



*Luis Beltrán and his daughter Paula talk about their multifaceted journey to American residency.*

# Finding The American Dream

*By Jaylen Pearson*

Many immigrants come to America in pursuit of a better life for themselves and their family. One of them is Luis Beltrán. Born and raised in Cali, Colombia, Beltrán lived there for the first 35 years of his life. He worked various jobs to support his family, mainly construction.

Beltrán, however, was not content with what he believed Colombia could provide for his family and began the process to come to America. With his daughter Paula translating, Beltrán explained their immigration story, saying, “I wanted to give a better life for my children so they could go to school. I couldn’t give them the education they needed to succeed in Colombia. I saw an opportunity here for them to become professionals.”

Before coming to the United States, Beltrán only knew of the country based on snippets he had heard from others. According to the people he talked to, this was the land of opportunity with the freedom to grow and prosper. He thought that this was a place where his family could not

only survive, but thrive. In the late ‘90s, Beltrán started to save money to make his first voyage to America. He then went through the embassy to apply for a tourist visa. When he arrived in America, he found it to be everything he was told. However, the financial burden of the trip was heavy; the plane ticket to and from Colombia was extremely expensive. As a construction worker, Beltrán did not have much money for an extended stay, and returned to Colombia later that year. Once back in his home country, he found himself unemployed and struggling to find work.

Though funds were an issue, Beltrán managed to send his two children and their mother to America in December 1999. His daughter, Paula, was only 6 when she went with her brother and mother to her family in the U.S. When she was first told that she was coming to America, her aunt declared to her that “the streets are made of gold.” Paula had high expectations

of the country due to this. Her first trip here, however, did not go as she thought it would. “The first time around, it was awful. That’s why I did not want to come back.”

Paula was used to having much more freedom in Colombia than she had in America. She would often become lonely and bored just sitting in the house. She was also not used to the cold weather. Paula did not see America as the paradise she was told, and was happy to come back to Colombia in February 2000 with her brother. This happiness was cut short when she was told that she’d be going back to America; she cried about it. Her aunt promised to take her to Disneyland when she got to America. Paula is still waiting.

Paula came back to America with her father and brother later that year. This time, though, it was better. The trio reunited with her mother and toured all over the east coast. “We went to New York, we went to the Twin Towers, we went to the Empire State Building, and we went to the Statue of Liberty,” Paula said. “We traveled down to D.C.; we toured all the different museums. Like, we were legit tourists.”

As the family settled in the U.S., Beltrán and Paula both encountered a few issues. Beltrán found work as a factory worker on night shifts. He would often be forced to leave his children alone at night. He did not want to, but he had no other choice since he had to provide for them. Still, he managed to spend time with them, taking them to school every morning.

Another issue was the language barrier. Beltrán has never learned English. Time that could have been invested in learning a new language, Beltrán spent working to make sure that his family had all that they needed. He wants to learn, even to this day, but time continues to be a factor. Because of this, he has trouble communicating with people who do not understand him.

For Paula, the language barrier was difficult, too, as she encountered it as a small child. In the second grade, she would often get in trouble since she did not understand what the teacher was saying.

It also made making friends hard. By the

third and fourth grade, however, Paula was able to learn sufficient English.

Since they were both undocumented, Beltrán and Paula had problems getting health insurance. According to Beltrán, it was his biggest barrier. “In Colombia, every worker is entitled to a doctor. It’s not the same here,” he said. Beltrán has never had health insurance in America. For Paula, there are some health services for undocumented children, but they are difficult to find. She did not have health insurance until she went to college and acquired it through the school.

Although they are both legal permanent residents now, neither has been able to get their own health care. Paula has it through her job and Beltrán still does not have it.

Paula could not obtain federal financial aid for college as an undocumented immigrant. She had to prove herself first by attending Reading Area Community College, earning an associate degree in business in just one year. From there, she received private scholarships to go to Alvernia University, where she would get her bachelor’s degree in Business Administration. She currently works as an advocate for Planned Parenthood.

Despite some of the troubles they have had, they are very happy with their lives here. Beltrán says that he wants to give back to this country. They feel grateful towards America, as the country has given them the opportunity to grow. However, if they could make any change to the immigration process, they believe it should be more open. According to Beltrán, there are many good people who want to come to this nation to work and do good. 🍷

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### **#FactsMatter:**

Undocumented Americans pay \$12 billion annually to the Social Security Trust Fund.

*Source:* Social Security Administration

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