

Mark Cangemi, 9/11 Investigator, Adopts Immigrant Teen's Cause

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WOODBURY, Minn. — When a teenage boy sits down to dinner with his girlfriend's father, he's bound to feel intimidated. That's particularly the case if the boy came to the United States illegally and the dad is a former Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent who spent three decades apprehending violators of immigration laws. But for Alan, the captain of his high school football team and an honor student, it's like eating with family. That's because the immigration special agent who ordered the arrest of convicted Sept. 11 hijacker Zacarias Moussaoui, has taken up a new cause. Mark Cangemi is trying to help the teenager stay in the country. Alan, who illegally crossed the U.S.-Mexico border with his parents at age 4, has asked that MPR News not use his last name, as he fears making his family vulnerable to deportation. Even as he works to legalize Alan's immigration status, Cangemi can't help but talk like a former immigration agent. As they sit down to dinner, he throws an odd question at Alan, quizzing him on what a little bus is called in Puerto Rico. "A little bus?" Alan asked. "Um hmm. A guagua. " It's part of a story Cangemi tells about the tactics he used to verify if someone was from Puerto Rico, a U.S. commonwealth. Cangemi would test them to determine if they knew the colloquial expression, commonly used in Puerto Rico. "We'd have Mexicans who'd say, 'I'm from Puerto Rico.' " Cangemi said. "And I'd say, 'What's a little bus called in Puerto Rico?' They'd say, 'I don't know.' But if you're from Puerto Rico you oughta know what a guagua is. This is classic Cangemi. Even with an immigrant boy sitting across the table, he's still telling war stories from the days of immigration busts. His biggest single arrest was of Moussaoui, the "20th hijacker" who was involved in the Sept. 11 hijackings and terrorist attacks. But he also caught scores of undocumented workers at Swift & Company's meatpacking plants around the Midwest. But Alan is now practically a member of the Cangemi family. It all started last year when he took Cangemi's daughter Margo to the prom. Alan then started to hang out with the family. Cangemi's wife Pat, a former federal prosecutor, took a shine to Alan. This was classic Pat. She had a pattern of taking in friends of Margo's with tumultuous home lives. But in the past they were female friends. Pat Cangemi noticed that Alan appeared to lack proper clothing and enough food. Before Alan's immigration status came to light, she started to mother him. "You have to understand we first saw a child who was not getting what we thought was needed-- financially, emotionally," she said. "The fact that he then had legal issues became a second piece of the puzzle." Alan learned about his legal status from his aunt last summer. But for years his parents's peculiar behavior, such as refusing to allow him to apply for a driver's license, had sometimes made Alan worry that he was in the country illegally. His aunt's confirmation of his status made him panic. He worried college would be off the table. "So then I was really devastated," he said. "And I asked my mom, 'Is it true?' And she was like, 'Yes.' " Alan eventually told Margo about his situation, and later spoke to her mother. They all knew they'd have to tell Mark Cangemi, too. Margo pleaded with her father to step in. "My daughter asked, 'You're going to help, aren't you?' " he recalled. "I said, 'Within the confines of the law, I'll do the best I can.' " Pat Cangemi filed papers to become Alan's legal guardian just before the boy's 18th birthday in February. A Minnesota judge signed off on the arrangement. So did Alan's parents. Now Alan is angling for something called special immigrant juvenile status, which would set him on a path to citizenship. Special immigrant juvenile status can apply to minors who have been abandoned, abused or neglected. According to data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, only about 1,000 children are granted special immigrant juvenile status each year. To advance Alan's cause, the Cangemis have collected letters of support from Alan's high school principal, teachers and guidance counselor and U.S. Sen. Al Franken. Mark Cangemi said he hasn't used any of his old ICE connections to help Alan. He said he's just pursuing the available legal options. He understands that some might consider it ironic for someone who led immigration raids to go to such lengths to help a young man who is in the country without permission. "To an outsider, who never took the time to understand who I am as a person, yeah, it probably would be kinda strange," he said. "But I look back at my career, and the way I pursued my career was always the criminal cases." That means the drug smugglers, human traffickers, and people who flout the law with false

documents. To violate the law in those ways, Cangemi said, demonstrates a clear intent to do so. He said young people like Alan, who were brought to the country illegally through no fault of their own, don't fit that profile. "I think something needs to be done for those kids that have in many instances done more than say even native born kids in terms of playing by the rules and having potential," Cangemi said. "Are you going to ignore that potential? I don't think that's a reasonable approach." Cangemi has become increasingly outspoken on immigration issues since his retirement from ICE in 2006. He even worked briefly at a Twin Cities law firm known for defending immigrants. Immigration lawyers who dealt with Cangemi as an adversary during his tenure at ICE say he was always hard-nosed and aggressive about law enforcement. But several speak with surprising reverence about him, including Twin Cities attorney Susana de Leon. "He was zealous, but most of the times we could call and say, 'This is what's going on, and this is the human story about it.' I think he was very willing to listen, in ways that the government is not open now," de Leon said. De Leon, who represented workers detained in a 2006 immigration raid at a Swift meatpacking plant in Worthington, Minn., has a lot of criticisms about how ICE handled the raid. But those complaints don't apply to her direct dealings with Cangemi. "During the raid he helped us tremendously," she said. "Somehow we were able to communicate directly with him, late at night. He made sure that mothers who were detained who had little children were released. I felt like he really did care about the families that were detained," De Leon said she's pleased to hear that Cangemi is helping an immigrant teen. But she said there are lots of teens like him who will never receive that kind of help. According to the American Immigration Council, an advocacy group, each year, approximately 65,000 students who are in the country without permission graduate from high school. Their options afterwards are limited. They might be able to win admission to college, but getting authorization to work in the country is difficult. The Dream Act, which would help college students and members of the military gain citizenship, has stalled in Congress. Meanwhile, the Obama Administration has encouraged immigration enforcement not to deport people, including students, who are not wanted for criminal offenses. But that doesn't mean they can secure work permits. Advocates of stricter immigration enforcement say that might be a shame, but it's not the government's problem. "Children do bear the consequences of their parents' lawbreaking," said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors robust enforcement of immigration laws. Camarota said current proposals to help immigrant teens, like the Dream Act are too costly and have too many loopholes. Until the law changes, he said, they have to accept the bind their parents put them in - and should leave the country. "The parents made several decisions over the course of a number of years that have now put their children in this situation," he said. "And that happens a lot in life." For Mark Cangemi, resolving the predicament of young people like Alan is more complex and defies simple solutions. He said he would support some version of the Dream Act - as well as some kind of amnesty program for immigrants not legally in the country. He's not worried about what people in immigration enforcement might think of him now that he is an advocate for Alan. "People are going to find my actions perhaps unfavorable," he said. "I couldn't care less. For now, Cangemi is focused on helping Alan together win enough scholarships to attend college this fall.

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