



The Ghosts of Grand Island

STORY BY Olivia Exstrum

Martha* will never forget the day she lost her mother.

It wasn't just one day, exactly. As is the case for many undocumented immigrants, Martha's mother Luisa's* journey, from working at a meatpacking plant to provide a better life for her five daughters in small-town Nebraska back to her hometown of Guadalajara in western Mexico, spanned several years. It began with months of detention in an Omaha jail and continued through countless court dates anxiously awaiting her fate. In the end, she was forced to return to the very place she had fled from an abusive husband in 1999.

Luisa left five years ago, but for Martha, the tragedy began years before, on a cold winter day in 2006. A mother of two young boys, Martha was working toward a bachelor's degree and, like her mother, had escaped an abusive relationship. She worked part time at an elementary school in town when she received word of a raid happening at the meatpacking plant where her mother worked the early shift. At the time, focused on the kids in her care, she didn't even think about her mother, Martha told me in an interview at the community college where she now works in student services.

"Not until I got off from work, that's when it hit me," she said, her voice breaking. "That's when I started asking questions."

A single mother desperate to support her five girls, Luisa had made what Martha calls the "worst mistake of her life" and bought a fake birth certificate to work at the plant. After her mother was detained, Martha said, she was taken to one of about 200 detention facilities across the U.S. — she doesn't know where — and eventually landed at the county jail in Omaha. Martha and her children visited Luisa at least once a month. Things settled down, albeit temporarily, when she was released and given a work permit as her case dragged through the courts. Then, more than six years after the raid, Luisa was charged with identity fraud and ordered to leave the country. Martha has a maternal warmth about her, with kind eyes and a broad smile, but her voice is firm as she talks about the system that she believes failed her family.

"I honest to God don't feel that my mom is a criminal," she said. "I know that if you ever ask a judge, they will tell you she's a criminal, but in my opinion, the system is broken. ... She knew from that first day that buying that birth certificate wasn't the right thing to do. There was no other way for her to help her daughters grow."

Martha and Luisa's story is but one of countless just like it, and so is that of my sleepy hometown of Grand Island, Nebraska. More than a decade ago, federal immigration authorities raided a meatpacking plant here, arresting more than 250 people and upending countless families' lives in the process. Eleven years later, I headed home to find the story.

I am a white, straight, upper-middle-class 23-year-old woman. I grew up in Grand Island. I am a pure product of the Grand Island Public Schools system, from Wasmer Elementary School, just a block from my house in the historic southern section of the city; to Barr Middle School, where (much to my horror) my mother taught health class; and finally to Grand Island Senior High, the cavernous halls stuffed with 2,200 other kids from all corners of the city, where my above-average height gave me a slight advantage in the competition for space. For the first 18 years of my life, Grand Island was the only home I knew. I am not an immigrant, and have no idea of the unique challenges immigrants and the children of immigrants to our city face. But in my research for this story, the sheer scale of the raid became clearer, as it seemed every person I talked to had a family member or friend who was working at Swift & Co. when it happened or, worse, was deported. Although it's been more than 10 years since the raid, its impact is still palpable. This was abundantly clear in my months of reporting, when at times it felt like I had talked to everyone and their mother trying to find someone willing to speak on the record about their personal experience with the raid. The wound, it appears, is still fresh.

In the days and weeks after the election, journalists from New York to Chicago parachuted into "Trump country," eager to talk to the salt-of-the-earth people angry at being forgotten by the political establishment. Although much has been made of immigration to the coasts, data shows that as the Midwest's

*Martha and Luisa's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

native-born population is declining, it is increasingly drawing immigrants attracted to the low cost of living and job opportunities.

Grand Island, particularly its schools, was praised for its response to the raid. Most of the immigrants I interviewed love living here, citing its small-town feel, strong family values and supportive school system as reasons they stay.

So what did it mean when, come Nov. 8, 2016, the vast majority of Grand Islanders voted for a man whose vision for America is one without immigrants? These two groups — discouraged white people emboldened by the president's tribalistic rhetoric and immigrants seeking the American Dream in the heartland — come together in Grand Island, a railroad town that was itself settled by immigrants. Its conservative politics — Nebraska's 3rd district, of which Grand Island is a part, went 75 percent for Trump — creates a dichotomy. Despite working, living and going to school alongside immigrants, the majority of Grand Island voters elected a president whose platform was premised on ugly stereotypes about immigrants, especially Latinos. Thus, the story of immigration in Grand Island is a story of paradoxes, of a community that wouldn't be the same — may not even exist — without the very people that many would rather see leave. The unity, or at least the illusion of it, that came out of the raid is once again at stake, as the fate of immigrants both documented and not hangs in the balance.

