

PAUL BRIDGES

In Conversation with Joelle Chase

Paul Bridges, Republican mayor of Uvalda, Georgia (population 600) experienced a profound shift in the way he viewed his Latino neighbors in 1999. [The story was highlighted on CNN.com in June.](#) Since then, Mayor Bridges has taken a strong stance in opposition of Georgia's new "papers please" law, House Bill 87, that would criminalize knowingly aiding or harboring an undocumented immigrant. In conversation with Joelle Chase, Mayor Bridges shares his journey toward compassion and justice.

JOELLE CHASE: Even before becoming mayor of Uvalda, Georgia, you made it your mission to know your neighbors, all 600 of them—knocking on doors, asking questions, listening. Years ago, in the grocery store, an encounter with strangers broadened your definition of “neighbor.” Tell us about that life-changing moment.

PAUL BRIDGES: I was going to prepare a meal for my girlfriend who was coming to visit, and I had gone to the store to buy ingredients for lasagna. While in the store I noticed a younger couple that didn't look like the rest of us, and they were speaking a foreign language. I assumed that they were Mexicans because there were Mexicans in the area working on farms. I had this attitude that I had formed, I suppose, just from my environment, that the people who had come from other countries were kind of lower, less than us in some fashion. I'm not sure how I came to that understanding, but that's the way I felt at that time.

These two young people, perhaps 25 years old, were talking and looking deeply into each others' eyes, and I could tell they were in love. Any moment they found to touch each other they would. It was a beautiful sight, and I thought, *Gosh, I wish I knew what they were saying.* As we continued our grocery shopping I watched them intently. After I bought the groceries and was outside going to my car, I saw the young couple walking down the sidewalk with their grocery bags in their hands, and I asked them, “Do you want a lift?” They didn't understand me, so I said, “Do you want a ride?” And they still didn't understand me; they gave me this look of, I don't know what you're talking about. But a guy across the road came running over, and he said, “Yes, yes!” They got in the car with two more people. So here I was with several people in the car, not having any idea who they were, and I didn't know how to ask them, “Well, where do we go now?”

They started pointing, and we found how to go and where to go, arriving at a cotton field with two trailer houses. As we pulled in, the people inside the single-wide trailer were coming out, a lot of people. I could tell they were motioning me to come inside, but I told them that I had meat in the car and I had to go on to my house. So I left. When I got home, I discovered my girlfriend's car had broken down, and she wouldn't make it for dinner. I had already put the lasagna in the oven, so when it was done, I took both pans of lasagna back up to the trailer where I'd dropped off the group, and offered it to them. I had brought my daughter's Spanish/English dictionary and tried to say, “This is for you.” Of course, no one understood anything I was saying. But they invited me to come in. I pointed at the lasagna, and I said, “You eat this.” They began eating, and I could tell they liked it.

Using my dictionary, I asked if they had kids. The young woman, Osbilda, stiffened and left the room. I wondered if I had just really messed up by saying something wrong, that maybe they had lost a child. In a few minutes she came back out and handed her husband, Dunaldo, a picture. Dunaldo was grinning from ear to ear as he showed me the picture of a little boy, probably 3 years old. He had on coveralls and just the cutest expression of mischievousness. On the back of the picture was written “Dunaldo.” There was another word on the back of the picture. I looked it up—turtle. Their little boy had a turtle inside of his coveralls. It was just a touching moment. And then I realized that their little boy was back in their native country (Guatemala) and that this family had been separated so that they could come to the United States to work and make some money to support their family.

It was a very pleasant meeting even though there was little verbal interaction. They invited me to come back, and each time I returned, I learned more Spanish and became closer friends with Dinaldo, Osbilda, the other people in their trailer, and their neighbors. The people living in the single-wide were from Guatemala and had passports to be here. The Mexicans in the double-wide did not. One Mexican owned his own construction company back in Mexico. One was a schoolteacher, and another was a manager for Western Union. I became aware that these people are coming to the United States to do the work that no one here would want to do, the work that is just too uncomfortable for us to do. Yet these people were more than happy to do it. And I realized they were not low life. They were not *less than*. They were real people with real families, working as hard as I was to support their families. I have three children and, Joelle, I realized that I too would have done what they're doing; I would have gone to Mexico or Guatemala to do what those people were doing here if that was the best way to provide for my family.

