

Together We Marched

by Olga García Echeverría

My sister Gladys and I were eating a tlayuda covered in black beans and Oaxacan cheese when we first heard about Senator Sensenbrenner and his immigration bill on Univisión. I

almost choked when I heard the senator from Wisconsin wanted to get rid of all the “illegals aliens.” What would he think of me? Would he see America in my face? My hair is black. My skin is cacao-colored. I have my great grandmother’s Zapotec eyes, slanted slightly at the edges.

My family is originally from San Pedro Cajonos, a small pueblo in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, where I visit once a year. Even though I was born in Southern California, in the city of Huntington Park, San Pedro is always with me. It is the land where my parents and sister were born, where my grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins live. San Pedro is a town full of colorful houses on steep slopes. In San Pedro windows have no screens, children wearing thick huarache sandals wander free, and toasted corn tortillas are as big as pizzas. The people in San Pedro always know when someone is coming or going because there’s only one main road, and dust clouds rise like smoke signals with each moving car. When you meet adults in San Pedro, they say things like, “Oh, yes, I know you. You are the daughter of so-and-so.”

On Univisión, the newscaster explained how the Sensenbrenner bill would build a fence at the border, all the way from California to Texas to keep undocumented immigrants out of the country. “Don’t you have better ways to spend our tax dollars?” my sister asked the TV. Gladys always talks back to the TV when things upset her.

The fence was only the beginning. The Sensenbrenner bill would make crossing the border without papers a felony and punish anyone who helped or sheltered the undocumented. This meant a lot of people would go to jail. I thought of Yolanda who lives with us and my throat tightened up like it does when I want to cry. Yolanda doesn't have papers. She cleans houses five days a week and takes English classes at night. The Sensenbrenner bill would make her and my family criminals.

Then I thought of my friend Marta at school. She doesn't have papers either. Her parents brought her to the United States when she was just a little kid. Nobody ever asked her if she wanted to cross the border. Huntington Park is her home now. This is where she grew up, where she goes to school and where she has all her friends. Would she be deported? My sister must have seen the look on my face because she leaned over and hugged me tightly. "Don't worry, Leo," she said. "A bill isn't a law. This is wrong and we're going to fight this Sensenbrenner!"

But how do you fight a bill? I went to bed that night imagining my loved ones in prison. I had to do something. I remembered how back in San Pedro, before I was born, my mother was a school teacher. She taught us that education is the most important thing. "Inform yourself," my mother always says. That night I made a plan. I would ask my parents, my sister, and my teachers questions. I would read the paper, listen to the radio, surf the web, and watch the news.

During the following weeks, I learned that the immigration bill had many names: H.R. 4437, Sensenbrenner, and The Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. I had a hard time pronouncing Sensenbrenner, so I looked up the name on the internet. I found out it originally came from Germany. Maybe

Senator Sensenbrenner and I had something in common. His ancestors had once crossed the Atlantic. They were immigrants too.

I also learned that the Sensenbrenner bill was passed by the House of Representatives on December 16, 2005 by a vote of 239 to 182, but it hadn't yet been passed by the Senate. People across the country were speaking out against the bill to prevent it from becoming law. My sister and I tuned in daily to El Piolin's radio show because he gave updates on what was happening with the immigration bill. Through El Piolin we learned that in February, nearly 2,000 demonstrators marched in Philadelphia in support of immigrants, and in early March, about 100,000 people protested H.R. 4437 in Chicago.

At Gage, my junior high school, everyone was talking about the Sensenbrenner bill. Students throughout Los Angeles were planning walk-outs for the following week. School administrators scared us with suspensions and sent us home with warnings for our parents. But the student organizers said we needed to send a message to the politicians, even though we weren't old enough to vote. "Write to your Senators! Write to your representatives!" They passed out flyers for a big demonstration on Saturday, March 25th. I went home with the flyer in my hand, eager to share the news with my family. Although my parents forbade me to walk-out, I didn't have to convince them to participate in the demonstration. They were outraged at the Sensenbrenner bill just like I was.

On March 25th, my family and I joined hundreds of Oaxacans on the corner of Normandie and Pico in Los Angeles. We carried huge "¡OAXACA PRESENTE!" banners and made our way towards the demonstration. I had never participated in a demonstration, but I had been following the news and I knew Los Angeles was only one

of many cities speaking out against Sensenbrenner. Two days before, 15,000 people marched in Milwaukee, and on March 24th, 20,000 marched in Phoenix.

I knew something incredible was happening as we approached downtown. At every block our numbers grew. By the time we reached the Staples Center, we were surrounded by a sea of people. U.S. flags flapped alongside those of Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, Ecuador, and many other countries. Thousands united on this day to protest the Sensenbrenner bill. Latinos, African Americans, Koreans, Chinese, Whites, and Middle Eastern people carried signs that said:

***NO HUMAN BEING IS ILLEGAL.
IMMIGRANTS ARE NOT CRIMINALS.
WE ARE A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND WE ARE PROUD OF IT!***

I marched with my family, my heart swelling with pride as the three of us chanted as loud as we could: “El pueblo unido jamas sera vencido! The people united will never be divided!” I thought of the people of San Pedro, of Yolanda, of Marta, of my parents’ and sister’s journey to this country. I thought of Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez. They had given their lives for civil rights. I knew in my heart if they were alive, they would be marching with us. I didn’t know yet that we would never make it to city hall that day because 500,000 protesters jammed the streets. I didn’t know that on that same day 50,000 were also marching in Denver, Colorado and hundreds more in Cleveland, Ohio. Or that in the following months demonstrations would spread to more than 100 cities throughout the nation: San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, Las Vegas, Charleston, Oklahoma, Indianapolis, Washington, Memphis, and even cities I had never heard of, like Pensacola, Florida and Grand Junction, Colorado. I didn’t know that

these national demonstrations would later defeat the Sensenbrenner bill. But already there was a feeling of triumph as we marched and raised our voices. We were making history.