

Estranged in America

In rural Colorado, an immigrant family faces an uncertain future

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Lucia Gaspar was 14 years old when the thing that she and her family dreaded occurred. Lucia, her mother and two siblings were driving home from church one night in Alamosa, Colorado, when the red-and-blue lights of a police car began flashing in the darkness behind them, and a siren started wailing. Lucia's mother, Eulalia Pedro, pulled over. The two officers ordered everyone out of the vehicle and asked for identification. When no one in the family could produce any, the police said they would call Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

In 1999, three years after Guatemala's civil war ended, Pedro, a single mother, left her village in rural Guatemala with her four children, and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. She sent Lucia, the youngest, by bus with an aunt and uncle, while she and the other three journeyed on foot through the West Texas desert.

That night, as she stood with her family on the side of the road, Lucia was filled with fear. One cop watched them closely, eyeing them up and down, while the other returned to the police car. All Lucia could think about was deportation.

"We were so scared," Lucia told me recently — frightened of losing the life they had fought so hard to build, of losing their home, or even worse, each other.

But that night, at least, they were safe. The police officer told the family that the immigration agents were "too busy to come get them," Lucia said. Later, she wondered if maybe the police had never actually called ICE — if they were just trying to intimidate the family. If perhaps they didn't know what else to do about this single mother and her children

— people who had committed no crime, but who were, under the law, unwelcome in America.

LUCIA GASPAR IS NOW 27 AND MARRIED.

She has long glossy hair, a beaming smile, and a small scar on her upper lip where a dog bit her when she was a little girl. Growing up undocumented in southern Colorado, she never talked about her status with her family. Her mother, who had limited education, worked constantly to support them, so Lucia learned about her situation in a haphazard fashion. During middle school, when her teacher took the class to McDonald's to practice applying for jobs, Lucia couldn't complete the mock application; she had to leave the space for her Social Security number blank. She learned the anxiety that comes with never knowing where or when ICE might find you or your family — at work, maybe, or driving to the grocery store. Even at home, there was no sanctuary; they could show up at your door at any moment.

A few years ago, however, those fears began to subside. Then-President Barack Obama created a program called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which gave young people who'd been brought to the country without papers temporary legal status, a work permit and — crucially — a reprieve from the threat of deportation. Even Lucia's husband, Javier, who is also undocumented but ineligible for DACA because he never finished high school, began to feel safer. Although Obama deported more than 2.8 million people during his tenure — a record number, far surpassing his predecessor, George W. Bush — in his final years he prioritized deporting people with criminal records, instead of

those, like Javier, who may have entered the country illegally or overstayed their visas, but had longtime jobs and families in America.

Then came the 2016 election. President Donald Trump was eager to fulfill his campaign promise to deport all undocumented immigrants — even if they had been law-abiding residents for decades. Last September, Trump went even further, canceling the DACA program. Lucia felt her old fear return. But now her situation was worse: Lucia and Javier now had three U.S.-born children. What would happen to their kids if they





were deported?

In the wake of the administration's immigration crackdown, people across the West are grappling with similar questions. They live in places where the line between "legal" and "illegal" cuts not just through families, but also through entire neighborhoods, schools, churches, workplaces and communities. Alamosa has felt this anxiety more acutely than most. More than half of the town's roughly 9,000 residents are Hispanic, many of them first- or second-generation immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala. Regardless of their legal status, they've

become an integral part of this rural community — a place shaped by the very people the government is trying to expel. Now, as fear and uncertainty spread through Alamosa's immigrants, a deeper threat is emerging: What happens to a community when its people's sense of belonging begins to unravel?

ALAMOSA LIES IN THE MIDDLE of southern Colorado's San Luis Valley, a 125-mile-long strip of sagebrush sandwiched between two mountain ranges, a five-hour drive from Denver. One of the largest high-desert valleys in the world, the

land is sparse and sweeping — an ideal home for the "Blue Sky People," the Utes who originally lived here.

The Utes, too, were the descendants of migrants. Thousands of years ago, their ancestors migrated to the San Luis Valley from what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala, traveling north across the mountains and deserts that formed the undivided Americas. With the arrival of European colonists, new actors would claim control: Spain, Mexico, and finally, the United States, which annexed the valley from its southern neighbor in 1848. As settlers arrived — Hispanic farmers,

Lucia Gaspar at Ortega Middle School, where she works as a teacher's aide for special needs students. She got the job after she applied for and was accepted by the program Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, known as DACA.



