

A Houston father checks in with ICE to learn his fate

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By Olivia P.

Tallet

Juan Rodriguez sat Wednesday morning in the lobby of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Northpoint where the undocumented go to be deported, waiting for - he wasn't exactly sure.

An undocumented Salvadoran, he'd shown up here 25 times over a decade to check in. With a wife and three daughters who are all American citizens, a clean record and a thriving auto repair business, Rodriguez had been granted "prosecutorial discretion" during the Obama administration, which allowed him to remain in the country and legally work. He was proud of being a taxpayer.

But then at his annual visit in February, a month after President Donald Trump took office and embarked on his immigration crackdown, Rodriguez was told that "the rules have changed" and he would be deported. He pleaded for more time to watch his eldest graduate from high school, and, shortly thereafter, became the subject of a Chronicle series, "Out of Time."

Soon, the Hispanic Bar Association rallied around him and his family and helped him win a series of reprieves.

Now, here he waited, yet again, one would-be American who had become the face of a political maelstrom in Houston, an ultra-diverse metropolis with an estimated 600,000 undocumented immigrants. Because he'd played by the rules for years, it seemed, he'd been caught up in a dragnet that could deport him at any moment. And were that to happen, it could take years to be reunited with his wife, Celia, seated on his left, and their three girls. Karen, 19, an engineering student at the University of Houston, sat to his right. A row behind them, Rebecca, 17, wove French braids into the thick, dark hair of her little sister, Kimberly, 10.

They were all elegantly dressed - Juan in a black suit and black overcoat, Celia and the girls in skirts and dresses at the behest of their lawyers, who huddled nearby.

There were David Medina, a former Texas Supreme Court Justice, and his partner Juan Vasquez, of Chamberlain Hrdlicka. They'd gone to federal court and filed suit over the summer to block his deportation on constitutional grounds, only to withdraw it to allow Rodriguez's asylum claim to proceed. They conversed sotto voce with Carolina Ortuzar-Díaz and Jacob Monty, partners in Monty and Ramírez, an immigration firm, who had filed a stay of Rodriguez's pending deportation and were also representing him in a bid before the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services for residency with his citizen wife.

They'd come around 8 a.m. with an inkling, based on prior conversations with ICE attorneys, that the government was prepared to be flexible. But they didn't know much more than that.

Shortly before 9 a.m., an ICE official appeared at the door that leads to the inner offices from the lobby and called out, "Juan Rodriguez."

The lawyers, who were near the door, approached him, exchanged a few words and handed him a file. The ICE official took the file and closed the door. At his earlier visits this year, Rodriguez had always been called inside for an interview, but not this time.

"They didn't ask me to go in with them!" he said, his face covered in a big smile. "That has to be a good sign, right?"

His lawyers didn't say a word, although his smile clearly warmed them.

Fifteen minutes later, the same ICE official opened the door and again called out, "Juan Rodriguez." He gave Ortuzar-Díaz the document back and told her they could leave.

Ortuzar read the document, and soon, an expression of disbelief appeared on her face. She raised her eyes from the paper, looked at all the other lawyers, and said: "This document doesn't have a date for Juan's next appointment."

"Are you sure?" Monty asked.

"They wrote here an acknowledgment of the documents that we brought, but they did not put any date! Let me ask."

Ortuzar-Díaz turned to find the ICE official. The Rodriguezes and the other lawyers all exchanged quizzical looks, each trying to glean what the other was thinking.

"No, no more reporting here," said the ICE official said to Ortuzar-Díaz.

It was, for the time being, over.

Instead of the 30-day reprieve the lawyers had been expecting, ICE had handed Rodriguez an indefinite stay until the Board of Immigration Appeals rules on his request for asylum, which could take six months or more.

"Let's go, let's go outside," Medina said to the group, not wanting to create too much commotion in a room where others awaited their fate.

'Not a bad man'

They all gathered in a parking lot across Northpoint Drive, about 15 miles north of downtown,

"Yes, Yes! I am so happy," Rodriguez exclaimed.

Medina, one of Houston's best-known Hispanic lawyers, spoke with a cracked voice, clearly holding back tears, extolling what ICE had done and reflecting on his own family and the immigrant story in America.

"My children are really first generation Americans, from their mother side," he said. "Their mother is from Honduras."

Monty, the immigration lawyer, didn't try to minimize the complexity of the immigration debate dividing the country. "It's a very difficult job, sorting out the bad men," he said. "But (ICE) appears, so far, to have been able to find that Mr. Rodriguez is not a bad man, and that is good."

Karen Rodriguez, who had been dreading this day for weeks, fearing she would have to help raise her sisters if her dad was whisked away, glowed with relief. "I am so grateful with you all!" she told the lawyers. "Because this year has been crazy; it has been a rollercoaster, but we know that God has supported us. We came thinking that we were going to get just 30 more days, and then you see what we got!"

The Rodriguezes are devout Seventh-day Adventists, attending Wednesday and Saturday services at their church on Fresa Road in Pasadena.

Celia Rodriguez beamed. "I feel grateful first to God, right? Because of the many opportunities he has given us, and because of such good lawyers," she said. "So busy are you all. You are important people, and are here with us. "

"Let's pray," Medina said.

A husband and wife and their three daughters clasped hands with four lawyers and bowed their heads in what was, at this moment, a distinctly American moment. "Our Father, thank you for everything you give us," Medina began.

When he had finished, Rodriguez excused himself and left to go to the office that monitored the ankle bracelet he has been required to wear since his ordeal began. That hasn't changed.

On her way home, his wife pondered what she would cook for a celebration with the lawyers. Maybe cheese pupusas, or a Salvadoran fish soup.

OUT OF TIME: *Candidate Donald Trump inspired anti-immigration fervor across the country - and created panic at Juan Rodríguez's home. His family felt that Juan, an undocumented immigrant from El Salvador who had been regularly checking in with ICE, would be in danger of deportation. Soon after the election, he was told that he wasn't "a priority for this country anymore." An immigration lawyer came to his defense, and three high-profile attorneys signed on to assist Juan's wife, a U.S. citizen, and their three American daughters in the legal battle.*