



The faces behind the wall

61 million. Each with a past and a future. Each with a family. Each with their own set of dreams to chase, goals to achieve, and a life to fulfill. The journey of immigrants coming to the United States is one driven by hope, but met increasingly with struggle, as recent immigration policy makes it increasingly difficult for certain immigrants to enter the U.S. Here, three recent immigrants share their stories and insight into the journey and struggle of immigrants today.

story by | **Samantha Winn, Francesca Mathewes and Kat Kollegger**

May Nguyen

On the second try, May Nguyen and her family were able to start the immigration process to the United States.

It didn't matter that Nguyen's mother was working for the United States at the Embassy in Vietnam for 20 plus years, nor that her father works for the Vietnamese Customs Department.

They had to wait their turn. Her chance to come to the U.S. came a five years later -- this time with a green card.

"We started going to Saigon to do the immigrant visa medical procedure in Dec. and it took for about two weeks until the result to come back and then we go to the Embassy and then put that in too," Nguyen said. "but then and when it's done, it's sent to us and then we're good to go. Six months later then we are here."

Nguyen started at Wando High School her freshman year, and is currently a junior. With the move from halfway around the world, Nguyen, her mother, and her brother were forced to leave bits of home behind.

"We leave a lot of our photo albums behind, we leave lots of memories and all that behind, so just a clean slate when we got here," Nguyen said.

However that clean slate could be interrupted. With recent legislation among representatives in the national government of building a wall, along with President Trump's executive order, the fear for immigrants to get a new life could be blocked or make a difficult process longer.

In Dec. of 2016, shortly after the election, Nguyen and her family packed their bags to visit Vietnam for three weeks.

On their trip home, the circumstances they faced at customs held Nguyen and her family for two days. "On our way back, we got stranded at the airport, New York airport for two days and it was just frustrating," Nguyen said. "My mom was up for another 24 hours without sleep after 30 hours of flying, she stands in long line asking the attendant, asking everyone working at the front desk, it's really frustrating and really nerve wracking, it's seems like we just want to give up."

"A lot of people were crying because they have to get back for a job, they have their things planned out and suddenly they get stranded at this place, they can't get home, and so I was only stuck there for two days I already feel like, I'm so far away from everything we built in Charleston so I can't really imagine how heartbreaking for people to visit their home and then when they came back they suddenly got someone saying 'Hey you can't go back to your

life that you built in the U.S. anymore,'" she continued. "No one is going to give back all the things that you've put your heart and soul in there anymore, so it was a really heartbreaking moment to realize that."

With immigration being a forefront in the United States political climate, many of Nguyen's friends and family have called with concern and safety. Despite the controversy of being an immigrant currently in the United States, Nguyen tries to stay positive about her experience.

"We try to be very positive at times, even when... we can't vote, we sort of don't really have a say as to who is going to be president," she said. "It's sort of sad that we can't do anything about it because we aren't citizens...we can see it on the TV and think about it and prepare ourselves if we have to go home. It's sad, but it's just the reality of it."

Anna Smith*

Anna Smith was 13 when this process began. Four years later, the end is in sight.

Smith, now a junior at Wando High School, and her mother immigrated to the U.S. in 2013 from Jamaica when her mother became engaged to Smith's step-father, a resident of the U.S., and their path to legal citizenship began.

The path to citizenship

1) Green card

In order to apply for citizenship, candidates must be at least 18 years old and have been a permanent resident for at least 5 years (or 3 years if you are married to a US citizen) and meet all other requirements.

Cost: \$249 plus government fees

2) N-400 Form

When all requirements to become a U.S. Citizen are met, complete Form N-400 to apply for naturalization

The N-400 must be completed, 2 passport style photos must be taken, and supporting documents must be collected to accompany the N-400 form.

3) Complete the interview

After preliminary processes are complete, USCIS will schedule an interview with you.

Arrive on scheduled interview day and bring appointment notice with you

4) Receive decision

The USCIS will send you a written notice with one of these three decisions.

Granted: establishes you as eligible for naturalization

Continued: The USCIS may continue you if you need to provide additional documentation, fail to provide correct documents, or fail the English and/or civics test the first time.

Denied: you will be denied if your Form N-400 if the evidence in your record establishes you are not eligible for naturalization.

5) Take Oath of Allegiance

USCIS will mail you a notification with the date, time, and location of your scheduled ceremony. You are not a US Citizen until you take the Oath of Allegiance

After taking the oath, receive your Certificate of Naturalization

--according to uscis.gov

"To become a citizen here, you have to study things about the United States and know the history. It's about a three to five year process. You have to study your surroundings and the culture and take these tests, and to even begin that process you have to have your green card. So if you have that, then you're legal," Smith said. "And to get a green card, you have to go through immigration, send in a lot of your personal papers and information, which costs a lot of money."

