

Quarantine across borders

by Judit Vega

In the Time of COVID-19
ESPERANZA STAFF STORIES



Judit Vega, Esperanza staff member, with her husband & children.

We have now been in social isolation as a family since early March. My husband, German, left for El Salvador in late February for his visa appointment at the American Em-

bassy. This was to be the last leg of a many years- long immigration process that would finally result in a green card that would bring him out of living in the shadows as undocumented. He was unfortunately delayed for his original appointment because of the obligatory doctor's appointment in El Salvador, where he was harassed because of his tattoos. Tattoos in El Salvador are always assumed to be affiliated with gang activity, and the doctors saw an opportunity to manipulate his situation to attempt to extort money from him. I thus learned that immigrants are manipulated for cash both here and in their home countries. His appointment was rescheduled for late March. We made plans and bought tickets to go to El Salvador to support him, and so that I could attend his interview.

El Salvador initiated a national quarantine in mid- March with only a few COVID-19 cases, including all international flights into the country. His subsequent appointment in March was cancelled indefinitely. Trump then announced that all legal employment and family based immigration visas to the United States would be halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We were assured by our attorney that this did not apply to us, as the exception was for visa seekers who are children or spouses of US citizens. We have to wait until the embassy reopens for visa appointments. We have been separated now for nearly four months. There are other families in similar situations across the world, as the State Department has halted all visa applications and appointments. Knowing this has not made it easier to wait.

Being separated from your loved ones during a global pandemic is at turns unbearably tragic, and at turns hopeful. I try very hard to maintain my composure on bad days for the sake of the children. German and I both have gone through some very dark moments, thankfully not at the same time—fighting anxiety, depression and despair with all the unknowns. What if he gets denied once he has an appointment? What is our Plan B? Do we move to Mexico? What if he gets sick? What if he dies? The coronavirus is expanding in Latin America, including in El Salvador, despite the national quarantine. All schools and businesses are closed, but social distancing has been very difficult to enforce, and people continue to get together and visit. Gang violence is still another constant reality there. A study released in February 2020 by Human Rights Watch found that from 2013 to 2019, 138 people who were deported to El Salvador were killed and more than 70 others were beaten, sexually

assaulted, extorted or tortured. Many fell victim to the very conditions that they had fled in emigrating to the US. This is a very real threat for my husband.

We are very worried also about the effect on our four kids with his prolonged absence. The pandemic has not only disrupted their lives and daily routines—with preschool, school, and extracurricular activities being replaced by Zoom meetings; friends and family only now in contact through phone calls and visits from the porch and curb; but now as well their beloved Papa is gone. They talk to him via Facebook video calls throughout the day. From isolation in quarantine at his tia's house in San Miguel he has virtually helped with homework, played outside blowing bubbles, joined in story time, helped change a car battery, gone to the park, gave consejos, and so many other things. I realized how sad and strange this really is one night when my daughter Maya put the phone on her pillow and told her papa that she wanted him to lie down next to her. I tried not to let her see my tears, I have never been a stoic person but now I am forced to be.

My oldest son's senior year, graduation and possibly fall semester at college has been irrevocably ruined and altered, and he has since boycotted all the "bullshit" as he calls it. He did not attend his graduation, and refused to send out announcements. I know that it may be his own way of coping so I have ceased to push him to pretend that everything is normal. My shy child has retreated more within himself, and my four year old wakes up nightly and has lost weight. Only the baby, Lulu, seems blissfully unaware. I am thankful that at least I am able to stay at home with them through this all. Everyone just wants him to come back, and now.

The truth of this all is that we are all facing more uncertainty in the world than ever before. Now with Texas experiencing the second wave of COVID-19 infections, we do not know when or where this will end up. The pandemic and lackluster federal government response to it has made the shortcomings and insecurity of capitalism and systemic racism ever more exposed and painfully obvious in this country. German's presence there during this pandemic has put into stark contrast for me the privileges that we have here in the US. Many of us have the ability to work from home, the kids have virtual lessons and now summer camp, have access to free COVID-19 testing and if we get sick we have subsidized acute hospital care, irregardless of whether we have insurance or not. The health-care rationing that was feared here has never panned out, even in the hardest hit areas of the U.S. like New York and New Jersey. That has not been the case in El Salvador. Since the national quarantine was implemented on March 11th, all businesses and schools have been completely shuttered. The economic fallout on the poor has been profound. Although quarantine sites were established early on, testing has not been widespread and acute hospital care is not at a level to handle the surge in cases that are now occurring in other Latin American countries.

As for our case, all I can do is have faith that we will be together again as a family. Our marriage has been difficult at times, but we have worked hard to overcome our own traumas from our families of origin to build a solid emotional foundation for our kids. That is something that transcends borders, American imperialism, and racist immigration policies.