

AMERICA LOOKS LIKE SCOTLAND!

Guest: Zoe Bouras
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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JD: I'm Joshua Doležal and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. We continue our Immigration series this week with a story from Zoe Bouras. Zoe emigrated with her mother from northern England to rural Illinois when she was eight years old. Her British accent stood out, and she did her best to lose it.

ZB: I think one of the things about being different is that it's a really cheap shot, right, it's easy to pick on someone for that. And so I think I was probably 14 before the accent went away all together, but I worked at it so hard. And I can turn the British accent on now. If I want to and if I'm speaking with my mom it comes out very strong. And if I'm speaking to anyone from England or any family, it's very heavy then. But, for the most part, I prefer to speak in an American accent just because it's an equalizer but yeah I used to get a lot of go back where you came from! Oh, Zoe, the British are coming!

JD: Zoe Bouras is an AmeriCorps VISTA with the Immigration Project in Bloomington, Illinois. AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs devoted to community improvement and civic engagement. And VISTA stands for Volunteers in Service to America. I spell all that out because it's remarkable that Zoe is now serving a country that isn't officially hers - at least not yet - in ways that many Americans never will.

Zoe came to America because her mother met a man from Arthur, Illinois, in an online book forum. Their friendship grew, and soon they knew they would marry. Zoe was grateful for her new American family. But even as she tried to lose her accent and assimilate into small town Americana, Zoe kept the British part of herself alive. So it was jarring in high school, when she studied in Peru and her hosts thought of her first as an American. Even when she returned to her native England for graduate school, Zoe was called upon to explain the 2016 election, as if she had a secret window into the hearts of Trump voters.

Zoe now thinks of herself as a Midwesterner, but it was only this year – while working for the Immigration Project as a Volunteer in Service to America – that she began her own path to American citizenship.

JD: One of those loaded questions that people sometimes ask is where are you from, and I'm curious how often you get asked that question and how you answer it.

ZB: I don't get asked very often because I am white and I sound like an American. But my mother gets asked probably three times a day when she's, you know, out in the world. And it depends on how they ask. So, my mom speaks with a really strong British accent and so we

either get, “Oh! Your accent is so cool! Where are you from?” or we get “Oh you’re not from around here, where are you from?” And so when people ask and it’s a nicer, curious tone, you know, she’ll say “Oh, I’m from the Northeast of England.” But when people seem like they have their backs up about it, my mom just says, “Well I’m from Arthur.” And you know we get it so often that it has become a kind of passive aggressive thing because she really can’t go anywhere, she can’t even order things at a drive-through without someone saying something about it, so.

JD: And so, Arthur is Arthur, Illinois, and is that how you answer when someone asks where you’re from?

ZB: Typically, unless it’s a conversation in which people know that I’m an immigrant, if it seems relevant I’ll say, well, you know, “I’m from England, but I’m half Greek.” Generally though I just say that I’m from Arthur or that I live in Arthur.

JD: Well thinking of your immigration story, where do you see your immigration story beginning in time? With your own, do you think of that as starting with your own personal journey or farther back in earlier generations of your family?

ZB: I think that as a child with dual-nationality I was always pretty international, you know in England it’s real close to other places where you can go on vacation, European holiday laws you know, are quite generous compared to what most people get for vacation time here, so I was traveling a lot as a child. We would go to Spain, we would go to France, we would go to Greece, we would go to Holland to see my godmother and so I never really thought about being in the same place for a long time because I never really was until we moved here. So I guess I would say that my immigration story started then, but I think more realistically it started the first, I had a conversation on the phone with the man who is now my step-father. I would’ve been six, just turning seven, and my mom put me on the phone with him, and he said he was from America and at this time, I didn’t really know what that meant, you know the idea of going to America to me was like the idea of driving to Scotland, which is maybe an hour north of where I lived and then, I don’t even remember what we talked about, but I remember him saying, Oh, like, you guys are going to come and visit, and I was like “ah, road trip.” I just remember sitting, you know in our living room having that conversation with my step-dad on the phone and thinking “oh this is, this is fun! You know, I want to go to Scotland! I love Scotland! America looks like Scotland!”

