

# IMMIGRANT ISSUES

*As tougher laws pervade the Midwest, local organizations appeal for a more human look at illegal immigrants.*

WRITTEN BY KEVIN KUZMA



**CHAVA TULE'S COMPLEXION SHOWS NO TRACE OF HIS SOUTHERN MEXICO ORIGINS.** His apron, where it has been brushed and lightly stained with brownish cooking sauce, is the same color of his skin. He has a handsome face with high cheek bones, and black hair—cropped at the ears—is a stark contrast to his pale skin. He moves around the kitchen at Los Tules, on Broadway Street, with purpose and a pride that some might confuse for mere confidence.

Tule's existence as an American is tied to the sudsy dish water and stainless steel provisions in the kitchen at Los Tules. He started out here 15 years ago as a dishwasher on a six-month visa, when the business was called Las Chiquitas and under different ownership. Once he had returned to Mexico, Tule made several repeat trips to the states throughout the next two years as an illegal immigrant, crossing the border and coming to Kansas City to be with his eventual wife, Maria.

Today, after earning his citizenship through his marriage, Tule is the owner of the restaurant where he once merely scrubbed plates. To mention that he is a successful Latino entrepreneur and not just an accomplished business person undermines his story. He has made a name for himself in the United States with nothing more than hard work and determination, which is after all the American dream.

*According to the Missouri Department of Social Services Office of Research and Evaluation, Kansas City Hispanics make up less than 3% of the people who receive public assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid.*

**above:** *There are thousands of successful immigrants in the United States and in Kansas City, and the organizations that serve their caseloads on a daily basis have a different perspective on immigrant workers that could open people's eyes to their experience.*

On her: Tan one-piece from Birdies  
On him: Brown swim shorts from Zinfandel by Milo  
On her: Blue and white one piece from Swim Quik

Fashions and accessories courtesy of:

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*“People think that because you have dark skin and dark hair, you’re undocumented,” says Christina Jasso, case manager at the Guadalupe Center. “That’s obviously not the case. There are so many different types of statuses.”*



In spite of Tule’s accomplishments, he has inadvertently become one of the success stories so many Americans overlook in the illegal immigration debate. There are thousands of successful immigrants like Tule in the United States and in Kansas City. The organizations that serve their caseloads on a daily basis have a different perspective on immigrant workers, which could open people’s eyes to their experience.

“I love Mexico, but it has a really bad government,” Tule says. “In Mexico, if you are rich, you are very rich. If you are poor, you are very poor. There is no middle class. That’s why I love this country. I started washing dishes and used to say to myself, ‘One day this restaurant will be mine.’ I have always thought big like that. I started with no money, and now I have my own restaurant.”

While the immigration issue continues to spark controversy nationwide—particularly in states such as Oklahoma—organizations such as the Guadalupe Center, Mattie Rhodes Center, and El Centro face a stiff challenge in changing opinions about illegals. At the very least, many officials of these non-profit organizations that help immigrants with everything from finding attorneys and counseling to food provisions see the issue from an alternative perspective.

Guadalupe Center Case Manager Christina Jasso says that facts and first-hand experience show that the majority of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States are good, hard-working people who want to establish a new life for their families. Her view contrasts with the stereotypical outlook of immigrants as low-wage earners that take occasionally demeaning jobs that workers from other ethnic backgrounds won’t touch.

Many illegal immigrants are vilified for not speaking English and are said to live on government services or tax dollars. But Jasso says immigrants do pay taxes, contrary to popular belief. In fact, a 2005 study by the National Immigration Forum showed that immigrants pay between \$90 and \$140 billion a year in federal, state, and local taxes.

Locally, Kansas City Hispanics make up less than 3% of the people who receive public assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid, according to information provided by the Missouri Department of Social Services Office of Research and Evaluation. But immigrants also pay in emotional currency due to the constant threat of deportation, whether it’s a realistic danger or just a misperception held by some natural citizens.

“People think that because you have dark skin and dark hair, you’re undocumented,” Jasso says. “That’s obviously not the case. There are so many different types of statuses.”

Every foreign person entering the United States must have permission to enter the country. Until someone becomes a permanent resident or citizen, every entry into the United States is limited. The limitation is based on the kind of visa used to enter the United States and the conditions of that visa category. Most foreigners entering the United States are given a fixed period of stay, which is reflected by a white card—called an I-94 card—affixed to the passport. Anyone who violates the period of stay is an illegal.

Jasso says the assumptions being made about immigrant workers are harmful in more ways than typical prejudice—they are starting to be dangerous for the Hispanic population. She cites a study by the Oklahoma Bankers Association that found if 50,000 immigrants leave Oklahoma, the state would lose about \$1.8 billion annually in productivity and wages. Immigrant workers are being driven from the state, and farmers are finding it hard to place American workers in the field.

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“Until recently, [Missouri] has been pretty lax on enforcing immigration laws, but it’s important we don’t make the same mistake as Oklahoma,” Jasso says. “I don’t think people realize that in 2006, immigrants produced \$11.6 million in local economic activity.”

To dispel common misconceptions about the immigrant population, the Guadalupe Center and its partnering agencies issued a survey to more than 800 local adult immigrants in 2006. According to the survey, 94% of respondents said they believe that proficiency in the English language is important to their survival in the United States. The survey also showed that 35% of respondents were employed full time and receive healthcare through employers. Of the respondents, 84% plan to stay in Kansas City for 10 years.

How much headway can be made locally for the immigration issue remains to be seen. Those on the inside, such as Jasso and Roger McCrummen—an immigration attorney at McCrummen Immigration Law Group—say the current popular perspectives are unfair.

“Our national aspiration should be for justice,” McCrummen says. “Today’s national approach of harsh dealings is not consistent with our national history and is certainly not consistent with our basic notions of fairness or morality.”

Justice was the furthest thing from Tule’s mind upon arriving in the United States for the first time in 1993. He slept overnight in an airport terminal, unable to find anyone who spoke Spanish. Eventually, a bilingual flight attendant helped him, leading him to an office where he was able to call a friend for a ride. This gesture of politeness and understanding was what made Tule believe he could find his way in this country—and he has, but the path to an American dream is more concealed and less friendly now. 

For information on volunteer or advocacy opportunities, contact Christina Jasso, Guadalupe Center Case Manager, at (816) 561-6885, ext. 27.

A 2006 survey conducted in conjunction with El Centro, the Guadalupe Center, and Mattie Rhodes Center sought to put some Kansas City area’s immigrant population in perspective. More than 800 adult immigrants from Kansas and Missouri responded with the following results:

- More than 80% have less than the equivalent of high school education from their country of origin
- Respondents are more likely to be married than others in the metro area
- 63% live in mixed-status families
- 52% have worked multiple jobs simultaneously
- 36% are not paid overtime for working more than 40 hours
- 35% were employed full time and receive healthcare through employers
- 71% report that they send money on occasion to family in their countries of origin
- The median household size is four people
- The average rent is \$700
- The average payment for homeowners is \$97
- 94% believe that proficiency in the English language is important to their survival in the United States
- 71% attend church regularly
- 81% of non-homeowners desire to become homeowners
- 57% hope to start their own small business
- 86% of non-citizens desire to naturalize
- 84% plan to stay in Kansas City for 10 years
- 75% of employed respondents have taxes withheld from paychecks