

## COMMENTARY: Our pledge of allegiance to young immigrants

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Inside the cafeteria of Emiliano Zapata Elementary School in La Joya on Thursday morning, about 125 first- and second-graders sat “crisscross applesauce” style on the floor listening to mother and daughter co-authors read their children’s book, titled *I Pledge Allegiance*.

The event was part of a Texas Book Festival’s Reading Rock Stars program, which sends national authors to disadvantaged schools in the Rio Grande Valley to inspire students to read more and possibly one day to write books.

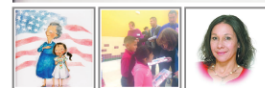
At Zapata Elementary School, it was obvious that many of the students did not fully understand English as authors Pat Mora and Libby Martinez read their book. Many fidgeted and squirmed and looked around. But when Mora, 73, and Martinez, 44, read a few words in Spanish or asked them questions in Spanish, they turned their faces to the stage, focused, smiled and engaged.

And when the authors read portions of their book that recited the Pledge of Allegiance, the students all spontaneously joined in. This happened four times in the span of 45 minutes and the kids did so with such gusto and enthusiasm that it moved me.

Moreso, when Mora asked how many of them had been born in Mexico (just like a lead character in their book) dozens raised their hands and smiled.



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I can only imagine how some of these children got here, how long they’ve been here and how difficult it must be to live in a country that speaks a different language.

Yet here they were in South Texas, most wearing blue jeans, the girls touting adorable bows in their hair, and all able to proudly state our nation’s Pledge of Allegiance —in English.

I wish that the lawmakers in Washington who quibble and argue and make immigration reform such an ugly subject could have seen these children. I wish they’d heard Mora and Martinez recite the part of the book where the elder character, Great Aunt Lobo (or wolf,) explained her patriotism for America to her great niece, Libby, and why she needed to learn the Pledge of Allegiance to become an American citizen:

“*M querida*, I was born in Mexico and went to school there, but the United States has been my home for many years. I am proud to be from Mexico and to speak Spanish and English. Many people are proud of the places where they were born or where they grew up. But a long time ago, when I was a young girl, my father wanted a safer place for us to grow up, and we came to the United States. The American flag — red, white, and blue — wrapped itself around me to protect me.”

Nearby me, a toothless grin sat up and smiled when she heard those words. Later when all students were receiving a signed copy of the hardback book, she shyly thanked the authors and then quickly opened it and began reading it while walking down the hall.

Good for the Texas Book Festival for flying these authors here — Mora came from Santa Fe and Martinez from Colorado Springs — to relate to and encourage these Valley children. And thanks to the festival for giving away hundreds of free copies to these students and for realizing the deep and inspiring message that this simple, 30-page color-illustrated children's book could have on this next generation.

This book is based on real life. Tia Lobo was Mora's aunt and Libby is Martinez and this is the true story of their aunt Ygnacia Delgada who came to El Paso during the Mexican Revolution in 1910 with her father and sisters and later became a U.S. citizen in her late 70s.

As I sat in the drafty cafeteria, I wondered how many of these children weren't U.S. citizens and how many might apply for citizenship later in life. Or whether they have *tias* or parents who are engaged in this very process. I wondered if they realized the hatred that so many in the United States have for those who are here without proper documents — or simply because they are different.

And I wondered if they truly would take to heart what Mora told them to “read everyday” and “study hard,” and they can one day be “anything they want to be.”

I wondered if, during these next few months, as Congress (hopefully) takes up the contentious issue of immigration reform whether these children will believe in our American flag, as the book's character did, as a source of protection. Will they do so even if families are split apart and if conservatives are successful in reversing President Barack Obama's temporary immigration reform that could allow 4 million undocumented immigrants to stay here legally and work and become more productive, contributing members of society?

I wondered how U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen of Brownsville would react to the scene in this very cafeteria. He is the federal judge overseeing the case in which a coalition of states, led by Texas, have sued to stop Obama's executive actions on immigration.

Could he look at these young, eager faces and hear them say loudly and proudly our nation's Pledge of Allegiance and still determine that the president's methods are illegal? Will he possibly rule in such a way that might force some of these children to lose their parents or to be sent back themselves to other countries?

I hope lawmakers will pledge to do their part to fully realize the allegiance these children and families have for our country. I hope they will truly listen and learn and have meaningful discussions on this issue that will forge our country's future and could forever change these children's lives.

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