

August 15/16 2009

# FT WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## Postcards from Martha's Vineyard

How the holiday retreat of America's  
rich and famous became a magnet for illegal immigrants

**SKETCH** an unforgettable day at the UK Schools Memory Championships  
**MRS MONEYPENNY** shares a stately bathroom with a Tory MP  
**PURSUIITS** on the catwalk - Tom Cox takes four felines for a stroll

*Reportage*

*By Daniela Gerson*

*Photographs by Edward Keating*

*An estimated 3,000  
Brazilians live on  
Martha's Vineyard.  
Many work illegally;  
others, such as Tarcisio  
de Oliveira (right), who  
owns a landscaping  
company, are legal  
permanent residents*

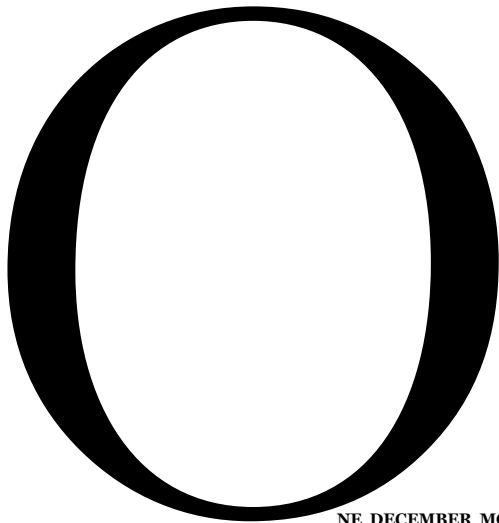
*A tale of  
two islands*

Martha's Vineyard, summer haunt of America's elite, also attracts thousands of Brazilians, most of them illegal immigrants. Many of these cooks, maids and labourers that started to arrive 20 years ago thought they'd one day go home. Few did ➤➤➤









**ONE** DECEMBER MORNING IN 1986, A BRAZILIAN IMMIGRANT NAMED LYNDON JOHNSON PEREIRA STRODE DOWN THE FERRY DOCK OF MARTHA'S VINEYARD, an island south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. A job tip had lured the young man with shaggy brown hair and blue Converse sneakers to leave Boston, where he had been working as a dishwasher for a little over a year. But as he took in the deserted streets and weather-beaten buildings, he worried he had made a mistake. "The island appeared poor, badly maintained," a now middle-aged Pereira recalls. "I remember thinking, 'What am I going to do here?'"

With those unsteady steps Pereira would forge a link between his home town in the backwaters of Brazil and what was, contrary to appearances, the holiday retreat of many of America's richest and most influential citizens. During that first winter he had a hard time believing anyone would choose to live there. Then the sun emerged, turning the steely ocean a brilliant blue. Fudge shops, fried-clam shacks and chic boutiques opened their doors. And boatloads of vacationers arrived hourly, filling the old whaling towns with summer revelry.

Pereira was in the thick of it, helping to start a new restaurant on prime real estate just off the same wharf where a young Teddy Kennedy swam ashore after his accident on the nearby island of Chappaquiddick almost two decades earlier. Soon, the Brazilian immigrant was making more money in his 100-hour working week than he could in a year at home.

That June, Pereira turned 24 and took a rare day off to go fishing with his boss. "It was a birthday different than all others, living on an island where I'm the only Brazilian," he wrote home. "It's a land full of millionaires in the summer, full of artists, and actors. It's a beautiful island, and I hope to make good money this summer so that I can return as soon as possible."

A year and a half was all it took. With tens of thousands of dollars already wired home to his father, Pereira locked up the restaurant for the last time, slid the keys under the door and left to catch a flight back to Brazil. He would never return to Martha's Vineyard, but he had already triggered the island's first significant immigration influx since the Portuguese arrived en masse more than a century before.

Today, Martha's Vineyard – summer retreat for the likes of Bill Clinton, Harvey Weinstein, Spike Lee and now the Obamas – depends on thousands of Brazilians to do the hard labour. Unlike earlier influxes, these newcomers are mostly illegal (estimates are as high as 70 per cent); but until recently, their efforts were welcome and their legal status largely ignored. The immigrants build, garden and scrub the summer residents' trophy homes – so that they can build their own trophy homes back in Brazil. Nobody, including the immigrants themselves, expected them to put down roots on the island.

