

## Focus on Immigration

### MARIA: A Portrait

María, a mother of two living in Mexico, was faced with a question every mother dreads to hear from her child. "Can I have more to eat?" was her five-year-old daughter's cry at breakfast, lunch and dinner. All that María could say was, "There is no more to eat."

Hunger was one of the main reasons that María put her faith in God and decided to make the hard and dangerous trip from Mexico to the United States. In past years, her husband would leave her and their children in Mexico and migrate to the U.S. in order to make enough money to support the family. This went on for several years until María felt that her children did not really have a father and that she was missing a husband.

At age thirty-one, with two young children, she decided to make the trip to the U.S. In order to join her husband, she and her children crossed the Rio Grande alone. As she traversed the dark river in the middle of the night, she wondered what might happen if they fell out of the boat. The boat was small and her

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### What You Need to Know About U.S. Immigration

- In 1993, the "Top Ten" immigration sender countries from which the U.S. received immigrants were Mexico (109,027), Mainland China (65,552), the Philippines (63,189), Vietnam (59,613), the former Soviet Union (58,568), the Dominican Republic (44,886), India (40,021), Poland (27,729), El Salvador (25,517), and the United Kingdom (18,543). ("A Guide to Immigration Facts and Issues." National Immigration Forum, 1994)
- More than half of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. come from six countries: Mexico (31%), El Salvador (9%), Guatemala (9%), Canada (3%), Poland (3%), and the Philippines (3%). (Ibid)
- Every year 1.1 million immigrants arrive in the U.S. 700,000 enter as lawful permanent residents, chiefly to join their spouses, parents or family or to contribute their talent to American universities, research institutions or corporations. 100,000-150,000 enter legally as refugees. 300,000 undocumented immigrants enter the country each year. Approximately 3.2 million undocumented workers live in the U.S.; an estimated 16,925 reside in North Carolina. (Statistical Department of Immigration and Naturalization Services, 1993)
- Today, immigrants comprise a smaller percentage of the population than they did at the beginning of the century. During the time between 1870-1920, approximately 15% of the total population was foreign born. In 1990, 8% of the U.S. population was composed of immigrants. (Ibid)
- Immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits. Legal and undocumented immigrants together pay 70.3 billion in taxes and receive 42.9 billion in services. Undocumented immigrants alone pay 7 billion in taxes. ("Setting the Record Straight." Michael Fix and Jeffrey Passel, Urban Institute, 1994)
- You may apply for U.S. citizenship if you: have been a lawful permanent resident for 5 years; have been a lawful permanent resident for 3 years and have been married to a U.S. citizen for those 3 years, and continue to be married to that U.S. citizen; are the lawful permanent resident child of U.S. citizen parents; OR have qualifying military service.

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*To bring students and farmworkers together to learn about each other's lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers, and build diverse coalitions working for social change.*

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SAF is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization funded in part by: The Charles and Mary Grant Foundation, The Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, The Kathleen Price Bryan Family Fund, The North Carolina Humanities Council, Church Women United, The Migrant Health Program, local individuals, students, churches, and farmworker agencies. *A special thanks goes to Julia Elsee for her continued support of SAF.*

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Published by SAF

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youngest son, a mere thirteen months, could easily be lost in the river's muddy flow. When María was asked if she would ever travel again the way she did the first time, she replied, "No." The only reason she might would be if her family became split between the two countries again. If fate divided her family, she would do anything to reunite it.

María explained that life is different in the U.S., because here she can feed her children. Both she and her husband work and provide for their family together. When she worked in a fabric store in Mexico, she was still not able to put shoes on her kids' feet. She heard that in the U.S. people can advance themselves, so she crossed the border to better feed and clothe her family. When asked if she found what she had expected, she said, "Yes, but it took a long time."

María has returned to visit her family in Mexico and has heard all of their tales about poverty. After hearing those stories, she doesn't want to live like that again. María said she would only return to Mexico if she could work and feed her family the way she can in the U.S.

The most difficult barrier that María and her family face in the U.S. is language. It is very hard to communicate with others here, she says. María tried to learn English, but feels she cannot

grasp the accent--she is afraid she will not be understood and will not understand others. María has been going to English classes, although it is hard to find time when she must work and care for her family. She is thankful that her children do not face the same difficulties with English as she does; she works hard to encourage them to get a good education.

Recently, María passed her citizenship test and now she is waiting to be sworn-in. She is happy that she lived through the initial nightmare of immigration and thankful to have escaped the poverty that drove her to migrate.

*by Graciela Magallanes,  
1996 SAF Intern*

## IMMIGRATION ASSISTANCE ORGANIZATIONS:

### Immigrants Legal Assistance Project

224 South Dawson St., PO Box 27343, Raleigh, NC, 27611

**Phone:** (888) 251-2776

**Fax:** (919) 856-2175

**Services:** Free representation & legal advice in the areas of immigration, civil rights, employment/labor and education law for low-income individuals, non-profits and community agencies.

### Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and Services

**Phone:** (415) 243-8215

**Hotline:** (415) 543-6767

**Services:** Non-profit, bilingual hotline provides general information on the new welfare reform law, welfare benefits, immigration procedures, becoming a citizen, and petitioning for relatives.

