# Will the next generation save the American Dream for immigrants?

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Tony Messenger | Post-Dispatch

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The story of America's broken immigration system can be told by connecting a 25-year-old thread between Donna Hughes-Brown and Ann Hoban.

Jim Brown poses for a photo with his wife, Donna Hughes-Brown, during a July 2025 trip to Ireland for a funeral. Upon their return to the U.S., Hughes-Brown was picked up by ICE and sent to jail. She's a legal, permanent resident of the U.S.
Courtesy photo

On Dec. 18, Hughes-Brown was freed by an immigration judge after several months in a Kentucky jail cell, awaiting possible deportation. She lives in Bowling Green, Mo., with her husband, Jim, a 20-year Navy combat veteran. She's an Irish citizen with legal residency in the U.S.

Born in England to Irish parents, she came here when she was 11. The judge realized what the law, and those administering it, didn't: breaking up the family by sending Hughes-Brown to live overseas made no sense.


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Her case drew national attention, including for the reason she was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. A decade ago, during a period in her life when she was struggling financially, Hughes-Brown wrote a couple of bad checks. She pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor. She paid restitution and served a year of probation.

A lot of people were shocked that somebody could be deported for such a minor crime, committed so long ago. I was not. That's because of Hoban.

I met her in 2000, when she was being held in the Missouri women's prison in Vandalia on a bad-check charge. The 46-year-old was struggling. She stole a couple of checks from her mom, Monica, and forged them. Mom decided some tough love was in order and helped the Boone County prosecutor put her daughter in prison.

2A Sunday, July 23, 2000, COLUMBIA DAILY TRIBUNE, Columbia, Mo.

# Freedom finally rings in immigration case

Freedom is a wooden bench outside a Kroger's in Warrenton.

That was Ann Hoban's view just after noon Friday, and she soaked up every minute of it.



TONY MESSENGER

"If I had been free already, I would have been annoyed sitting on a bench outside a grocery store," Hoban said. "But I loved it. I could get up and walk down the street to the dollar store. I watched everybody go by. I was free."

It was a long road to freedom and one that had a sudden end, with the Immigration and Naturalization Service simply opening the prison doors and letting the Columbia woman walk away.

Hoban, some readers will recall, is the 46-year-old woman of Irish descent who has spent the past 2½ years in prison — most of it in Vandalia Correctional Center — for stealing a couple of checks from family members in 1997. There's no question she did the crime. And there's no question she's lived a rocky existence, fighting drug addiction and more than once being on the wrong side of the law.

She also fled to avoid prosecution at one point. Oh, yeah. And now she has AIDS.

But the redhead's toughest battle resulted from being on the wrong side of a law she had nothing to do with: a 1996 federal immigration law that made deportation automatic for noncitizens who committed any one of numerous felonies — including forgery.

Luckily for Ann, she has friends who know how to fight.

And it starts and ends with her diminutive 67-year-old mother, Monica, who ignored her own health battles to wage a scrappy fight with foes who towered over her. But like a brawling Irish bare-fisted boxer, she outlasted them all.

The prosecutor. The attorney general. Judges. Defense lawyers with no guts. Immigration officials. Congressmen.

All stood in her way at one time or another.

All failed.

This morning, Hoban woke up free in her mother's south Columbia home.

"It's indescribable," she says. "Nothing short of a miracle."

The miracle is actually an unexpected legal victory for two brothers, Tim and Dan Wichmer, who took up the Hoban fight after Monica wouldn't let Tim say no.

In a last-ditch effort to stop Hoban's deportation to a country she hadn't seen since age 6, Tim Wichmer filed for a habeas corpus hearing — claiming Hoban's convictions were invalid because she had never been told of the deportation consequences of her crime. Such arguments rarely win, and Wichmer, at the time, was cautious. But the brothers were victorious, and early last week an appeals court in Missouri upheld an Audrain County judge's decision.

By midweek, Wichmer was still hedging his bets. "This case has had such a charmed life," he told me Wednesday. "Every time I thought we were going to lose, we won. Now I'm scared because I think we're going to win."