JD: As you’re describing it, that phone conversation was really the beginning of that immigration which was permanent and really changed the rest of your life. But you were born and raised in Sunderland and if I’m mistaken, that’s a coastal city in Northeast England? I’m curious what the culture is like there compared with say other regions of the UK?

ZB: Yeah! The north is very distinct, some people mid-landers specifically would probably refer to that part of the country as like the armpit of England. It used to be really industrial, a heavy,

heavily mining community the place that I lived actually was old mining cottages, it was a terraced row of what used to be mining cottages and when my mom was a little girl almost everybody's dad worked in the pits. And there is a lot of northern pride I would say because there is such a stigma against the north of England as being not great. But, I don't know, it was nice, it's traditional compared to, you know, a lot of, of other areas of England. It has a lot of countryside, it has South Shields and the beach, and it was a really nice place to grow up. You know, I, my life was pretty regimented as a child. I would go to school, my grandad would pick me up, and I would ride on the crossbar of his bike and he would, you know, take me home, and we would ride through this country park every single day. And then we'd have Sunday dinner which is basically like Thanksgiving dinner, just a little bit smaller and every week. So when we moved here, everybody loves Thanksgiving and my mom was just like "eh". Regular Sunday.

JD: Yeah. Well tell me a little bit more about your parents. You said your mother was college educated and worked at the university. Tell a little more about her and then, maybe a little about your father?

ZB: Great. My mom went to the University of Edinburgh and studied textile design and she worked as a college administrator in England when I was a child. And my father lives in Greece, he is Greek, he grew up in the village of Regini which is maybe forty five minutes outside of Lamia on the mainland. Now he owns restaurants in Rhodes, which is the tourist island and famous for the Colossus of Rhodes. And my stepfather is an environmental health and safety engineer. He went to the University of Illinois, as did most all of his family. We're U of I people and he works in manufacturing as a, as a manager.

JD: Well so, you were estranged from your father for many years, how did you renew your relationship? Was that you reaching out of him reaching out or, or both?

ZB: He reached out, I, well he told my mom that my Papu, my grandpa had, had passed away. And I took that surprisingly hard. I have memories of my YiaYia and Papu from when I was a child, you know, we'd go to Greece, we'd go to Cyprus. And for a while, my YiaYia came to stay with us for like six weeks when I was a kid. So I was really upset when I heard that my Papu had died. And so I reached out to him.

JD: Well and, and now you visit your father's family in Greece, quite, quite a bit. So what are those visits like, you know, what do you do with your cousins, and I know you've told me that you don't speak a lot of Greek so how do you communicate across language barriers?

ZB: So basically the first time I went to the village all we did was, like a tour of introducing me to everybody we knew. And I have never gained so much weight so fast because everybody is like, here's some cake, here's some cake, here's some cake. And after like the 34th house visit of the day and their like "ah more cake" so. And I would go out with my cousins and, some of them aren't really my cousins, but they call them cousins. So, you know, I have my cousin Nico and Thenasus, and Alexandros, and they I don't think they're related to us at all but one of them

is my godmother's son. So I would hang out with them and they all speak English because in most of, I mean in most of the world now, English is taught as a second language in schools so. That's not such a problem, but YiaYia doesn't speak a lick of English, and so I've never, my dad or my aunt would translate or we would just kind of look at each other and she would cry, so that was hard. But

JD: So how do you communicate then?

ZB: We'd like draw pictures or hand signs. And a lot of what I would have to say I think that there isn't really a reference point for her. You know the world is so very different than it was when she was growing up. And I don't think she has any conception of what life would be like here. So mostly we just like look at old pictures and draw pictures and hand signs or my dad would translate for us.