But that's what they did. An estimated 3,000 Brazilians live on Martha's Vineyard, a considerable presence on an island with a winter population of 15,000 (rising to 100,000 in the summer). For the most part, the Brazilians have created a parallel society. They've built three evangelical churches, opened landscaping companies and moped shops, and started four small



groceries that offer Amazonian fruit juices, cheese from Minas Gerais and manioc flour. But for all the speed of the change – realignments of local economies and identities over the course of a couple of decades – we are just beginning to see the repercussions. One telling indicator: of all the babies born on the island in 2007, nearly one-third were to Brazilian mothers.

**COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE US ARE FACING SIMILAR CHALLENGES AS THEY CONTENT WITH THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION. UNINTENDED AND UNEXPECTED.** This was not supposed to happen. In 1986, the US congress granted an amnesty and attempted to put the brakes on the illicit flow of migrants with new enforcement measures. The plan failed. When the economy boomed, border controls proved inadequate and employers and immigrants exploited loopholes in the new law. As a result, the illegal immigrant population has roughly tripled in the past 20 years, to an estimated 12 million, and spread beyond traditional agricultural and urban hubs. And while Mexicans remain the main group, other nationalities have played a significant, and often overlooked, part in that growth. The Brazilians' illegal immigrant population has jumped 72 per cent since 2000 to an estimated 180,000, according to the US government.

A migration network, legal or illegal, typically grows by word of mouth, starting with a small group of pioneers. When Lyndon Johnson Pereira's time on Martha's Vineyard was nearing its end, he told his childhood friends Manuel and Edilson, immigrants living in Boston, that a restaurant on the island was hiring. Word travelled fast: that tip resulted in more than 20 Brazilians, almost all young men from Pereira's home state, showing up to work the following summer. Most arrived with Pereira's same twist on the American dream: to make enough money to build a better life in Brazil.

According to Maxine Margolis, a US anthropologist, this is typical: "The majority of Brazilian immigrants to the United States – past and present – have always claimed they would eventually go back to Brazil after

*Much of the labouring work on Martha's Vineyard is carried out by Brazilians; (right) Lyndon Johnson Pereira, credited with starting the current wave of immigration, on his arrival on the island in 1986*



***Of all the babies born on the island in 2007, nearly one-third were to Brazilian mothers***

they saved a requisite amount of money," she writes. However, in a pattern shared by other labour migrants, temporary moves often become permanent, and "many delayed the return home for years or even decades". This has translated to a total Brazilian population in the US estimated between 345,000 and more than 1 million residents, with the largest concentration in Massachusetts.

The Vineyard's summer pleasures had attracted a smattering of high-profile visitors for more than a century, but until around the 1970s, it was "a poor island", according to Tom Pachico, a former "selectman" or councillor in the town of Tisbury. Then it was discovered, he says, and became "a rich man's paradise". Since the mid-1990s, when the Clintons holidayed on the Vineyard and visitor numbers were hitting new highs, countless Brazilians have been cleaning the homes of newscasters, actors and venture capitalists. One said he tended a golf course where, on different occasions, he watched rightwing shock-jock Rush Limbaugh; Vernon Jordan, an influential liberal lawyer and senior managing director of Lazard; and Barack Obama, when he was still just a senator, all tee off.

But not everyone stayed happy with this arrangement. Locals – who often refer to the Vineyard as "the Rock" and the mainland as "America" – are, for the most part, hardly affluent; they earn about 10 per cent less, on average, than other Massachusetts residents, while faced with a cost of living that is 57 per cent higher than elsewhere in the US. Some islanders began to gripe that there were too many immigrants; that they were using the hospital without insurance; that they were dipping into a local charity fund while buying homes fit for kings back in Brazil; and that they were getting into trouble, as evidenced by the monthly so-called Brazilian day at the courts, when a Portuguese translator was on call. By the time the credit crisis hit – affecting even this playground of the rich – the grumbling had grown to a steady rumble. "It's a microcosm of the whole situation," said Mike Bettencourt, an electrician born on the Vineyard who found himself

at the centre of the backlash against the immigrants. "Here Brazilians are the target group, just like in California it's Mexicans."