And for many, the monetary cost of even beginning the citizenship process is a substantial obstacle.

"It cost at the very least \$500 to first get the green card, but it's a process. Each time your green card has to be renewed, you have to send in money and send your documentation again, your fingerprints, your ID, all of that," Smith said. "But you're legal, so you get your Social Security number and you can work here and live here. You have the right to be here with a green card. But it's still hard, because when most people first move to the U.S they don't just have hundreds or even thousands of dollars to spare."

But Smith's family has successfully stayed committed to this process, and she and her mother hope to both be full-fledged U.S citizens by early June.

"My mom's studying and working towards getting her citizenship now, and if she passes her tests before I turn 18, I'll have my citizenship too, and the whole process will be over."

And although Smith's story is one of success, she understands that many others this is not the case, especially for those in countries that have been the subject of recent international policy decisions, such as the planned wall at the Mexican border and the travel ban on Syrian refugees.

"I know I'm here legally, so I don't have a problem, but if I was in their position now, like if I were from Syria or Mexico, I would feel very targeted," Smith said. I wouldn't want people to say 'Oh my god, all Jamaicans should get deported from this country,' just because they're Jamaicans. It's wrong. Everyone comes here for a better life, a better education, and I just feel like people are being targeted for being their own nationality."

And as far as remedies to the current illegal immigrant crisis, Smith believes that there are solutions out there that can be a benefit to both those trying to enter the U.S and those who are already citizens. "For people that come here illegally because they can't afford the process, there should be jobs or programs set for them so that they can pay their way and prove that they're not bad people, they just want a better way of life," Smith said. "It would make it so much easier for people who are illegal now to become legal, instead of just bashing them or trying to deport them."

Lorena Limonji

Better opportunities, better education -- a better life. That's why senior Lorena Limonji from Clarke Central came to America from Brazil nearly four years ago.

Limonji is living here legally on an F-2 visa, which states that she is legally dependant on someone who is here to study. Her mother, currently working on her doctorate at the University of Georgia in piano performance, lives on a F-1 visa, allowing her to

work.

On Limonji's visa, she cannot hold a job.

"I don't have that many rights hereI think that's one very frustrating thing about not being here on a green card or a work visa is being able to only study and not help your family," she said.

The current political climate and rhetoric towards immigrants in the U.S, many live with fear. Fear of deportation and at the least, having to face discrimination or conflict that recent anti-immigrant policy could potentially spur.

"It's not fun to live in fear, it's really not. And although that is not my case, I know that is the case for millions of people in America," she said.

"It is not something that people should have to go through. People that were in danger in their countries still feel like they are being threatened in a place that should welcome them or at least not make them feel like they're in war."

Recently, with President Trump's ban on immigration from several Muslim nations, the fear that immigrants in America feel is at an all time high. Although the policy was struck down, its short lived implementation speaks volumes about our government's current views on immigration.

"I can definitely sympathize with the idea of wanting to give yourself and your loved ones a better life and better opportunities in a country that offers those. Still having that wall and political barrier, and cultural barrier, that doesn't allow you to feel as much at home as you would like to," Limonji said. Part of what frustrates Limonji about current immigration policies is the lack of information regarding rights upon entry.

"Many immigrants don't understand that they have many rights here...Like the fact that you don't have to respond to an officer whether or not you have your documents with you. You don't have to open the door to an officer if they don't have a warrant against you, a signed warrant from a judge. You have the right to get an education until the twelfth grade of school, and public schools are not allowed to background check you on whether or not you have your documents with you," Limonji said.

"There are plenty of rights that they don't know they have and people who know about those should definitely be doing a better job informing the immigrant here in the United States because it is a land of immigrants," she continued. "People live here in fear, but they don't necessarily have to at this point, even at this point because of so much information they are not made aware of."

During Limonji's time in America, remembering how she came to the country reminds her of how lucky she is to have the opportunity.

"I sometimes walk the streets and I think about how lucky I am to be here and how lucky of a position I'm in. It's a very beautiful thing, because I remember growing up it was my childish dream to one day come to America and study here," Limonji said.

"I can only imagine what it must feel like to be here and not being able to focus on what really matters, like getting an education, and not enjoying life because you have this fear in the back of your head that one day someone might knock on your door and try to kick you out in the country."

May Nguyen, Anna Smith*, Lorena Limonji (left to right)