Downtown Alamosa, Colorado, population 9,000, where almost half the residents are Hispanic, many of them first- or second-generation immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala.

and then Anglos, and later, Dutch and Japanese — the Utes were forced from their homeland.

If colonization and conquest determined the fate of the valley's earliest inhabitants, more recently, America's immigration laws — dictated by labor needs and race discrimination — have determined who belongs and who gets expelled. Laws like the Immigration Act of 1917 were intended to permanently restrict immigrants from “undesirable” areas, and Operation Wetback, a series of immigration raids in 1954, sought to deport as many Mexicans as possible if they couldn't prove their citizenship, often without regard for due process.

Yet even as the U.S. reinforced the sanctity of its own borders, it was busily crossing others, helping stage coups and propping up foreign leaders favorable to U.S. interests. The same year that Operation Wetback was launched, the CIA overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz, part of a series of U.S. interventions in Central America throughout the 20th century that sparked civil wars and a migration crisis that continues to this day.

Among those forced to live with the

consequences were Lucia Gaspar, her family, and hundreds of thousands of Mayan people displaced, widowed, or orphaned during Guatemala's 36-year civil war. With the support of U.S. military aid and training, the Guatemalan armed forces carried out assassinations of suspected militants and large-scale massacres in Indigenous communities thought to support guerrilla forces. One day, soldiers came to Santa Eulalia, the town where Lucia was born, telling villagers to go into a local school where food would be served. Gaspar's mother stayed home — she didn't trust the soldiers — but many others went. Once the villagers were inside, the soldiers locked the door and set fire to the building, killing everyone in it.

As the atrocities mounted in the mid-1980s, many of Eulalia Pedro's family members fled to Mexico or the United States, where the Reagan administration considered them “economic migrants” rather than refugees fleeing political violence. The vast majority were denied asylum. A few years later, though, after a lawsuit forced the government to rehear their cases, many Mayans were finally granted asylum.

Though Pedro and her children had

survived the genocide, the end of the war did not end the poverty that would eventually compel them to leave. Some of Pedro's relatives had found jobs and a better life in a small town in rural Colorado. And so in 1999, Pedro left Guatemala with four kids in tow, hoping to join them.

Today, more than 400 Mayans live in Alamosa, and their culture and language are woven into the town. On Main Street a Guatemalan grocery store sits across from a microbrewery; in the community garden, Spanish and Q'anjob'al mingle with English; and every February, the town hosts a traditional Mayan celebration honoring Santa Eulalia, the patron saint of Gaspar's birthplace — a reminder of the long road they took to get here.

BACK IN GUATEMALA, Lucia and her family had imagined Alamosa as a big city, but when they arrived, they found the opposite: a small town surrounded by a vast desert. They moved into an apartment complex for migrant workers called Tierra Nueva — in English, “New Land.” Everything felt unfamiliar, from the water faucets and the modern kitchen appliances to the indoor toilets. School

was filled with yet more unknowns. Lucia was used to eating just tortillas and a few vegetables — no meat — and she found the school lunches too strange to eat. Speaking only her native Q'anjob'al, she understood little in the classroom and relied on her cousin to translate.

Within a few years, though, Alamosa began to feel like home. Lucia learned English and eventually Spanish, too. The hardest part would come later, when as a teenager, she realized that despite all her efforts to adapt, she could never fully belong. She dreamed of going to college and helping others, but as an undocumented student, she was ineligible for the financial aid and grants she needed. Instead, she graduated from high school resigned to the same life her mother had led: picking mushrooms on a farm for up to 16 hours a day.

Meanwhile, she lived in perpetual uncertainty, feeling as if her own life was outside her control. In 2007, ICE raided a potato-processing plant near Alamosa. News of the arrests spread throughout the San Luis Valley, prompting her mother to quickly move the family into an aunt's apartment, in case ICE agents came looking for them. Even back then, Lucia told me, "I knew what could happen."

A year later, her 19-year-old brother, Juan, was driving to work with a friend when a police officer pulled them over. Since neither Juan nor his friend could show identification, the officer called ICE. Juan spent 10 months in a detention center in Denver before he was deported to Guatemala. Lucia never got to say goodbye.