Bettencourt would know. On a January night last year, his stepdaughter Brandy Gibson, a popular aspiring teacher just shy of 21, died when her Oldsmobile collided with a van driven by a Brazilian who did not have a driving licence. The tragedy sparked an angry backlash among islanders.

Gibson was at fault in the accident – she had been drinking and was driving almost 50mph over the speed limit – but before that became clear, posts on the website of the Martha's Vineyard Times tended to be stream-of-conscious and furious: "Illegal Brazillians [sic], I think you can see from the posts on this board that it is past time for you to go. What will it be next time? A car full of tourist kids? Then we'd all be scr\*w\*d," wrote "paladin". Other locals decried the backlash, including Gibson's mother, but it was the hateful postings that transfixed the island. "I was blown away," said Jim Rivard, a roofer. "People were coming up to me, wanting me to participate in a boycott of Humphreys [the doughnut shop where the Brazilian driver reportedly worked] and Brazilian businesses."

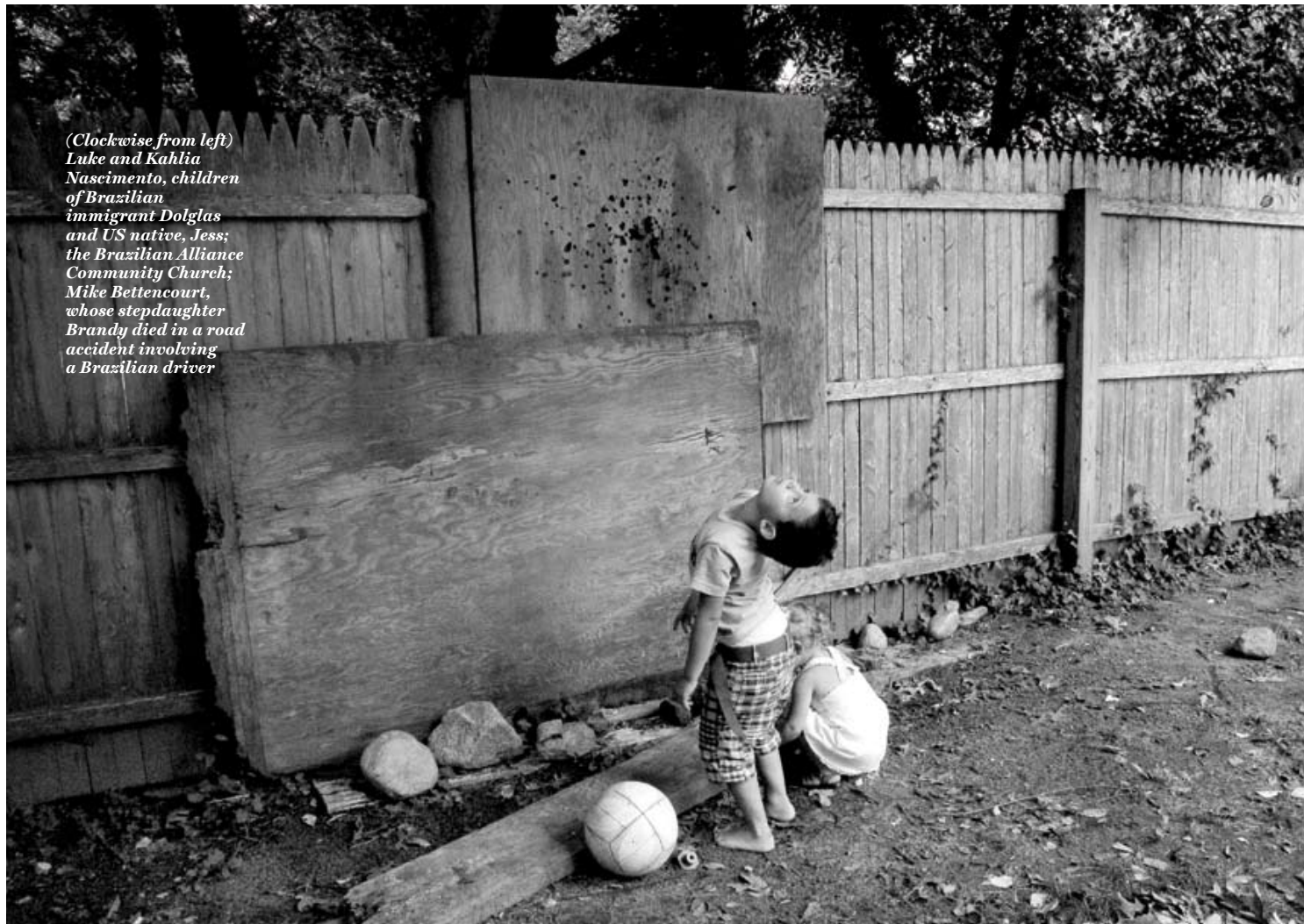
Dolglas Nascimento, an immigrant who worked on the island as a house painter, says he was dizzy with fear, having heard rumours that police were targeting Brazilians: "I was driving and my head would just ache in the morning because I didn't know if I'd get back."

