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Catering Hall Harbors Immigrant Families Through Underground Employment

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It is Saturday evening at a catering hall nestled in a corner of Queens, peak work hours for the kitchen workers. Dinner is about to be served.

Some 400 party guests are seated at their tables below chandeliers waiting for their main course to be served. Sometimes they can hear plates clanging against each other behind the kitchen doors as a kitchen helper piles up those 400 plates. The temperature is getting hotter in the kitchen as the chefs finish off the main courses: stirring 3-foot wide pots of chicken francesé, slicing roasts of prime rib, peeking at the long platters of broiled salmon in the oven.

On a particularly rigorous night as this, even the dishwashers are pulled out of their muggy corners on the opposite side of the kitchen to help serve dinner, the most intense operation of the night. Waiters zip through the kitchen and line up beside the piles of plates to carry up to 16 dinner plates at once on a large tray into the ballroom. The trays are heavy, and for some it is a strain, but they don't show it. They proudly lift the trays onto their shoulders with looks of satisfaction at their hard work.

In many ways this is a typical night for any busy catering hall, but this hall is not typical. But this is not a typical catering hall. What the guests at weddings and other celebrations don't know is that almost all of the staff are immigrants. Indeed it must remain anonymous.

For six decades, the hall has been a source of work for generations of immigrants without authorization to work legally in the United States. By not reporting its workers it has lowered its labor costs and tapped into a steady pool of reliable employees. But it has also served as an important gateway for the immigrants and their families who established the economic stability that they hoped for when they arrived in the United States.

It has been an occupational backdrop for personal and complicated stories of immigrants from around the world; at first they were primarily from Italy but now they are from Latin American countries, largely from Ecuador, Venezuela and Mexico.

Big waves of immigrants started coming from Europe in the 1880s in search of better economic opportunities. New York swelled with more than XX million immigrants from Europe and later from closer places such as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Each generation came and assimilated as generations went by.

The stories of the catering hall workers—younger and older, longtime residents and new arrivals—reflect the different struggles of immigration across the different generations of immigrants who work there. Their stories also show the common bonds for the different generations and the longstanding dreams of America.

Some of the older immigrants working at the catering hall arrived to the United States decades ago and quickly found the restaurant as a means to start earning the wealth that a trip to the U.S. promised. They left their homelands permanently and sought to resettle their families far from the poverty and corruption at home. They are now the chefs and the “captains” who manage the wait staff, some of which became citizens, and are experiencing the fruits of their long-term sacrifices with their growing American-born families.

They have overseen newer waves of younger undocumented immigrants who have taken their places doing the more menial work. Most of the undocumented workers at the catering hall now are living their lives as providers to their wives and children back home. Many of them, unlike the older workers, intend to one day return to their homeland; they have temporarily traveled to the U.S. for the economic opportunities that will help them build better homes for themselves and their families in countries such as Ecuador and Mexico. They plan to leave once they have made enough money.

But many of the youngest workers at the hall are the children of those older workers or are members of the successive generations of their growing families. While they have not experienced the challenges of long voyages and resettling in a new country, they have still inherited new futures in the U.S. from their parents who sacrificed so much for them. And they are struggling to assimilate and take advantage of the opportunities those futures present.

This is particularly familiar to me; it is my own story. My parents arrived in the U.S. separately as immigrants from Ecuador in the '70s and '80s and have worked at the catering hall themselves for the past 20 years. When I was 15, I started working there too.

As a new journalist starting out in the one the most fraught political climates immigrants have ever faced, I felt compelled to explore this world and the courageous, colorful and hardworking people in it who are now on the coalface of what is potentially America's biggest political upheaval in decades.

Their stories reveal personal and complicated accounts of sacrifice, adaptation and hopefulness.

Chapter 1:

At about noon on any Sunday morning, the senior chef, Manuel—whose name has been changed to protect his identity—silently dumps the water out of a 2-foot pot of boiled pasta. A burst of steam shrouds his face.

His forearms are thin and his skin sags. The pot seems to outweigh his small frame.

His face is unseen behind the metal counter while young waiters wasp back and forth in front of him and other chefs are prepare to feed the weekend's party guests, Manuel almost disappears in the background of the bustling kitchen.

But despite falling into the shadows, Manuel is the face of the opportunities made available to the immigrant workers.

Manuel grew up in the 50s when Ecuador was facing a series of economic misfortunes that led to what socio-anthropologist Victoria Stone describes as three recognizable “waves” of Ecuadorian out-migration.

