

Testimony of
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to the

Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Oversight

regarding the hearing titled

“How the Tax Code Subsidizes Hate”

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Chairman Lewis and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of YWCA El Paso del Norte Region, YWCA USA, and my El Paso family and to speak about the issue of hate speech and anti-immigrant rhetoric and its link to hate crimes and terror attacks. I stand before you as the Chief Executive Officer of an organization whose mission is to eliminate racism, empower women, and promote peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. This mission has no exceptions and it has no borders.

YWCA History and Expertise

My testimony today is informed by my personal experiences as a Latinx woman and member of the El Paso community, my educational background, which includes a PhD, and a Master of Arts in Political Science with a focus in National Security, and my professional experiences as CEO of YWCA El Paso del Norte Region.

YWCA is on the ground in El Paso and some 1300 communities across the nation. We have been at the forefront of the most pressing social movements for more than 160 years-- from voting rights to civil rights, from affordable housing to pay equity, from violence prevention to health care reform. Today, YWCA El Paso touches approximately 40,000 lives. We offer housing and supportive services, including counseling, education, childcare, and more to survivors of domestic violence. We provide free workforce development in our community and teen leadership programs in areas with high rates of high school dropouts. We serve more than 5000 children and teenagers in our community.

In the past two and a half years, YWCA El Paso has:

- Stood at the gates of an immigration center in Tornillo to call for an end to family separation and better conditions for children detained in US custody
- Visited a child immigrant detention center to ensure quality care for migrant children
- Organized community service projects for individuals recently released from Border Patrol custody at a downtown bus station. These individuals we assisted had no food, changes of clothes, transportation, means of communication, or shelter. Yet together, YWCA El Paso staff, family, and community members spent hours making food, organized makeshift medical tents for volunteer doctors and nurses, collected clothes, shoes, and diapers,

and lent our phones so these human beings could contact their family members.

- Hosted a delegation with Hispanics in Philanthropy where, YWCA CEOs and staff joined other nonprofit advocates and philanthropic leaders in a site visit to El Paso and Juarez, Mexico. Together, we heard from migrants, advocates, and service providers about the impact of the crisis on individuals seeking refuge in the US as well as on the broader El Paso Community.

My Story

Today I sit before you as the daughter of an “immigrant” and a migrant worker where Spanish was my first language. The reason I put the word immigrant in quotation marks is because my mother was an American citizen born in Oxnard, California who repatriated to Mexico with her family in the 1930s as part of the Mexican Repatriation Program (INS Records for 1930s Mexican Repatriations, 2014). The fear mongering directed at immigrants, including Mexicans, after the Wall Street crash and the onset of the Great Depression led to my grandparent’s repatriation to Mexico, a country that my mother a U.S. citizen had never known but because of her heritage was now her home. Years later, my mother, a U.S. born citizen, returned to the United States where on a cross border trolley (U.S./Mexico) she met my father. Three months later they were married. My mother would go on to work at an El Paso clothing factory, raise her children and eventually start her own small business. My father began his life in the United States as a bracero. He immigrated to the United States as a field hand and cannery worker. After many years of migrating to various parts of the United States for work, he was hired by a copper mine in El Paso and became a proud union worker. While working at the copper mine my father also became a real estate entrepreneur, eventually owning a majority of the homes in our neighborhood. My parents were kind, honest and law abiding. They were active in their community and church. They raised five college educated children. They paid taxes. They were proud American citizens of Mexican heritage. They labored to achieve the American Dream so that they could provide a better life for their children. Through their story, they taught me to value education, hard work, ethics, and to care for those that were less fortunate. They also taught me to love my country. My parents were immigrants.

As much as my parents loved this country, they were not immune to the discrimination and racism faced by countless Americans. As a brown-skinned woman, I am familiar with that same discrimination and profiling. I have heard the

stereotypical remarks and have been profiled based upon my race. I have experienced the looks, both of anger and fear when people see me. I have also known the looks of surprise when someone learns of mine and my family's successes. I have had people try to re-label me as Spanish, Greek, Mediterranean--anything but Mexican in order to try to justify my education, as if being Mexican American somehow limits my intelligence or ability. No one in the United States should ever have to experience judgmental, hurtful, and disrespectful feelings of hate or exclusion based on their heritage or color of their skin. Although these acts would frustrate me and even make me angry, it never occurred to me that in 2019, my skin color, my immigrant story, and my ethnic identity could result in my murder or that of others like me.

The Impact of Hate

On Saturday, August 3rd, 2019 all of that changed. A gunman motivated by hate and anti-immigrant sentiments drove 10 hours across the state of Texas to a Walmart in El Paso to murder 22 individuals and injure dozens more because they were Mexican, because he saw them as invaders. His screed spouted his hate of Mexicans and Hispanics and clearly outlined his goal: to stop the "invasion." Although this feeling of being persecuted was new to me, it is commonplace for others.

The language of hate has historically caused acts of violence against innocent individuals simply for being. I wasn't alive when Emmett Till was murdered. I was a baby when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I have never seen a lynching or witnessed a genocide. But it was not necessary for me to experience these events to be horrified by them. My whole life, I have empathized with African Americans who, throughout history, have been enslaved, beaten, lynched, and murdered solely because of the color of their skin. Like so many, my heart ached when I learned in history class about the millions of Jewish people who were systematically killed because of their faith. My husband is Native American and we must never forget the genocide faced by his people and every other tribe in this country. I have felt empathy, sorrow and anger. I have been stirred to action on behalf of so many marginalized groups, including Hispanics and women, but still I did not know what it felt like to be targeted and persecuted until the horrific attack my community experienced on August 3rd.