**THIS WAS NOT LYNDON JOHNSON PEREIRA'S MARTHA'S VINEYARD. BUT NOR WAS PEREIRA'S HOME TOWN OF GOIABEIRA, IN BRAZIL'S MINERAL-RICH INTERIOR, the same place that he had left in search of work a generation earlier. The migration that Pereira kicked off had made its effect felt in both locations.**

Pereira was born in 1963 in a concrete two-room farmhouse with no toilet and holes in place of glass windows. A sickly baby, he went nameless for months. Then, in late November, the radio – the town had no television, >



*(Clockwise from left)  
Luke and Kahlia  
Nascimento, children  
of Brazilian  
immigrant Dolglas  
and US native, Jess;  
the Brazilian Alliance  
Community Church;  
Mike Bettencourt,  
whose stepdaughter  
Brandy died in a road  
accident involving  
a Brazilian driver*



newspaper or telephone – announced that President Kennedy had been shot and Lyndon Baines Johnson would take over. Pereira's mother knew nothing about the man, but liked the ring of his name.

By the time Pereira was approaching adulthood, he wanted more than a future tilling the land for rice, coffee, maybe corn. That's when he heard that in the nearest big city, "many people were going to the United States and making lots of money. And that started the dream." In 1985, presenting fake employment records, and borrowing from everyone he knew, he was granted – to his surprise – a tourist visa on the first try. Fortune stuck with him. Within three days of arriving he had a job washing dishes at a Boston falafel joint, using a fake social security number. His tourist visa ran out after a few months, but he stayed, moving on to a bakery in the suburbs.

That could have been the extent of this migrant story, except that the hardworking young dishwasher made an impression. When one of his former co-workers opened a restaurant with her family on Martha's Vineyard, she offered him a job. Pereira packed his bags, caught a bus to Cape Cod, and took a ferry across the Vineyard Sound.

By the time he was starting a family back in Goiabeira, the repercussions of that maiden voyage had transformed his hometown. Despite runaway inflation of around 2,000 per cent in Brazil, Goiabeira was seeing modern, US-style homes going up, towering over the traditional bare-wall cement architecture. New cars and trucks began to edge out horse-drawn carriages and bicycles. And a clear divide emerged between residents with a US connection and those without.

Few of Pereira's countrymen were as lucky as he had been to receive a tourist visa. Instead, an illicit itinerary emerged, linking towns such as Goiabeira to Massachusetts, via the Mexican border. A dozen or so agents dealing in the journey sought out the town's young people, luring them with the promise of riches. "Everyone was crazy to go," recalls Maxwell da Silva, from the neighbouring town of Cuparaque, who was 21 when he made the trip in 2000. He borrowed from relatives already in the US to cover the \$11,500 smuggling fee, kissed his wife and infant daughter goodbye, and boarded a Mexico-bound flight packed with other would-be migrants.