Provinces in Ecuador were the center of a prosperous Panama hat trade before they suffered an unexpected demise in the '50s when large distributors in the U.S. and Europe opted for hats manufactured in other countries.

Manuel was 22 years old during the 1970s when he first tried to enter the United States. But he failed. He tried twice more before he was successful. He used a falsified passport, a former vehicle for clandestine migration that was made for him in the mountainous regions of Ecuador where he lived until he was 20. He is what scholars call an economic migrant, someone who moves to improve his standard of living.

He worked in a hardware store in Ecuador and says he would work only a couple of times a week, giving him a very easygoing life but could not make a living of the limited work.

“You have to work really hard in the United States,” he said. “Here, I work all day for six days a week, but I make money. I didn't make money in Ecuador.”

Once he arrived to the United States and began to understand the extent of the opportunities the U.S. offered him, he orchestrated the resettlement of his entire family. He paid for their falsified passports, so they could travel the same way he had. He said he oversaw six flights from Ecuador on which his family was on board.

They all had their own circuitous routes to citizenship, which he does not want to talk about for this report.

A second wave of out-migration came after falling oil prices and increasing inflation in the late 80s, which caused the Ecuadorian population in the U.S. to double. Naturally, Ecuadorians began to look beyond their borders for labor opportunities.

The third wave occurred in the 90s into early 2000s when Ecuador underwent long political and economic turmoil resulting from the dollarization of their currency and from various toppled presidencies.

Throughout these waves of migration to the United States from Ecuador, Manuel initiated a long legacy of bringing family members and many other immigrants to the restaurant, which has often served as their first place of employment after immigrating.

On this recent evening, the sous chef next to him seasoning the salmon is his cousin; the third chef around the corner preparing potato croquettes is a childhood friend. Other friends and relatives are scattered through the kitchen. They didn't arrive to the U.S. at the same time, but they all knew each other as schoolboys in the same Ecuadorian neighborhood.

When Stone, the sociologist, said, "some become a source of a social network," she could have been describing how Manuel helped others migrate and assimilate.

In his early days as a dishwasher starting in 1978, Manuel introduced the catering hall as a means for work to people he knew arriving to the U.S. But now, as the head chef, he is responsible for hiring everyone in the kitchen: the dishwashers, the helpers and the chefs. He has become a constant, a godfather-like figure for employees who arrived at the restaurant shortly after stepping on American soil.

Manuel's aid to them, however, extends beyond the introduction to the restaurant. As his network grew, he began to help those who encountered challenges on their treks across the border. If there were sudden unexpected costs or if their debt to coyotes grew, Manuel would lend them the money they needed to arrive safely. They would pay him back eventually, from their wages.

Many have stayed and continue working at the catering hall to build and maintain a better life in America.

Manuel was directly responsible for bringing many migrants to the catering hall. But many others, like my dad, found their own way there.

My dad arrived a few years after Manuel. He started out as a doorman but he has climbed the catering hall's ladder of success through 23 years of working there: first doorman, then waiter, then bartender, and now "captain," who manages the wait staff during events. He is one of only a few at the restaurant who has worked all those positions.

At 61 years old, he is still a very strong man, carrying the heavy trays of dinner for the younger staff who are still building the strength to carry them.

In his words: "Work doesn't escape me. I go where there is work."

And then his voice gets choked up as he tearfully remembers his mother in Ecuador, who is the reason he came to the United States almost 40 years ago.

"A solitary woman, abandoned by her husband," he said. "A female fighter. She came to this country to be able to take care of her children."

My dad is one of nine siblings. And he remembers dropping out of middle school to help his mother provide for his family. Selling in a market, driving buses, cleaning racetracks.

He got up at sunrise for five years since he was 16 years old to unload trucks of plantains. He was paid one plantain for every truck he unloaded. Later in the day he would lay out a blanket on the street with the plantains to sell what he earned.

"Like I said, I happily worked," he said. "Provided for my siblings and my mother. Thank God, she was a woman without vices."

In 1978 when his uncle, my grandma's brother was able to earn legal residency and petition to bring her as a resident. And she did the same for my dad.

Petitioning for a relative's legal status gives the applicant a place in line to be approved to immigrate to the U.S. after passing background checks and meeting requirements for admission, according to the Department of Homeland Security website. It only took a year for my dad to get legal status, a process that takes much longer today.

