

Not American Enough

News Column

By Emilia Perez Tellez

I stand every morning with my hands over my heart, pledging allegiance to the same flag as my classmates. Singing the same anthem at games. Calling the same town home.

I am still being told I don't belong.

Imagine being described with words that don't fit, words that are dehumanizing. Words like "illegal alien." As if a human being can be illegal. As if a little girl with braids and a bookbag is somehow a threat. As if a father who wakes up before sunrise to work a twelve hour shift is somehow foreign, something less than human, less than a white American.

We are not illegal. We are not aliens. We are people.

The term "illegal alien" tries to turn my existence, our existence into a crime. But how can someone's life be illegal? How can a child born in a hospital on this country's soil, who says the Pledge of Allegiance, who learns American history, who cheers at school football games, be called an alien? The word itself suggests that we are outsiders, strangers, invaders. Yet this is the only home many of us have ever known.

When politicians talk about deporting millions, they talk in numbers. But behind every number is a family like mine with children who wonder if their parents will come home from work. There are over 16 million people* in this country living with at least one undocumented family member, and millions of those children are born here, are American children. Not aliens. Not criminals. Children.

The language matters. When people repeat phrases like "illegal alien," it becomes easier to forget we are human. Easier to justify cruelty.

Easier to look at my parents and see a problem instead of a story. But no law can erase someone's humanity. No label can take away our dignity.

I am the daughter of immigrants. That is not shameful. It is something powerful. It is actually the essence of being an American. If you are not a Native American, sometime in your past someone in your family was an immigrant.

My father spoke up once when his coworkers treated him unfairly because of the color of his skin and made fun of his heavy accent. He believed that doing the right thing would protect him. Instead, he lost his job. I watched him sit at the kitchen table, exhausted in a way that had nothing to do with work. That is what discrimination does; it steals our identity and replaces it with stereotypes.

My mother took me to a protest when I was little. She held my hand and taught me that rights are fought for, not handed out. She taught me that our voices matter, even when people try to silence them.

There is a deep hypocrisy in how society treats us Hispanics and Latinos. People tell us to "speak English," yet proudly learn Spanish when it benefits them. They say we are "too loud," as if passion is a bad thing. They tan their skin darker than mine but treat my natural skin as something suspicious. They reduce me to "my Mexican friend," as if that is my whole identity.

My white classmates do not have to worry about being questioned or threatened by police because of how they look. They are not suspected of stealing simply because of their skin color.

They can disagree with immigration policies without their citizenship or loyalty being questioned. That is a privilege. Something I don't get because of the color of my skin.

But I am not a stereotype. I am not an "illegal alien."

We are more than stereotypes. We are not criminals. We are not threats. We are not "illegal." We are students, daughters, sons, workers, and dreamers. We contribute to our communities. We work hard. Our parents sacrifice everything to give us opportunities they never had. My parents did everything and continue to do everything they can for me to get opportunities they didn't get.

Living with constant fear: fear of discrimination, fear of being judged, fear of being treated differently, affects how students focus in school and how families feel in their own neighborhoods. It creates anxiety where there should be security. It makes people feel like outsiders in the only country they know. No one should be judged by the color of their skin, the language they speak, or where their parents were born. Belonging should not depend on appearance. Respect should not depend on race.

We deserve to live without being questioned, stereotyped, or reduced to labels. We deserve dignity. We deserve equality. And we deserve to be seen as fully American, not because of politics, but because this is our home.

*<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/us-citizen-children-impacted-immigration-enforcement/>