JD: Well you probably have spent some time thinking about if you were her, you know, just how much the world has changed for women as well in terms of opportunity and, it seems like you're opposites, your grandmother and you in terms of how much you've seen and how many experiences you've been exposed to compared to what sounds like a fairly sheltered life for her?

ZB: Absolutely. I am very very lucky in that I have been able to do I think an awful lot for someone my age. You know, I went to college, I have a masters degree, I've seen 31 countries and you know, I've climbed a mountain, I've swam with sharks, you know, I've done a lot of really really interesting unique things, and you know for my YiaYia, I think, some of those things are unimaginable. I did tell her I was gonna go rock climbing in Morocco and climb a mountain and she was like absolutely not. You cannot go to Morocco and you cannot climb a mountain there. And so did and just didn't tell her because I was worried about her heart. But I don't know if you've ever seen Mama Mia, but there's a scene in it where all of the men are dancing on a dock in like flippers and snorkels, and one of, there's an old woman with like a bundle of sticks on her shoulder. And the first time my mom watched that she was like, oh my god that's just like the village. The boys doing whatever they want, and the girls are carrying the sticks, even the old ladies.

JD: Well tell me about your Greek christening, this is a vivid memory for you, I think it was a new year's celebration? What do you remember best about that day?

ZB: So, my Greek christening was when I was a child. And I, so I've been christened twice, I've been christened Orthodox and I've been christened Anglican. And my mom tells the story of it, and basically they just kept killing animals to feed her, you know they killed all these chickens, everyday, what kind of meat do you want? I don't know. Well, we'll have chicken and they'd go and slaughter a chicken. And by like, day 15 she couldn't handle it anymore, but she knew that you know my family didn't have any cows so she said okay, I would like some cows, I want, I want steak. And instead of being like, oh sorry we don't have any steak, I we can't kill an animal

today, they went to the other side of the mountain and got a cow from our cousin. And at the christening party, you know, they, the whole town roasts lambs on spits, basically all big holidays. Easter is big for this as well. You know, you'll have entire communities around roasted meat and then I went to Greece for New Years and we went to the village and my dad takes me to a butcher and I've never seen a butcher like this before in real life. You know, it looks like something from a black and white movie because there are just animals hanging from the ceiling and he buys an entire lamb and we take home, and then he puts it on the spit in the backyard and that is what he does for like nine hours that day. He roasts the lamb and it was so funny to see the story that my mom used to tell come to life. And the lamb was great, but also the lamb head stressed me out, so.

JD: It was late December, nearly Christmas, the day Zoe left England for good. She says she slept for most of the flight, but she still recalls the goodbyes with her family - and the greeting she received from her new family in Illinois.

ZB: So we went to my aunt Karen's house, who isn't really my aunt, she's my mom's best friend and we hugged her goodbye and there was crying and then we went to my great aunt and uncle's and there was crying and they were way more skeptical than everybody else. My great aunt and uncle were like what are you doing? This is crazy. And they hugged us and they cried and I remember her saying to my mom you can come back. You don't have to stay. And I remember we got here and my brother and sister they, they got a Christmas tree and they were waiting until we got there to decorate it so it was like the entire holiday season in four days. Because they just hadn't done any of the Christmas preparations without us basically. So my brother and sister were like sitting around the tree waiting to decorate when I got in. And I remember just standing in the door and staring at this Christmas tree. And they were like, okay now you're here, lets go. It was very you know, you're here, we're family, let's get to it.

JD: Zoe had much of the Christmas holiday to settle in to her new home. But soon enough she had to go back to school. I asked her what adjustments she had to make and which of these new challenges were hardest to overcome.