This hateful and cruel treatment is not new. Throughout the country, people with brown skin are treated disdainfully and met with cruel words and actions. Although

I was consciously aware of the effects of hate-filled rhetoric, I did not internalize these feelings until it turned into mass murder. I did not know what it would feel like for someone to decide they wanted to kill my friends, my family, myself because of our ethnicity. More than a month later and my community is still on edge, still afraid. My greatest fear is that someone else out there sees Mexicans and Hispanics as invaders and will travel to our community, or one like ours, or yours, to inflict even more harm.

The Importance of Healing

One month after the attack, our community is in pain. We are still trying to make sense of the violence, of the death, and of the hate that motivated it all. It is the children in our community who truly opened my eyes to the lasting impact the August 3rd attack will have. The increased anti-immigrant rhetoric and hate-filled climate has a direct effect on their lives and perceptions of themselves. American children, between the ages of 4-12 years old, have expressed concerns and fears of going to jail or being killed because of their Mexican identities and the increased targeting of people of color at the Southwest border. Many children have expressed anxiety about the potential deportation of their parents, even if their parents are US citizens. I believe those fears will stay with them and impact them for the rest of their lives. That is the trauma that hate leaves on the soul.

On September 5th, YWCA partnered with the El Paso Holocaust Museum and the City of El Paso to host “Dinner and Dialogue.” This was part of a series of events we have done with the Holocaust Museum in an effort to open dialogue and have meaningful conversation between community members from all belief systems, religions, political leanings, backgrounds, races, ethnicities, etc. The September 5th event was entitled: El Paso: Our Story, Our Healing, Our Response. More than 200 El Pasoans came together to discuss the August 3rd attack and the rise of hate language in today’s society. Individuals attending this event were from diverse political, social and religious backgrounds. The daughter of a former member of the KKK who was in attendance affirmed that the language of hate fueled division, fear, and violence.

Victims and family members of the August 3 terrorist attack testified as to the impact in their lives. Pastor Mike Grady’s daughter was shot three times and has had to undergo six surgeries. She is currently in a rehabilitation facility. He denounced hate and spoke of the fear that he and his wife experienced at the thought of possibly losing their child. He spoke of the horror and chaos – all a

direct result of hate. We also heard from the attending physician at University Medical Center who received several of the wounded. She lived a nightmare but chooses to focus on the strength of the community who volunteered to help. Another speaker's brother was killed while protecting his wife and granddaughter. Her brother gave his life to save his family, but he should not have had to. The one thing that these individuals that spoke that evening had in common was that not one of them was Hispanic or Mexican. None of them were the expressed target of the shooter. Yet they were casualties of the hate that was meant for "Mexican Invaders." There have been reports that the shooter targeted Hispanics or Mexicans, but the pain, the suffering, the deaths were not restricted to one ethnicity or skin color. The list of victims, those killed and those injured, include Mexican Americans, Mexican Nationals, white Americans, Hispanics, a teenager, black Americans, a young mother and father, grandparents. Because hate does not discriminate. Hate cannot be controlled and it cannot be contained. Hate is not a mental illness. Hate is a direct manifestation of intolerance, ignorance and fear that is fueled, nurtured and disseminated through language.

If we allow the continued rise of hateful language, no one will be safe. And so I say to those who remain neutral in the fight against hate: do not think you are safe. You may not be the target, you may not be the object of someone's hate, but you or someone you love may one day be the collateral damage.

No one among us can be silent in the face of hate, because it is not just affecting my community at the border, rather it is affecting every single person in this country. And if it hasn't yet—it will. You can draw a straight line from racist, hateful language and anti-immigrant rhetoric to the repatriation of my mother's family to Mexico and to the domestic terrorist attack that occurred in El Paso on August 3rd. The impact of hate is real and tangible and it must not continue.

We must commit to ending language that dehumanizes. We must do this now. We must do this so that we can provide the next generation of Americans with an opportunity to live in a world where the threat of violence based on any classification, including gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, race, ethnicity is a thing of the past. We must be vigilant in order to move toward ending tragic acts of violence spurred on by the language of hate. I call on Members of Congress and our national leaders to unequivocally denounce hate speech. This is not a Republican or a Democrat affair—the denunciation of hate is

not a political or partisan issue. So today I implore on Members of Congress to uphold the YWCA El Paso del Norte's pledge against hate:

- I will refuse to stay silent when I witness racism, sexism, or discrimination.
- I will treat every human being I encounter with respect, including women, disabled individuals, all members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people of all races, ethnicities, faiths, and nationalities.
- I will continuously examine my beliefs, values, language and behaviors to identify and eliminate any that are discriminatory or oppressive.
- I will embrace YWCA's mission of eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We look forward to working with you on these critical issues.

INS Records for 1930s Mexican Repatriations. (2014, March 3). Retrieved from US Citizenship and Immigration Services: <https://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/our-history/historians-mailbox/ins-records-1930s-mexican-repatriations>