

Imminent Deportation:
A Foundation Assessment of Alejandra Juarez

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For my client, I selected Alejandra Juarez from the Netflix limited series *Living Undocumented*. The documentary follows several families or individuals who are presently living “without papers” and under threat of or order for deportation from the United States as a result. The individual circumstances vary from people who came on a visitor’s visa that did not leave when it expired, to situations such as Alejandra’s, where they were denied entry and then re-entered the country without crossing at a port of entry. One of the things that drew me to social work as a field is a desire to help immigrants adjust to life in the United States, and to process difficulties that may come from being non-native residents here, and I felt this would give me a better perspective on the sort of work that might be involved. Alejandra and I are of a similar age, but where I am a life-long Midwesterner, she lived in Mexico until age 16 or 17, and after crossing into the United States, married a U. S. Marine and settled with him in Florida. For the purposes of this assignment, I am working in a local family support agency that specializes in working with Latin American immigrants, working to determine what services may be appropriate for incoming clients.

Presenting Issues

Alejandra arrived from Mexico in 1998. She initially applied for a visa three times and was denied, and ultimately decided to cross the border anyway. The first time, she was apprehended, denied entry, and sent back to Mexico. Shortly thereafter, she crossed the border a second time, undetected, and has been in the United States since then, living in Florida. During a routine traffic stop in 2013, her undocumented status was discovered, and she was ordered to check in with ICE twice per year, but at the time had committed no serious crimes and was not in

any danger of being deported. Once the Trump administration was in place, the rules were changed, and Alejandra was informed that she would be deported. She has filed several motions for stay of deportation, and multiple appeals, but has been denied, and her deportation is now imminent. Currently, she plans to take her younger daughter with her back to Mexico because she is not old enough to take care of herself, and her husband is not home enough to provide sufficient childcare and guidance.

Alejandra is frightened by the prospect of returning to Mexico and stated more than once that she used to have nightmares about being sent back. She has been living in the United States for over twenty years and does not feel she has anything back home to return to. She has also expressed concerns about her older daughter, Pamela, being able to take charge of household duties and take care of herself in the absence of her mother. Her emotions are complicated, which is to be expected. She has taken an attitude of keeping her faith and keeping her head held high, while also acknowledging how difficult she expects it will be for she and Estela relocating to a country she left behind for what she felt was a very good reason. There are also tensions with her husband, both because he voted for Donald Trump and so, in her mind, is partly to blame for her present circumstances, and also because he has been acting more distant toward her.

Alejandra disclosed that when she still lived in Mexico, she was robbed at gunpoint while working in a bakery. She complied with the robber, then reported the crime to the local police force, who then informed her assailant that she intended to press charges. He returned to her place of employment and told her that if she continued to press the case, he would kill her. Alejandra expressed that she was not certain he would not kill her either way and felt the safest option to protect not only herself but her siblings and mother was to leave her life in Mexico

behind. She cited this as the reason she chose to come to the U.S. in the first place, because she would be safer here, and her family was less likely to suffer any fallout.

Relationship Building with Client

Alejandra has been very explicit that she has no problems with asking for help. When her appeals for stay of deportation were denied, she contacted several news agencies to discuss her plight, and drew the attention of her U.S. Congressperson, Darren Soto. In terms of her willingness to seek services, I believe Alejandra will be open to any options that help make this transition as smooth as possible for her family, whether it is temporary or permanent. In terms of our significant intersecting identities, Alejandra and I differ widely, and the first steps I need to take involve bridging the cultural gaps between us and gaining her trust. It is hard to imagine she would not have some level of distrust for a White man working in a social service agency, no matter her general willingness to “call in the cavalry” as it were.

I would spend the first session or two focusing on asking questions to assess her general feelings of the situation, listening actively to her answers, and demonstrating empathy for her circumstances and how difficult this is for her. Because I also speak Spanish at a high-end intermediate level, I will also be able to let her speak in whichever language she is more comfortable using, allowing her to set the pace and tone of our interviews and taking the role of guide and information-gatherer until I have enough data to begin planning and selecting programs to suit her needs.