"Wait times for adult children used to be a year or 2, but now it's 7," said Jennifer Oltarsh, an immigration attorney in New York. "For siblings it could be 10 to 13 years."

His mother always wanted to move back to Ecuador. Not my dad.

"I always say I was born and raised in Ecuador, but I will grow and die here," he said. "It's not that I am rich here. But life is a bit better here."

He held a few odd jobs as he got settled in with the help of his uncle. He worked 12 years in a different catering hall on Long Island and in a textile factory before he found this catering hall.

Before starting to work at the catering hall, he met my mother, a woman from his same coastal town in Ecuador. They were married a year later and began to put down roots to the U.S. to become Americans and raise an American family.

He found the restaurant a year after I was born and it has been his longest-held job in the U.S.

He is proud to work there. Like Manuel, he has earned the respect of the rest of the staff. The waiters and bartenders wear plain black vests but my Dad wears a black jacket with gold accents.

The younger generations, who work there for different reasons than the pioneers, as outlined below in Chapter 3, like to poke fun at him, often mocking the orders he barks as work gets busier during their shifts.

“Guys! Ok! Break is over, waters on the tables,” they laugh, puffing their chests in playful mockery of my dad’s emphatic work ethic. *“NOW!”*

But they still hug him and laugh with him when they walk in on Saturdays after not seeing him the entire week. It’s that very tough and militaristic manner with which he performs his work responsibilities that they find so endearing.

Manuel works full time at the restaurant and it is his primary source of income; becoming the head chef was his attainment of the “American Dream.” He was able to send his 3 kids to college and his oldest son is a successful banker with Citibank. They live comfortable lives with the wealth that the restaurant afforded them.

However the same can’t be said for many of the immigrants at the restaurant. For my dad, for example, it still serves as the second or third job on the weekends.

The pay is below the minimum wage: \$60-70 for every 7-hour party shift. But they make it work with the number of shifts they commit to. Their days start as early as 9 a.m. and end as late as 2 a.m.

When waiters stream in to begin their shifts after a late shift the night before, Manuel will often joke about this.

“Hey, hey, hey, did you sleep here last night?” he jokes.

The older generations like Manuel and my dad don’t see themselves as successful at work. They view their legacies as the successes of their children, the seeds they planted. It is emotional for them to talk about that.

“In this country, everything is sacrifice,” my dad said, blinking back tears. *“We want the best for our children. For them to be professionals. That’s the only legacy we leave them with. There’s no money to inherit. No wealth. Just their education. That’s our job as parents.”*

[video of above quote]

I have always been very aware of my family's struggles as immigrants, and those of my being a first-generation American.

Translating for my parents at an early age, navigating college alone, negotiating a salary alone were trials for my sisters and I that let us know we were the first in our family to experience the United States. My family has no history here. The first time I filled out the FAFSA alone, I made so many mistakes that I accidentally processed myself as "independent orphan."

Our struggles are different than those of my parents, but my dad always reminds us of the opportunities we inherited.

Maritza Briceño is another longtime worker who sees the fruits of her labor through the accomplishments of her son, Mario.

Briceño arrived from Venezuela in 2004 alongside her husband's family—many of which have worked at the restaurant—who fled the economic collapse that followed the falling oil prices in the 80s.

"Thank God Mario has been such a good student since we got to this country," said Briceño. "I am so grateful for Mario for that, for being a good student. He has known how to reward us for all we've sacrificed."

Mario, who also works at the restaurant, is the first among his cousins who came from Venezuela to go to college. He is now a freshman in pre-dentistry.

The Venezuelan economic crisis that caused inflation to skyrocket and the bolivar currency to devalue in Venezuela created weaker living conditions for Briceño and her family.

She had to save up for a month to buy her toddler a pair of shoes, she said.

"If I wanted to buy, say a blender, I would have to make monthly payments on it," said Briceño. "For a blender. Same for an iron. I hate to admit this but sometimes the collector would come knocking on my door on the date we arranged I would make a payment. But I didn't have the money. So I would pretend not to be home. I didn't open the door. I am so ashamed to say it, but that's how it was. I wouldn't open the door."

So she said that while it pained her to leave her parents and the rest of her family behind, she thought of Mario. And she held on to the fact that he would at least be able to have a better education in the U.S.

The methods for arriving to the U.S. were less difficult for Briceño because her father-in-law had earned legal residency and was able to petition for her family to travel with green cards, the way my grandma did for my dad.

