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Thousands of undocumented Mexican citizens spend formative years in U.S. to return to strange birth country

WHAT'S HOME?

PHOTOS BY GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES

Angie Olea Nava and Vanessa Olea Nava (front) prepare to go through security before boarding a plane to Florida on July 29 at the Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juarez in Mexico City.

■ Families are separated by circumstance

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo
Special to the Caller-Times

MEXICO CITY – On this Thursday morning, it seemed like everyone was out on the roads for a leisurely cruise.

The tension in the car was palpable, and after 45 minutes in traffic Nancy Palencia politely asked the Uber driver, "Falta mucho?" Much farther?

He assured her they were close to the British Consulate, but the minutes kept ticking away on Palencia's phone.

"I'm going to hyperventilate," she said aloud in English.

See MEXICO, 10A

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Angie Olea Nava (left) talks through tears to her mother Linda Nava before boarding a plane to Florida on July 29.

Schooled here, then deported

■ In Mexico, U.S. education not valid

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo
Special to the Caller-Times

MEXICO CITY — Nancy Landa's life changed suddenly in 2009. Within the course of a day, she found herself deported from Los Angeles to Tijuana.

Her family was the victim of notary fraud. Rather than fulfilling their hopes of becoming legal residents, the rest of Landa's family was returned to Mexico within a month.

Despite graduating from California State University, Northridge after studying business, she found that her high school diploma and college degree were not recognized in Mexico. Landa went on to get her master's degree from a university in England, but it's not validated either, she said.

GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES

Nancy Landa talks about how she was deported from Los Angeles to Tijuana in 2009. Landa now lives in Mexico City.

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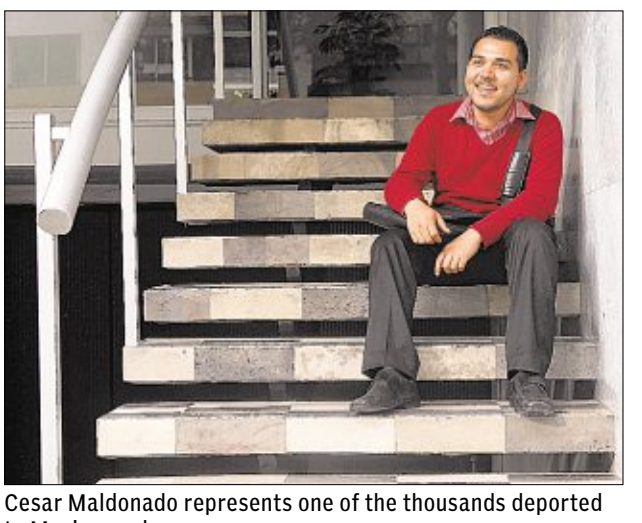
FROM THE COVER

> “There’s a responsibility in the United States to know what’s happening to us. Why is it in the U.S., we’re not pressuring Mexico to be more open to people educated in the U. S.?”
>
> **Nancy Landa,** *who ultimately gave up her attempts to get her bachelor’s degree in business validated by the Mexican government*

PHOTOS BY GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES

Frida Espinosa Cárdenas is the coordinator for transnational family support for Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración in Mexico City.

Aremy Carrillo is a dual citizen who grew up in Los Angeles and didn’t finish high school in Mexico.



Cesar Maldonado represents one of the thousands deported to Mexico each year.

Frida Espinosa Cárdenas is the coordinator for transnational family support for Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración.

EDUCATION
from 1A

“That was also a political point,” she said, “that I have to go across the ocean to a country that will recognize my degree.”

Access to education and recognition in Mexico are challenges faced by residents who grew up and went to school in the United States. The census estimated 597,000 U.S. born children were living in Mexico in 2010. As more return — some willingly, some not — migrant advocates say the country is not prepared for their arrival or to meet their needs.

A FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

American children born to Mexican nationals are entitled to citizenship in both countries, said Frida Espinosa Cárdenas, a coordinator for transnational family support for Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración.

Among Mexican nationals in the United States, there’s not a culture of parents getting their children’s Mexican birth certificates from the consulates. Lack of education and promotion is partly to blame, she added.

That makes it difficult for those children to enroll in school.

Until June the Mexican education department required children migrating from the United States to have their American school transcripts validated with an apostille, or official seal from an officer such as the Texas secretary of state.

