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OPINION

Fighting for Immigrant Families

All colors deserve dignity and fairness

BY BENJAMIN TODD JEALOUS

I am fighting for my father. He is undocumented. I am fighting for all of the children who don't have their mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters."

That was the speech I heard last month from Yahir Servin, an 11-year-old who participated in a civil disobedience on Capitol Hill with the Fair Immigration Reform Movement.

Yahir was one of seven kids between the ages of 11 and 17 who joined 20 adults in a jail cell all afternoon to draw attention to the need for immigration reform. As rain poured down, the protestors sat resolutely in the middle of the street



outside Capitol Hill while police handcuffed them one by one.

A few blocks away, the U.S. House of Representatives was in session but immigration reform was not on the agenda. Even though every day of inaction means that more immigrants are evicted and more families broken up, the House has still not taken up the comprehensive reform bill that passed in the Senate, or offered an alternative of its own. Meanwhile, although President Obama has been an outspoken supporter of reform, deportations have risen significantly over the course of his presidency.

Immediately before the protest, a 16-year-old named Talia Gonzalez told a heartbreaking story about her family's situation. Her father had returned to Mexico in order to get the necessary documentation to become a citizen. The U.S. officials at the Mexican border told him that he could not return.

For the past four years, Talia and

her father have only seen each other a handful of times, a mountain of paperwork separating father and daughter.

She is not alone. According to a 2012 report by the Center for American Progress, one out of three U.S. citizen children of immigrants live in mixed-status families, and tens of thousands of parents are deported each year.

This has a devastating impact on families, forcing children into foster care or leaving single mothers who struggle to make ends meet.

I stood with the protesters because I believe that immigrants of all colors deserve to be treated with dignity and fairness. This has been a priority for the civil rights community for a very long time.

It was a priority for Frederick Douglass when he opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act in the years after the Civil War, arguing in effect that he did not intend to watch the government brutally exploit workers in the Southwest just after end-

ing slavery in the Southeast. It was a priority for civil rights leaders in the 1960's, when, immediately after passing the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act, Congress pushed through what historian Taylor Branch has called through the "third pillar" of the civil rights revolution - ending the racist Europe-only preference for immigrants in this country.

As Douglass, Ella Baker and Roy Wilkins understood, our communities are strongest when we are willing to stand up for our neighbors' families with the same passion that we fight for our own.

There is reason for optimism. A number of Republican lawmakers have spoken out recently, urging their colleagues to take a vote on immigration reform. The pressure on these intransigent legislators will only increase as more people, young and old, stand up to make their voices heard on the issue.

By going to jail for their cause, Yahir and the other young protest-

ors took a page from the Birmingham Children's Crusade of 1963.

We all know the iconic images of children locking hands, marching in step and singing "We Shall Overcome" as Bull Connor's deputies blasted them with fire hoses. Fewer may remember that some of the children's parents had second thoughts about letting their little ones out in the charged Birmingham streets.

In a speech that week, Dr. King was able to put the situation in perspective, in words that called to mind the actions of Yahir, Talia and the other young activists half a century later.

"Don't worry about your children," he said, "They are going to be alright. Don't hold them back if they want to go to jail, for they are not only doing a job for themselves, but for all of America and for all of mankind."

Ben Jealous is the former president and chief executive officer of the NAACP.

#BringBackOurGirls: Why We Should Care

A real war on women

BY MARC H. MORIAL

A real war on women, marked by murder, rape and slavery is raging in too many parts of the world. In fact and unfortunately, human traf-

ficking is now thought to be among the fastest-growing illegal enterprises globally.

The latest and most grotesque example is the April 14 kidnapping of more than 200 girls from their Nigerian school by a terrorist group known as Boko Haram.

The group violently opposes any activity associated with Western society and for the past several years has been waging a bloody campaign to prevent the education of Nigeria's girls. Yet, I have been asked by several people in the past few weeks why we should continue to care about events happening so far from our borders.

The answer is simple: we cannot ignore the fact that attitudes that deny, question or compromise the value of women anywhere are harmful to women everywhere - no matter where they occur.

In many parts of the world and some cultures, outdated, patriarchal and inhumane ideas such as forced

marriages, sanctioned wife beatings and even female genital mutilations continue to keep women subservient and from contributing to society and achieving their full potential.

Preventing girls from getting an education is also another unacceptable tactic



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used to continually oppress women around the world. As First Lady Michelle Obama pointed out in the White House weekly address in honor of Mother's Day, "more than 65 million girls worldwide are not in school."

In his Sunday New York Times column on May 11, Nicholas Kristof asked, "What's So Scary About Smart Girls?" Simply put, nothing threatens oppressive, male-dominated societies more than educated girls who are likely to have fewer children, become productive workers and boost their economies. As Kristof puts it, "The greatest threat to extremism isn't drones firing missiles,

but girls reading books."

In addition to the issue of education for girls, this latest tragedy in Nigeria also highlights the deplorable crime of human trafficking - not just around the world, but also here at home.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center reports that from 2008-2012, it received more than

65,000 calls to its hotline and received reports of more than 9,000 unique cases of human trafficking. Of these, 41 percent of sex trafficking cases referenced U.S. citizens as victims, and women were referenced as victims in 85 percent of sex trafficking cases.

As distressing as these numbers are, they still do not represent the entirety of the problem because this data is based on reported incidents only. According to the human trafficking watchdog group, with an estimated 100,000 children in the sex trade in the United States each year, the total number of human trafficking victims in the U.S. reaches hun-

dreds of thousands when estimates of both adults and minors and sex trafficking and labor trafficking are combined.

The awful drama unfolding in Nigeria has touched the heart of the world, and it has also raised the consciousness of an international community about the continuing fight for the rights of girls and women.

As the father of two daughters, I cannot imagine the pain that the parents of the missing girls must be feeling. As a civil rights leader, it fuels my commitment to do what is within my power and influence

to ensure that we #BringBackOurGirls everywhere.

While there is no scale or moral equivalence between what is happening in Nigeria and the treatment of girls and women in America today, we cannot ignore our own responsibility to fully educate and empower girls in this country, to champion equal pay, to end violence against women, and to stop the human trafficking of hundreds of thousands of children, girls and women each year.

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