

## **Illegal Immigrants: Where is the Compassion?**

**By J. Roger Wilson\***

It's been eating at me for nearly a year since a Honduran orphan, whom I had taught for over two years, was denied a green card. His father had been killed; his mother died from cancer. I was never able to verify the story, but I am reasonably sure he left Tegucigalpa after a drug gang murdered his younger brother. He felt terrible about running away without telling his aunt, who had cared for him, where he was going. And now this boy, from a steamy Central American climate, is living in chilly but more welcoming Canada. If I could, I would have adopted him. I'd love to find a way to bring him back. Regardless, I don't want to see the same thing happen to students that I come to care about deeply or to any child who has already suffered the loss of family, language and culture.

After more than five years as a refugee tutor, I have become quite committed to teaching them. I want to start a school for immigrants. However, my concern is what happens to them legally, especially those without papers. Immigration courts have denied green cards to two of my students, after several years in the process and just stopping short of deporting them. After waiting for years, kids who crossed our border illegally are expected to return, on their own recognizance! The first student went to California to live with cousins and lay flooring. The oddities of the situation didn't quite register with me, in his case. The other one, now in Canada, had been my student for more than two years. I taught him English, stuck with him through several foster families, taught him basic math skills and even invited him to stay with me a couple of times. He became more than just a student, and I even considered becoming a foster parent to him. I was heart-broken about what happened to him.

I have another whose case is still pending after nearly four years. He has asked me why others who have been here for less time get green cards. I have no answer for him. Sometimes, he is angry. I can't blame him; sometimes I'm angry, too. Last year, when he was scheduled to go to court, his caseworker gave him instructions on how to answer questions about his background. They didn't make sense to him, and he told me he wasn't going to lie! He has an attorney, presumably pro bono, but no one here really knows much about the process, which is shrouded in confidentiality. Do they investigate his history? Is his behavior, school performance or character a factor here? What is the court doing that takes years to decide? Is there anything anyone here can do to help?

It is cruel, if not evil, to provide housing, education, medical and dental care and more than a taste of American life, only to rip it away, or worse, intend for them to simply become part of the underground economy. I certainly expect better from my tax dollars!

But it's not just "illegals;" public schools, around here anyway, don't do any better for those with papers. Teenagers from places like Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia, who come with little or no English or formal education of any kind, are placed in classes by age. They are not tested for proficiency or placement or even taught how to pronounce, spell or write. Except for a few exceptional students, most of them "graduate" functionally illiterate. They're required by law to attend school, and state and federal laws mandate testing and appropriate instruction. As far as I've been able to learn, the schools take their per-pupil funding but do little for them beyond a one-size-fits-all, English as a Second Language class. It is what one parent described as ESL support.

Imagine a normal teenager who often finds classrooms deadly dull, forced to sit hour after hour, day after day, trying to learn but unable to understand the language spoken by the teacher and students and unable to read textbooks or tests printed in English. Is this mere incompetence, political correctness, diversity and multiculturalism run amok? Or is it a scheme designed to create low-income workers?

For legal refugees or undocumented illegals, their cases are “confidential,” and many seem not to know what’s going on. I am concerned that “undocs” do not receive fair treatment. Is it necessary for due process to last for years? If we intend to send illegals back to their countries of origin, is there no way to do it quickly, rather than draw out the process so as to make leaving an even greater hardship? Or is the whole thing a sham designed to create low-class laborers, who know enough English to serve us but not their own interests?

Government grants that pay for tutoring end for the undocs when they turn 18. I have continued tutoring a student, who has been four years without a green card, without pay. If he gets his green card, he may be eligible for tutoring again. After spending so much time together, I am more than his teacher; I have become his confidante, advisor and friend. I had to move unexpectedly, and he has helped me almost every day for over a week. And recently, when I was looking “tense,” as he put it, he noticed and offered comfort: “God will take care of everything.”

He’s not perfect, but what kid is? When he got himself in some legal trouble on New Year’s Eve, he told me about it and admitted, on his own, that he’d been stupid. He went to court, accepted his punishment and even wrote about his experience for government class. Now he’s stuck between courts—immigration courts, which have yet to give him a green card and prevent him from working—and another court, which wants him to pay a fine of several hundred dollars and says he should get a job to pay it. His pro bono lawyer has yet to return his call. Does this make any sense? Does anyone care about these kids? Is it possible to find caring advocates to watch out for their interests and welfare? Does anyone think that this is what the immigration debate is really all about?

I am only a tutor trying, during after school hours, to provide what the schools should but fail to give these young people. Can we do something to give my guys a better shot? After all, if no one really intends to deport them, why not just give them green cards and a decent chance at a good life here? Given the flood of immigrants already here and more coming, a school for them isn’t just a matter of decency and compassion. It is a matter of protecting our communities and heritage, an alternative to an ever-growing, angry subculture of unintegrated foreigners.

I write about my students at [www.WeMustCareMore.blogspot.com](http://www.WeMustCareMore.blogspot.com). I oppose open borders, but, as a Christian, I believe in compassion. Read my ideas on immigration, with a message to immigrants, at <http://www.xanga.com/JRogerW/570103758/a-peacemakers-view-of-immigration.html>. My blog at <http://right-thinking.blogtownhall.com> links to everything else.

\*J. Roger Wilson is a refugee tutor in Lansing, Michigan. He is also an ordained Baptist minister, secondary school teacher and has been a peacemaker with Christian Conciliation Service since the early 1980s.