

## OPINION

# Opinion: ICE deportations are kicking out some of the best and brightest



by Phillip Halpern

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Federal agents conduct immigration enforcement operations on Feb. 5, 2026, in Minneapolis. (Photo by Ryan Murphy/Associated Press)

On Saturday, April 12, immigration agents **detained Dr. Rubeliz Bolivar** at an airport in south Texas. She is an emergency room physician in McAllen, Texas. She has lived in the United States for a decade and holds a

valid work permit.

She was traveling with her five-year-old daughter, a U.S. citizen, to meet her husband for an asylum interview. When border agents approached, Dr. Bolivar showed them her work permit. They arrested her anyway.

Bolivar did everything this country asks of immigrants. She worked in a medically desperate area. She saved lives. She was raising a family here. She was part of the very fabric of American life. Until that Saturday, when we decided she was not.

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The doctors who supervised her called her brilliant. Her colleagues described her detention as heartbreaking and deeply disturbing. The hospital system that depends on her is now scrambling to cover her emergency room shifts in a region where physicians are already scarce.

But this is not really a story about Dr. Bolivar alone. It is a story about what America has decided it values — and what we are choosing to throw away. I should know.

Three men saved my life. I had an aggressive and typically fatal form of blood cancer. Over several years, I underwent stem cell transplants at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston and UC San Diego. I am now in remission. I owe that to Dr. Vincent Ho, born in Saigon; Dr. Ayalew Tefferi, born in Addis Ababa; and Dr. Dimitrios Tzachanis, born in Greece.

Ho's family fled Vietnam by boat—a wrecked vessel salvaged from the Mekong River, overloaded with 350 desperate people. To keep it from capsizing, passengers threw their possessions overboard. They survived a refugee camp and came to America when President Carter opened the doors. Vincent grew up in Boston, graduated from Harvard Medical School, and now leads one of the nation's premier transplant programs. He gives his patients his cell phone number and expects them to use it.

Tefferi did his medical training in Greece, spent the last four decades at the Mayo Clinic, and has become one of the world's leading authorities on blood cancers. He has published over 800 papers and helped shape how the world classifies these diseases. He is also, improbably for someone of his stature, genuinely warm, kind and gregarious. He has been unstinting with his time while looking after my medical needs.

Tzachanis also received his medical degree in Greece, was a fellow at the Dana-Farber Cancer Center in Boston, and has served as principal investigator on numerous national and international trials exploring novel therapies for hematologic cancers. Even when it ran against his institutional interests, he recommended my treatment by other doctors at other hospitals. But he always added that he would be happy to treat me if I

needed care in San Diego. A true gentleman.

I have spent the last 40 years in San Diego. I have seen this country at its best, and I know what it looks like when we get things right. These three men could have built their careers anywhere. They chose America. What they built here — the research, the innovation, the lives saved — belongs to all of us now. I am living proof of what immigration at its best looks like.

American strength has always rested on a single, practical principle: talent, drive and dedication matter more than where you were born. That is not sentiment. It is how we attract the world's best minds and turn their ambition into American breakthroughs. It is how we have stayed ahead of every competitor. It is the fundamental calculus that has built this country.

This principle does not turn on border security or immigration mechanics. It turns on whether we still believe that talent and dedication trump origin.

I am alive because this country once decided that ability mattered more than where you were born. In McAllen, Texas, people are suffering because we now have decided the opposite.

*Phillip Halpern was an assistant U.S. attorney for 36 years in the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Diego.*

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