Identification and Discussion of Client System

Alejandra Juarez is approximately 37 years old and has lived in Florida since she was 17. She has no postsecondary education, may not have completed high school, and her primary occupation has been as a homemaker, while her husband has been the primary wage-earner for

the household. She has no known diagnosed mental health conditions, though some of her descriptions of events she experienced before relocating to the United States may suggest the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder, notably the presence of consistent nightmares about having to return to Mexico, which predated her 2013 order of supervision from ICE. These alone are not conclusive, but it may be worth exploring with a counselor. Alejandra has no known significant medical issues and reported that she enjoys going for walks or runs often to clear her head. She has noted that more recently her hair has been falling out from the stress of dealing with deportation proceedings, saying “I don’t even want to brush my hair because it just comes out in clumps.”

Alejandra presents as a heterosexual Mexican American woman. She is a devout Christian, who prays often and has expressed the belief that God is watching over her. Despite living in Florida the past two decades with no intentions of returning to Mexico, it is clear that she is still deeply influenced by her upbringing there. Her father died when she was young, leaving her mother to raise six children alone, embodying and modeling the post-revolutionary values of self-discipline and hard work for women and men alike (Sanders, 2008). This is not in keeping with the stereotypical view of Latin American women but is born from cultural forces that began during the Mexican revolution of the 1910s (Hernández, 2015) and shaped women’s roles in modern Mexico. Even as a stay-at-home mother and homemaker, Alejandra displays a fierce and independent identity, and a willingness to be outspoken and fight her deportation, while her husband seems to have taken a more docile approach.

Significant Others/System(s)

Alejandra lives with her husband, Temo, who is a former United States Marine and roughly the same age as she is, and their two daughters, Pamela and Estela, who are sixteen years

old and nine years old, respectively. Of her marriage, Alejandra said that prior to the 2016 election everything was “great.” She and Temo were happy together, and raising their children comfortably in their Florida home since his retirement from the Marine Corps. She began expressing concerns to him after Trump won the election, because she knew Temo had voted for him, and because of comments made during the presidential campaign regarding Mexican immigrants. She has generally tried to separate the personal circumstances from the political, and said, “He didn’t know that [Trump] was going to deport his wife.” Nevertheless, this has added to the strain caused by the deportation, and she expressed the concern that she does not know how being apart will affect their marriage. Temo has been reticent to discuss it much, and for instance, during a conversation with their daughters about what her and Estela’s living situation would be in Mexico, Temo remained silent. He has said he “can’t just break down” about it, no matter what he feels, but also admitted that this has also made it difficult for Alejandra to connect with him, and she has told him so.

With Pamela, Alejandra has focused her efforts on teaching her daughter how to be self-sufficient, how to cook, and general life skills. It has been implied that Temo works and is away from the home much of the time, so Pamela will often be fending for herself. This is also why Estela will be going to Mexico with Alejandra, because Pamela cannot watch her and care for her, and her father will not have the time to do so directly. In general, Alejandra and her daughters seem to have an open line of communication, and she has been frank and honest with them about the upcoming challenges once she and Estela have relocated across the border. This brings into sharp relief the barriers that seem to exist between she and her husband, and the strain that the present situation is putting on their marriage. Notably, a unifying factor in the household is their strong identity as a military family.

Community Systems

Alejandra's community seems to be primarily focused around her family. She has not mentioned close friends so far, though when she threw a party for Estela's birthday, her daughter had many friends present. Also notable here is the support from Estela's friends, which carries over to Alejandra's sense of connection to the community. She has a positive working relationship with her lawyer, and even when receiving bad news she expressed gratitude for the work they have done and said "God bless you." Her children both have good school communities, and she reported no significant challenges for them there, though this may change. The family lives in what looks to be a middle-class neighborhood, with quality streets, a well-constructed and well-maintained home, and no significant barriers to resources. Her husband works more than full-time hours, though she has not stated his occupation, but it is clear the family is more than adequately provided for with his income.

Other Significant Information Collected, Observed, or Needed

It would be helpful to know more about Alejandra's social connections outside her family, and to know what her husband does for his livelihood. This information would provide a more well-rounded view of the family and their needs.

