

Capitol Comments:

My Immigrant Story—What's Yours?

By: Jennifer Carr Allmon

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I was lucky to be born to native Houstonian parents at Houston's Hermann Hospital in the 1970's. My dad owned an Irish restaurant and pub and my Sicilian grandpa taught me about baseball and had secret ingredients shipped to Houston on dry ice to make the best cannoli south of Chicago. My upbringing was distinctly Irish, Italian and American but I never thought of my family as an immigrant family.

When the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops began the Justice for Immigrants campaign in 2005 it occurred to me that the struggles of today's immigrants reminded me of stories my grandpa told of his dad, who came to Chicago from Sicily. As a new immigrant, his dad was poor, spoke Italian, worked in manual labor, and struggled to provide for his family. He came to America and endured discrimination and poverty to assure that his children would lead a better life.

That Thanksgiving, I asked my great uncle why dad's family came to the U.S. from Ireland. The story he told was remarkable. My great-great-great-grandmother was kidnapped from Northern Ireland and brought to the United States in the 1820's to work as a slave on a plantation in South Carolina. After several years of hard labor she escaped with my great-great-great grandfather. Eventually, they made their way to the region that became Texas.

What's the point of this little family history? To illustrate that many of today's immigrants face the same struggles with discrimination and poverty. Unfortunately, human trafficking and forced slavery continue today as well. On a hopeful note, hard-working people still come to America seeking a better life for their families and victims of human trafficking have the opportunity to become Americans. (For information on Human Trafficking, call the National Trafficking Hotline: 1.888.3737.888)

The percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born now stands at 11.5%; in the early 20th century it was approximately 15%. Similar to accusations about today's immigrants, those of 20th century ago often initially settled in mono-ethnic neighborhoods, spoke their native languages, and built up newspapers and businesses that catered to their fellow émigrés. They also experienced the same types of discrimination that today's immigrants face, and integrated within American culture at a similar rate. If we view history objectively, we remember that every new wave of immigrants has been met with suspicion and doubt and yet, ultimately, every past wave of immigrants has been vindicated and saluted. (USCCB, [www.justiceforimmigrants.org](http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org), & 2002 Census Data).

This Independence day, pause to remember your immigrant roots and you may find they are not too different from recent immigrant to the U.S. While I am proud to be an Irish-Italian Texan, the only label that really matters is that I am a child of God. Are not our immigrant brothers and sisters also children of God, first and foremost?

*Jennifer Carr Allmon is the associate director of the Texas Catholic Conference. She is a newlywed married to a French-Dutch-Irish-Scottish American who calls himself a mutt.*

Immigrant Prayer (optional):

Blessed are You, Lord God  
King of all creation.  
Through Your goodness, we live in this land  
that You have so richly blessed.  
Help us always to recognize our  
Blessings come from You  
and remind us to share them  
with others, especially those who come  
to us today from other lands.  
Help us to be generous, just, and welcoming,  
as You have been and are generous to us.