And they found the catering hall. Briceño began working there, but not in the job of her dreams.

“I arrived to work in a bathroom,” Briceño said, breaking into laughter. “Cleaning bathrooms, cleaning the floor. But I am not ashamed to say it, to be honest. That I came here to work in a bathroom.”

In the 12 years she has been working at the restaurant, she has moved up to work at the coat check, then a waitress, and eventually to be a bartender.

She says the people who work at the restaurant are family to her. Mostly everyone in the staff is Latino and the restaurant serves as a center for community and familiarity bound by the staff’s journeys to the U.S. and their ensuing lives in this new country.

“All of us are friends who treat each other well,” Briceño said. “Sometimes I get to the restaurant and I tell the guys in the kitchen: ‘I was missing the family.’ After so much time working there, you see them as family.”

But she continues to take care of the family she left behind, who are now suffering food and supply shortages in the worsening economic crisis in Venezuela.

Briceño holds up her hand to about her stomach while she sits, signaling the height of the boxes she fills with supplies to send to Venezuela. They are filled with toothpaste, toothbrushes and toilet paper, and notebooks, crayons, pencils, and clothes for her nieces and nephews.

“If I wasn’t in this country, I wouldn’t be able to help my family,” she said. “And they are so grateful for things like what? Toothpaste, shampoos, you know why? Because it’s so hard for them to buy those things there. So I buy it here and send it to them.”

She sometimes struggles with her family’s growing expectations in Venezuela to provide for them. Because the reality is her jobs as a bartender on the weekends and a home attender for elderly people during the week can only afford so much. And her family back home needs more.

“Everyone thinks that coming to this country is like going to another world,” she said. “The fact is that they think that if you live in the United States, you have a lot of money. That one is rich. But it’s not like that. They don’t think of the fact that if you earn more, you have to spend more too. You spend so much money here. In what? Rent. Everything you make here in this country you use to pay rent.”

Nonetheless, it is because of the jobs at the restaurant that these workers have sustained that they are able to both begin their new lives in the U.S. and can provide

healthier livelihoods to their families in their home countries and the ones who have resettled in the United States.

For other immigrant families at the restaurant, the reasons for migration were different. Sometimes their narratives had more egregious outcomes.

Chapter 2:

“I just about lost my life in this country,” said Angel Cantos, perched upright at the edge of his bed in the tiny room he rents in the basement of a two-family home in Queens.

He maintained his dignified posture, but his eyes sank as he talked about the family he left behind in Ecuador 29 years ago. Things had not gone as he hoped when he set out to make an investment for his family.

He immigrated to the United States with the intention of returning to Ecuador after a few short years of making enough money to give his family a better life. He arrived at the catering hall to work as a dishwasher, dreaming of what he might have when he returned to Ecuador.

“My only thoughts were to have a house,” said Cantos. “And that was the basis on which I left my country. Everyone wishes to have a home. And that was my thinking.”

Cantos, like many immigrant providers who come to the U.S. to send enough money home for larger investments, found that their family ties become strained as their absence grows longer than anyone expected.

He had initially thought to be returning to Ecuador after three years, but it had taken him that long to find a job and repay his debt to his cousin for financing his trip to America. But he then lost his biggest reason to go home.

“My wife told me it was impossible to keep waiting for me,” said Cantos, 62.

“It’s a sad story to tell. I stayed here alone. It was a huge suffering for me.”

His dreams lost; Cantos realized he was better off staying in the U.S. He worked hard, saved his money and eventually earned citizenship. He left the restaurant and made his career as a chef at another restaurant in Manhattan.

However, once he retired, he went back to the hall to work weekends to save up extra money so he can return to his homeland. He is washing dishes and assisting chefs in the kitchen with other menial work.

Alfredo, 45, is considered a “general helper” at the restaurant. He brings up large bags of frozen foods from the downstairs refrigerator, cleans up the large ballrooms in nearly impossible one-hour turnarounds before the next party, and washes dishes.

As the general helper, he is valued and cared for by a majority of the staff. Many of them affectionately call him Alfredito.

In Ecuador he worked as an “arrumador,” a banana-picker. He was required to fill two trucks with boxes of bananas a day, which equaled about 2000 boxes, Alfredo said. And he earned 15 dollars a day.

That could only afford him weekly food shopping and he had three kids he wanted to see finish their schooling.

