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## 3 immigrants talk about their lives since coming to America

By Dan McFeely

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Without a visa or a welcome, Juvenal Gamarra walked into the United States 21 years ago -- hiking overnight through the mountains near Tijuana, Mexico -- into a land of freedom and opportunity.

"One of my friends almost got bit by a rattlesnake," the Peruvian-born Gamarra said, recalling his journey to cross the border into California. "The risks were many, but all I could think about was making it here."

Like those of millions before him, his reasons for risking arrest and deportation -- even death on the dangerous trek across the border -- were well established: to escape economic hardship in his homeland and live the American dream.

It's a commonly heard refrain in the Hispanic community of Indianapolis, home to a growing number of legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American nations.

Entering and staying in the United States legally isn't a viable option for most unskilled foreign workers; the U.S. grants only a limited number of temporary visas. So they sneak across borders and typically live in the shadows.

These back-door arrivals include women such as Veronica Guerrero, who entered the country with her parents illegally as a 9-year-old, eventually went to work in a hotel kitchen and, after winning her citizenship through an amnesty program in the 1980s, now owns a shop that sells fancy First Communion dresses for Mexican girls.

Jose Luis Alcauter arrived with only a temporary visa and little money and now runs a thriving small bakery operation and is a legal resident.

Like many who share their background, Gamarra, Guerrero and Alcauter are paying close attention to a hotly debated bill before state lawmakers this year: a proposal to crack down on employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

Sen. Mike Delph, R-Carmel, who wrote the measure, says the growing number of illegal immigrants has become a drain on Indiana taxpayers who help foot the bill for health care, education and, in some cases, the incarceration of those here illegally.

His legislation goes after employers who, he said, profit from the illegal workers who earn much less than legal citizens, giving them an unfair advantage over employers who only hire legal workers.

Opponents of the legislation say illegal immigrants are not a drain on the economy. On the contrary, they say, these workers are part of the fabric of society and fill the jobs that most Americans simply will not do.

So why not enter legally? Why not obtain the proper documents and live as Americans with civil rights, better pay and health care rather than toil in the dark corners of the U.S. economy?

Skilled workers -- such as doctors and scientists -- can apply for an H-1B visa, a temporary card that allows them to work here while applying for a green card and citizenship.

But unskilled workers, such as those at farms, hotels and in construction, can apply only for a temporary H-2B visa, allowing one to stay just long enough to complete a short-term job, such as seasonal work.

The U.S. limits the number of these visas each year, and critics say those limits are not high enough to fill the jobs available in the U.S. Until that imbalance is addressed, illegal immigration will continue to be a problem, they say.

### Worth the risk

Most of the 250,000 to 300,000 Hispanics in Indiana are legal, but about 85,000 are not.

"Every immigrant that decides to make the (illegal) journey here is risking their life," Gamarra said. "But it is worth it that they try, because of the situation in our homeland."

The 49-year-old Brownsburg resident lost hope in Peru because his family was not politically connected, and that made it difficult to advance in society, he said.

He obtained a tourist visa to visit Mexico in 1987 and promptly crossed the border into the U.S.

"We were on foot, crossing the mountains all night to get into the U.S.," Gamarra recalled. "It was one night, and one long walk."

After arriving in Los Angeles, Gamarra became a laborer in the hotel industry and enrolled in a school to learn English. He also married and started a family. Once he was able to speak his second language, he joined a cousin in Bloomington and worked as a salesman for a computer company.

Apart from a year in Virginia, Gamarra has never left, deciding to move his wife and three children to Brownsburg, where "the schools are much better compared to California."

He became a U.S. citizen five years ago and owns the Machu Picchu Restaurant on the Westside.

He's hoping the illegal-immigration legislation will die. If not, he fears there will be a mass exodus of workers, hurting both Latino and American employers.

"It is going to affect the way a lot of people view their lives in this community," Gamarra said. "And it will affect a lot of non-Hispanic folks, too. There is not enough thought going into how this will affect people's lives."