ZB: American school was a nightmare. I cannot stress enough how hard the transition to American school was. For the first time in my life I didn't have to wear a uniform, so we had to go and buy me a bunch more clothes just because I didn't have enough clothes to do, you know, seven days a week of street clothes. You know, I was used to wearing school shoes and tights, and skirts and all of a sudden there were all these rules about what I could wear and all of this freedom of choice about what I could wear. And it really made me stick out. I remember, I had this little like sweater with a fake fur hood, and people, like the kids really thought that I'd killed a Dalmation because 101 Dalmations is set in England. You know, there was a lot of ignorance I think about what it meant to be English, a lot, one of the girls asked me if I'd ever been to a nude beach because she'd heard all of the beaches in England were nude beaches and I was like ten, like I don't even know what you're talking about? The first day of school, I used an entire pencil! I came home with this little stub and my mom was like what is that? I was

like this is how much I wrote today mom! And I couldn't believe it. And that night we were up doing homework until three in the morning. And my mom was like, oh my god, this is going to kill her.

JD: Zoe and her mother were marked by their accent as different. As "not from around here." And this led to bullying in school.

ZB: Yeah. So I think one of the things about being different is that it's a really cheap shot, right, it's easy to pick on someone for that. And so I think I was probably 14 before the accent went away all together, but I worked at it so hard. And I can, I can turn the British accent on now. If I, If I want to and if I'm speaking with my mom it comes out very strong. And if I'm speaking to anyone from England or any family, it's very heavy then. But, for the most part, I prefer to speak in an English, in an American accent just because it's an equalizer but yeah I used to get a lot of go back where you came from! Oh, Zoe, the British are coming! Like trying to.

JD: Revolutionary war stuff huh?

ZB: Yes, which I had never learned about before so the first time someone said it to me it didn't even mean anything. I was like, I don't, I don't know. For a long time I had the opinion that yeah England lost the revolutionary war, but like they were kind of focused on other stuff at the same time. So, yeah I worked really hard to get rid of the accent. The words that were most difficult were banana, grandma, because I, trying to say it in an American accent. I really wanted to put an R on the end of that. So for a long time it came out as grandmar. And can't, I got in a lot of trouble at school trying to say can't with an American accent.

JD: I can imagine.

ZB: Yes. And when, one of my early-- so one of my like earliest American school memories is we were reading a book called Number the Stars which is about the Holocaust and in England for, at least in my primary school, they didn't teach about the Holocaust in World War II until you were a little bit older. They taught about like the Blitz and that makes sense because we have lived memories of World War II in England on our, you know, on our land. My grandma was bombed in World War II and I grew up hearing that, so in classrooms, you learn about the Blitz in primary school and then you learn about the Holocaust in secondary school. And so we started reading this book and I asked what the Holocaust was and I got sent in the hallway because the teacher thought I was trying to be funny. And so, still nobody explained it to me and then I went home and I was like, what was the Holocaust? And then I got told.

JD: So how, how do you describe Arthur, Illinois to people who are unfamiliar with it?

ZB: Depending on how much time I have, I typically just say that it is just a really small town south of Champagne, with an Amish community in it. Because that's the thing people are likely to have heard. Arthur is quite famous for the Amish community and our celebrations. We have a

Cheese Festival and a Barbeque Festival and a Strawberry Jam Festival and an outdoor hunting expo festival and like a Christmas Parade, we have these huge fireworks, they are some of biggest fireworks in the state and we'll get like thirty, forty thousand people into our tiny town of two thousand people to watch fireworks display that gets put on by the Rotary. So, people kind of associate that with Amish towns so I tell people that because it's what they'll remember. But, I think it's a lot more than that. It's a really close-knit community. It's very safe, everybody knows everyone. One time I got in trouble at school and my dad knew before I got home. First thing I said, he said when I walked in the door was, what'd you get in trouble for at school today? And I was like, well how did you know that? And it's because somebody called their dad at work and told their dad and their dad told my dad. Like at lunchtime. Yeah, so, it's very tight-knit but it's very safe and people look out for each other.

JD: I'm curious about how you've reflected on how your experiences as a white immigrant to the rural Midwest is different than it would be for immigrants of color, who often come to those same rural communities.