Strengths and Resources

Alejandra has an incredible sense of self-worth and dignity. She has made it clear she has no intention of giving up this fight, and when receiving bad news about her deportation, she called every contact she had among news channels to arrange interviews and make her story known in the community. Despite her lack of education, she displays an incredible astuteness and capability to navigate the situation she is in, and continues to look for new ways to improve it. She has also maintained her faith, never backing down from her need to "pray and keep

fighting.” She said, “You know, I used to have nightmares that I was going back to Mexico. And [Temo] used to say, ‘Don’t worry, that’s not going to happen.’ And now that it’s happening, I’m thinking, ‘Oh, Lord, they weren’t nightmares.’ They were just messages from God to prepare me for what was coming.” In the face of this, she has kept her faith, and continues to believe they will find a way for her to avoid deportation, or for her to come back home to Florida. She refuses to accept defeat.

Goal Development and Identification of Goals

Based on the information she has given so far, it seems her goal would be to focus on working with her daughters to ensure they have access to and understand how to use their own coping skills in the coming months, particularly at the prospect of the family being separated indefinitely and how it will impact them. In identifying this as a potential goal and talking with Alejandra, I expect her focus would be on helping her daughters more than herself. Again, because she is incredibly self-sufficient and good at maintaining a positive outlook, it makes sense that she would want to focus on helping her daughters build those same skills. I would check with her to make certain this seemed like the primary goal of her seeking services with my agency, as well as determining whether her husband would also be participating in the program or not.

Identified Intervention

Given the family’s strong association with the identity of “military family,” and the need for unity and cohesion during such a stressful event, I selected an intervention called Families Overcoming Under Stress, or FOCUS, for short. This is a short-term, eight session intervention originally designed to work for military families experiencing high stress or traumatic events, especially where one family member is on active duty, including imminent deployment

(Saltzman, 2016). While Temo is retired from the military, because of his background, this program, or perhaps a modified version, may fit well with the family's general worldview and needs. Deportation is certainly not the same as deployment, but there are parallels—namely that a member of the family is being sent elsewhere for an indeterminate period of time at the behest of the government, which already puts strain on the whole family's relationships—that indicate this intervention could at least be a strong starting point. Additionally, it uses a mixture of sessions with the parents, children, and the family as a whole to give the clinician appropriate time to understand the family dynamic while teaching communication skills that build by the end of the program. The FOCUS curriculum was evaluated with “434 racially diverse families in which both parents completed baseline, post-treatment, and follow-up assessments” and “in 97% of the families, the parents were a male service member...and a female civilian spouse” (Saltzman et al., 2016).

The program is designed to be administered by a FOCUS-trained, master's- or doctoral-level clinician, so my primary role will be in connecting the family to this service, and conducting follow-ups to assess family cohesion, as well as maintaining ongoing communication with Alejandra to ensure that her needs as a client are being met. I would also follow up with the clinician providing the FOCUS program to get feedback from them on how effective an intervention it was, given that it was designed for a population that, while closely related, is not the same as the client in question.

Conclusion

I did not realize some of the specific barriers that exist in our immigration system, such as permanent bans for individuals who were discovered to have immigrated illegally. As well, having learned Alejandra's personal story, it filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge of why

people would choose to bypass the immigration system and cross the border anyway. Hers was not the only story I learned, and the combination of these things gave me a much broader perspective, and a deeper understanding of the need for immigration reform in this country.

It was helpful to have looked at the outline for the project in advance, and to go in knowing what questions I would be “asking” my client. Remembering to take a strengths-based perspective helps immensely to find ways to build on the client’s own self-efficacy. The ability to tell Alejandra, for instance, that her refusal to give up hope is inspiring is one way to keep the focus on finding what she can do to improve her circumstances, as well as building rapport with her by assuring she feels respected.

I will admit that I had a somewhat visceral reaction to Temo’s detached attitude, and I was taken aback by how smoothly Alejandra was able to accept the distance, even while being bothered by it. I would have some difficulty dealing with her acceptance, rather than calling her husband out on his lack of support for her or the children. Not knowing what he does for work leaves a gap in my knowledge, but I would be hard-pressed to accept that Estela had to go with her mother because her father couldn’t participate in her care.

This definitely illuminated the process of more detailed assessments, and gave me more to think about when it comes to identifying interventions. Finding an intervention appropriately tailored to the population being served is both more and less complicated than it seems, and I think it would be difficult to find one that meets every need of the client without modifying it. I have also realized that, while I plan to continue straight on and complete my MSW, and I understand some of the things that can only be done with an MSW, I do not have a firm grasp on what can be done by someone who only has a BSW. I would like to know more about what generalist social work practice *is*, and not just what it *isn't*.

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