

Searching for Homeland Security

The house isn't really a house at all.

Four brick walls and a low, rusty gate that serves as a front door sit back off the road near the gas station. Sprawling weeds cover the dirt floor. The kitchen area – at least, where the family used to cook – is in one corner; the area for the bed along a back wall. There is no roof. No electricity. No running water.

This is the house that minuteman Frank George – or Francisco Jorge – visited in Mexico to see how the family of immigrants he was spending a month with used to live before mother Paty, father Rigo, and their two children at the time illegally crossed the Mexico-U.S. border to start a new life in East Los Angeles, Calif.

"This is a horrible place for anybody to live," George said during his visit to the Gonzales family's prior home in Mexico. "Only somebody that's homeless – which they were – would live in a place like this. And you couldn't possibly last very long... This is not a place like a home at all. No way. Nobody lasts in a place like this. You get out of here as soon as you can. First chance you got... It's a horrible place, just horrible."

George, himself an immigrant who moved to the U.S. from Cuba legally with his family, spent 30 days with the Gonzales family in their less than 500-square-foot one-bedroom apartment. George was a minuteman at the time, patrolling the border for illegal crossers and notifying Immigration and Naturalization Services officers when he spotted them. Naturally, his position on immigration made for a tense first meeting with the Gonzaleses.

Paty and Rigo sustain their family of seven on side jobs that earn them just \$15,000 per year since neither of them have the documents needed to acquire permanent positions. Three of their children were born in the U.S. and are American citizens by birth. Yet George admits that none of that mattered to him initially upon his arrival.

"My thought is to arrive and then 30 seconds later have an INS bus come and pick them up," George said. "If I could deport the Gonzaleses tomorrow, I would have to. That's the way the law is written."

Despite his initial certainty about illegal immigrants, George admits he underwent a change during those 30 days. He remembers one particular day struck him.

After accompanying Paty to the recycling center where she exchanged a trash bag full of bottles and cans for \$5, they returned to the apartment. George watched as Paty reached into a kitchen cupboard and pulled out a miniature, red boot. She cradled it in her elbow as she stuffed her hand inside and pulled out a small wad of bills. She carefully counted it out -- \$49 in all. This, she said, she had been saving for her family. This little boot

would be for her children to have Christmas presents, for her to keep her promises to them this year, unlike years past.

"It was Paty, the wife, who broke the ice for me," George said, "with a beautiful wonderful, loving personality that embraces you without even touching you."

Paty wasn't the only one who touched George during his visit, though. The Gonzales' daughter Armida, a senior in high school awaiting news about her college applications, served as a teacher for George. She expressed to him, in English, why she felt that illegal immigrants deserved a chance at the American dream and should receive opportunities for amnesty and naturalization.

During his stay, Armida engaged George in discussion, took him to an immigrant rally, and even taught him how to golf. Over time, George began to view her drive to succeed as a product of her background. She came from a horrible place, he came to understand, and she never wanted to go back to that place. As George lived and interacted with this family of legal and illegal immigrants, he came to see them not as a problem, but as a product of a problem.

"You can read a book but a book doesn't laugh, a book doesn't cry, a book doesn't have memories," George told the family as he reached the end of his stay. "A book is not a human being... There comes a time when you love people for who they are, all politics aside."

And other possible leads...

In the living room, Armida sleeps on the day bed, her sister sleeps on the trundle bed hidden below, and her brother sleeps on the floor. In the bedroom next door, another sister sleeps in a full bed, another brother sleeps near her on a twin bed, and her parents sleep together on the floor. The Gonzales family's tiny, less than 500 square foot apartment was already cramped before they opened their door to minuteman Frank George.

Minuteman Frank George is unapologetic about his feelings toward illegal immigrants. He wants them out of his country, and he wants them out now.

"The foremost problem I see," George said, "is the dissolution of this country. It will tear it apart totally and completely."

As legal and illegal immigrants gathered in the streets of Los Angeles to support a senate bill creating a path for illegal immigrants to gain citizenship, they raised and waved American flags and chanted, “USA, USA, USA.” But minuteman Frank George wasn’t buying it.

“They don’t mean that,” he said. “They don’t mean that.”

George wouldn’t be chanting. He wouldn’t be lighting a candle or participating in the vigil. And he certainly wouldn’t be changing his mind about illegal immigrants. At least, that’s what he thought at the beginning of his 30-day stay with a family of immigrants in East L.A.