The problem with that, Espinosa Cárdenas said, was that parents often could not afford to — or cannot legally — travel back to the United States to get their children’s documents stamped in person. Some were able to either hire an agency for the task or mail the documents to a friend, who then got them stamped and returned.

her family could not afford to send her to school in the next town.

“There’s a huge need in terms of pedagogy that is culturally competent,” Espinosa Cárdenas said. “That’s an extreme case, but Mexican society is not prepared for the large population of U.S. migrant children.”

CULTURE SHOCK

Stigma was partly why Aremy Carrillo, a dual citizen who grew up in Los Angeles, didn’t finish high school in Mexico. She was in 10th grade when her family returned about four years to Guadalajara.

Sitting outside a café in Colonia Centro, the 20-year-old nursed a cup of coffee as she recalled having to wait six months before she was allowed to enroll.

> “Some teachers don’t like the fact you’re from the states. They feel like you feel like you’re better, so they’re mean.”
>
> **Armey Carillo,** *a dual citizen who grew up in Los Angeles*

Even so, Espinosa Cárdenas said, there were also costs associated with getting the documents translated for Mexican officials.

While the apostille will no longer be required from primary school students, Espinosa Cárdenas said advocates are worried about the implementation of the new policy. How will the Mexican government ensure that every school director in the country is aware that children don’t need the seal to attend school?

“That’s the biggest burden that families face,” she said. “Even though that was a huge accomplishment in June for the migrant program, we’re still worried about how this information is going to get to the local level.”

Also still a question — the quality of education for U.S.-raised children. There’s no guarantee they will receive bilingual education, assistance learning Spanish, or understanding from teachers.

Children face stigma from other children and even school officials. Espinosa Cárdenas said she met one family in Michoacan where a 15-year-old girl was given provisional enrollment in the local high school and was not allowed to wear a uniform. The girl was involved in a fight off campus and expelled, and

“You feel lonely; you don’t have any friends; there’s not much you can do,” she said.

Once she started classes, they were — as one would expect — all in Spanish. She couldn’t take notes or write essays. History class was totally different. Mexican grammar was difficult. It seemed as though teachers doled out good grades to their favorites and grudgingly passed everyone else, Carrillo said.

“Some teachers don’t like the fact you’re from the (United) States,” she said. “They feel like you feel like you’re better, so they’re mean.”

And the removal of the apostille requirement doesn’t do anything to help people like Landa, who ultimately gave up her attempts to get her bachelor’s degree in business validated by the Mexican government. She said she called four different universities to ask whether her degree plan was compatible with their curriculum, and they all made it clear that she would have to take additional classes.

“There’s a responsibility in the United States to know what’s happening to us,” she said. “Why is it in the U.S., we’re not pressuring Mexico to be more open to people educated in the U. S.?”

FROM THE COVER

PHOTOS BY GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES

Ailyn Avendano (left) and Vanessa Olea Nava stand the alter during their quinceañera, July 25 in Naucalpan, Mexico City.

MEXICO
from 1A

Ailyn Avendano talks with her grandmother Martha Bermudez during her quinceañera July 25 in Naucalpan, Mexico City. It was five days until Ailyn's visit to Mexico would end with her branch of the family heading home to Florida.

Palencia won a Chevening Scholarship to attend King's College London, where she planned to start on a master's degree in international political economy in a few months. But she still needed a United Kingdom visa, and she would have to get to her interview on time for any hope of that.

Palencia is a University of Texas at Tyler graduate, but attending graduate school in the U.S. is out of the question.

She is one of thousands of Mexican citizens who spent their formative years undocumented in the United States and returned as young adults to a birth country they barely remembered.

Some were deported. Others, undocumented and dual citizens alike, followed deported parents or parents who yearned to be closer to family in Mexico. Others still, like Palencia, return to Mexico after being left in a virtual stalemate by adulthood and their undocumented status in the U.S.

A few days before her interview at the British Consulate, Palencia sat cross-legged on a couch on the second floor of her Roma Sur apartment. She was a business editor for an English language newspaper and shared the living space with five friends.

She moved back in 2014. She was 5 the last time she was in Mexico.

Her parents moved to the United States in the early 1980s but went back after the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, where they missed President Reagan's Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Her family ultimately returned to the U.S., moving first to California, then to East Texas.

Palencia recalls at the time her parents talking about an uncle in Las Vegas they couldn't visit. There was a Border Patrol checkpoint on the way. And she didn't have a Social Security number. That set her apart from peers, too. It was a secret she kept from nearly all her friends in Texas.

