Beyond Arizona, Fear and Loathing

Written by Michael Puente and Adrian Uribarri PHOTOS: Rachel Castillo and Rafael Cardenas | 02 August 2010

Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 sent shockwaves throughout the United States and the world, and did what no march has been able to do thus far – thrust the immigration debate to the forefront of the American political landscape. For better or worse, a defining moment is upon us.

The nature of SB1070 and similar proposed legislation in other states, whether at the state or the municipal levels, contains a more serious reality: the element of racial profiling. And though the bill doesn't have outright discriminatory language, many Latinos say they feel they are now the direct target of racial profiling due to the color of their skin or their last name.(A federal judge prevented the most contested parts of the bill to go into effect on Juiy 29.)

Missing in the mainstream media coverage of this debate are the voices of those directly affected and those who work with those directly affected by this issue. These people, who live and breathe the debate on a daily basis, are only a small fraction of the thousands upon thousands affected economically, socially, politically and culturally by immigration.

The issue goes beyond whether an individual is an undocumented immigrant. This is an issue that, in the long run, will affect not only every resident of this country and the home countries that immigrants leave behind, but ultimately the standing of the United States in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Marlyn Gutierrez, Arizona
More than anything, Marlyn Gutierrez says she feels sad over a new law in Arizona designed to "get tough" on illegal immigration.

"It makes me sad. It makes me really sad," says Gutierrez, 42, a native of Chicago's South Side and whose parents came to the United States legally from Coahuila, Mexico. The 1986 graduate of Maria High School and Columbia College moved to a Tucson suburb two years ago. Now, she wonders if she made a bad decision in moving to Arizona.

Because she is more light-skinned than the average person expects Latinos to be, Gutierrez doesn't believe the new law will target her directly.

"I think it targets many of my friends," says Gutierrez, who works in media production and has done voiceover work for companies such as McDonald's. "I think the new law is going to lead to racial profiling."

Gutierrez says momentum has been lost in the effort for comprehensive immigration reform, especially since the large rallies that took place in Chicago and nationwide in 2006. It doesn't help, Gutierrez says, that the Arizona legislation has allowed folks in that state to express what she believes are mean and racist views.

Heated debates over the topic have erupted in coffee shops, grocery stores and fast-food restaurants, Gutierrez says. "People are very split over this issue, but they are very outspoken," she says. "This [law] gives them the freedom to say what they want in public."

Gutierrez says she cringes to think what would happen if stopped by an Arizona law enforcement official and asked to prove her citizenship. "I wouldn't be the most pleasant person," she says.

Juana O. Watson's life can be considered that quintessential American dream. She was born in a small village nestled high in the middle of the Sierra Madre range in the state of Hidalgo, in central Mexico.

"Life there has not changed much since my birth. Women are still dying giving birth and children die before they get to be five years old because there is no infrastructure," says Watson. "The people in the village drink water from the river, and there are no clinics or doctors in town. Life is hard and many young men and women are being forced to leave the village to look for a better life."

Watson, 53, arrived in Indiana in 1978 with the equivalent of a junior high education and didn't speak English very well. "I became a student by accident, out of need to help my children with their homework," Watson says.

Fast forward several decades: Watson overcame immense socio-economic challenges to become an internationally recognized expert and speaker on Latino and multicultural affairs. Today, she holds a doctorate in education, earned at the Graduate Theological Foundation in South Bend, Ind., which is associated with Oxford University.

Watson worries the new Arizona law could result in racial profiling. "Many of us that have experienced discrimination understand this issue," Watson says.
Now there are rumblings that Indiana also could pass legislation similar to Arizona's. Watson, who now lives in Indianapolis, says it seems the country's ways of dealing with Latinos as a group have receded.

"With laws like [that of] Arizona, we are going backwards. It seems to me that many people think that the word Latino is a bad word and equals undocumented. The Arizona law would bring more discrimination against anyone that looks Latino," Watson says. "My perception is that our community has been singled out and targeted. All of these issues limit our young people chances to get ahead."

Jose Gonzalez, Florida
Jose Gonzalez remembers witnessing his share of injustices as a young Cuban boy in 1960s Miami. But what's fresh in his memory is not a slight against immigrants.

It’s a recent episode he perceived as an insult to a U.S. citizen. Gonzalez, a South Florida nurse, says a homeless immigrant from Haiti came into his hospital’s emergency room in poor health and received an expensive round of tests. The man had neither money nor health insurance, but he needed emergency care, so he received treatment despite his inability to pay.

During the same week, Gonzalez says, a colleague worried frantically as her own health condition worsened and an insurance company denied her request for a CAT scan.

“How could a mother of three, a U.S. citizen who pays her taxes, be denied approval, and this bum up the street gets three free exams?” he asks. “Little things like that hit hard on the hardworking American.”

Gonzalez, now a U.S. citizen, says he empathizes with law-abiding immigrants who are abused in “the land of opportunity.” He remembers how his father, also a health care worker, pleaded with his boss, a medical doctor, to pay him the minimum wage after the family arrived from Cuba. The doctor callously told him, “You don’t need more money. You need more money management.”

Yet Gonzalez, 48, doesn’t view the Arizona law as an abuse of immigrants. While he would prefer officials would allow nonviolent offenders to apply for legal residence before they’re separated from family, he says the law is otherwise fair.

“I’m all for immigration,” Gonzalez added, “*pero* legal immigration. There are people who are burdens on the system.”

Gisselle Acevedo, California

Gisselle Acevedo read the child’s words with dismay. They were scribbled in cursive, with tiny bubbles dotting each lowercase “i.”

“When we learned about the Arizona law, I was sad,” wrote one of Acevedo’s fourth-graders. “It’s not fair when police and other people deport families or friends.”

Acevedo, 53, is president and chief executive officer of Para Los Niños, a Los Angeles not-for-profit organization that provides child care, education and other services to at-risk children and families. Many are immigrants, and nearly all are from some of California's most impoverished urban neighborhoods.

"The funny thing about this law is that children feel so exposed as it is," Acevedo says. "They're piecing this together. They're not quite sure what it all means. What they hear are the words, 'brown skin,' 'police,' 'separation of family.' They think, 'What will happen to me if the person who takes care of me is taken away?'"

Acevedo says she knows what it's like to feel vulnerable. In the late 1960s, her mother came to the U.S. with a 12-year-old Gisselle in tow, carrying little more than the jewelry she would eventually sell to pay the family's bills. The single mother struggled to make more than $12,000 to $13,000 a year cleaning homes and working at a bank, even as she raised Acevedo and another daughter she later picked up from their native Costa Rica.

Now, as Acevedo raises her own daughter, she is concerned about the law of her adoptive land.

"The last I heard, I live in the United States," Acevedo says. "We said that we were not going to tolerate discrimination of any kind. It's unfortunate that this is what it took to push us into this conversation."