**The exiled**

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Immigrants are the “enemy” in Donald Trump’s America. The president has made the arrest, detention and deportation of immigrants the centerpiece of his domestic policies, seeing it as an effective tool to whip up racial resentment among his base and preserve his power. Even though Trump has dramatically ratcheted up the immigration enforcement machine and racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, other U.S. presidents have engaged in the mistreatment and expulsion of immigrants for decades. Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama, oversaw a record 2 million deportations during his presidency.

Among those Obama deported was a man named Israel Concha, who came with his family to the U.S. when he was only 4 years old. After living for more than 30 years in this country as an undocumented immigrant, Concha was pulled over for speeding, at which point his ‘nightmare’, as he calls it, began. In an interview with me, he explained that from that point onward, “It was the US government versus Israel Concha”.

At the time of his arrest, Concha was offered an order he could have signed that would have allowed him to be immediately deported. But he was a business owner and had just been married – his wife was expecting their first child. So he decided to legally fight the deportation and spent two years in various detention centers in the US “I still remember the first time I met my son,” he said. “It was at an immigration hearing. He was so close to me, only a few steps away, but yet so far.”

Concha’s son is now 5 years old, and father and son have yet to meet freely and be able to touch one another. As the parent of a 5-year-old boy myself, the trauma of what Concha and his child are experiencing is unimaginably heartbreaking.

When Concha inevitably lost his case, he was immediately sent back to Mexico – a country he did not consider home – and was promptly kidnapped. Because of security concerns, he felt unable to tell me the details of his kidnapping – except to say that he was tortured by his captors. Eventually, he was freed and worked for a time at a call center where his fluency in English became an asset. Two years later, he founded a nonprofit organization called New Comienzos, which translates to New Beginnings. It is designed to help newly deported people find their footing in an unfamiliar land.

Putting his own harrowing experience into a broader context, Concha told me, “My story is just one of thousands of such stories”. There have been so many immigrants deported to Mexico over the past decade or so that a growing community of people who once called the US home have made a new home for themselves in a neighborhood in Mexico City called ‘Little LA’, where Concha’s organization is based. More than a thousand repatriated deportees from the US live in the area, have started businesses and formed a community. Concha told me that enterprising deportees have opened tattoo parlors, nail salons and even a restaurant serving California-style burritos.

He recalled that when he was first dumped into Mexico, he had no support from either the Mexican or US governments, a condition that made new deportees like him easy prey for criminals. Today he brims with pride that New Comienzos has helped more than 8,000 people since it opened two years ago.

With the Trump administration ramping up arrests of undocumented immigrants, especially in the interior of the country, Concha sees a stark difference between Obama – under whom he was deported – and Trump. “We’ve noticed there’s a lot more discrimination against our community, as undocumented immigrants or as Hispanics as well”, he said. Trump’s policy of deliberate family separation resulted in thousands of children cruelly ripped away from their parents. Today, hundreds of children are still separated because their parents have been deported while they remain in US custody.

Concha told me, “We’re tired of a US president that uses migrant families as a pawn in this chess game so he could get his wall”. He considers himself one of the lucky ones who was able to navigate the detention system thanks to his familiarity with American customs and his fluency in both English and Spanish. “What about other people like those from Central America that may not speak English or Spanish? It’s a humanitarian crisis”, he said.

Concha’s goal is to humanize migrants, deportees, refugees and the like. “If you know an undocumented person in America, or a deportee in Mexico, listen to their stories and you’ll see that they’re also human like you”.

Among the services Concha’s organization offers deportees is psychological assistance, legal help, food vouchers, and classes in Spanish grammar and Mexico’s culture and history. The organization even offers free certification in English fluency – which can help many newly deported people find good jobs in Mexico using skills they developed in the United States. Young Mexicans in particular who graduated from American colleges and universities have gifted the Mexican economy an American-educated work-force. In other words, the mass deportation has resulted in a ‘brain-drain’ from the US – making it our loss and Mexico’s gain.

“Many of us want to go back,” said Concha. “Like they say, ‘your home is where your heart is,’ and for many of us it’s still in the US.” He added, “But something funny is happening. We start falling in love with Mexico as well. Now the American Dream can also be achieved in Mexico.”

Concha himself is a perfect example of what the US has lost with its policy of mass deportations. While he lived in this country, Concha obtained a college degree in business administration and went on to start a transportation company providing limos, shuttles, concierge and taxi services in his home state of Texas. His company employed about 20 US citizens. All of that was lost when he was deported to Mexico.

Once he landed on his feet and started working at a call center, he earned commissions for referring people and spent two years saving enough money from the commissions to start New Comienzos. Everything in Concha’s life has led him to a place where he is now able to offer support systems for immigrants like him who were abused by the US immigration system and ripped away from their homes. “This is my calling,” he said with a deep sense of conviction.

This article was originally published as: ‘How One Deportee Is Helping Other Exiled Immigrants in Mexico’.

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