"My parents are pretty strict to begin with," Palencia, now 27, said. "You thought, 'If I get sent to detention, you get deported. These was always this fear of, 'You can't screw up.'"

Palencia majored in political science with a pre-law minor at UT-Tyler, her sights set on becoming an attorney. She was in cross country, student government, Model U.N. and spent a semester interning in Washington, D.C. In her senior year, her peers gave her a leadership award.

She had to savor it. After graduating in 2010, Palencia went on to one of the industries open to undocumented post-grads. She spent a year cleaning houses with her mom. Her parents, both undocumented, still live in the shadows of the U.S. failed immigration that routinely separates families, even of U.S. born children.

"It seemed like everything was a dream," she said. "I got to pretend I would be someone significant, and they're like, 'No, you can't.'"

She went through depression, weight gain. And a realization about her life as undocumented adult hit her.

"If I don't leave," Nancy remembered thinking, "I'm going to die."

DIFFERENT PEOPLE

There's not just one experience by people who have been deported to or returned to Mexico.

The Caller-Times spent two weeks this summer trying to learn more about the lives of those people affected by immigration law — the challenges they face to get educated, start new lives and stay connected to immediate family divided by the U.S.-Mexico border.

Will Perez, an associate education professor at Claremont Graduate University in California, surveyed 284 returnees and deportees in Mexico City last year. On average, they moved to the United States at age 5 and returned when they were 19. Half of those interviewed went to high school in California.

They included people who made the choice to return because of family illness or other deportations, were discovered through minor traffic violations and people who did jail time in the United States.

"Others, they just got tired of hiding and that ongoing anxiety that never subsides," he said, "and made a leap of faith that things will be better in Mexico, not realizing how difficult it would be. Even people who are pretty bilingual, bicultural ... the adjustment and hardship is more severe than they had imagined."

Sympathy to help returnees and deportees adjust to life in Mexico is low, he said, compared to support given to undocumented students in the United States.

Vanessa Olea Nava displays the back of her dress during her quinceañera July, 25 in Naucalpan, Mexico City.

Participants in his survey were between the ages of 18-25, and about 5 percent had children still living in the United States.

"Some of the more painful interviews we did were with family separations," Perez said, adding he finds it to be a punishment that outweighs a crime like a DUI. "They're separated from parents, brothers or sisters, but a good portion are also separated from their small children."

Jill Anderson, another researcher originally from Utah and Texas, knows what it means to be binational. She travels between the United States and Mexico, and her children are dual citizens.

Last year, Anderson edited the anthology Los Otros Dreamers with first-person stories by people who returned or were deported to Mexico. They were hungry to share their stories, Anderson said, ones that were difficult to tell their own families.

"They were adolescents in the U.S., and that's never going to change," she said. "They will never be just Mexican because, in the depth of their being, they're American. It's not just about who has papers and who doesn't."

Anderson is among activists who believe both countries have a responsibility to binational Mexican citizens. They need mobility in education, the ability to visit family in the U.S., and recognition of their language and culture, she said. They're criminalized as immigrants in the U.S., she added, and face stigma from families and employers in Mexico.

"The U.S. is losing the investment in all these amazing youth, including those who spent time in the jail system," she said, adding that they don't remain criminals for life.

A key point, she said, is a court case that established undocumented students' right to public education in the United States. Even among American immigration activists, people have told Anderson they haven't given thought to what happens to people once they're removed from the country.

"There's an effort to stop deportations, but no discussion about what happens after," she said. "I just hope the dots keep connecting and people keep thinking of the story outside the U.S. The story is unfolding in a great big world."

BEGIN AGAIN

The Starbucks could have been anywhere. From the green patio umbrellas to the whir of a blender crushing ice for frappuccinos, it bore a comforting sameness to its sister coffee shops.

What stood out were two patrons seated outside and their unmistakable American English.

Omar Manriquez Hernandez's words were tinged with a Midwestern twang. The 22-year-old said his nickname among friends was Denver, for the city where he grew up.

For soft-spoken Noe Madrigal Garza, whose family moved to Texas when he was 3, it was his rhythmic Fort Worth drawl.

"This is the chill part of the city," Hernandez said of La Condesa, the fashionable neighborhood he and his friends frequent. "We were used to seeing guns, seeing people get shot."