You asked me to tell about a life-changing moment. I know that wasn't a blink of an eye moment, but the encounter that I had with those people became a life-changing experience. The young couple became very good friends of mine. I helped Dinaldo get his driver's license, studying the book in Spanish and teaching signs in English. Their little boy is now 15 years old and their daughter is about 7. On a recent visit, their little girl just fell in love with my goats, so I gave them one of the kids to take home.

I would take my Mexican friends to Wal-Mart or wherever they needed to go. I would use any excuse to be with them so that I could learn Spanish. I asked the director of a nearby Latino outreach organization if they offered Spanish classes. They said no, but told me if I would teach English as a second language, I would learn Spanish quickly. I protested that I didn't know enough to do anything with Spanish. But the director assured me I'd be speaking in English and that if within six months I hadn't learned Spanish, she would pay me for teaching. It wasn't even a month and I was already speaking Spanish.

My friends would go back to Mexico after the season of harvesting onions or pine straw. In those years the people would come and go because it was easy to cross the border, so they could spend six months here and earn some money and go back home and spend six months with their families. But as the border crossings became more dangerous and more expensive, families started coming into the United States with their men.

One year, the day after Christmas, I drove to Mexico and spent a month there with the family of one of my good friends. That too was a touching, very emotional experience. The family's home was very small, clean. They had a little store and would sell Cokes, cheeses and things out the window. My friend's sister and her husband were going to give up their room for me, but I resisted, even when someone said I'd hurt their feelings. I just couldn't take their room. So I stayed with a friend of theirs. I am so much richer for this experience.

The friendships that I developed in 1999 are still with me. These people are my family now. They go to our family reunions and share their wonderful food—quesadillas, tamales, mole. It has been a cross-cultural exchange in my family that is very rural and in earlier years was extremely racist.

JC: Though you identify as a Conservative Republican, your position against Georgia's HB 87 and in favor of Comprehensive Immigration Reform is not popular with many of your fellow Republicans. It appears you've been able to step out of the dualistic, partisan thinking that pervades our political system. What brought about this *metanoia* for you, and how others might—our politicians, social activists, religious leaders and our very own selves—experience this way of loving “Other?”

PB: The very simple answer to that is—get to know an “illegal alien;” when you get to know someone you find out that the demagoguery is no longer real. You'll find that they really are just like us. These are not others. They are us. They do the same family things that we do. They have a religious faith like we do. Other than saying that we are all people, I don't know another way to answer that. I think that if anyone were to open the door to someone who is not like them, then their life would be richer by far. Getting a politician to see that

is a difficult thing; I've been working toward making politicians aware of the "other" since I became active challenging HB 87.

I am a conservative Republican. I am conservative because I believe in small government, a balanced budget, business, and that government should not enter our personal realm. As a Republican I think we should do everything we can to promote business and the economy; HB 87 doesn't do that. HB 87 is not conservative, and it is not Republican. I don't have an answer as to how it is that people who call themselves conservative Republicans would have passed a law like HB 87 because it absolutely infringes on all the personal rights and freedoms that we have, and it duplicates federal law and state law without having trained officers to implement the law. It is going to destroy the economic machine that drives South Georgia—agriculture.