Even after the court's decision, there were some anxious waiting moments. Hoban was still being held by the INS. The attorney general was considering another appeal. And then there was Boone County prosecutor Kevin Crane's office.

With the convictions erased, Crane would have to decide whether or not to reprosecute a woman who already served 2½ years.

Friday, attorney general spokesman Scott Holste said his office was done with the case. Two losses were enough.

And Crane spoke the magic words: "At this point, it would be unlikely we would reprosecute her," he said. "In the grand scheme of things, she did do time in the penitentiary. And the AIDS is a consideration. I don't know that justice would be served by seeking another sentence."

Then came freedom.

Hoban said that when the warden called her in, she expected yet another transfer for some legal hearing or another. But instead, he told her she was going home. He opened the prison gates and said goodbye.

"When I left Warrenton, I didn't even know if my family was going to be there," Hoban said. "I just walked to the grocery store and sat down and waited."

A fellow inmate took care of the rest. "Wendy" called and left messages for Monica and Ann's twin, Margaret Jones, for more than an hour. They were there by 2:30 in the afternoon.

"It was a moment to remember," Jones said.

"I was ecstatic," Monica recalled. "They had to scrape me off the ceiling."

Now, the reality of freedom hits. While shopping this weekend, Monica said Ann would constantly stop, as though waiting for somebody to tell her what to do, where to go.

And with freedom comes responsibility. "I'm going to stay on the right side of the law," Hoban said. "Now I've got to go get a job."

For Mom, it's been an amazing ride.

"I'm so relieved," she said. "She's changed. She's not the same Ann."

No, Monica, she's not. Now she's free.

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This is a newspaper story Tony Messenger wrote in 2000 about Ann Hoban and her immigration case.

Then the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the predecessor to ICE) came calling. Ann Hoban, it turns out, wasn't an American citizen. Like Hughes-Brown, she had been brought to the U.S. as a child by her Irish parents. All of a sudden, Monica Hoban had a fight on her hands. She had to find a way to stop her daughter from being deported.

In 1996, during one of the last major rewrites of American immigration law, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act. It added to the list of crimes that could lead to automatic deportation, including writing bad checks.

Hoban and Hughes-Brown are a lot like the "Dreamers" at the center of congressional debates every few years — children of immigrants brought to the U.S. as infants or toddlers, raised as Americans and often unaware they aren't citizens until they try to get a driver's license.

There was a time, not long ago, when America reached a consensus on Dreamers: they deserved to stay in the U.S. and be given a path toward citizenship. It didn't make sense for America to split up immigrant families, often a mix of those who are citizens and those who are not.

But the administration of President Donald Trump has taken aim at the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which protects Dreamers. So their status is up in the air.

Whether you're an Irish immigrant, a Dreamer from Mexico or a former Afghan interpreter who came to America to flee the Taliban, the problem is the same. Congress needs to find consensus on how to speed up approvals in asylum, refugee and parole cases; how to solidify pathways to citizenship for some immigrants; and how to consistently protect the border. Until then, immigrants will remain political fodder every four years, with the rules constantly changing and federal documents not worth the paper they're printed on.

Trump's overreach — which has included arresting immigrants at their green card appointments and stopping immigrants from some countries from taking citizenship oaths after a years-long process — will backfire. The pendulum will swing back, and perhaps 10-year-old bad check convictions won't be used as deportation tools. Maybe it will occur the next election cycle, or the one after that.

But until then, all Americans can do is what Hughes-Brown's husband, Jim, did. He used every bit of democratic power he could muster to get his wife's case before Congress, and in the national press. Surely, his efforts contributed greatly to her freedom.

A quarter-century ago, Ann Hoban, too, won her freedom, after her 67-year-old Irish mother put on a full-court press. Two attorneys who are brothers — Tim and Dan Wichmer — took up the case and filed a petition to overturn Ann's original conviction because she had not been advised of the potential for deportation. A judge and appeals court ruled in her favor. The original prosecutor declined to re-file the charge. She was never deported.

Twenty-five years apart, the stories of Hoban and Hughes-Brown ended as they should — with freedom. But too many other immigrants who, like the two Irish women, are not dangerous criminals, are still behind bars. They face deportation and separation from their families.

