

Frequently Asked Questions About the Campaign to Assist Juana Luz Tobar Ortega

(Provided courtesy of American Friends Service Committee)

Background:

Juana is a mother of four who lives in Asheboro and has worked at the same textile company in High Point as a sewing machine operator for the last eight years. She arrived in 1994 from Guatemala, fleeing violence, and applied for asylum status. Her petition was denied, but she was allowed a work permit while she filed an appeal, which took six years. In 1999, her eldest daughter in Guatemala suffered a life-threatening illness, and Juana left the country and returned without permission in order to be her daughter's caregiver. ICE subsequently revoked her work permit, ordered her to leave the country, and in 2011 took her into custody, then released her a week later. Since then, she has reported to the Charlotte ICE office periodically for required check-ins, but last month, instead of accepting her attorney's plea for a stay of removal, ICE ordered her to prepare for voluntary departure, telling her she has until May 31 to leave the country, potentially leaving her husband, kids, uncle and cousins behind.

Why Was Juana Given a Deportation Order?

In 1999, while she was trying to gain asylum, Juana left the country without authorization in order to care for her daughter who had a life-threatening illness. She tried to reenter the country by presenting what turned out to be a false visa, which ICE says is essentially an unforgiveable offense. After being detained at her job in 2011, ICE gave her deferrals every year for the last six years. Juana has paid tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees trying to fix her status over the last two decades.

So She Broke the Law?

No, Juana did what any of us would do to care for a sick child. But our immigration rules don't have provisions for empathy or basic humanity. And she thought she was doing the right thing by purchasing what turned out to be a fake entry document on her way back to Asheboro. Because of that "mistake", which is not a criminal charge, ICE says she deserves to be permanently separated from her family.

What Would Happen If She Were Deported?

Studies show the emotional and psychological consequences for her and her immediate family would be enormous and long-lasting. And she originally fled Guatemala after receiving threats of violence; her hometown on the El Salvador border has again become a violent place, and she fears for her safety.

Why Sanctuary?

ICE has denied Juana's requests for a stay, and ordered her to leave by May 31. Taking sanctuary is a last resort, because ICE has a policy of not entering houses of worship (or schools, hospitals or demonstrations) to apprehend immigrants.

What is Sanctuary?

Sanctuary is a manifestation of faith in action. Fundamentally, sanctuary is about the community coming together to protect those who need it. There is a long history of churches providing shelter to anti-slavery activists, civil rights workers, and refugees in the 1980s.

What's Next? What Can Sen. Thom Tillis Do?

We are launching a campaign to convince Sen. Thom Tillis to personally request that ICE stay her deportation, and continue granting her deferrals until the government creates a way for her to obtain legal status. A woman in Denver who lived in sanctuary in a church for three months, Jeanette Vizguerra, was recently given a two-year stay after intervention by one of her senators (and after she was named one of TIME's 100 Most Influential People).

How Can I Help?

You can get involved in Juana's Campaign Committee, and take actions like convincing your employer to sign-on to a letter to Sen. Thom Tillis.