

# **Hanging On To Hope**

*by Nathan Thompson*

In recent years, I have found myself often struggling to keep my emotions in check. One day, I am standing in my classroom listening to a Hmong learner from Laos speak of the murder of a cousin, the starvation of a child, and of the nightmares she experiences to this day about the years her family spent in hiding in the Laotian jungles. The next day, I am sitting in a coffee shop, listening to people who are practically my neighbors ranting about, as they say “all those illegals.”

Sometimes, as I reflect on the history of the United States, I find it astounding that many of us still can't see where we have come from, and how we have become what we are today. Every time I hear someone argue that undocumented persons are “breaking the law,” I want to remind them that before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, anyone could, and often did, land on our shores. Every time I hear claims that restricting immigration in the manner that we do is not discriminatory, I want to remind them of the fervent anti-Eastern European and anti-Asian sentiment of the quota systems set up in the 1920s, and to show them how the effects of that system continue to influence our laws today. Furthermore, every time I hear President Bush and others speak glowingly of a guest worker program that contains nearly no worker rights provisions, and offers only a faint path to citizenship, I want to shout out the words Bracero Program, and remind everyone of the slave-like conditions that Mexican laborers experienced during the 20 plus years of that program's existence.

With a history like this, and with the less than immigrant-friendly climate we have today, I sometimes wonder why so many people continue to dream of coming to America. However, I am often quickly reminded by the stories of the learners in my classes. Whenever I begin to feel hatred towards my extremely privileged homeland, I often find myself, hours later, listening to the story of a family losing everything in El Salvador, or of a mother whose two sons died in the civil war in Somalia. Hearing these stories, I feel immense gratitude to have been able to grow up relatively free from life-threatening danger. I was able to learn, able to play, able to get enough food to grow into a healthy adult. This isn't the case for many of the learners in my classes.

Even knowing all this, I still struggle with the many wrongs I believe our nation has done, and continues to do, towards its newcomers. I am inspired by the millions of immigrants and native-born allies who are speaking out, who are marching, and who are working to change public policy.

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