Unlike many of da Silva's peers, his border jump was a relatively easy four-hour walk, but then, having reached McAllen, Texas, he was picked up. Da Silva spent 29 days in detention, terrified he would be sent home with nothing. What he didn't know at the time was that the US government had a problem: not enough detention beds. Enforcement spending on the border was at a record high but while Mexicans could be dumped back over the border the same day, repatriating Brazilians and other immigrants from further afield could take weeks, or even months.

Da Silva, like tens of thousands of "other than Mexicans" – OTMs for short – was offered a way out. Through a policy known as catch-and-release, he could pay a bond and sign a paper allowing him to stay in the country for six months, on the condition he appeared in court at a later date. "I signed it, but I wasn't going to go turn myself in," he says, laughing. Like almost all immigrants in his position, da Silva never showed up in court. "I went to Martha's Vineyard, which was very far away; I needed to get to work."

When he got off the Vineyard ferry, he felt like he was arriving in Cuparaque. Most of his old soccer team was now on the island, and it was "just like I was at home". Within days, he had a job as a roofer.

**LYNDON JOHNSON PEREIRA, NOW 46, IS A PILLAR OF GOIABEIRA, TEACHING AT THE LOCAL SCHOOL AND RUNNING A COMMUNITY RADIO STATION IN HIS FREE TIME. HE LIVES IN ONE OF THE GRANDEST BUILDINGS** in town, a pink Italianate house complete with pool, two refrigerators and a Jacuzzi. His teaching salary did not pay for this house, nor did the money he had made in the 1980s. Sitting one afternoon on a plush sofa in the living room, he reflected that those who followed in his footsteps to Martha's Vineyard enabled him "to dream again". More specifically it was the business acumen of his father-in-law, Joaquim Carrizo, a sprightly 60-year-old who describes himself as "practically illiterate but a man who knows how to invest". Carrizo financed the house by making loans to others eager to go to the US but lacking the cash to pay the smuggling fees. In a few years, charging 5 per cent interest per month, he had more than tripled Pereira's net worth.



**“People were going to the United States and making lots of money. And that started the dream”**



But these days, Carrijo turns down all requests for loans. Lending money to would-be emigrants is no longer good business. Fewer people want to go to the US, and if they do, there's a higher chance they won't pay back their travel debts. For a start, the voyage is more expensive: under pressure from Washington, Mexico changed its policy and now requires visas from Brazilians, thus pushing the illicit traffic south, via Guatemala, and the smuggling fee to as high as \$14,000. At the border, there's another hurdle: the catch-and-release policy that let Maxwell da Silva slip through the net is no longer in place. And if Brazilians do make it, they're not earning as much any more, thanks to the recession. Moreover, now that so many of the immigrants' compatriots are settled in the US, it's easier to find a niche there and lose sight of plans to return.

Last September, Dolglas Nascimento, the soft-spoken house painter who'd been afraid to leave his home after Brandy Gibson's death, boarded a flight in Boston bound for Brazil – but not intending to remain. He had overstayed his US tourist visa by eight years and now, tired of living in fear of being deported, he had come to Cuparaque hoping for a quick fix so he could return legally to the place he now considered home, Martha's Vineyard. Accompanying Nascimento was his wife, Jess, an exuberant, blue-eyed Massachusetts native, and their two US-born young children. But by December, the fix wasn't looking quick: they were in limbo, waiting for the Department of Homeland Security to process their request.

Jess, who speaks fluent Portuguese, was holding up well. Even as she coped with a dengue epidemic and water that comes out of the taps thick with mud, she found the children in town “wicked cute”, enjoyed the family's evenings sitting outside in the plaza, and hoped to return home skinny and tanned. But Dolglas was impatient. “There, I work, have cars, make money. Here I just spend,” he said. Moreover, his roots were now in Massachusetts soil. “My mother, my brothers. None of them want to leave the island.”

