

I Left My Son and Daughter Behind

Gladis Escano

When I came to the U.S., I felt sad because I left behind my son and daughter. The decision to come

**They cried and said,
“I want my Mama to
come back to us.”**

to the U.S. affected my family and me so much.

Every day, my children would ask my parents about me. Some days, they cried and said, “I want my Mama to come back to us.” When I talked to my son on the phone, he always cried.

I wanted to see my family, but it was impossible. Because of the type of visa I had, I could not travel easily. In any case, I didn’t have the money to buy a ticket to go home.

After several years, I brought my son to the U.S. He was 10 years old. I haven’t seen my daughter again, but I am hoping and praying every night that she will be able to come and visit me this year.

Gladis Escano, originally from Honduras, is a student in the adult ESOL program at the Fairfax County Public Schools in Fairfax, VA.



“Cruzando Fronteras.” Paula Nicho Cumez, © 2008 Arte Maya Tz’utuhil, www.mayawomeninart.org

Make up your own title for this image. Use the details in the image to explain why you picked that title.

My Dear Daughters

An Immigrant Mother Writes to Her Children in Africa

Racky Ly



My dear lovely daughters,

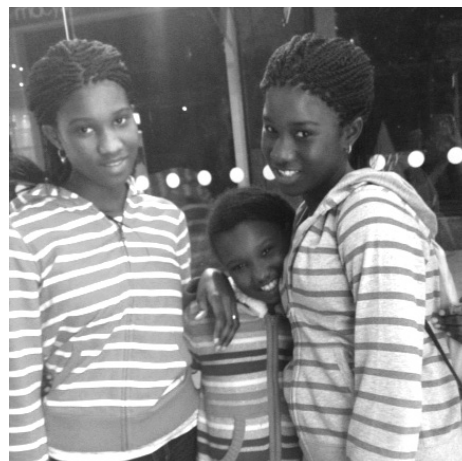
Everybody wishes to grow up with their parents. But in life, you do not always get what you want. I wish I could have all of you with me. But I can't. I have two jobs and I have to go to school too. I don't have time to spend with you the way I want.

That doesn't mean I don't care about you or I want the money more than I want you. No, it isn't that. In this country you have to make a living, and the way to do that is to work. Especially if you are a single mother like me with no degree, you cannot choose the job that you want; you have to take what you get. I love my jobs, but they are not the jobs I dream for you.

So my dears, remember that it does not matter how beautiful you are. The key to success is education. No matter how hard school is, don't ever give up. And remember, books and love do not go together. Getting married and having babies is a part of life, but there is no rush. Books first! If there is ever a time that you sit and have nothing to do, I hope you will think about Mom and take a book and start reading.

I will always love you, my princesses.

Your loving mother,
Racky



Racky's three daughters in Senegal.

Racky Ly is from Senegal. She is an ESL student at the Adult Learning Center, New York City College of Technology (CUNY) in Brooklyn, NY.

YOUR TURN: Write a letter to Racky or José. Include responses to at least three specific details in their letters. Or...write to someone you have been separated from. Use Racky's and José's letters (on pp. 38-39) as a model.



How U.S. Policies Fueled Mexico's Great Migration

Impoverished by NAFTA, residents of Veracruz crossed the border to work in Smithfield's Tar Heel slaughterhouse. Now, they're condemned as "illegals."

David Bacon

Roberto Ortega tried to make a living slaughtering pigs in Veracruz, Mexico. "In my town, Las Choapas, after I killed a pig, I would cut it up to sell the meat," he recalls. But in the late 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) made it possible for U.S. companies to sell their pork in Mexican markets. [Read more about NAFTA on p. 54.] Companies like Smithfield Foods in North Carolina could sell their meat in Mexico at a very low price. Ortega and other small-scale



butchers in Mexico could not compete with a large company like Smithfield Foods. Ortega says he did everything he could to make money. "But," he explained, "I could never make enough for us to survive." In 1999 he came to the United States, where he again slaughtered pigs for a living. This time, though, he did it as a worker in the world's largest pork slaughterhouse, in Tar Heel, North Carolina.

Who was his new employer? Smithfield Foods—the same company that was selling pork and putting small butchers like him out of business in Mexico.

David Ceja, another immigrant from Veracruz who came to Tar Heel, recalls, "Sometimes the price of a pig was enough to buy what we needed, but then it wasn't. Farm prices were always going down. We couldn't pay for electricity, so we'd just use candles. Everyone was hurting almost all the time."

Ceja remembers that his family had ten cows, as well as pigs and chickens, when he was growing up. Even then, he still had to work, and they sometimes went hungry. "But we could give milk to people who came asking for it. There were people even worse off than us," he recalls.

In 1999, when Ceja was 18, he left his family's



Roberto Ortega and his wife (above). David Ceja (upper right). Photos by David Bacon.

farm in Martinez de la Torre, in northern Veracruz. His parents sold four cows and two hectares of land. They earned enough money to get him to the border. There he found a “coyote” [a person who would take him across the border]. He paid him \$1,200. “I didn’t really want to leave, but I felt I had to,” he remembers. “I was afraid, but our need was so great.”

He arrived in Texas, still owing money to the coyote. “I couldn’t find work for three months. I was desperate,” he says. He feared the consequences if he couldn’t pay, and took whatever work he could find until he finally reached North Carolina. There friends helped him get a real job at Smithfield’s Tar Heel packinghouse. “The boys I played with as a kid are all in the U.S.,” he says. “I’d see many of them working in the plant.”

North Carolina became the number-one U.S. destination for Veracruz’s displaced farmers. Many got jobs at Smithfield, where the conditions were dangerous and the pay was low. Some, like Ortega and Ceja, helped lead the 16-year fight that finally brought in a union there. But they paid a high price. Asserting their rights also made them the targets of harsh immigration enforcement and a growing wave of hostility toward Mexicans in the American South.

The experience of Veracruz migrants reveals a close connection between U.S. investment and trade deals in Mexico and the displacement and



The Ceja family farm in Veracruz, Mexico. Photo by David Bacon.

migration of its people. For nearly two decades, Smithfield has used NAFTA and the forces it unleashed to become the world’s largest packer and processor of hogs and pork. But the conditions in Veracruz that helped Smithfield make high profits plunged thousands of rural residents into poverty. Tens of thousands left Mexico, many eventually helping Smithfield’s bottom line once again by working for low wages on its U.S. meatpacking lines. “The free trade agreement was the cause of our problems,” Ceja says.

This is an adaptation of an article originally published in The Nation magazine, 1-23-2012. Some names have been changed. David Bacon is a writer and a photographer <dbacon.igc.org>.



Sows used for breeding are confined in 7 ft x 2 ft gestation crates. This image was taken inside a Smithfield facility in Virginia in 2010. Photo from <commons.wikimedia.org>.

Take it Further

In your own words, explain the author’s point of view about how NAFTA has affected Mexican and U.S. workers.

Learn more. Find out what union now represents workers at Smithfield. How has it affected work at Smithfield?

More globalization! Find out who owns Smithfield Foods now. What might be the effects of this change in ownership?