His trip to the U.S. was meant to lift his family out of hardship and pay for all three of his children to go to school, and he has been here for 11 years.

His family disintegrated in Ecuador three years ago.

But it had been coming for almost a decade. Just three months after he left Ecuador in 2006, his 14-year-old daughter became pregnant.

“I thought, what could I do from over here?” said Alfredo, recalling his helplessness at being far away. “I thought I risked everything here for their well-being.”

In frustration, he watched his family fall apart from a distance:

His son had intended to go to the military, a decision that made Alfredo proud since he had served in the military too.

“I thought he would represent me in some way if he went to the military,” said Alfredo. “I had everything prepared for him, I sent him money and helped him with what he had to pack.”

But his son had a girlfriend who gave him an ultimatum: he could stay with her, or leave to the military and lose her. So he didn’t go.

“Another disappointment,” said Alfredo.

His youngest daughter, he said, now 19, was ready to graduate high school two years ago. He said he was her last hope at some accomplishment with his family. And he still remembers her promises to not let him down.

“I always had my hands open with money for her, she was about to graduate,” said Alfredo, before taking a long pause and looked down to stare at his lap. “Then she

was pregnant, too. I spent so much and supported her so much. I have to say, she was all I had left.”

He and his wife argued a lot while he was here, he said, about the way their children’s lives ended up. They blamed each other for their children not finishing school and starting families too soon.

He says his children always fight with their partners.

The last thing he did for his family was build them a house, the way Cantos wanted to do for his family. Then he and the mother of his children decided to go their separate ways three years ago.

I can’t do any more for them.”

He has paid off the \$14,000 debt that it cost him to travel to the U.S. by boat, truck and foot. Manuel had lent him a portion of that, the way he has sometimes helped fellow Ecuadoreans on their journeys.

After a decade of living in Queens, and now with no family to provide for, he is unsure of what happens now, especially while undocumented.

“I have to attempt to make something out of the future,” Alfredo said. “[My friends] tell me I should make a life here.”

He said a lot of the friends he traveled with and who he has kept in touch with now have wives and families within their immigrant community. But many of their wives are fellow undocumented immigrants, which means they cannot earn legal status through marriage.

They encourage him to do the same. But he is conflicted between finding love—potentially with someone who is undocumented therefore, eliminating the only chance he has at earning legal status—or finding someone to marry him for the sole purpose of gaining legal status.

But marrying someone for the purpose of earning a green card is illegal. While it is not a common crime in New York, according to immigration attorney Jennifer Oltarsh, the process is not a straightforward path to citizenship.

“Your spouse can file for you but you still have to go back to get your visa,” she said.

If the foreign spouse entered the U.S. without inspection like Alfredo and other who entered illegally, they still have to leave the country and conclude their immigration process through U.S. consulates abroad to obtain their green card.

Moreover, if they stayed for over a year, like Alfredo, they can be barred from re-entry to the U.S. for up to 10 years once they leave the U.S.

“They’ve found families and have children and I look at that and think, well that’s love,” said Alfredo. “But there is hope for them to get their citizenship, at least through marriages. That’s how I am thinking about it.”

Both Cantos and Alfredo are in transitional periods, making decisions for their futures.

“I want to rest now in my country in peace,” said Cantos. “I had decent work in this country without problems. Here, I don’t need anything, I had it all.”

“The only thing I need is a new wife, but one can show up at any moment,” he jokes.

Meanwhile, they spend long days in their humid and steamy corners of the catering hall behind metal countertops where waiters dump the dirty dishes they collect from the ballrooms. Sometimes they have to step out into the kitchen to larger sinks where chefs dump the large, dirty pots that they’ve used to cook with.

The same goes for Jose, another dishwasher who immigrated from Mexico.

He is a big man who seems to enjoy carrying 20 dinner plates on each arm after they have been washed and takes them to the hotbox in the kitchen where they are kept. He walks nonchalantly even though his face drips with sweat and his t-shirts are ripped and soaked from the heat of the dishwashing corner.

Jose arrived to the U.S. with his second wife 13 years ago. They had a daughter, born in the U.S. His wife and daughter went back to Mexico for a family emergency a few months later and decided they didn’t want to come back to the U.S.

Strained by distance, they eventually ended their relationship.

Jose has tried to sustain a relationship with his daughters, one from each of his marriages. Although, like Alfredo, he has watched his second daughter make poor decisions: she dropped out of the fourth grade and “wears makeup like a clown,” said Jose.