Community leaders told me Trump's election has renewed familiar fears felt in 2006. Although many expressed doubt that a similar large-scale raid will happen again, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement data shows individual arrests are on the rise, particularly in the interior as border crossings have decreased. In April, ICE raided a meatpacking plant in rural Tennessee, arresting 97 workers in what immigration experts said was the biggest workplace raid since the George W. Bush years. It surpassed that record in June when it arrested 146 workers in Ohio.

One Latino leader spoke of a whisper network in the community, warnings traveling between family and friends about rumored imminent immigration operations — be careful, they say, *la migra* (Spanish for immigration) is at this restaurant, or on this street.

“This community is going to be marked forever by what happened that day,” said Alma Rawlings, a small business owner from Guatemala who helped families get legal counsel in the days after the raid. “It's not the same. You don't look at the authorities the same. You don't look at people the same.”

Early in the day on Dec. 12, 2006, federal immigration agents raided Grand Island's Swift plant (today owned by JBS USA). Similar raids were happening at Swift plants in Iowa, Minnesota, Texas, Colorado and Utah. A 2009 report from the Center for Immigration Studies, a right-leaning think tank that favors reducing immigration, said almost 1,300 undocumented immigrants were arrested at plants across the country. Several of those detained, including Luisa, were charged with illegally using the identities of U.S. citizens. The report estimated about 23 percent of Swift workers were undocumented immigrants at the time of the raids. ICE reported 252 workers were arrested in Grand Island.

The Swift plant there primarily employs immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America but also in recent years from Somalia and Cuba. Census surveys in 2016 found 29.6 percent of Grand Islanders are Hispanic. Black residents number 2.5 percent, and Asians make up 1.2 percent. Faced with a shortage of workers after the raid, Swift officials orchestrated recruitment efforts in Mexico, offering goods like dishes or blankets to recruit employees, said Jerry Watson, former sheriff for Hall County, which includes the town.

“Okay, it's illegal, but we're kind of winking at it,” Watson said of the attitude among law enforcement and government officials toward illegal immigration then. “We got 10 to 12 million illegal immigrants in this country. To actually pull them out now, that would have a major economic impact.”

In 2006, the Swift plant employed about 2,600 people. That number is now more than 3,000, according to a JBS USA representative. The representative said the company has worked with an ICE program since 2012 “to strengthen the company's legal workforce.”

Dr. Stephen Joel is a man that takes up the room. Tall, with salt and pepper hair and

an authoritative air, he talks animatedly about the raid and the days and months that followed. It's easy to understand why: Joel was superintendent of the school district in 2006 and a key player in orchestrating the effort to take care of children whose parents were affected. He was thrust into the spotlight as Grand Island became a national model for public schools that, in an era where immigration buzzwords like "dreamer" and "sanctuary city" are regularly used by our politicians, are having to grapple with the unique challenges faced by immigrant children. National outlets like the Washington Post and Wall Street Journal wrote about the raids, with the latter specifically highlighting Joel's role. Joel traveled the country speaking to fellow administrators about the experience, and gave a TED talk in Lincoln in 2012, where he spoke about the impact of the raid on his career.

"The politics of it, which I've always been fascinated with, is we were on our own and we ended up being the spokespeople for these impacted community members," he said in an interview.

Today, Joel is superintendent of Lincoln Public Schools, a much larger, urban district in the state's capital. Although Lincoln presents its own integration challenges, he said, Grand Island is an effective case study of the massive influence of immigration on working-class communities.

"As somebody that studies economics, and I used to say in Grand Island prior to the raid, 'What if all the immigrants left?'" he said. "What would happen to the local economy? What would happen to your property values? And of course, the more they thought about it, they realized we've already converted to an economy that's driven by a labor force that we couldn't supply with local Grand Islanders, the sons and daughters of railroad workers."