ZB: Yeah. So, it's definitely different being an American passing immigrant. YOU know, being white and speaking with an American accent. Kind of for three reasons. Firstly, I don't get the extra attention that you know immigrants of color get. People don't necessarily think about white immigrants in the same way, at least that's my understanding. And when people hear about you know illegal immigration and undocumented immigrants and DACA recipients, they are not thinking about people that look like me. So I generally don't get the criticisms and I kind of get to live apart from that. But at the same time, I do have similar burdens that those immigrants have. Not all of them, obviously, but some of it is, is very similar and when people talk about legislation, the legislation will affect me too. And that's difficult to navigate and it's kind of the second thing is that you are always expected to have an opinion but in the same breath, people say that your opinion doesn't matter because your opinion doesn't count because it's not about people like me. And so that's really difficult to navigate and I think it's kind of an identity crisis for probably a lot of white immigrants. And you know the third thing is that because people forget, I can kind of catch them off guard when they say things I think that a lot of people say things in front of me that they wouldn't necessarily say in front of an immigrant of color or someone that was more obviously an immigrant and then I'll be like oh well, you know, I'm one of those people. And they're like oh well that's, you know, that's not what I meant. I--

JD: Well what are, what are some of those things that you've, you've heard said about immigrants by people who didn't realize that you were an immigrant yourself.

ZB: I have a family friend and I was hanging out with her and her dad came in and was like all these immigrants are coming here to rape and pillage and I was like hello! I am an immigrant. And he was like well, I don't mean, I don't mean people like you. It's like well, but it is people like me you know, people like me are immigrants and I have obviously not come here rape and pillage, I came here to like eat pumpkin pie and I don't know, be an American right? And so that's always kind of difficult.

JD: Well I'm curious how much of the religious attitudes in the community, like kind of carried into the culture of the school and if you felt any conflict there given your Orthodox and Anglican background.

ZB: Religion in America is something that continually perplexes me. So Arthur, the last time I had to know, it had eleven churches in like one square mile. The youth group that's run by the Methodist church on Wednesday evenings was hugely popular, tons and tons of kids went. It was actually one of the first social activities I was invited to when we moved here and I didn't know what it was. And I went home and I was like, hey dad, what's youth group? And I'd gone to Sunday school as a kid in England and I did like the equivalent activities we just weren't calling it youth group. But it was weird to me because in England it's, or in the Northeast of England, it's almost more embarrassing to say that you are religious than to say that you're not.

JD: Zoe spent a year in Peru as an exchange student. After feeling British in rural Illinois for much of her life, it was startling when her host parents and classmates saw her primarily as an American. But she reflected that her time abroad made her grateful for the Midwest community that had raised her.

ZB: I was a gringa and then I was American. Some of the kids had really, you know, crazy ideas about what that meant. One person asked me like if we had a six car household they asked me how many houses we had, they asked like how much money the average American makes because they just, there was the assumption that we were all really rich, we all had tons of cars you know, huge houses which was just really interesting coming from a place of relative poverty right. You know, where I live it's not a super wealthy community, there's tons of kids on free or reduced lunches when you look at the demographics of the census you know because a pretty high poverty rate is you know the county has a pretty high poverty rate and then you know, you go to Peru and they're like oh you guys must be super rich.

It definitely cleared a space for me to fully fall into being an American immigrant just because I came back so appreciative, or with a new, not so appreciative because Peru is great and I don't want it to sound like I went there and was like oh this is terrible because that's not the case. I loved my time there, I love the people there. But I did come back with a new perspective, I'll take perspective on what it is to be here and being raised in a community where you know I was terrible at track in high school. So, so, so profoundly at it, but everybody's mom still cheered for me when I was the one that was running. You know, things like that. And I think that it was maybe the final part of what I said earlier where I stopped viewing myself as an expat that was temporarily displaced and I finally decided that this is who I am and this is where I belong.

JD: Zoe stayed close to home for college. She chose Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, where she now works with the Immigration Project. She credits the classes she took for opening up more of the world to her. And eventually those interests drew her abroad again for a summer internship in South Korea.

