

Christian Formation
and Church Relations
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Hopeful songs from a golden cage

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Christian Formation and Church Relations administrative assistant Jackie Batres Bonilla reacts to the outcome of the Nov. 3 election with hope, but knows there's still work to be done for people with Temporary Protected Status living in the U.S.

By Emma Eidsvoog

Hopeful songs *from a* golden cage



Photo by Vanna Contreras



When November 3 came and went, Jackie Batres Bonilla was still unsure of her future.

Joe Biden won the presidential election and she still wondered how long she had until she would have to pack up her life in America.

With a November 2021 deadline looming above her head, Batres began to let go of the things she built in America. Her job as Pastor Laurel Bunker's administrative assistant, her Shakopee home and her future of being a marriage and family therapist all hung in the balance.

Batres is among 400,000 people residing in the United States with Temporary Protected Status. TPS holders have jobs, own homes and pay taxes, but aren't allowed to vote or freely travel outside the U.S. For Jackie, this means she can't visit her parents in El Salvador.

"Latinos call it a gold cage," Batres said. "You have all these benefits and all these blessings, but you're still in a cage because you cannot go out."

In 2017, the Trump administration ended TPS benefits for some of the designated countries, based on the program being a temporary rather than long-term solution. This gave TPS holders 18 months to move back to the countries where they were born.

"How do you build something and not want to live in it with peace?" Batres said. "I know everything is uncertain."

Batres moved to the U.S. in 2001 after an earthquake in El Salvador forced her family to find refuge. For almost 20 years she has held a TPS in hopes to one day become an American citizen.

Her sister Karla, a junior at Bethel, is a U.S. citizen and is 10 years younger than Batres. In 2003, when Karla was 3 years old, she and her mother were going back and forth from St. Paul to El Salvador. On one of these trips, an immigration officer stopped them at the airport. The officer decided to cancel her mother's visa. Karla still remembers the tears shed at that moment.

Her mother had a choice: either send Karla back to St. Paul to be with her dad and siblings, or bring her to El Salvador. She decided to bring her back with her so she didn't have to return with a stranger.

Since this incident, Batres' whole family has never been in the same room together.

In 2008, her dad moved back to El Salvador to be with Karla's mother. In 2014, before starting high school, Karla moved back to St. Paul

for better opportunities than she would have in El Salvador. Batres became Karla's guardian, giving her a place to stay, food to eat and a family.

"If she ever has to leave the country, I lose my number one support," Karla said. "Yes, they are not us citizens, but they have supported U.S. citizens. They have contributed to my education and the person I am today. It's a loss for the community and the country if they have to leave."

The route to citizenship

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, TPS isn't a path towards lawful permanent resident status. This means Batres can't simply apply for U.S. citizenship, because there isn't a law that allows a pathway for those with TPS. The route to citizenship isn't as clear as people assume, she says.

"People say, 'How come you've been here for 20 years and haven't become a U.S. citizen?' What I have to explain to people is that it's not that easy. [They] have to have a pathway," she said.

And they can't rely on TPS. Since the program ended, TPS holders sued the Department of Homeland Security to grant them extensions for the deadline to 18 months. But the extensions aren't enough to release the tension in the lives of people like Batres. They feel unaccepted in a country they call their home and they can't be sure if the future they've built will be wiped away.

With Biden's platform on pro-immigration policies, Batres has hope for the new administration – although she can't be certain that serious reform will happen in the next four years.

"We hope for something to come out after January. We don't want to live in this extension. Our lives are not extensions," Batres said.

The right to vote

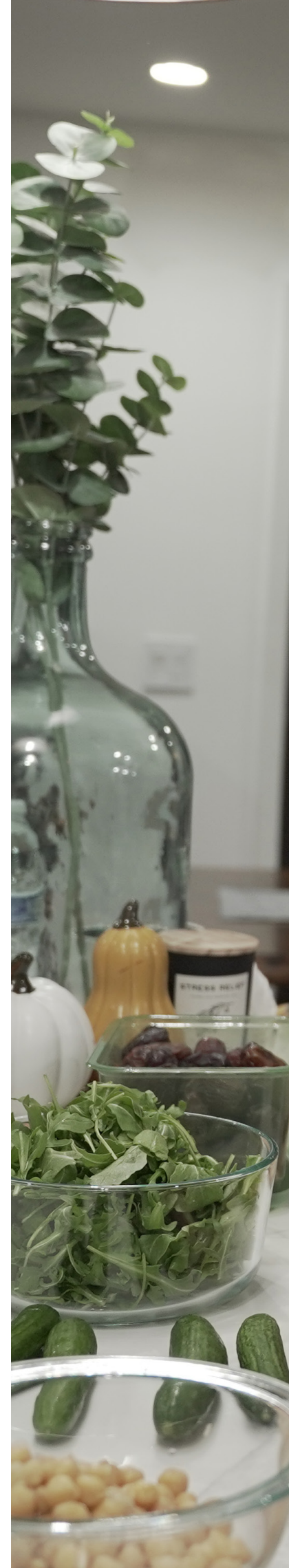
Batres stood outside El Guanaco Bakery and Cafe, where she shared her journey as a TPS holder. During the week before the election, Batres worked with COPAL, a nonprofit that provides resources to the Latino population in Minnesota.