This wasn't always the case. Grand Island was settled by German immigrants from Iowa in the 1850s. The town's incongruous name — the "grand" descriptor is debatable, the "island" is too — comes from *La Grande Isle*, what French traders christened the "island" formed by the Wood and Platte rivers. The early years were marked by conflict with the Sioux and Pawnee tribes native to the region. The Union Pacific Railroad came to town about a decade later and still whistles through several times a day.

Immigrants from Mexico started to arrive

in the 1970s, in line with national immigration trends. The census in 1970 found 1.5 percent of the population was "of Spanish origin or descent." By 1990, that number was 4.8 percent, and in 2000, the year before I started kindergarten, it reached 16 percent. More than one in four residents were Hispanic or Latino by 2010. Demographic data from 2016 about the Central Nebraska Public Use Microdata Area (a geographic unit used by the U.S. Census), which includes Grand Island, shows Mexico is the most common place of origin for immigrants, followed by Guatemala and Cuba. Relatively high numbers of immigrants in the area are also from Sudan and Somalia.

The face of Grand Island is changing in more nuanced ways than what the numbers suggest, however, and perhaps no one knows this reality more than longtime resident Yolanda Nuncio.

Nuncio is as synonymous with Grand Island as the sandhill cranes that draw conservationists to the town to witness their migration every spring. She's in her 60s and a head shorter than me, though what she may lack in physical presence she more than makes up for in her fiery, take-no-shit attitude. It's no wonder she's been a fixture in Grand Island activist circles for years — right now, she's focused on voter registration. When the raid happened, she was many people's first call.

The first time I met Nuncio last June, we occupied a corner booth at Azteca Market, a local Latino grocery store and restaurant popular at lunch with the downtown office crowd. Over chips and salsa, she traced her journey through Grand Island's various iterations over the years, from the beginning of Latino immigration to the melting pot it is today.

"When I was a kid, the Latino population was mostly Chicanos who had been here for a couple of generations, like my own family," she said. "At that time, it was mostly young, single men, and they came to work, of course, at Swift or other packing plants in the area. I remember this community where you were either related to everybody in town if you were Mexican because our families have been here so long, or you saw the young male population starting to migrate here."

As those young men started families and those families started families, Nuncio said, the

demographics shifted. Suddenly, immigrants from other Latin American countries — mostly Guatemala, Cuba and Honduras — arrived and made their homes alongside the Mexican families who had been in Grand Island for generations. Nowhere embodies this shift more than downtown's 4th Street, an enclave of Hispanic business. Outside 4th Street, locals can eat sambusas at a Somali restaurant and buy bubble tea at an Asian market. Census data indicates there were 516 "minority-owned firms" in Grand Island in 2012, many of them owned by immigrants.

Grand Island's rapid demographic shift is most obvious in its schools. When I started kindergarten in 2001, my elementary school was 43.5 percent non-white, the fourth-most diverse of the district's 14 elementary schools and far more diverse than the city overall. Grand Island Public Schools doesn't shy away from highlighting its diversity: It features a "Newcomers Program" for newly-arrived immigrant children (who usually can't speak English). The administrators I spoke to proudly emphasized the "every" in the first part of the district's "Every Student, Every Day, A Success" mantra. I shared their pride a decade after leaving my alma mater when it made headlines in 2014 for having the highest math and reading proficiency of the 77 high-poverty public elementaries in the state.

This, of course, doesn't mean Grand Island and its surrounding communities haven't experienced racial animus. In a widely publicized incident during the 2010 state men's soccer championship game, students from majority-white Lincoln East High School threw fake green cards on the field, presumably a reference to immigration status, at the opposing team from Omaha South High School, which was 60 percent Latino. A boy wearing a "Border Patrol" shirt at a volleyball game last year sparked controversy in the small town of Lexington, disparagingly nicknamed "Mexington" for its large Hispanic population. Police the same year ticketed a man in nearby Hastings for plastering fliers around town promoting a white supremacist website.

My time in the Grand Island school system gave me the chance to know several kids affected by the raid. One of them was Kevin Garcia. A friend from high school, he has a father, grandfather and numerous aunts, uncles

and cousins who have worked or are working at Swift. Kevin's father, Candido Garcia-Ortiz, and his uncle Artemio Garcia are here legally, yet feared the raid.

