

OPPRESSED. THREATENED. AFRAID. UNDOCUMENTED.

Undocumented is a word familiar to the people of the United States. It is easily shrugged off by some because of the impersonality of its sound, but for others, it's blindingly real.

By Cecilia Whalen, Staff Writer

Immigrating to America is a process that takes years to finish and years even to begin; the journey can take a lifetime, and sometimes, it can take a life. For those who are lucky enough to arrive in the States, the journey continues. Acquiring citizenship can take even longer than getting here—and it continues with discrimination, deprivation and constant fear.

Getting to America

Coming here is a grueling operation, and for those coming from the south of the border, it can be especially dangerous. Jane Smith, a currently undocumented immigrant and student at East Meck, whose real name has been changed in this story for the protection of herself and her family, shared her and her mother's story about their journey from Mexico to America.

"It took my mom three times to get here," Smith said. "The first time she was pregnant with me, but she didn't know it yet. My dad was already in America, so she wanted to go live there with him."

Making it to America is a very strenuous and difficult process, especially if you attempt on your own. In some areas of Mexico, there is a group of people called *coyotes* whose business it is to get people across the border. Her mother traveled with them.

"They traveled in a car and she hid under the seats," she said. "They made it all the way to the border."

But when they reached the border, her mother didn't get through. It was a little girl in the car, a daughter of one of the *coyotes*, who inadvertently sold her out.

"When they got to the border, the police asked them all to get out. When the mom of the little girl got out, the little girl started crying. My mom [still hidden], who is good with kids, was trying to calm her down, like 'don't cry', but since the little girl didn't know my mom she started crying even more," Smith said.

The police then found Smith's mom in the car, and she was sent back. A few months later, she tried again.

"The second time she went through the desert with this old woman and her granddaughter. The old woman didn't make it... they had to leave her. But my mom kept the granddaughter with her, and kept going," Smith said.

The little girl was uncomfortable without her grandmother, and she cried all the time. Unfortunately, this would be the second time that a little girl would out the secret.

"She was caught," she said. "Also, by that time, my mom was showing [her pregnancy], and a blonde woman at the border said she couldn't come because 'she was just trying to come to the States to have her baby' and benefit from all the things here. That's



why my mom kind of has a prejudice against blonde people."

It was the third time in which newborn Smith and her mother finally made it across the border.

"Every time you try to go [to America from Mexico with the *coyotes*] it costs about \$5,000, so my mom had to wait until I was about six or seven months before trying to go the third time.

When we got there I passed through with a Mexican lady who said I was her baby," Smith said.

Because the newly American citizen was light skinned, her husband was white, and Smith is light skinned, Smith passed for that woman's child.

"My mom had to really trust that woman," she said, and luckily her mother made the right decision. "She took me to Texas to stay with my dad. My mom had to go through the river, the Rio Grande."

With about five other people, her mother traveled across the river and the border, where a truck picked her up and finally reunited her with her family.

Even 15 years after coming to America, Smith and her mother remain undocumented citizens.

"I'm getting my papers soon...my mom, in about a year. My dad has his now," she said.

Acquiring citizenship is a process that has taken Smith's entire lifetime, and she and her mother still live in fear of deportation today.

"We can be so easily stopped by police and quickly deported," she said.

Upon Arrival

Getting to the United States does not mean the hardship is over. Current laws put in place by Congress make obtaining documentation extremely difficult, and for those who have acquired citizenship but whose families have not, the strain continues.

Another student, Mary Jones, whose name has also been changed to protect her family, says that as a daughter of undocumented immigrants, it is hard not to feel trapped.

"Everyone in my family are undocumented except myself and my siblings....," Jones said. "That's my parents, aunts, uncles....one of my aunts is being deported soon. [I have also had] distant cousins, other aunts, and uncles deported."

Being an undocumented immigrant in America is a huge burden, and the struggle continues for those who are citizens, but whose families are not.

"I can't do anything; we can't go anywhere," Jones said. "We have a curfew, basically. We can't be out past a certain time, because of the police. We always have to be in fear."

And the fear is absolutely paralyzing. One time, she and her family had to pull off on the side of the highway in order to tend to her brother who had gotten sick. Soon, they saw a police officer pulling up to their side.

"We were so scared...we were actually crying, me and all the kids," she said.

It turned out that the police officer had just stopped to see if he could help, but that didn't change her perception of the men in blue.

"I don't trust them...there are many examples of why I don't," Jones said.

The burden doesn't end with the police. Being an immigrant means constant discrimination. Being undocumented means even more.

"Whenever we go to a store or to the mall, you know, where there are a lot of white people, everyone looks at us," Jones said. "They're like 'you're not supposed to be here.' And when it comes to those people, [store clerks] are all friendly, but when it comes to us, they completely ignore us."

Immigrants come to the United States in search of a better life. One thing they search for is jobs. Finding a job for a regular American citizen is difficult, but when you are not a citizen it is nearly impossible.

"My mom and dad can't get certain jobs," Jones said. "One time my mom tried to get a job and she didn't get it because she didn't have her papers."

Even if they get a job, undocumented

immigrants are the first to be laid off.

"My dad works three jobs. He wants to leave because of the new E-Verify," Jones said, referring to the new internet-based system that allows businesses to determine the eligibility of employees to work in America.

"They'll lay you off without your papers," Jones said.

If an immigrant is able to keep a job for a while, it doesn't necessarily mean he or she is being treated fairly. Along with being the first to be laid off, undocumented immigrants are the first to be abused by their employers.

"Sometimes they'll withhold his [my dad's] paycheck. But he can't stand up to them because of the risk of being deported," Jones said.

Besides work, another reason people immigrate to America is to find better health care. However, without citizenship, one cannot benefit from it.

"We don't get Obamacare. My mom and dad don't go to the doctor because it is too expensive," she said.

Although she and her siblings are able to receive care through Medicaid, her parents remain ineligible.

"My mom has an eye problem, but she can't go to the doctor...she also has an infection from her [recent] C-section in her tummy...but we're still paying the bills for the [birth of] the baby, so she refuses to go," Jones said. "She says it's too expensive and we can't afford it."

Citizenship may help with some of these problems, but it is not that easily attained. According to usimmigration.com, just applying for citizenship is a process that can take six months to a year. After that, it can take more than a year to be accepted.

Even after acceptance, one must take the 'citizenship test', and after a wait of between "one day and 180 days, on average" only then may one assume citizenship. This is only if everything works smoothly, and not to mention the costs: \$700 just for an application.

"It feels like the only way for us to get a visa is if something bad happens," Jones said. "My dad got robbed a while ago, and now he might be able to press charges and get his papers."

Immigrants go through much pain and heartache simply to arrive to the United States. Unfortunately, even when they get here, they are met with public hatred and discrimination. Not only are they offended by statements made by public figures, but they are also hurt by the remarks.

"Some people think that what Donald Trump says is funny, but Hispanics get kind of ashamed," Jones said. "I know we shouldn't be and we should be proud of where we came from, but when people are always criticizing you, calling us 'rapists' and 'criminals,' it's hard not to be angry."