With the birth of Lucia's first son, Erick, in 2008, the precariousness of her life grew more intense. Erick was a U.S. citizen, while his parents remained undocumented; they had separate legal statuses but intertwined fates. Two years later, Alexandra was born and a year later, Anna. Both Lucia and Javier worked the same long hours at the mushroom farm, leaving little flexibility for the demands of parenting. They had to wake their young children in the middle of the night and take them to a babysitter when their work shifts started at 3 a.m. Meanwhile, the threat of deportation loomed over them, leaving them with an impossible choice: Would they keep the family together and take their children back to Javier's native Mexico? Or leave them behind in the U.S., where they would have a far better education and more opportunities?

IN THE YEARS BEFORE DACA, Lucia and Javier often thought about relocating to a city with better-paying work. As in many remote, rural communities, wages in Alamosa were low, and many young people were leaving. DACA, however, changed everything. The program did not offer a path to citizenship or even legal permanent residency, but it did allow

Dreamers like Lucia who were enrolled in school and met certain other requirements to obtain valid driver's licenses and a work permit — and, crucially, a reprieve from the nagging anxiety that had dogged her for so long.

Lucia applied and was accepted as soon as the program launched in 2012. Now she could do the kind of work she had always dreamed about. She got a job in a nursing home and then at an education nonprofit, helping migrant families. Later, she worked as a teacher's aide in the local middle school, and, in June, she got a new job, helping young adults with disabilities further their education or start careers. The freedom was empowering. With DACA, Lucia saw a future for herself and her family in Alamosa.

By September 2015, Lucia and Javier had saved enough for a down payment on a four-bedroom house. They moved out of the Tierra Nueva apartments and onto a quiet street near the Rio Grande, into a light-blue home, with a fenced backyard filled with bicycles and a trampoline. Inside, the rooms are spacious and clean, the kids' beds neatly made and in the living room there are portraits of the couple, taken just after they started dating. Here in the new house, looking out over the same river she crossed as a young girl, Lucia envisioned a stable, safe place to raise her kids — where they each had their own bedroom and a place to play outside.

They had lived there for just over a year when Donald Trump became president. Suddenly, with the rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric and an uncertain

future for DACA, the family began to plan for the worst.

Lucia reached out to Flora Archuleta, the director of the San Luis Valley Immigrant Resource Center, for help arranging guardianship for Erick, Alexandra and Anna, in the event that she and Javier were deported. They signed a power of attorney form, making Javier's uncle, a U.S. citizen, the children's legal guardian. Previously, Archuleta told me, she'd processed power of attorney requests sparingly — roughly 10 per year. Since the election, that number has more than doubled, as undocumented parents grow increasingly anxious that their children could end up in U.S. foster care if the parents are taken away by ICE.

From her office just off Alamosa's main street, Archuleta is trying keep up with the new demands for advice and support from local immigrants. She estimates that paperwork for visa applications has tripled, if not quadrupled, and the center has been flooded with calls from immigrants who are confused and frightened about the administration's new policies.

One man, who's in the process of getting his GED, keeps phoning the center to find out if he'll still be eligible for DACA.

"He calls me at least once a month," Archuleta said. That's on top of the five to 10 other calls she gets every day from people wondering about DACA. She now spends much of her day just talking to people, trying to comfort them and give advice without really knowing the answers herself.

The Colorado Mushroom Farm on the edge of Alamosa, where up to 80 percent of workers are immigrants. Owner Don Clair says he's hired American-born workers in the past, but most have walked off after the first day of work.





Lucia Gaspar stands on the back porch of her house in Alamosa, Colorado, with her three kids, Anna (standing), Erick and Alexandra. In rural areas like Alamosa, 22 percent of DACA recipients, Gaspar among them, have been able to buy a house for the first time after being approved for the program.

"We're really struggling," she told me, when I saw her in February. With so many people unable to pay for the center's services, lately Flora and her staff have been doing a lot of work for free.

THE SAN LUIS VALLEY IMMIGRANT RESOURCE CENTER was started by three volunteer lawyers out of Boulder, Colorado, in 1987. The year before, President Ronald Reagan had signed an amnesty law giving legal status to 3 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., at a time when tens of thousands of Central Americans were seeking asylum from the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador.

When Archuleta took over as director 17 years ago, there were still deep cultural divisions between the new arrivals and long-term residents. Richard Jackson, the Alamosa County sheriff and a longtime police officer, recalled that the first Guatemalans who arrived in the 1980s were mostly men who came alone. There were problems with alcohol abuse and domestic violence, which Jackson attributes to the "rub" of two very different cultures, but things improved when the migrants' families arrived.

