U.S. with his family as an undocumented immigrant. He worked his way through grade school and high school, and when it came time for college, learned that his school was not able to give—or capable of giving him—guidance about how to navigate the future. I interviewed him in Las Vegas in March.

SANTIAGO: I, like all seniors, met with my school counselor to discuss the opportunities of a university education. I had just got in my ACT scores and I knew my GPA was stellar and that I had ample volunteer opportunities under my belt. But because I didn't have the proper paperwork and because I came from a poor family, my school counselor informed me that there was no opportunities for a student like me. Obviously, that's not true and not the case, but it held me back a year from my studies. It hurt me in ways that I'm still learning to accept and to not hold any resentment towards, because I can now understand that due to the nature of how complex immigration is in this country, my counselor probably didn't have the best information to help me and I didn't have that information to help myself.

I was undocumented almost all of my life. I didn't receive my citizenship until the year 2015. A couple of months before the deadline towards applications were due, I had taken a gap year after high school because I didn't have the proper paperwork to show the university that I was an in-state student and therefore qualified for a reduced price to attend.

Now, having been a citizen for a number of years and having gone through the university experience, my life has been changed in so many ways. Specifically, though, in a way that will help me or that will push me to help immigrants in the future.

HUDAK: Santiago talked to me about the difficulties of navigating the citizenship process coming from a low-income family.

SANTIAGO: It was a process that lasted a couple of years, specifically because of the financial reason. There are documents that you have to be able to find as well as acquire from your own existence here in the nation, that of your family. So for me, it was my mom's as well as my own, like, paperwork from the schools I had attended, doctors that I might have visited. Anything that just proved my existence in the country, which takes a while.

But specifically the financial ones where you have to pay for offices to print out the paperwork, where you have to apply for citizenship. And because of how complicated all that is, you really need someone who can help navigate that process. So for us, it also included a lawyer and all the fees she charged us to help us navigate my pathway toward citizenship.

It's been a confusing mix of emotions because of the fact that I do have citizenship, while there's some of my family members that don't. I have the ability to go to school and travel outside of the country, to visit a doctor's office, and to make my name known here at UNLV. While some of my family members have to remain in the shadows, either not working jobs because they're being exploited or overworking themselves, because that's the only way they can help fund my family. Umm ... yeah.

HUDAK: Since this interview, I'm happy to share that Santiago has graduated from UNLV summa cum laude with a B.S. in biology with a minor in neuroscience. He plans to attend medical school in the Fall of 2021.

From the many conversations I've had with immigrants and immigrant advocates, I am struck by the many similar themes I hear, even though each individual has his or her own story or perspective. One thing that rings true throughout is that the invective in discussions of

immigration policy do not match immigrants' experiences nor their behaviors. Claims about immigrants' unemployment, usually including words like "lazy" and "welfare," arguments about crimes usually referencing MS-13 or rapes or DUIs, and talking points about disrespect for the country in which they reside, *do not reflect facts*.

What does that false rhetoric do? It spreads misinformation, contempt, and even hate. We know that as anti-immigrant rhetoric increases, and bias because of race, ethnicity, religion or national origin takes root, incidences of hate crimes increase. Whether those crimes affected Irish and Italian immigrants in the late 19th century and early 20th century, Asian immigrants through World War II, Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, Muslims and Arabs after 9/11, Latinos during the 21st century and especially over the last 4 years, and Asian Americans in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, language has consequences.

So, too, does leadership, and it is incumbent upon leaders at the federal, state, and local levels to govern with facts instead of Facebook memes. Bringing data to bear to deal with the country's policy problems is always more useful than defaulting to the worst tendencies among us. Our nation of immigrants deserves nothing less.

In the next and final episode of this mini-series, we will explore why immigration has been such a difficult political problem to solve, and some of the policy solutions the guests we interviewed have to offer.

This has been Our Nation of Immigrants.

A lot of people contributed to the episodes in this special series of the Brookings Cafeteria Podcast. First, I want to thank my guests who took time to let me interview them for this episode: Martine Kalaw, Clarissa Martinez de Castro, Carlos Guevara, as well as UNLV students Saha and Santiago.

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I'm John Hudak.