

A Veteran Perspective on Immigration since 9/11

By Veronica Carter, as told to Maria Fernanda Barriga-Mateos
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This story is by Veronica Carter, a retired veteran and current council member for the town of Leland, N.C., as told to piece reporter Maria Fernanda Barriga-Mateos. She spoke to Barriga-Mateos from UNC Hussman MEJO 390 Crossing Borders Journalism, Human Rights, and the Law about her military experience since 9/11 to today's current events on immigration.

I am an African American, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. I'm a product of New York City public schools K-12 and went to Fordham University. I joined the Army ROTC Reserve Officer Training Corps program and on graduation, I received a commission as a regular army officer in the Ordnance Corps.

I'm a political science major and have a master's in public administration. What I did in the Army was the gratification of satisfaction: you feel like what you're doing is helping people; you have a common goal and you're not doing it just for profit, you're doing it to help make it better than what you found it.

When 9/11 happened, I saw it as an attack on the homeland, something that had not happened in my lifetime.

The last time someone attacked the homeland was Pearl Harbor in World War II. To have someone crash two planes into the World Trade Center was personal.

As a newly retired Army officer, I was ready to go back on active duty. I said, "Let's go to war." The frustrating thing was we didn't know who to attack. We didn't know who the enemy was.

With any new agency, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has gone through some growing pains. It's gotten better.

I'm not sure we had the best and brightest people working on it initially. The whole country was still in shock because nobody was expecting it.

For probably a good six to eight months, people were in zombie mode. I think we can forgive D.H.S. maybe for not getting it right automatically.

D.H.S. wasn't necessarily about immigration. It was about national security at the time. Immigration has morphed into D.H.S. because politicians and others have decided that one of the ways to keep us safe is to secure our border. The United States has been dealing with immigration problems for decades, since Ronald Reagan.

I think it's way past time for us to have a serious conversation about immigration. There's nothing wrong with immigration. If you go around the world, we're that one melting pot. It makes us who we are.

The United States federal government had an opportunity [in the last 10 years] to make a long-needed change to immigration law. They had worked very hard on a joint bipartisan bill [Border Act of 2024]. It looked like they were going to pass it. It did not have everything for everyone, but no good piece of legislation ever does. Politics is about compromise.

If we truly want to live up to the Pledge of Allegiance and with the thought that the founding fathers, who we know were very flawed because they all were slaveholders, but nevertheless, they left opportunities for us to make corrections, and we have [to make amendments]. The fact that we haven't gotten this and now we weaponized it and are turning these human beings into some sort of commodity or less than human is frightening.

Human beings were commodities in the original family father. My ancestors were three-fifths a person and were property. The Constitution has looked at certain human beings as weapons as commodities.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a good example. We've had an opportunity to do the right thing by kids who appear through no fault of their own for years now. We've done nothing. We just kind of dragged them on, kind of sort of a status, but not necessarily a totally legal one.

The idea of ending birthright citizenship [she paused], I am only a citizen because of the 14th Amendment. The 14th Amendment came out of slavery. When you start screwing around with an amendment that basically had to be written because when you freed the slaves, they weren't automatically citizens, you needed to make them citizens.

It's unconstitutional.

You didn't get here legally, but you know what? I guess theoretically, neither did I [her ancestors/slave trade].

I was stationed in Germany for three years. One of the first things I did was go to the Dachau concentration camp [the Holocaust].

To think that human beings would do that to one another. And, unfortunately, I see a lot of parallels from what happened in Germany [to now].

Sending people whose only crime and being here illegally is not a criminal act, it's a civil act. Sending them home in shackles like they are hard murderers is wrong. For me, as a Christian, it's wrong and upsetting.

Gitmo [Guantanamo Bay] has been a personal moral dilemma since 9/11. Throughout my military career, I was taught humane ways to treat and interrogate prisoners.

First, it's proven through scientific studies that when you torture people, they say whatever you think you wanna hear. They're not necessarily telling you the truth. They just want to torture to stop. Don't forget the fact that it's inhumane.

Number two, we have been taught that we are better than that; we are humane. We're gonna treat their prisoners humanely because we want our prisoners to be treated humanely.

You have to have values, the military does have values. If you're a professional soldier, you are someone who can live by rules, have discipline, and treat people with respect.

There's something called the just war theory [why and how wars are fought] and the law of land warfare [a set of rules and international law covering how wars are conducted]. Not only was I taught it, but I taught it to future army officers.

Then we got scared and all of our morality seemed to fly out the window [Abu Ghraib, a prison where three Iraqi men who were tortured in 2004, recently ruled the Consolidated Analysis Center, Inc. (CACI) is liable for its role in torturing]. U.S. forces tortured prisoners. That goes against everything they were taught and what we stand for. Some of that's been fixed in the courts.

If you're guilty of sneaking in, but living and working in the fields for years, getting caught with an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) raid, and you end up at Gitmo, can't have a translator or a lawyer, that's a problem. (- why? Ask her)

The constitution says, even if you're guilty, even if you're a criminal, caught in the act, you still have rights, you have the right to appear before a jury of your peers. You have the right to representation, someone to defend you and explain to you how the law works [miranda rights].

If you denied that, then you're basically saying, well, we're just gonna suspend this part of the constitution over here for this reason.

That's not how it works.

If you truly believe in your system in the law of the land, in my case and others took a vote, you either believe in it or you don't.

Let it work.