

H. Wesley Bryant
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CESAR

It was about 6:30 in the evening, I was in my hotel room watching Fox News. The world was in its third month of the Coronavirus, with most of the U.S. now in lockdown, many businesses closed and people instructed to stay at home. I got a call on my cell phone.

“Is this Wesley?” the caller asked.

“Yes...it is.”

“My name is Cesar, and I am confirming your appointment tomorrow. You still okay for 12:30?”

“Yes, of course,” I replied.

Cesar then asked me if I wanted him to answer any questions that I might have about the procedure. I told him I was happy to discuss that tomorrow.

Los Algodones, Mexico, is a tourist destination with a difference. It hosts more than 900 dentists and 300 dental practices. The border town specializes in medical tourism, with dentistry at the top of the list. That is why I was there. But it was not the dentists, their professionalism or the affordability that captured my interest most, it was Cesar’s story.

Cesar is a Mexican-born (American) now employed as an office manager with one of Los Algodones’ dental practices.

Born in 1989, Cesar was the second child to parents struggling to make ends meet, like many others in the largest city in the country - Mexico City, with a population of more than 15 million at that time, and a poverty level that left many people starving. More than 45% of the population was barely surviving, with just a few bucks a week coming from one source or another. Cesar was too young to remember that time, and can only recall the family stories of their flight to the U.S. A dream of many Mexican families.

It was 1993 and their destination was Nogales, just short of the border with Arizona. The bus trip of nearly 1400 miles was mostly memorable for the food. His parents and older brother said it was different than what they were used to in the city. Every region heading north was a new taste-bud experience. Their story also recalls the dangers.

“What did your parents say was dangerous about the trip?” I asked.

“The people helping us warned us to be careful,” Cesar explained.

“Why”

“Because a lot of people get mugged, especially at the border.”

I was surprised that poor people would be the targets of mugging, and asked Cesar why that would be.

Cesar said, “The men helping us told us it was because they know we are trying to cross the border illegally, so no one will report their muggings. If we talked, we might get held and sent back to Mexico City”

“You mean you had people-smugglers helping you?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting! Tell me more.”

“My parents said we nearly got caught crossing the border fence. The men had to take me and my brother first, and we waited for our parents. The border control were trying to find us, but we got away.”

“Where?”

“McDonalds.”

“You mean, there was a McDonalds nearby?”

“Yeah! In the town just across the border. You can walk there. The men told my parents to wait until the patrol was out of sight, and then come on once they could see it was safe.”

Cesar told me that his dad had saved up the money he got from tips working at the bus station in Mexico City. That paid the guys to help them. It cost \$150 per adult and \$75 for each child. Much has changed in this smuggling business in recent times, though, and it's not only the increased cost to the ones dreaming of America.

“Polleros”, “coyotes”, “enganchaderos” and “wetbacks” are just a few of the terms that evolved during the early twentieth century, as the demand for Mexican workers grew in the U.S. But the term “coyote” would become the common description of a Mexican people-smuggler, and that term goes back to the early twentieth century or earlier.

With the U.S. imposing a cap on total immigration from the Americas in 1965, the demand for coyotes increased, with “do-it-yourself” border crossings from then on being very rare. Mexican workers in search of American jobs were dependent on the coyote system to accomplish their goals of freedom and prosperity. Further tightening of immigration laws, and border policing has resulted in the coyote industry becoming more organized, and of course, much more costly for potential U.S. aliens. While in the mid 1990's, Cesar's family's costs for the coyote service was less than \$500, the cost now for a family could be as much as \$20,000.

But it is not just the cost that has changed significantly. The risk of violence along the way, as well as the high chance of being arrested and incarcerated at the border, has added further challenges, for both the clients, and the coyote professionals.

Cesar's family destination in the U.S. was their uncle's place in Phoenix. He lived in a mobile home with his wife and two kids. Cesar's strongest memory of the time living in the trailer, was the smell. The carpet was old and dirty. The very tight living space for eight people, a strange city, and a different culture made this a difficult time for a four-year-old.

Cesar's brother Alex started school very soon after the move, and Cesar started preschool (HeadStart) about a year later. Both of his parents soon got jobs working in the Revlon manufacturing plant. It wasn't long before they could afford their own apartment.

As they settled into the American lifestyle, one memory that stuck with Cesar is playing a game in kindergarten. "Duck-Duck-Goose" was a new experience for Cesar, especially when he knew very little English. He remembers never getting "tagged" by other players in the game, and still doesn't know why.

"Were they being polite...or rude?" I asked.

Cesar laughed. "I don't know, probably rude!"

The English language came slowly, and most of the progress Cesar made in learning the language was earned by his own efforts, and mainly during school time. By the time he was eight years old he was close to speaking and understanding English fluently. Cesar and Alex went on to finish elementary school. They stayed at the same school for the duration of their middle and high school education. It was in high school that he met Rosalva, became very close friends, and eventually married.

Cesar worked at night at a store during his high school days, and he remembers paying rent to his parents from the earnings. He is grateful to his dad for encouraging that discipline, as it has followed him as an adult.