See MEXICO, 11A

FROM THE COVER

MEXICO
from 10A

Roughly half of the 438,000 people deported with Hernandez in 2013 had faced criminal charges, he among them. When Garza was sent back in 2009, it was about one-third, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Hernandez skimped on the details, but said he violated his juvenile parole when he was 18. Shortly after, he found out his girlfriend was pregnant. He was a foreman and climber for a tree company and community college student when he lost his immigration case a few years later.

Garza said he was in a car with three friends when they were pulled over, and police found a gun and stolen items in the vehicle. He opted not to fight his deportation when he learned he could spend a year in jail while making his way through immigration court. The now 26-year-old stayed with family in Matamoros for four months, until a cartel member stopped him one day and asked to see his ID.

"I've been on my own ever since I've been in Mexico," Garza said, listing off close to a dozen cities where he's lived developed his skills as a tattoo artist. He only had two when he got to Mexico. Now he's covered with them, including a portrait of fellow Texan Selena on his left calf.

He and Hernandez have met a lot of deportees with criminal records, people like them who used to be in U.S. gangs, who have a couple things in common: they have nothing and no one. That's when gang affiliations fall to the wayside, where Garza sees a chance for them to start fresh.

"I tell them, 'Dude, this is your second opportunity, and you're going to do that?'" he said. "They're 17, 18 years old. You're really going to do that for the rest of your life? Out here, they don't play around. They chop off heads around here."

Garza said he came to Mexico City to settle down and build a steady life, a record he can use to show how much he's changed when he can apply for a U.S. visa in four years. His adoptive son, Xavier, was born in the United States two months after Garza was deported. His mom was recently in a car crash, and his 15-year-old brother is working to help with bills.

Hernandez has more than seven years before he will have a shot at legally reentering the United States and he admits every day is a struggle against the grip of depression. Hernandez is the family cautionary tale, and his mom calls from the U.S. when his younger brother needs straightening out. He parents via video call. His 4-year-old daughter Rashel asks when he'll be able to take her to the zoo again.

"I'd give my mom one last hug and kiss and tell her I'm sorry for everything," he said. "But I don't even have that chance. Or hug my brother or sister or see my daughter grow up. They took everything away. I could care less if I lived in a crack house. I would have my family. I would be happy."

But at that Starbucks in La Condesa, where dog walkers and joggers across the street in Parque México carried on in peace, the men can pretend they're somewhere closer to home.

PHOTOS BY GABE HERNANDEZ/CALLER-TIMES

Ailyn Avendano (right) and Vanessa Olea Nava stand with their family as they get their photo taken by friends during their quinceañera on July 25 in Naucalpan, Mexico City.

Ana Nava (left), Martha Bermudez, Kimberly Nava and Jose Luis Terroba Larios gather birth certificates and identification to hand to immigration July 29 at the Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juarez.

SWEET 15

Along one of the almost impossibly steep roads of Naucalpan, northwest of Mexico City, the family of Americans, Ailyn Avendano and Vanessa Olea Nava, anxiously waited inside a church for the cousins' arrival. The girls were late for their quinceañera, where some of the family in attendance had traveled from Sarasota, Florida.

Finally the girls arrived, each styled in bright red, hoop skirt gowns with matching red and white roses in their updos. The smiling, giggly teens approached the altar.

The ceremony marked more than the girls' 15th birthdays. It was five days until Ailyn's visit to Mexico would end with her branch of the family heading home to Florida. After about six years in Mexico, Vanessa and her younger siblings would board the same airplane with their cousins and aunt — though without their mother. The children are dual citizens for Mexico and the U.S.

"I'm excited," Vanessa said later at the reception. "My brother wants to go, but my sister wants to stay."

Her mother, Linda Nava, had taken a few days off from work at a call center to help get ready for the quinceañera. The long hours, which usually left her getting home around 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. after the commute, fueled her decision to have her three children move back to the U.S.

"(It's) where I know they're going to be growing up with family," Nava, 33, said. "Yes, I'm worried because they're used to being here with me, especially the little one, but I know they're going to be better off."

While Nava's father, siblings and children have legal status in the United States, she grew up there undocumented. She moved back to Mexico to be closer to her mother, and her father is helping her apply for a U.S. visa.

The family's layers of immigration statuses grows more complex with Nava's mom, Martha Bermudez. Her story was interrupted at some point when Whitney Houston's rendition of "I Will Always Love You" began piping in over the speakers, and the girls performed a dance that ended with them being lifted into the air by their escorts. Had the quinceañera been held in the U.S., it was a moment Bermudez would have missed.