They will languish there until America comes to a consensus on whether the American dream is worth preserving.

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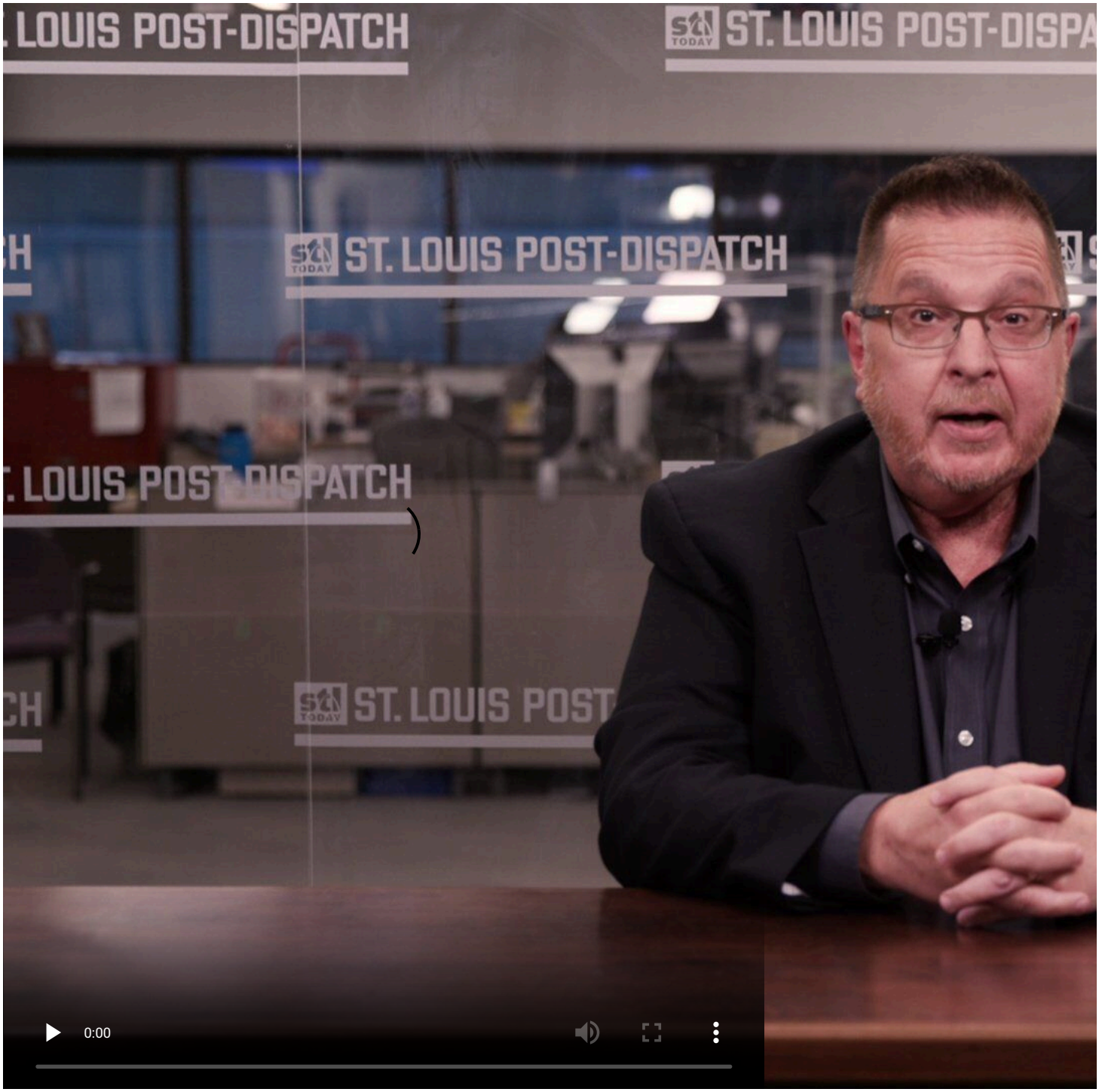


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