

## Upholding the Statue of Liberty's promise



**BARB GUY**

There's a beautiful old camelback trunk in my office. It was my mom's, and her mom's before that. I don't know how many moms back it goes, but it's filled with family relics.

A couple nights ago, my friend Axel, a fourth-grader, asked if he could open the trunk. He happily explored the contents, which I hoped would keep him busy so I could talk with Hugo, a seventh-grader.

These two brothers, Americans with parents from Mexico, are navigating a cultural and political tidal wave. The boys are bright and interested in the world, and I wanted to hear their thoughts about recent community events.

My husband, Chris, and I have become friends with these kids. We spend a few hours each Tuesday as study buddies and often have dinner.

In my car, Hugo plays CDs of Kumbia Kings and Bow Wow and politely endures my attempts to interest him in Public Enemy and Celia Cruz. We're having a four-person cultural exchange. Chris and I have learned that "snap" is a perfectly satisfying substitute swear word.

So the other night Axel nosed around in the fusty trunk while Hugo and I talked about last Sunday's Pro-Immigration Dignity March and Monday's Unity Rally.

I mentioned Emma Lazarus' sonnet engraved on the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor . . ."). I found the text online and we slogged through the wretched refuse, the teeming shores, the tossing tempest.

I tried to paraphrase her message, settling on, "If there's trouble in your country and you want to come live here, you are welcome to."

Axel jolts upright out of the trunk and blurts, "Then she lies! That's messed up. People from Mexico traveled a long way and they should get to stay. They don't want to go back to Mexico. They need jobs."

The boys tell me the march and rally were for "Mexicans who want to come to America."

While we didn't attend with the boys, Chris and I did go to Monday's rally carrying a few friends in our hearts, including Hugo and Axel, their sister and their parents.

I play a sound recording of the rally. Hugo says, "That song, 'Mi Gente,' [playing from the stage] - it's a good song for the day. It tells you that they came here for family. It's like Martin Luther King's speech of 'I Have A Dream.' He was doing it for freedom so black people could go to the same schools as white people.

"It's like that now. In Mexico they're suffering so they come here to work. Then they send money to Mexico so their family can have good things, too. Our parents do that."

Hugo continued, "When I went [to Sunday's march] I was amazed. I thought, 'Wow, there are a lot of people who come from Mexico.' There were two kinds of people there - the ones that were helping and the ones that were hating."

Axel kept showing off finds from the trunk: a pair of embroidered red slippers, a book from 1800, a folder of 1940s postcards from Mexico.

He asked, "What was this trunk for?" I told him people used to pack trunks and travel across the

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ocean to a new land. I said, "A lot of people came to America with everything they owned in one of these."

Finally I realized that the trunk wasn't a distraction, it was the lesson.

Some ancestor of mine braved unknown seas to make a life in America, and maybe she brought this trunk. Maybe she was welcomed, or maybe she was greeted with anti-immigrant backlash, which, after all, is not new. But my family had our turn and I don't like to hear the Statue of Liberty get called a liar, so we'd better let today's immigrants have their turn.

For these American/Mexican boys, their family's immigration story is present tense, not history. Hugo and Axel say if they were in charge of America, they'd let everyone stay. I would, too, even though things can get messy. I'd rather be a helper than a hater.

After all, that was the deal when America got made. That's what the Statue of Liberty promises, and if we start changing the rules now - snap, that's messed up.

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