Influenced by five close friends who all decided to take college business courses, Cesar also decided to enroll in college, and join them. This was a proud moment for him, and his parents, as he was the first in the family to go to college. But the college life only lasted a year. It was the birth of their first son, Anthony, that led Cesar to find a job to support his young family. With the out-of-state college fees, it was difficult to maintain the education, coupled with his desire to provide for the family. Cesar left his studies to commence full-time employment.

It seems inconceivable that a person who grew up in the U.S., with parents who owned their own home in a major city, was educated by its schools, was provided part-time and full-time employment, would possibly be deported as an illegal resident. But that's what happened.

Cesar, his wife Rosalva and their two children, Anthony and Sofia, would be uprooted from their stable American lifestyle, wondering what their future would bring.

On June 15, 2012, the Obama administration deployed the controversial Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, by an Executive Branch memorandum. DACA gave a way for illegals to gain work authorizations under broad-criteria, but specifically for people who came to the U.S. as children. Cesar successfully applied for a work authorization under the DACA initiative, and obtained full-time and rewarding employment.

But on June 22, 2018, the department of Homeland Security (DHS), under the Trump administration, issued another memorandum rescinding the DACA program. Included in the memorandum was the statement “regardless of whether the DACA policy is ultimately illegal, it

was appropriately rescinded by DHS because there are, at a minimum, serious doubts about its legality.”

Cesar’s DACA permit was close to expiring so he immediately sought legal advice. After consulting with three different lawyers, in one day, he decided on the basis of their advice that his status was perilous, to leave the U.S. and moved his family to Los Algodones, Mexico. He had very little time to deal with matters of work or finance, including surrendering his car to the finance company.

The only alternative he could imagine, if he was to stay, was being picked up by immigration and put in jail, until a solution was found. Cesar did not want that for his family. Fortunately, he had a brother living in Los Algodones who gave them a place to stay while Cesar sought employment, and housing for his family.

Soon after settling in Los Algodones, Cesar was offered a position as a receptionist with Dental Del Rio, a small practice of only one dentist and an assistant. It wasn’t long before Cesar had proved himself as a valued team member of the dental practice, and his fluency in both Spanish and English was very beneficial for the practice, as well as their patients. Cesar was soon offered another opportunity with a sister practice (Dental Solutions), as an office manager, which he accepted, and excelled in his service to that organization.

Seeing the potential for Cesar to become more involved in the professional aspects of the dental process, the owner suggested they put him through a “dental assistant” school. This involved several months of part-time classes and studies. Cesar then became involved in the consultancy aspects of the dental service, and would be the first point of contact for clients.

Cesar’s ambitious customer service focus is appreciated by Dental Solutions clientele. He also provides added value for clients who need recommendations for other services in the small

town of Los Algodones. The town has many specialists in pharmaceuticals and optometry, with some of which Cesar has established good rapport, and trusts they will offer a good service to his customers.

While initially, the circumstances that left little alternative but to move to Mexico caused much anxiety, settling in Los Algodones brought early success for Cesar. Within a very short time he had bought a car, and then a house. But it was the people he was now surrounded by who puzzled him. Most people's lives in Los Algodones, from Cesar's perspective, are stagnate with very little motive to advance themselves, to sneak away from the "breadline" or perhaps poverty. Many live in their aging parents' family home, in some cases along with siblings, with no vision of anything outside the norm of their daily existence. Cesar achieved a good lifestyle for him and his family in the small Mexican town, in a very short time – why couldn't others?

Curiously, I asked Cesar why this is so noticeable to him.

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose they don't know any other life."

"That's probably all they have been used to", I replied.

"Yes! But what they have is only the beginning. They can have much more."

"It's funny this is so noticeable to you. Do you think it is because you grew up in the U.S. that you see more opportunity than the local Mexican people?"

"Yes – probably."

Recently the Trump administration has had some backlash on the rescinding of DACA. On June 18, 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with DACA recipients, ruling that the way in which the DCS rescinded the DACA program in 2018 as unlawful. This decision restores the

program completely, and both initial and renewal applications should be accepted by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

In discussing this with Cesar, I asked him how he would feel about the opportunity to apply to return to the U.S.

“I would love to come back,” he said.

Given Cesar’s success after returning to Mexico, I was surprised at his response.

“So... I would have thought you would want to stay in Los Algodones. You are doing so well here”

“No,” he replied “It would be great to get my old life back. It’s hard here. I’m doing good but it’s still a hard life. It’s not the same. My family would be better off. My kids would get a better education.”

“Okay, I can see that. And you would be able to see your mom and dad, in person, rather than just through a cell phone screen?”

“Yes! I would love to get my life back.” would be Cesar’s final words in our discussion of his family story. He lives in the hope of a resolution in the U.S. that would make a way for his family’s return.

SIDEBAR

DENTAL SERVICE COSTS COMPARISON

SERVICE	CALIFORNIA	LOS ALODONES
Fillings	\$300 - 400	\$75 - 150
Root Canal	\$1500 - 2000	\$300 - 450
Crowns	\$800 – 1200	\$250 – 450
Implants	\$750 – 1800	\$350 – 800