"It's very difficult because the families are splitting apart," she said in Spanish. "The love changes, the communication changes, the respect gets lost. Each person in a couple get used to being alone."

Bermudez worked for 15 years in the U.S., first at a laundry facility, then a landscaping company and later a KFC. She was separated from her husband and children about eight years ago, when she came to Mexico to visit her own ailing mother.

At the time, Bermudez said, she was on the cusp of being granted U.S. residency. When she was caught trying to enter the country through Matamoros, she was banned from returning for 10 years. That's the typical punishment when immigrants are caught in the U.S. illegally.

Over at a table at the front of the room, Ailyn and Vanessa were still buzzing with excitement as dinner is served.

"It only happens once, so we were happy we did everything together," Ailyn said, adding she's happy Vanessa will be returning with her to Florida. "We lived with each other before, but she moved. It's like having another sister."

She giggled as Vanessa searched for words.

"Pos, I don't know," Vanessa exhaled. "I miss all the people that are over there. Grandpa and uncles."

Ailyn chimed in again.

"It's very few," she said, "but we're close together."

SAYING GOODBYE

Amid the chaos and dull roar of the Mexico City airport lobby, Nava's eyes were focused on her children as they zigzagged through belted lines to check in their luggage. In about two hours, 15-year-old Vanessa, 13-year-old Isaac and 8-year-old Angie would be on a plane without her to Sarasota.

A few feet away, family members began the long ritual of embracing and crying, then laughing, until the immediacy of their impending separation set in again and the tears returned.

The children's grandmother, Bermudez, held her year-old grandson, Christian. "Mi vida, (My life)" she said, and laid a kiss on his cheek. Angie wrapped herself around her mom, crying into Nava's neck.

"I want to go back with my family," Bermudez said in English, her voice cracking. She has two grandchildren she's never met. "Two years, I hope. But I have 10 years here (by) myself. It's very hard."

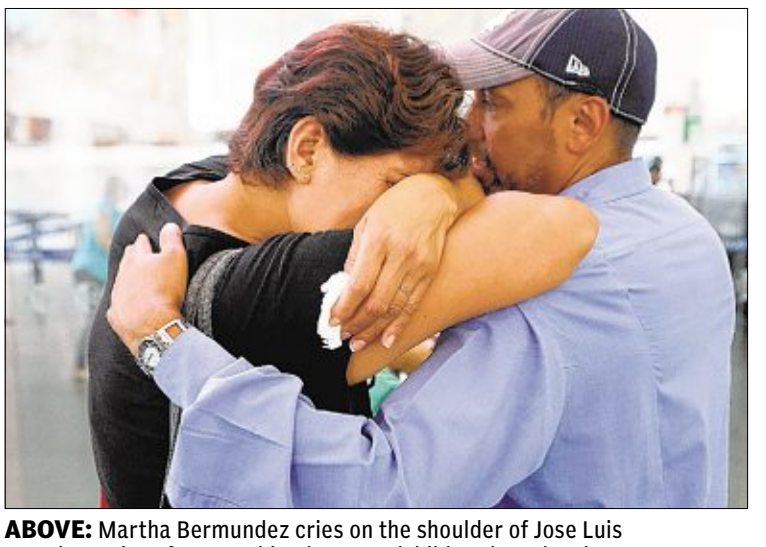
The group headed to the airport immigration office, but soon Nava, Angie and two others sprinted out with Bermudez yelling after them, "¡Córrale!"

People in the office had insisted Nava's children needed their Mexican — not United States — passports to leave the country. Why, Nava had pressed, when they're dual citizens?

With no time to argue further, Nava raced to find a shop in the airport to make copies of the children's birth certificates, their passports, and a notarized letter giving her sister permission to escort them.

It was time to rush everyone to the security gate after the flurry of papers was sorted. Nava and Bermudez took a few seconds to hug and kiss everyone again, the last chance before they returned to Mexico next summer, and Angie started to sob.

The women wiped away tears, and Nava hugged herself as she stood by the blue Interjet rope and watched her children disappear behind the security gate.



ABOVE: Martha Bermundez cries on the shoulder of Jose Luis Terroba Larios after watching her grandchildren board a plane to Florida on July 29 at the Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juarez in Mexico City.

LEFT: Angie Olea Nava (center) cries as she says goodbye to her mother and grandmother before boarding a plane to Florida on July 29 at the Aeropuerto Internacional Benito Juarez in Mexico City.