### **From tears to action**

Guerrero used to cry every morning.

As a young, illegal immigrant to America, she worked as a laborer for hotel chains in Chicago and Los Angeles. It was hard work, with long hours in the kitchen.

"I would cry in the morning because I would think, 'This is not for me,' " said Guerrero, 41, a native of Guadalajara, Mexico. "Some people said, 'You know, that is just what you gotta do.'

"But I would get up every morning and think, 'This is not for me.' "

So Guerrero set out on a path toward a better job and a better life -- a path that brought her to Indianapolis in 2000, where she had heard through friends and family that work was plentiful and life was less dangerous.

With little money to spare, she found cheap living accommodations on the Westside, working to put her three boys through Catholic schools.

"It was not appealing, but we could not afford to live in Carmel," she said with a laugh. "You know, you always want something better for the kids. But I am very happy we did what we did. I have good boys."

Guerrero was one of the lucky illegal residents to take advantage of amnesty offered by President Ronald Reagan in 1986. Today, she is a U.S. citizen who cherishes her right to vote.

After her move here, Guerrero took classes to become a licensed real estate agent, then a lending agent. Eventually, she landed a job with a local bank. But still, she believed, there was more opportunity.

And then she found out that friends wanting to celebrate their daughters' "sweet 15" parties -- a Mexican tradition for girls coming of age -- and other traditional milestones were struggling for supplies.

"Everything the Hispanic community needed, they had to go to Chicago to get, like First Communion dresses."

So she opened up her own shop on West Washington Street, Creaciones Guerrero, where she sells dresses, party favors and gifts. She also has become a community leader, often speaking out for better living conditions and public safety. Lately, she has been speaking out against the immigration bill.

"I understand his view," she said of Delph. "I am a U.S. citizen, and I want the borders to be protected, too."

"Deport the gang members and the criminals. But we have some good people who have been here for 20 years. They missed the Reagan amnesty, but they have kids, grandkids."

"This bill is like you are handicapped, and somebody is going to pull the wheelchair from you."

### **Honored for success**

Alcauter, the owner of Merry's Bakery on the Westside, has the same fears.

Tickets to the Indy 500 brought him to Indianapolis for the first time in 2000. He was surprised that, while here, he was unable to order a torta -- a Mexican sandwich with meats and vegetables on big, crusty white bread -- at a local Mexican restaurant.

A year later, during another race weekend, the veteran distributor of breads and pastries in Mexico fanned out across the city, scouting out the "bread scene." He found it to be lacking, and a dream was born. Actually, a second dream.

The first occurred back in 1980 when Alcauter was visiting family in California and made an eye-opening discovery: Dishwashers in America were making as much money as he was making as a seasoned executive with Mexico's Bimbo Bakeries.

"I thought, 'Boy, I am really missing the mark' ," said the father of six, who is a legal resident but not yet a citizen.

Using a work permit, he first worked in Houston, then moved to Chicago and spent 11 years there before moving to Indianapolis.

In 2002, the Alcauter family -- which eventually included children, grandchildren, brothers, sisters and extended family -- arrived with no jobs, rented apartments on the Northside and began looking for a place to start a bakery and a neighborhood to live in.

They found an old brick building a few blocks north of West Washington Street and set up the bakery -- securing deals with local restaurants (Mexican eateries and American cafes) to sell their breads and sweet rolls -- and then opened two stores to sell their products.

In April 2006, Family Service of Central Indiana, a nonprofit group dedicated to preserving and strengthening families in times of crisis and change, honored the Alcauter family for its success.

Alcauter, 58, hopes others will have the chance to emulate that success, a prospect he says will be dampened by the immigration bill he thinks will cost him and other employers a valuable labor pool.

"If this bill passes, we will still have to produce good quality bread and keep our costs down," Alcauter said. "(But) this will have an impact on our people and on others in the community."

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