But he has stayed for the common dream: to build a house and maybe open a business. Yet he remains disillusionsed with the way his trip to the U.S. proved more detrimental than beneficial.

He hasn’t built his house because has been difficult to coordinate the funds he had to send back to Mexico to pay the construction workers. A lot of his money was lost or misused because he wasn’t there to take control, he said.

Although he is convinced he wants to go back home, he has enjoyed the arduous labor that many immigrants resent.

“I enjoy working hard,” he said. “I love the agility, the velocity of the work. And I like putting in effort to the work that I do.”

Yet he feels a commitment to his daughters in Mexico, who regularly ask him to come home. And he is tired of feeling the insecurity that comes with being undocumented.

“You always live in fear that some federal officer will come up to you and ask, ‘where are your papers?’ and I just don’t have anything,” he said. “And I think that if I can get stopped like that and then get arrested, it’s better that I just go.”

The group of dishwashers has benefitted from the restaurant’s informal employment opportunities that don’t require them to have legal status; Cantos is the only one of the three to have gained citizenship during his long stay when his former employer helped him get an H1B visa.

“Immigrants don’t come in the country to harm this country, we come here to work,” said Cantos. “The reality is that immigrants do these jobs because they come in undocumented. If we had legal status, we wouldn’t be in factories or restaurant, we would be at the level of Americans too.”

And because Cantos believes immigrants lend a hand to the U.S. with their hard labor, he believes political leaders should help immigrants with their needs.

“And the most basic thing we ask for is help with our legal status,” he said.

Chapter 3:

Every time Tony, 55, looks up from his desk at the executive office at the catering hall, he faces a mirror he hung on the wall.

Beyond his own reflection, he can see a portrait of his late Italian grandfather that hangs behind him, the founder and original owner of the catering hall.

“I think he would be happy with the job that I am doing,” said Tony, who inherited the family business. “I think the bottom line is that I am very happy that I have been able to continue a family business in Queens that employs people. I’d like to think that people are better off with us being here than if we’re not here.”

Many of the catering hall’s immigrant workers would probably agree with him. The older immigrants speak with gratitude for the jobs they have that have helped

support them and their families—both financially and by protecting them while they remain in the shadows with the undocumented community.

Tony and his grandfather have helped a handful of workers gain legal status. For starters, the head chef, Manuel, and another longtime worker who is not profiled in this piece were granted amnesty with the help of Tony's grandfather when the Reagan administration passed a law in 1986 that would grant amnesty and give legal status to the country's undocumented immigrants. Tony's grandfather made a written statement to meet the law's requirement that employers attest to their employees' immigration status.

Tony himself helped another get an H1B visa, which allows U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in specialty occupations. He sponsored one of the chef's as a specialist in making "ceviche," a traditional Ecuadorian shrimp cocktail, for the parties at the catering hall.

However, Tony says it used to be easier pre-9/11 to grant these visas.

"The H1-B is almost impossible now," he said. "Unless you're a tech company like Apple and you have an engineer that you need to bring in. They used to be very restaurant-friendly, they are not anymore."

Tony said the restaurant has always employed immigrant workers; although they weren't always from Spanish-speaking countries the way they are today. He said he remembers the Italian workers in the early days of the catering hall's launch in 1951.

Tony's grandfather was an immigrant himself, making the catering hall not only a haven for immigrant workers, but its very existence is the realization of one immigrant's American dream.

"He came here in the 1920s from Italy, didn't speak a word of English," said Tony. "It was a very big thing for him to immigrate here, learn the language, go into business and his children all went to college. My grandfather stopped going to school when he was like in 6th grade. That was a very big thing."

His grandfather's story mirrors those of many at the hall.

Tony has become critical of the U.S.' increasingly hostile attitudes toward immigration. He is a registered Democrat, considers himself a conservative. And is disappointed by the stance of the Republican Party.

"I am very embarrassed by the lack of knowledge of our politicians who don't realize just how important to our economy and our country immigrant labor is," he said. "I just don't think that if they would only stop and talk to us and realize that a lot of this immigrant labor is the backbone of the American economy."

Sympathizing with some workers' instability and sensing the tension in the kitchen after Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election, he called together the chefs, dishwashers and general helpers, including Alfredo.

"I explained to them that I think now, more than ever, we have to hope for immigration reform," he said. "All the fear mongering out there, it's just not going to happen."