As he was moving product across the floor on pallets, "we started noticing it was not normal," Garcia-Ortiz told me in Spanish via an interpreter. "One person came over because they knew that there were two people that didn't have documentation and told them, 'Immigration is here, so you better do something, forget about the job, just go.'"

I spoke with Garcia and Garcia-Ortiz, who immigrated from Guatemala in the late 1980s and early 1990s, respectively, on an October morning at their small bungalow in the north part of the city. Garcia is a forklift operator who came to the U.S. when he was 18 and was present for a similar raid at the plant in 1992. He said people started running as soon as they saw ICE, looking for storage closets and corners to hide in. He said he was less afraid than during the first raid because he had his papers but was still nervous. The fear people felt then still lingers, he said.

"It's more fear," he said, gesturing broadly while we sat at his dining room table, which displayed pumpkins painted like sugar skulls for Halloween. "You can see more difference between white people and Hispanics and different things going around between those two."

For their part, local police and the sheriff's department made a point of staying out of the raid as much as possible, only assisting with traffic flow around the plant. Steve Lamken, who was police chief during the raid, said ICE alerted the department of the operation in advance, but GIPD declined to be involved.

"I didn't really want to be a part of the raid itself," Lamken said in an interview. "There was not a doubt it was going to be disruptive. When they leave at the end of the day, it's still our community to take care of."

Watson, the former sheriff, was less diplomatic.

"It was a dog and pony show," he said, adding that his department was given less than 24 hours notice of the raid.

"I wasn't happy, because there was absolutely no communication or coordination," he said. "That didn't sit well with me, because we live in the community, and for them to swoop in here ... was very disconcerting."

An ICE representative declined to comment, as none of its current agents were involved in the raid.

Meanwhile, teachers and administrators across town fought through the fog surrounding what exactly had happened at the factory. Those I interviewed recalled trying to identify which kids would go home to an empty house that night while keeping their students' fears at bay.

"It was really about running our day as normal as possible for our kids' sakes," said Kris Schneider, a former principal at a local elementary school. "A lot of work that day was done behind the scenes."

Teachers stayed at school late into the night until every student had a place to go. Sometimes that place was a teacher's home until a relative could be found. But despite teachers' best efforts, the raid degraded students' trust the moment it happened.

"Kids wouldn't go to school," Nuncio said. "People from the schools would go out and not find anybody home... They would drive through the trailer parks and it was like it was abandoned because there were not children playing outside, the curtains were all closed, the doors were all closed, because people were fearful."

When students did come to school, emotions were high. The rapport that teachers had tried so tirelessly to create, especially with newly-arrived immigrant children, quickly dissipated.

"One of my students said, 'I'm not supposed to tell you anything anymore,'" said Tracy Morrow, a teacher in the Newcomers Program for immigrant children. "It's tough because of the political part of it. It's easy to say we're going to love them all and do it all. There were a lot of emotions that next day."

However, amid tragedy was an opportunity for the community to step up. Cindy Wells, the cheerful activities director popular among students at Grand Island Senior High, told me a story of one girl. She was pregnant, left without a family after the raid and wanted to drop out. Wells and other staffers rallied around her and pooled their money to pay her rent and utilities so she would have a place to stay while she finished school. The girl later got married and now has three children that she still brings to the school to visit Wells.

Wells is a no-nonsense woman, tough but

approachable. She has a kind of legendary status among students, who regularly give her high fives as she walks briskly through the halls. But she gets emotional when she starts talking about her students.

"Our kids come everyday to really work hard to get an education," she said, her voice getting soft. "They're working really, really hard to get their green cards to stay here. I learned so much just from watching our kids go through the process. ... I'm so thankful that our kids are accepting of one another."

Wells is not alone in her sentiments. Joel, who arrived in Grand Island in 2000, believes the effect of the raid on children was key in changing people's minds about immigration, especially those who, in his words, "didn't understand what was happening to their railroad community."

"We all believe in kids," he said. "The American society believes in kids and the family structure. ... It is a very conservative community, probably the most conservative community I've ever lived in. But I also felt like after the raid, education carried a higher priority, and people began to realize that these are human beings."

The fact remains that no matter the number of platitudes about unity and diversity, most voters in Grand Island voted against immigrants. Trump's election has ensured that sensible immigration reform won't be happening anytime soon. So where does that leave us?