ZB: I got to learn so much about the the world at Illinois Wesleyan. I took a class called Third Women Speak, it was an English class, basically where we studied writing from women in the Middle East, obviously that title is problematic for some, a few reasons but that's what the class was called and that's what we learned about. And you know all of a sudden I was learning about Abu Ghraib and you know, the realities of the first and second Gulf War. I got to intern in South Korea for two months, fully funded through the MIDasia Foundation. And I lived in Seoul and researched refugee flows from Hungnam to South Korea and that was a really interesting time for me because lots of times people think about North Korea as having defectors, it doesn't produce refugees it produces defectors, and you know talking to people about that and how they see the two Koreas or if they see themselves as one Korea and you know it was the first time I ever went to Asia and I, I had a blast. It was super super interesting, I learned a bunch of history, went to the Korean war museum, cried in the Korean war museum, I also got to go to South Africa with a South African professor for a month. It yeah, my time at Wesleyan hugely expanded my world view.

JD: Zoe got news of the Brexit vote while she was living in South Korea. And two years later while she was studying at Oxford University, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. I asked her how she processed the 2016 election while living in England.

ZB: So I was, I was one of the people who was surprised at his election but also I knew a lot of people that were definitely going to vote for him, so also not very surprised. You know, I, because I come from rural America, rural small town America, I do know a lot of people that are, you know, card carrying conservatives. And they are Trump supporters and unapologetically so. And I have the privilege of knowing these people both as their political opinions but also who they are as individuals and so, it was a weird time because people are like oh well, Donald Trump supporters are this and this and this, and I was like, well I know some of them and that's necessarily the case and so that was a really difficult and uncomfortable time for me.

JD: Well it sounds like in that context, you were again being seen as the American even though you are English by birth. Was that

ZB: Oh, absolutely

JD: Was that strange to you?

ZB: Yeah. So there's a book called In the Name of Identity by a man called Allen Malouf and in it they say that the aspect of your identity that will be the most salient is the one that's under attack. And the first time I read it I didn't really get it until I went to England and all of a sudden I felt very American. Whereas here, I feel quite English in my day to day life.

JD: Zoe told me that one of her challenges as an immigrant was believing in America as an imagined community. The term comes from Benedict Anderson in his book of the same name,

published in 1983. Believing in American identity requires a curious faith that you share something essential with all other Americans, your imagined community, even if you never meet them. That belief is harder to sustain, Zoe says, for an immigrant.

ZB: So, I think that there it's, it's two fold. You have who the people that live here think about America and then you have how you think about America and reconciling the two. And obviously people's opinions can only be formed by their lived experiences and like things that they've read and things that they've exposed to, but you know, the average American school day, pretty patriotic. You say the Pledge of Allegiance and you have the flag in the classroom and we do veteran's day at school and the fourth of July is huge, you know Old Navy has those shirts, like the, the seminal American experience I think is being a child with a shirt from Old Navy with an American flag on it. And there's you know, all of this kind of folklore about what America is and what it means to be an American and a lot of the patriotic songs tell a story here, you know, the I'm proud to be AMerican song, the first time I heard that it was at a veteran's day assembly, with you know, a boy and girl who were older than me in school singing the, the parts at the beginning about giving up your children and your wife and you know it's all very evocative and it paints a picture of who America is and you know, the mystique of the melting pot and people really really believe it. And then the contrast to that is my experience coming here where you know no one spoke to my mother in a grocery store you know, none of the other parents spoke to my mother in public for five years

JD: Zoe found herself swapping identities while studying at Oxford. Sometimes she was called upon to explain America. At other times, she concealed her American identity as best as she could.

ZB: Europeans kind of think Ameircans are dumb you know when I travel in other parts of Europe I speak with an English accent so people don't think I'm an American because it makes you a target for alot of things.

JD: Like what?