He cautioned the workers against getting into trouble, explaining that a criminal record would be the primary disqualifier for earning legal status. He called on them to find proof of how long they have been in the U.S. And he tried to reassure them to not live in fear of deportation and to count on a road to citizenship in the near future.

"I can't guarantee that, but I think hearing that from me at least put them a little at ease 'cause, I mean, I did go to college and I know what's going on in the world," said Tony. "And I believe cooler heads will prevail and that they'll realize you can't just round up all these people and send them all home and have them line up to come back in."

However, Trump's campaign was at least partially won on anti-immigration rhetoric. And it is unclear what an ensuing immigration policy would look like. A Trump administration could potentially choose to impose penalties for employers who hire undocumented immigrants, contrary to what Tony anticipates will happen.

"Then we would have to probably have to revisit that and, look, I don't want to go to jail," said Tony. "If they were going to put me in jail for 5 years for every employee, then obviously that would impact what I do here."

The catering hall already faces other contentious legal problems for underpaying its workers, offering no benefits and requiring that employees work extensive hours.

Waiters make \$60 per 7-hour shift, where they set up the dining rooms, are responsible for an average of 30 guests, carry heavy trays of dinnerware and silverware and then clean up the room at the end of the party. And it is common to have two shifts per day.

Chefs serve hundreds of people per weekend, according to Alfredo, and the kitchen workers and dishwashers make less than \$8/hour for helping run the kitchen.

"Do I think I am taking advantage?" said Tony. "Absolutely not. Do I feel like it's mutually beneficial? I like to think any employee/employer relationship is beneficial to both. Are they going to get rich working here? No. Do they have a job, are they happy working here?"

He thinks yes. He said staff demonstrates their loyalty in many ways. At the end of the night, many workers go by his office to say goodbye. Some show affection by giving him presents during the holidays.

“I think they are loyal for a reason,” said Tony. “I think if there was resentment there, then I wouldn’t get the affection I get from my staff.”

Tony has also allowed the families to bring their children to work with them while they finish their shifts. He said he understands that families cannot always afford to pay for a babysitter and he allows them to hang out in the coat check or in the kitchen as long as they are not disruptive.

My sister and I spent hours of our weekends at the catering hall when we were younger when my parents scrambled to find a babysitter.

“You know, I think that trickles down and it sends a message,” said Tony. “I like to think we are fair to our employees. We don’t yell and scream; we treat them well. I like to think we are a very family-friendly place to work.

He said he doesn’t make conscious decisions to hire immigrants; rather, the makeup of the staff is a reflection of the diversity of Queens. He said he won’t even hire receptionists or what he calls “front of the house” workers, if they don’t speak Spanish.

“It’s the natural evolution of Queens,” he said. “There’s just a tremendous amount of the South American population that has parties here and they expect the banquet managers to be able to speak in their native tongue.”

While the future of the restaurant as haven for immigrant workers remains uncertain, Tony holds on to the possibility that the U.S. will offer a path to citizenship to the millions of undocumented immigrants who live here.

He says sanctuary city policies essentially do what he does with his business on a larger scale: “giving these people a place to work and allowing them to contribute to New York.”

And he also remembers his grandfather, who he says is no different than his employees. But he points out that his grandfather came at a time when America was welcoming immigrant labor.

“They were welcoming people because we were building,” he said. “Now there seems to be this philosophy where *‘I’ve got mine and I don’t want anyone else to have theirs. I am holding on to mine and if I let these people in, they are going to take some of it away.’* We are not going to grow with this mentality.”

Chapter 4:

“Well, my cousins started there and then I started there and then all my little cousins grew up and started working at [the catering hall] because they wanted money,” said Angelica Tapia, describing the framework for how children as young as 14 from large South American immigrant families began to work at the same establishment.

“Since we do come from an immigrant family, our parents get the minimum or below minimum pay,” Tapia said, now 33 years old and one of the head chef’s nieces. “I know I saw the struggle. And it was a way for me to release their duty of giving me money or whenever I needed stuff. It was a way of helping them out.”

Tapia was just under two years old when she illegally crossed the Mexican border into the U.S. with her family. Her mother, Manuel’s sister-in-law, was pregnant with her younger brother Edison, the only one of her family to be born in the United States.