A coach bus named 'La Libertad' painted with scenes of people voting at the polls and the words "Road to Justice. Residency Now" met at the bakery and then continued to other parts of the country where Latino communities often don't know their voting rights. Their mission was to educate the Latino communities on their rights and where to vote as a part of COPAL's "MN Latino Vote" campaign.

Bethel senior Leslee Gutierrez Carrillo works as COPAL's environmental justice organizer and was a part of the voting campaign. According to Gutierrez Carrillo, each year Latino voters face voting obstacles, including a lack of resources such as English only voting resources and websites.

"People don't understand that some are better at expressing themselves in another language. It discourages them to participate in their rights, even if they can vote," Gutierrez Carrillo said.

Batres and the people at COPAL won't stop their mission just because Biden was elected. The H.R. 6 bill, also known as the Dream and Promise Act of 2019, is the key to a continued TPS program and a path towards citizenship. The bill has passed the House of Represen-



“I think for me it is important that people are able to hear other people’s stories with an open heart and open mind. Not necessarily to fix somebody, but just to hear” Batres said as husband Marvin joins her in the kitchen to help her with dinner preparations.

Photo by Vanna Contreras







Photo by Vanna Contreras

Jackie Batres with husband Marvin in their Shakopee home. Batres worries about the future of her and her husband who are both TPS holders. “I remember my husband telling me ‘You know Jackie, as long as you and I are good. Everything else can crash. They can send us back, but we can start over anywhere else,’” Batres Bonilla said. The week of the election was stressful for her as she wondered about the results.

After many weeks of suspense due to the election, Batres found a sense of peace. “I’ve been voiceless for twenty years. I believe God has a plan. God can use anybody,” Batres said.



Photo by Vanna Contreras

tatives and now just needs to be passed by the Senate to become law, so TPS holders no longer live in dread of the next deadline.

“The Dream and Promise Act will enable Dreamers, TPS recipients, and DED beneficiaries to stay in America – the only home they know – and let them help build a brighter future for our nation,” said Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, who first presented the bill.

According to Roybal-Allard’s website, “H.R. 6 includes protections and a path to citizenship not just for Dreamers, but also for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) beneficiaries.”

“We still have a lot of work to do and we are pushing whichever administration to help,” Gutierrez Carillo said.

Relying on God during uncertain times

Batres says although Biden has stood on a pro-immigration platform, he hasn’t granted a promise to provide a pathway to citizenship, leaving Batres to fear for her future.

She holds the tension inside and it’s taking a physical toll.

Batres woke up at 1 a.m. the Friday after the presidential election, feeling like her eye was going to fall out. She visited doctor after doctor but they couldn’t find a reason for the pain. She realized it’s probably due to stress. Stress of knowing she might have to leave the United States next November.

While Batres couldn’t vote, she received texts from stu-

dents saying “This vote is for you.”

Marvin R. Batres, her husband of 11 years, reassured her that as long as they are together, they will be fine.

Batres and Marvin met at a church Christmas service in 2004, where he played drums and she sang on the worship team.

Marvin went to school, owns his own flooring business and is a children’s pastor on Sundays.

“There’s a lot of anxiety and unknown,” Marvin said. “Everything we had built is in the US. We would have to find a way to start all over again. We have contributed so much and this is how you pay [us] back?”

Marvin was reassured when Biden came out on November 7 and talked about unity rather than division. That’s how he wants everyone to see the world. He also wants everyone to be devoted to their faith like Batres is.

After beating a rare form of uterus cancer at age 11, which her husband says was like “getting a Green card from God,” she relied on God for her security. She prays and reads her Bible almost every day, without knowing what her next year might look like.

“I know that God has a plan, but things look so opposite sometimes,” Batres said. “We like tangible things. We like to see security.”

Now, she is more motivated than ever to finish what organizations like COPAL started and give TPS holders a chance to be U.S. citizens.

“The fight isn’t over until we get things done,” she said. **C**

Below: Jackie Batres with husband Marvin praying at the dinner table as some uncertainty still lingers about their future. Batres Bonilla works with organizations like COPAL and Alianza Americas to help inform politicians and voters about the reality of undocumented residents and TPS holders. She hopes her story will inspire others to act and advocate for those without citizenship. “Don’t just tell me that you’re praying for me. What are you doing?” Batres said.



Photo by Vanna Contreras