ZB: Like, getting pickpocketed getting like hit up for money, and also people just think you're dumb like the stereotype of Americans in Europe is that you're loud and you're obnoxious and you're kind of dumb and I'm not sure where that comes from and why that is the way people think about it but it, it absolutely is. And then, the flip side of that is that in Spain, Spanish people think English are loud and obnoxious and rude and dumb, so I think everywhere probably has their own, their own perception but Europe is not super friendly for Americans especially France. And so you know when I'm traveling to other places I do, I am cognizant of that and I think that being an American student abroad that's your responsibility you know part of what you're doing is trying to change that narrative.

JD: Before we talk about your work now, I'm curious, how has, how has the Midwest shaped you so you think and you know, you're, you're preparing for law school now and what you do you'll carry from the Midwest with you if you settle somewhere else?

ZB: A lot. I think that you know, I, as much as I'm English the Midwest made me. I learned about American government for the first time here, which is a huge interest of mine. I learned about the reconciliation between science and religion here. I learned about how to get things done with people that maybe don't want to agree with you here. You know the, the joke about the Midwest is that they always say hi to everybody. And they totally do! No where else in the world are people so friendly to people on the street. And I think that's just really nice! And so in a lot of ways I am very Midwestern and I do say ope, you know when I hit someone I'm like ope! Ope.

JD: Well you've really learned to pass then.

ZB: Yeah I'm absolutely integrated. I have a John Deere ball cap I have a family friend a few years ago they invited me to shuck corn with them. You know I have done the full, full range of the Midwest experience. I have lived it.

JD: I asked Zoe to tell me more about the mission of the Immigration Project, where she now works as a Volunteer in Service to America.

ZB: The Immigration Project has two offices, one in Champaign Illinois and one Bloomington and it is a nonprofit legal service for low income immigrants in down state Illinois. So the state of Illinois has interstate 80 that basically runs across the top and we serve everyone under that so its 86 counties with over a hundred thousand immigrants living there and we work to ensure access to justice for you know immigrants in need basically. And what that looks like in real life is we have lawyers and department of justice representatives who travel around the state to different communities to provide citizenship workshops, and legal clinics to immigrants who have you know immigration, family immigration issues so we do regular naturalization which is what they've helped me with we do adjustment of status we do work permits, we process DACA, some deportation proceedings and we do a significant amount of defense for survivors of trauma. There are a few different paths for immigration in the United States and you know the asylum system is one of them, we work with people trying to navigate that and we work with people who have been victims of crime and certain abuses at the hands of Americans while living here. Which is also a you know a, a big problem in a lot of cases.

JD: Well are there stories that you can tell without putting someone at risk about maybe a success story, either reuniting families, or or helping someone who suffered crimes by Americans?

ZB: One, in one case a woman called our office and she was an immigrant and her husband had basically been beating her and abusing and she you know felt like there weren't any options in a lot of these situations people are told if you go to the cops you'll get deported if you go to

the cops ICE will come for you. So they feel like there's no way out. Or asylum seekers, you know we, one of the the things that is being talked about right now at the national level for policy is what are the grounds for asylum and some of the discussion is circling around whether or not the threat of death if you go back should count. And so a lot of a lot of people are at risk if they go back you know there was a report issued about El Salvador a few months ago and people, you know the report was saying that of the El Salvadoran population that was sent back, that was deported, something like 138 of them have been murdered. And having come from America does put a target on your back in a lot of cases. Independently of anything else you might have done. And so, that's really difficult to navigate and

JD: So seeking asylum and not getting it would actually just intensify the danger because of the association with America?

ZB: Absolutely. One of the cases that we've had involved the defense of a two year old little girl from Guatemala who was brought here basically to escape incestuous sexual abuse in a community that would not protect her. And that's something that we're you know that we've, we've taken on that case and it's incredibly difficult to know what to do and how to handle that kind of case and it is something that can be difficult especially if people talk about their story publicly because then you know everything is traceable. If it's on the internet, it's there. So it can be difficult to get people to share their testimonies but also we do such happy work in a lot of instances. Just a few months ago we received a thank you card, one of our DOJ representatives got a thank you card from a client who thanks to the positive result of his case was able to return to see his family for the first time in 20 years. And we host a Valentine's day clinic every Valentine's day to help people that are you know that just need a consultation or that need representation for their Marriage Visas. And you know that's a really happy exciting event. You know to celebrate love.

