

IJJ's 2008 Ethnic Media Fellowships on Immigration
Supported by the McCormick Foundation

The Story Behind the Story
“Fallen and Forgotten”

By Fernando Díaz
The Chicago Reporter

Our story for The Chicago Reporter began as an investigation into whether the military naturalization process was as streamlined as the federal government had intended. We also hoped to report on the realities for service men and women at a time when immigration was such a polarizing political issue. But within months, as can happen while working for a bimonthly magazine, major metro newspapers were already reporting the story, finding that there were problems with the system. We decided to pursue a deeper track, looking into what immigrant families were experiencing after our reporting showed that their benefits were expanded in 2004, allowing them to apply for permanent residence status, even after the combat death of their loved one.

We knew we would need data, so we contacted the Department of Defense and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to identify what records they had of combat casualties who were awarded posthumous citizenship. During that process we learned that the Department of Defense also knew which service members had obtained citizenship prior to their deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. We combined these records into one database that would assist us in locating relatives and compiling a demographic profile of U.S. immigrant combat deaths.

We relied on a team of interns to conduct a comprehensive clip search through [Nexis](#) to learn more about the troops and identify sources, because we needed to reach as many of the families as possible to ask them whether they had been able to take advantage of the immigration benefits. We also used [Thomas](#) and [GovTrack.us](#) to track and locate legislation, tapped social networking Web sites, blogs and finally [Accurint](#) to find unlisted telephone numbers and relatives.

We were able to reach families of 56 of the 148 fallen service members and surveyed them about their experiences, their immigration status and whether they had ever been told of the immigration benefits. Most had not.

The project benefited greatly from the IJJ fellowship conferences in Arizona and New York. I was able to discuss the work with other Fellows and IJJ's staff, gaining valuable insight and advice on how to pursue the project. As we were in uncharted territory, I also made extensive use of IJJ Expert Fellow Dan Kowalski, who was very helpful in connecting me with sources and helping me understand some of the more obscure elements of immigration law. A teacher of one of the soldiers was also still in Arizona and I interviewed her for the piece.

The project was the most complex so far of my career. It involved managing several people, working with several federal agencies and connecting with sources all over the country. I also had to juggle this story with others I had already been assigned. My editors were incredibly accommodating, for which I am very grateful. I learned the importance of planning and project management the hard way with respect to the multimedia components I had planned for the project. I had gathered several elements for production but did not allow sufficient time to execute them in a coherent multimedia project.

My article was published in the November, 2008, issue of The Chicago Reporter. We also published two sidebars, an information graphic and a methodology explainer. One sidebar explored the immigration complications faced by military families while their loved ones are still deployed. The other covered the growing number of service members who are naturalizing while still enlisted in the military.

My story has been reprinted in a local Spanish-language newspaper and was carried on New America Media's Web site. It has been shared with several of the sources quoted in the piece who have said they will pursue the matter with their congressional representatives. We are also hoping that several legislators who have championed the cause of immigrant military service men and women will be able to use the work to garner more support for our troops and their families. We also highlighted misleading information in the posthumous citizenship application that has since been corrected by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

I would not have been able to do this project without IJJ. In an increasingly competitive and frenetic news environment, every minute is precious. And by the time I pitched this project every one of them was accounted for. The IJJ Ethnic Media fellowship provided the opportunity to pursue a story off the beaten path and provided the resources with which to execute a comprehensive analysis of the issue.

This was both a personal story and a professional opportunity, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and immigration have touched me personally and there is much work to be done chronicling the current chapter in our nation's immigrant history.

The fellowship experience has helped me think beyond the next deadline and broadened my perspective on immigration issues. Through the program I was able to witness Operation Streamline, a process in which immigrants are herded into federal court, poorly represented and all but forced to plead guilty and earn a criminal conviction. We spoke with Guatemalans who had hitched rides on trains through the heart of Mexico and waited in a bare bones hostel, sleeping on plywood planks, before they could walk across the border into the desert with a coyote. In New York, we met officials who understand the immigrants' plight and are working to address their issues. We also met with folks who had managed to arrive, find work and fulfill the dreams they had when they were all the way back in Mexico, across the border from Arizona.

But most importantly, I am also now part a network of individuals who are committed to better journalism and working to report on the complexities of an immigration system that touches every aspect of American society.

Read Fernando Díaz' fellowship project story, [Fallen and Forgotten](http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Cover_Stories/d/Fallen_And_Forgotten).
http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Cover_Stories/d/Fallen_And_Forgotten

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Find out about the methodology for this project.

[http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Sidebars/d/Methodology_\(Fallen_And_For_gotten\)](http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/Sidebars/d/Methodology_(Fallen_And_For_gotten))

View [Dying for the U.S.A.](http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/The_Numbers/d/Dying_for_the_U.S.A) This information graphic shows where fallen immigrant service men and women came from. As of the fall of 2008, they hailed from 41 countries—a third of them from Mexico. Most enlisted in the Army Reserves, and nearly half of the 148 people killed were Latino.

[http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/The_Numbers/d/Dying_for_the_U.S.A.](http://www.chicagoreporter.com/index.php/c/The_Numbers/d/Dying_for_the_U.S.A)