"Yes, we had a lot of people stand up and help, but at the same time, there was an opportunity missed by many community leaders," said Carlos Barcenas, a community organizer who came to Nebraska from the Mexican state of Guerrero in 1994. "I was able to see who I was really able to count on."

Some people I interviewed shied away from discussing the president, even refusing to call him by name. But others, like Nuncio, didn't mince words when telling me what they think of Trump, who infamously kicked off his presidential campaign by characterizing Mexicans as rapists who are bringing drugs and crime to the U.S.

"[Trump] has legitimized racism, he has legitimized hate," Nuncio said. "We've come so far in race relations and equality and bigotry and all that and I think we've gone back 20 to 30 years."

As people continue to nurse old wounds, organizations like the Multicultural Coalition have tried to connect immigrant and native-born populations through pancake feeds and community dinners, where half of those at the table are minorities. Initiatives like the Newcomers Program and the popular annual ethnic festival have a similar goal.

However, assimilation takes time, and often several generations. Rawlings, the small business owner from Guatemala, let out a deep sigh when I asked her about the challenges immigrants to Grand Island face. Rawlings, who is married to a white man and has a son about my age, said an unwillingness to step outside the bubble is just as much a problem within the Latino community as it is within Grand Island as a whole. She speaks with pride of her son, a legal interpreter at a public defender's office.

"I ask my son how [students] many drop [out of school], why they don't apply for a scholarship?" she said. "It's ignorance, the culture and the parents. We are not there yet. ... The Latino culture tells you you're 18, you're done, you get married, that's it. It will take a really long time to do the crossover."

Like Rawlings, Watson cited cultural hurdles, as well as institutional ones. He spoke of largely futile efforts to diversify the police department.

"I can tell you right now, I'd love to get Hispanic, Spanish-speaking officers and deputies to work for me," he said. "I've seen them come and go over the years, but not in this department. It's hard to get them even to apply."

He continued, "I was just talking to the director of the Multicultural Coalition. We were talking about the Sudanese and the Somalis and how it would just be wonderful to get somebody to just apply. It can give you that dimension because Grand Island — you can look at all the different communities across this state, and I think Grand Island is a mixing bowl."

"I've often pondered why did the government pick the cities they picked in 2006," Joel told me during our first interview almost a year ago. "Was it because nobody was paying attention in the Midwest?"

It's a question that has been on my mind since. Grand Island isn't a place that was meant for the limelight. And when something does happen, something as life-alteringly massive as that day in 2006, well, that's when Grand Island

shows itself, for better or worse.

Life is happening here. People are going to work and supporting their families and fighting for their rights, and when ICE plans a raid or the president says he's going to build a wall, it affects them just as much as it affects New York or Los Angeles.

"When we talk about immigration, we think it is a Latino issue," Nuncio said. "It is not a Latino issue. It is an issue that affects literally people from all over the world."

A lot happens in 12 years. I graduated high school, then college. I bounced around the country and once across the Atlantic Ocean for various jobs. Now I'm in California, living a life utterly different than what I could have ever dreamed in 2006. But Grand Island has stayed remarkably the same: not static, but steady. People have moved only to come back a few years later. Several of my childhood friends have gotten married or had their first children, buying houses blocks from where they grew up. I say these things without an ounce of cynicism. This constancy keeps me coming back.

But for Martha and others whose lives were changed by the raid, constancy hasn't been an option. In the four years that Martha has been without her mother, each day is rife with new worries, about Luisa's health and safety, raising her boys, keeping her family together. They go to Mexico at least once a year. Martha says a silver lining has been getting closer to her sons now that her mother isn't around to help take care of them.

Still, she wishes it didn't have to be this way. Late one night, as I was wrapping up the first draft of this story, I found myself on Martha's Facebook page. Like any doting mom, her page is cluttered with photos of her sons, in front of Christmas trees and with their dog. But one photo caught my eye. It's Luisa, a regal woman with silver hair, standing front and center, surrounded by an army of her many daughters, including Martha.

One commenter complimented the photo. Did you all go home? she asked. Martha responded, promising to pass along greetings, and said no, the photo was a few years old. She added: "I wish I was home though with everyone..."