JD: I asked Zoe how COVID-19 changed the way the Immigration Project tried to reach people in need. With the office closed, legal staff have been forced to consult with clients by phone or videoconference. Many people served by the Immigration Project did not receive a stimulus check from the government even though they pay taxes. So Zoe and her colleagues have secured grant funds to offer direct cash assistance to hospital workers, farm workers, custodians, and other economic contributors who often do their work unseen.

According to the American Immigration Council, one in seven Illinois residents is an immigrant. One in seven. That is nearly two million people in Illinois alone. Learning of their struggles has shifted Zoe's focus from traveling the world to serving the world. She dreams of one day working as a legal advocate for the immigrant community that she joined as an eight-year old girl who thought America looked like Scotland, and that she has served as a young woman searching for her life purpose.

ZB: So actually I'm interested in immigration law. I am studying for the LSAT, I'm going to take it here soon. I'm hoping to start law school in the Fall of 2021. I've always been kind of interested

in the legal profession, it was something that's always been in the back of my mind but since starting at the Immigration Project and getting to work so closely with the Iwaters and since seeing how much need there is I am very motivated to you know find a way to do some good so I am hoping to go to law school that offers an immigration clinic for pre-graduation practical training and then you know maybe join the immigration project or a similar organization to you know help those in need and contribute to America's rich immigration history.

JD: Well as I'm listening to your story it seems like so many of these moves that you've made in your life to Arthur Illinois, to Peru, now to the job that you have currently, these are things that seem to have really crystalized your future. Now Peru defined your college major and then your work now seems to be defining your career path.

ZB: Yeah I think so. I think it's an accurate assessment. I don't know that, I mean before this I was interested you know non-profit work and international aid. So I was always you know had a plan to do something that was quite civic minded but yeah I've just been really inspired by the you know the attorneys and advocates that I work with and you know we see so many people so many deserving people in such difficult situations that I'm really excited about the opportunity to help and also you know on the other hand we just see people that are you know they've lived here for the seven years and they're ready to make the step because they want to become full fledged members of the American community and I think that's really great. you know, that's that's where I'm at in my immigration journey I'm currently in the process of becoming an American imm-, an American citizen and you know it's something that I'm really, really looking forward to.

JD: So 15 years after you came to Arthur Illinois, you're working with the immigration project and your own citizenship. Tell us about that.

ZB: Yeah so actually I am being like represented in my citizenship by the Immigration Project, They are you know they helped me fill out my paperwork they turned it in if I need help in my citizenship interview, you know if I need defense at that, they will accompany me and we submitted my paperwork in November so hopefully here soon I will get a a call from USCIS to begin you know studying for the citizenship test. Then I will go to Chicago, probably the Chicago office. I'll sit the test, and I'll sit my interview and then hopefully after that I will be you know getting an oath ceremony. And it's just a really exciting time you know even, even as a teenager that was of two minds you know I went to Illinois Girls state I've always been really interested in politics, I you know want to be a part of it and I've always kind of wanted to be a part of it and so I'm really really excited about you know belonging.

JD: Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana. And big thanks to Zoe for contributing to our program.

Next time, Brian talks with John Paul Chaisson Cardenas, about his childhood in Guatemala, the erasure of identity he felt transitioning to school in the U.S., and his ongoing work to support

and advocate for young people at the margins, including immigrants, children of immigrants, and LGBTQ youth.

You can find transcripts and show notes on our website, midamericana.com, which includes original illustrations for each episode by Mathew Kelly. If you like our show, please recommend us to your friends and rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Zoe Bouras's story was produced by me and Brian Campbell, and edited by Brad Linder. Special thanks to David Barasoain for his support and insight. Music for this episode was written and produced by Adam Bruce.

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