Upon arriving, many families like Tapia’s get to know the long and steep ascent they face in order to build comfortable lives. The restaurant is often their first place of employment, giving them the chance to adapt to their new country while remaining among members of their own Latino immigrant community. And their children are no strangers to their limited opportunities.

“As a kid, I had to step up and help my family,” said David Beltran, 18—Maritza’s nephew—who followed his mother and brother in working at the restaurant. “When I started working I was 14 years old. The children of immigrants work to help their parents, to help themselves.”

But these kids make up a spectrum of their own. While Beltran and Tapia characterize young breadwinners for their continuously acclimating families, they still arrived at a young enough age to better assimilate and take advantage of the opportunities offered to American citizens. They were able to obtain an education, a grasp of the language, a better sense of how their futures will unfold in a country they have spent the majority of their life in.

For others, like Jose-Luis Leon, arriving at 14 years old, it was more difficult. He describes it as like being born again.

“I was a teenager, I didn’t know how life was going to be in the United States,” said Leon, who arrived as a permanent resident with his father and brother but his mother stayed behind in Ecuador. “[As an immigrant], you have to leave your family, you have to involve another language, and you have to sacrifice many things. Many things.”

He had to attend Newcomers High School, a school in Queens that specializes in introducing new immigrants to American culture and teaches them English. He

talked strongly about the toil in relearning very basic math and English topics in a new language.

“You have to understand and learn everything from the beginning, everything basic,” said Leon. “People who were born here already learned those things while they were in primary school.”

Integration into American culture is a more urgent priority for immigrant children than the parents they came with: they want to become Americans.

Their aspirations address concerns in the increasingly heated immigration debate that immigrants are not assimilating.

A 2015 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine said that the newest generations of immigrants are assimilating into American society as fast and broadly as the previous ones, especially with language.

English language learning “is happening as rapidly or faster now than it did for earlier waves of mainly European immigrants in the 20th century,” the report found.

By the third generation, most immigrant children speak only English, the report found.

But for all of them, working at the restaurant serves, to some degree, as a middle ground between their home lives and the hasty assimilation that is expected of them in school and in their professional lives.

“Ok, the first month it was kind of weird because I never worked as a waiter to be honest,” said Leon. “[But] working in the restaurant gave me the opportunity to see how the life is in the United States. You have to work to go forward in life. You get experience and then after that you can get a better job after college.”

In this regard, children differ from the long-time employees like their parents. They imagine themselves outside of the restaurant in the future.

“It’s not a job that will give you a better future,” said Beltran. “It’s a job to help you along the way.”

Angie’s brother Edison, 31, who was born in New York and works at the catering hall, appreciated watching how the hall has served younger immigrants like Leon. He saw himself as facilitating the adjustments young immigrants have to make when leaving their weekend safe haven at the restaurant.

“[The restaurant] could make you feel comfortable, but once you step out again from it, it’s going to be uncomfortable for them,” said Edison. “It’s their first time, it’s their

first job. It's their first opportunity to learn English and after that, go out into the world to see what actually is out there. Big opportunities."

But while at work, they take on the working attitudes of their parents, learned at home and at the hall where they are valuable.

Their work as waiters and waitress require them to lift heavy trays and buckets filled with plates and silverware.

Every food course is sent out on 3-foot trays and waiters often prefer to work effectively, not comfortably. They fill up their trays to maximum capacity to reduce the number of trips to the kitchen.

Each tray could carry either dozens of water glasses, up to 16 plates of dinner stacked on top of each other, 16 salad plates, or ten pasta plates.

Despite their age, they take on the labor and are generous with their work.

During the week, however, they are working equally hard to build their roots in the U.S. as professionals.

Angelica Tapia is a paralegal and graduated from college. Leon will be a freshman at LaGuardia Community College in September. Briceño's son is in his second year of pre-dentistry. Many are still in high school but have already developed career aspirations as engineers, designers, and psychologists. At least one is on a fast-track college program that allows him to take college courses while still in high school.

I am one of those kids, that next generation. I started working at the restaurant when I was 15. During my eight years there, I have gotten my high school, bachelors and masters degrees.

The younger generations are taking advantage of the opportunities they inherited from their parents' migration journeys. They work at the restaurant because they are a part of the network of immigrants that their parents started and they enjoy the familiarity of their culture and family members.

However, the job does not represent a lifeline the way it has done for the older staff. And they imagine themselves outside the hall.

Chapter 5: Reflections on Immigration Policy in the U.S.

[Video]