The people who have been doing the work for 10 to 15 years are now going to be forced out of Georgia by those who call themselves conservative Republicans. What these lawmakers don't understand is that when they call someone an illegal alien it demonizes people, and it causes the children of those people to take on a feeling of being less than—"I'm not very good. If my parents are illegal, then I must be illegal as well." Look at the demographics of our area: we have people who are citizens, who are undocumented, households of documented and undocumented people. Passing a law that criminalizes the person who has papers because they've associated with someone who does not have papers is just not Republican, not conservative. It's not human; it's not humane; it's not Godly; it's not Christ-like. It is evil; it's incomprehensible. I don't know how to say it in English well enough to describe how bad HB 87 is when it tears families and communities apart. It drives fear in everyone. If someone who has papers is driving down the road with someone who doesn't have papers in the same car, and they fail to use their blinker or they are speeding or for whatever little reason and they get stopped, this law would allow that person to be arrested and put in jail for a year, and the person who is undocumented to be deported.

When Judge Thrash blocked the two worst provisions of the law, he asked a very good question of the state's attorney: If you've got an 18-year-old citizen who's driving his mother (who is undocumented) to the grocery store, what happens if he's speeding? The lawyer had to answer truthfully that the teenager could be arrested and his mother deported. And I wish the judge had followed up with another question: What happens to the 10-year-old and 9-year-old citizens who are also in the car with this young man when their older brother is sent to prison for a year and their mother is deported? What happens to those two children? The ramifications of this law are not understood by the vast majority of the people. This law is so awful; for example, if you've got a family that's of mixed status in the home and they need emergency services, they're not going to reach over and dial 911 because they've got someone who's undocumented in the home. I have people tell me that I exaggerate and I'm blowing this out of proportion, but it is not out of proportion. The people in these homes have expressed this to me. We are fortunate that those two provisions were blocked by the judge, but we have no assurances that those blocks will hold.

JC: So the fight continues. Along with ACLU, you are committed to challenging Georgia's discriminatory, anti-immigrant law. How do you "fight" without becoming bitter, hard, hopeless or hateful?

PB: Well, I must tell you that sometimes it does feel hopeless, particularly when I was in Washington talking to a congressman who said, of the children of the undocumented, they shouldn't be citizens. I'm not bitter, but I know people who are. A mother who lives in Hazlehurst, an adjoining town, whose husband was deported, will be leaving Friday with her children to live in Mexico for ten years. Her children are U.S. citizens, and she's extremely bitter. I understand that. I understand the hard feelings and how difficult it is for families when they are ripped apart. I don't know how to deal with others' hatefulness. I didn't know how to deal with this congressman who said the children of the undocumented shouldn't be citizens. I simply told him that for right now they are citizens. I've seen their birth certificates; I've seen their passports. They are U.S. citizen children now. We need to deal with reality today that these children are citizens, and we must protect their parents. We must allow their parents to continue working for them and providing for them. The bitterness and the hopelessness, the hatefulness—all of those are, of course at times, within my emotional range. But I'm focused

on making change. I am hoping that there can be a unity of the various groups throughout the United States who are working to get comprehensive immigration reform that would allow these people who have been doing this work for years to have a pathway of citizenship, to allow them to continue doing the work they have been doing and even branch out to additional work so that they too can participate in the American dream of having life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness instead of driving down the road and seeing blue lights and their kids start crying out of fear that their family is going to be broken apart.

So all of those emotions are within me, but they almost never come forward. My anger comes forward more than any of the other emotions whenever I hear someone use demonic terms or say that a U.S. citizen should not be a U.S. citizen. I get angry, but I don't get bitter.

JC: And what reenergizes you or gives you the motivation, courage and resiliency to go back and keep working for justice?

PB: A little girl who calls me grandpa. When her mother was pregnant and in labor, I took her to the emergency room and went into the labor room to translate. I stayed at the mother's head while the baby was being born. Now that little girl calls me grandpa. This little girl did not ask to be born of parents who were undocumented, but they came across by invitation. I know people say they were not invited, but in reality they were invited because we had businesses that needed their help. Farmers value their skilled labor; these workers found quicker and easier ways to do the work. They were paid by the piece and so their production level increased where their skill increased. I call that an invitation. We didn't send a sealed envelope with an invitation inside, but we said that we need more people, more labor, and more hands. I'm saying that we should not suddenly stop and say, "You gotta go back and take your kids with you." We just can't do that. We can't do as Alabama is doing and not educate the children. We can't put the children in the position to have to report their parents as undocumented. Our federal government must do something to alleviate the stress and the strain and the terror that is on American families.