Today, that tension has largely disappeared, helped in part by efforts like the Integration Grant provided by the Colorado Trust, a nonprofit aimed at reducing social inequalities. The grant money helped immigrant parents get more involved in their children's schools, improved access to English classes for both adults and kids, and developed mentoring opportunities among foreign and native-born families. Another grant has funded trips to Guatemala for Alamosa's public school teachers, to help them better understand their Mayan students. One of the sheriff's deputies has partnered with a local immigrant to offer free driving lessons for Spanish and Q'anjob'al speakers.

"Things are different now," said Francisco Lucas, a Mayan immigrant who came to Alamosa 33 years ago, fleeing Guatemala's civil war. "In the beginning, nobody spoke English," he told me. "But as new generations are born and progress, there's less separation between immigrants and nonimmigrants — the line between them blurs."

THAT INTERDEPENDENCE HAS GROWN in other ways as well. Farms in the San Luis Valley grow 90 percent of Colorado's potatoes and form the backbone of the regional economy. Although mechanization has reduced labor needs, immigrant workers still do essential jobs, from picking and packing produce to manning conveyor belts and operating heavy machinery. More than one in three hired farmworkers in Colorado was born abroad.

One of those places is a sprawling 440-acre farm on the edge of Alamosa, where the smell of compost seeps outside

the windowless bunkers. Lucia worked here before she had DACA protections. The Colorado Mushroom Farm produces 120,000 pounds of white and brown mushrooms every week — mushrooms that are sold in grocery stores across Colorado.

Each crop requires 20 semi trucks of straw, three of chicken waste and one of cottonseed mill — just to make the compost the mushrooms need to grow. Like cows, mushrooms require daily attention, year-round, so the real key to a successful crop is finding enough people willing to work for an average of \$12 per hour, 365 days a year, including Christmas. “There’s not a day off at the farm here,” Don Clair, the farm’s business manager, told me, when I visited in May.

The farm opened in the early 1980s, when the first Mayans began arriving. “We’ve been real fortunate,” Clair said, referring to the immigrants that still make up the majority of his workforce. In the past, he has tried to branch out and hire nonimmigrants, with little success. After a few hours, most of the new hires walk off the job, he said. “They want to work six hours or eight hours and then they want to go home.”

Clair estimates that 75 to 80 percent of the workers at the mushroom farm are immigrants, but he doesn’t know how many have legal status and how many do not: “We check their paperwork and leave it at that.” Colorado law does not require him to enroll in E-Verify, a federal program that can confirm whether a person has work authorization in the U.S.

There are no available data on how many of Alamosa’s immigrants are working without authorization, but statewide Colorado is home to more than 189,000 undocumented immigrants. They contribute over \$227 million to Social Security and \$55 million to Medicare — entitlements they cannot receive themselves. But as immigration enforcement tightens and the number of workers who cross the border plummets, agricultural operations like the Colorado Mushroom Farm face a dwindling pool of potential employees.

There are other reasons, too. After two or three generations in Alamosa, immigrants resemble other Americans in the kind of life they hope to live. “Like anybody, generation number four is not real excited about becoming a picker,” Clair told me.

He could try to make the work more attractive by offering higher wages. But then, he said, “We’d have to raise our prices. The whole country would have to get used to that.”

Without immigrants, the farm would not exist, but sometimes Clair has felt slightly resentful. “Whether they’re documented or undocumented, they seem to have all the rights that an American citizen has,” he said. He recalled how, in 2012, the mushroom farm ran into financial trouble and shut down for two years

before reopening under new ownership. To him, it seemed like the local Catholic Church helped the Guatemalan immigrants who were out of work, while he and the other more senior managers were just “let go.”

“I get a little upset,” he added, “that we have people living under the bridge, and we don’t seem to be worried nearly as much about them as we are about the immigrants.”

LAST MAY, as spring painted the San Luis Valley shades of green, I visited Lucia and found her alternately hopeful and afraid. Her DACA permit expires in February — less than six months away — and attempts to create a permanent version of the program keep failing in Congress. The uncertainty was wearing on her. “It’s frustrating, not knowing what’s going to happen,” she told me.

Meanwhile, she struggled to explain concepts like ICE detention and deportation to her children. “Sometimes I don’t want to tell them,” she said, wishing she could protect them from the fear she knows so well.

One day, Erick asked her, “What if the police take Dadda?” The fourth-grader, who loves fishing with his father in the mountains east of Alamosa, was anxious. “I don’t want him to go to jail. I don’t want to live in Mexico.”

