



An Illegal Immigrant's Journey



Antonio handed me his fake green card. The Mexican foreman had taken Antonio to the swap meet for it. It wasn't the best false document I had ever seen, but adequate to satisfy the employers' need to claim "document verification." Upon an immigration service raid, the employer could wash his hands while Antonio would get deported for using a false document. No employer sanctions here.

Antonio's Story

Antonio was one of our best instructors at the State Bar's Guadalajara Legal Spanish course. This well-educated, thoughtful and well-spoken teacher was patient with our grammatical foibles. He was also generous with his life story of working illegally in the United States.

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Antonio was an atypical illegal immigrant. He was 29 when he entered the United States on a tourist visa. He scraped together enough money from family loans

and selling the old family car for an airline ticket. He broke the law by overstaying his visa and working.

Antonio had earned a master's degree at university and was a teacher. Despite this, he and his wife and three children could not make enough money to pay for rent, much less come near to buying a house. They lived with family and barely had enough for food. In 1995, a teacher in Mexico—even after eight years of higher education—could only earn about \$170 in two weeks.

A family member offered a job in a northern California vineyard, where Antonio could earn \$600 to \$700 in two weeks. Though the work would be 10 hours a day of hard labor—and living illegally—the discrepancy in earning made it impossible to turn down.

"Blisters in Places I Never Knew You Could Get Them"

In April 1995, Antonio arrived in the United States. On his first day in the fields he had "blisters in places where you never knew you could get them." The only place he could find to rest in the fields was the portable outhouse. It was hot and, of course, it reeked.

Antonio had a fever that first week, and the outhouse was the only place he could escape the elements. Although he was sick, he worked. His mother eventually sent him antibiotics, and he injected himself in the bottom to get well.

For six months he planted vines. After that he pulled leaves off to allow light to get to the grapes. He and the other workers spread chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides that came up in clouds as it burned their hands, eyes and lungs. Antonio still

wonders how this cocktail will affect him in the long term.

“No One Was Happy There”

Antonio lived with 16 others in a small house on the vineyard's property. They shared three rooms with four beds each, one television, and one small stove.

It was not a place of friendship. The others would ridicule Antonio for his education: “Look how much education you have, and you are doing the same work as us.”

After suffering just for the chance for the hard life of field work, Antonio's coworkers were not inclined to be friendly.

“They were basically good men, but hard men,” recalls Antonio. It is just not easy to tolerate new people that represent competition. Sharing the burden of work was not the point, and it was common to hear one say to another “that's your work.”

And there were thieves. They would get a job at the vineyard working for a few days to find out how best to rob the others. Then, one day, the workers would return from the fields and their money would be gone.

Every two weeks Antonio would call his wife. She would send him cassettes of the children talking, and Antonio would cry. He sent money back every month by buying a money order at the convenience store, which only charged \$3. With the \$10 for the guaranteed registered letter, it was the cheapest way to send his wife \$1,000 a month.

His wife bought a piece of land for a house.

“Americans Gave Me the Only Kindness I Received”

Antonio surprised me when he said that the worst treatment he received was at the hands of other Mexicans. “Son enemigos con cada otro” he said, “We are enemies with each other.”

Being an illegal immigrant in the United States is all about

the work. You compete with your countrymen for it. Antonio knew that Mexicans in the country legally would call the then-INS and inform on other Mexicans to get their jobs back after a trip away.

One time when Antonio went to the grocery store, he waited in line and saw a Mexican woman and her husband with a big bag of tortillas, an obviously cheaper way to buy them. He asked the woman where in the store he could find them. The woman answered in English, “I don't speak Spanish.” She walked out speaking with her husband in Spanish.

“The only ones who were kind to me the whole time were some of the people in the United States.”

Coming Home

Finally, it came time for Antonio to go home.

“I cried in the airport upon leaving because of the anger for the need to do all of this,” he says. The separation from his family and the hardness of the life overcame him.

But he also was leaving behind fear: the fear of looking at an attractive woman because someone may notice and call the police; the fear of being near a child that may cry around you because the mother might call the police; the fear of wearing old clothes because someone may notice you; the fear of walking down the street because you could be deported.

Upon going home, “I was free again” and “simply to walk in the streets again was a pleasure,” says Antonio.

“I came home again. I was thin, tanned and had long hair, but I left the personality behind with the life there. I even enjoyed seeing the persons I didn't like before.”

Would Antonio do it again? Antonio thinks, and then says “Yes.”

“Yo fue por una casa punto”—“I went for a house, period.” 