It would take so little for the federal government to create a method of identifying the people who have been doing this work. The majority of these workers file their income tax returns every year just like I do. They have applied for and received a tax identification number issued by the IRS that is only good for filing taxes. In other words, they can't open a bank account with it and they can't get a driver's license with it, but they can file their income taxes with it, and they do it every year. They pay taxes on everything they buy. Many of them now have their own homes and they pay their property taxes just like everyone else. For someone to say that they don't do that, it makes me angry too, Joelle, because they don't know these people. They're just repeating what they've heard, and the vast majority, including me, believes it, swallows it and takes it to be the truth without ever finding out what is the truth.

JC: I know that the issues related to immigration reform are many and complex, but what are a few of the biggest needs that we could and should address?

PB: You're right, there are many complex issues, but the one thing that I think we should do right away is identify the people who have been here and have been doing the work and give them permission to continue. Allow them to continue to support their children, both the ones who came across with them and the ones who were born here. That would have a positive impact in many areas. It would maintain and grow the economy. It would allow these people to assimilate and be able to legally fly to visit family in their country of origin. There are children who haven't seen their grandparents in Mexico in ten years. To identify the undocumented in all aspects would be positive, and that would be in my opinion the No. 1 thing that we need to do right upfront. But it has to be a safe and secure way of identification.

JC: How does this new way of seeing people, your neighbors, and of serving them align with your personal faith?

PB: I am Christian, and I have a profound belief in Jesus Christ. But for me that's personal. I try real hard not to push it on someone else. I talk about it only if I'm asked. I believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and if one understands those teachings of Jesus Christ then one would understand why I do what I do. The “illegal aliens” are God's people too.

JC: CNN has called you the mayor for everybody, so this is your service to the entire community regardless of class or ethnicity or nationality. How do you see yourself living out Jesus' teachings?

PB: God says to love your neighbor as yourself. It's hard to take the words “love your neighbor as yourself” literally because I don't know how I could love anyone as much as I love myself because I am a very selfish person inside. Just as everyone else, I have this inner person who tries to protect myself first in all areas. It's not something that I can control at times. My self-preservation comes in front of my religious beliefs, and I have to work on that just as everyone else does. Christ said, “Do unto the least of my brethren as you would do unto me.” If we don't, if people don't remember that and they start treating these people who are undocumented as if they are less than human, then it's not Christ-like. I believe that Christ has told us to treat them with love and respect and dignity.

JC: Thank you so much for your time, Paul. I don't want to take you away from your day and your people much longer, but do you have any last comments?

PB: Well, Joelle, I appreciate the opportunity to be able to talk with you because I'm passionate about helping other people understand that if you will open the door to other people, your life will be richer from that. Whenever I talk to anyone who believes that this law (HB 87) is good and I explain to them how bad it is, they will invariably say, “Gosh, I didn't know it was like that!” People do not understand how wicked this law is, how it prevents parents from supporting their own children and how it could easily cause grandparents to become criminals. If the grandparents were to allow their undocumented son-in-law or daughter-in-law with their children into their home over the weekend, then they become criminals by definition.

I know that we do have to do something, but what HB 87 did is not what needs to be done. We need comprehensive immigration reform, and we need it to come from the federal level. We need it to usurp the power of the individual states to create “papers please,” “criminal by association” and “children turn in your parents” laws. We must do our part to open the people's eyes to see that we are all one people. We've got to align ourselves to be first human and to then work for our community and not just for our individual ideas of who is who in our society.

I want you to understand this isn't about me, it really isn't. This is about an injustice to people who don't deserve it. There are no people who deserve what HB 87 has done to the families in Georgia.

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