Maxwell da Silva feels differently. He'd returned to Brazil in 2003 and opened his own business selling mangoes. And on January 1 2009, at 29, da Silva became his home town's mayor. At the inauguration, he stood movie-star handsome next to a wife who burst into tears of joy. When the

da Silvas were children, Cuparaque had one telephone; now, every child seemed to have a camera phone to snap a picture of the new mayor.

The town has received hundreds of thousands of dollars in remittances from abroad, making it a living example of one of the most talked-about development tools of recent years. But while private dollars have improved private lives, fundamental infrastructure is still badly lacking: Cuparaque, with a population of 4,300, doesn't yet have a hospital, the drinking water system is faulty and the only way into town is a half-hour drive down a dirt road that becomes impassable in rain. And the influx of money brought few new jobs beyond house construction. Sueli Siqueira, a Brazilian sociologist who studies return migration to the region, has found that money earned by emigrants abroad has rarely generated sustainable employment opportunities.

Da Silva worries that the recession in the US will only make the situation worse. “While three years ago the people were investing in the city, the city began to develop. Now it's paralysed.” A town built on remittances from the US must suffer with the US.

**ON A LATE DECEMBER DAY ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD LAST YEAR, THE SCRUB OAKS WERE AGAIN STRIPPED BARE, AND THE ISLAND POPULATION REDUCED TO THE LOCALS.** Just after dawn, burly men in work boots and faded shirts started to congregate at Humphreys doughnut shop. At around nine, Mike Bettencourt, eyes still heavy with sleep, took his place in line. A creature of habit, he goes to Humphreys even though he feels the shop owner, Michael Diaz, shares the blame for the death of his stepdaughter. It was Diaz's van that Brandy Gibson crashed into nearly a year before, and Diaz who hired the unlicensed Brazilian driver. “The reality is that's somebody who shouldn't have been driving,” Bettencourt says. “And if he had not been at the intersection, and not pulled out in front of her, she would probably still be here.” (Diaz says the Brazilian told him he had a licence and while he “certainly can sympathise” with Bettencourt's loss, “obviously the reason for her accident was high speed and alcohol”.)

When Brandy died, Bettencourt was technically no longer her stepfather: he had long since split with her mother. But Brandy called him “dad” and some of her ashes came to rest at his home, the last house on Goaway Road. It stands in front of where his grandfather once had a pig pen, part of a farm in what was the Little Portugal section of Oak Bluffs. Bettencourt's ancestors were at the forefront of the Vineyard's last big immigration wave – farmers from the Azores who arrived at the end of the 19th century.

Bettencourt believes the current backlash is not so much against new people arriving on the Vineyard, but about the Brazilians failing to integrate. Two small Portuguese flags hang in his kitchen, but they're dwarfed by the two enormous US flags framing the entrance – one inherited from an uncle who died in Vietnam, the other an American Revolution Betsy Ross-style flag (with a circle of 13 stars instead of a field of 50). “I'm Portuguese by heritage, but I'm not an Italian-American, or Portuguese-American,” he said. “Kale soup, linguica, chorizo. That's my only real connection to it.”

Smiling down from the refrigerator are pictures of a glowing Brandy, and a bumper sticker that reads “unlicensed Brazilians KILL”. Legal status, Bettencourt keeps repeating, is what distinguishes these immigrants from his ancestors. But after the accident, when many of his friends were posting furious rants on the Times website, he asked them to keep it under control: “We were going, ‘No, no, no, easy with that shit,’ trying to calm everything down.” Bettencourt was worried about his family's safety – Brandy's aunt had married a Brazilian, and “you don't want him getting jumped at Cumberland Farms”.

In a few days, Barack Obama is scheduled for a holiday on the Vineyard. Like most visitors to the island, he'll probably spend his time riding waves and eating lobster rolls without noticing the mostly unseen workers who make the island function. It is almost impossible to spend time here and not benefit in some way from illegal immigration, whether in the form of restaurant dishwashers or garbage-men collecting kerbside rubbish. When the summer's over, the president will return to Washington and face a busy agenda – which will not include a promised overhaul of the US immigration system, now postponed until 2010 at least. ■

*Daniela Gerson is a journalist specialising in immigration. Reporting for this story was supported by funding from the Institute for Justice and Journalism.*