More recently, Erick has suffered some disappointment as well. For over a year, Lucia and Javier had been saving up for a family trip to Disneyland. But all the talk about increased ICE activity had them worried. What if they got pulled over? Erick’s father could end up deported. So they canceled the trip they’d planned for this summer.

In the kitchen one day after school, Lucia was chopping up shrimp and vegetables for the kids’ favorite meal, ceviche. Alexandra worked in her coloring book, while Anna played with a toy dragon, flying it in circles around the living room, her long braids swinging behind her.

At the dining room table, Erick, who was supposed to be doing his reading homework, overheard us talking about the trip. “I want to go on the rides,” he said. Lucia reminded him that it was too risky, especially for his dad. At 10, Erick is thoughtful and inquisitive, with a mischievous streak. Now he looked worried. “Some people,” he told me, “are getting sent back where they came from if they don’t have papers,” he said. He was silent for a moment, his brow furrowing.

“They might send back my parents,” he said.

IN EARLY JULY, on my last visit to Alamosa, the air was hazy from the Spring Creek Fire, 25 miles east, and the normally stark outline of nearby Blanca Peak appeared smudged. Lucia was laying straw around the rows of zucchini, fava beans and cucumbers that her mother had planted in the community

garden to help lock in the moisture — because of the drought, the town had implemented water restrictions, and she worried the crops might not survive.

Meanwhile, America’s political landscape seemed harsher than ever. Under Trump’s now-reversed “zero tolerance” policy of prosecuting everyone caught crossing the border unlawfully, young children had been taken away from their parents.

“Imagine if that was happening to us,” she said to Javier one night. When Lucia told her own kids about the family separations, they wanted to know why, but she had no answers for them.

Then, a few weeks ago, Lucia learned that her sister-in-law’s brother had been caught crossing the border from Mexico and put in a detention center in Arizona. He was 16 years old. Lucia’s sister, who has legal status, drove through the night from Colorado all the way to Arizona to see him, but she wasn’t allowed inside.

“They must have lost their heart,” was all Javier could think. At least, he thought, he and Lucia had a place to go if they were deported. Recently, he had finished building a house on the outskirts of Mexico City, paid for in installments over the 19 years he had lived in America, and he had begun thinking about the possibility of returning to the country he left as a 14-year-old by himself. When Javier crossed the border then, he thought he would only stay a year or two — time to earn enough money so he could build a house in Mexico. But he kept finding jobs, and then he met Lucia, and then their children were born. If he had wanted to leave, he no longer felt like he had a choice. “I have three kids who need me,” he told me. It was like getting on a highway without knowing where the next exit was.

“Life is like that sometimes,” he said.

Despite everything, their main priority was to give the kids a normal summer. After her work in the garden was finished, Lucia took the kids to Splashland, the local pool, crowded on a hot Saturday afternoon. Wearing goggles and clutching blow-up toys, they splashed and bobbed among all the bodies moving through the turquoise water. Lucia watched Erick and Alexandra climb the steps that lead to the top of the waterslide. And then she lost them.

“I can’t see them,” she said, her eyes widening, searching for them in the crowded pool.

A minute later, she spotted the two swimming toward her together, grinning. Lucia relaxed, leaning back in her chair beneath the shade of an awning, breathing in the chlorinated air. For now, at least, they were together, a family indistinguishable from all the rest. □

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Immigrants in Colorado, by the numbers

10
Percent of Colorado residents born abroad (532,903 people)

8.6
Percent growth of immigrant population in Colorado between 2010 and 2014

83,794
Number of people who are employed by firms owned by immigrants

1 in 3
Proportion of Fortune 500 companies based in Colorado that were founded by immigrants or their children

\$20.8 billion
Annual revenue generated by those firms

\$1 billion
Amount immigrants paid in state and local taxes

73
Percent of foreign-born population that is working age

52
Percent of native-born population that is working age

41
Percent of immigrants in Colorado who are citizens

4
Percent of Colorado’s population that is made up of undocumented immigrants

87
Percent of undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. for five years or more.

FIGURES ARE FOR COLORADO FROM 2014. SOURCE: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NEW AMERICANS IN COLORADO REPORT, AUGUST 2016, PUBLISHED BY THE NEW AMERICAN ECONOMY, A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION COMPRISED OF MAYORS AND BUSINESS LEADERS WHO SUPPORT IMMIGRATION REFORMS