

My name is Howard Bailey. I am an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Navy. I served in both Operations Desert Storm and Providing Comfort.

I joined the military to serve my country and make my family proud. Navy recruiters came to my high school, and I quickly enlisted. I signed up for a pre-entry program while I was still in high school and I worked on an aircraft carrier during the weekends. I graduated in May, and by August I was at boot camp. It was hard—some guys washed out, but I stuck with it. When I finished, I was proud to show off the uniform I had worked hard to earn.

I have now been living in exile for eight years—ten years if I include the two I spent in immigration jail fighting my case.

Before I was deported to Jamaica, a country I had not seen in nearly 25 years, I was a happily married man, with two American kids, and a home I purchased with my VA loan. I owned my own trucking business with four employees and paid my taxes. In my mind, I was living the American dream.

The last time I saw my home was ten years ago and since then life feels like a total nightmare. Every day I hope that I will wake up and just be back home in Virginia again.

In 1995, about six months after I got out of the military I was arrested because a package of marijuana was mailed to my home from a new friend I recently met. I didn't know there was marijuana in the package. The cops told me not to worry. I don't smoke marijuana or do any drugs and I hardly drink alcohol.

I was about 22-years-old. It was my first time ever being arrested. But I still had to go to court. My lawyer advised to me plead guilty rather than take my chances with a trial. He told me: "this is just a slap on the wrist." He didn't mention anything about immigration. Twenty-five years later—I am still paying.

In 2010, 15 years after I received the marijuana conviction, ICE showed up at my front door to take me away. I had recently applied for U.S. citizenship and when the application asked if I had ever been convicted of a crime I said yes. I even went to the courthouse to get the paperwork to show that the case happened since ICE did not have record of it.

Then one day, I heard a knock on my door around 5:30 in the morning. When I answered I saw all these guys in khaki suits and a state trooper. I got so scared. I had no idea what was happening. It was ICE and they told me they were taking me because of the conviction — even though it was so many years before.

ICE grabbed me and didn't care that my 11-year-old daughter came out screaming and crying. My wife begged them to let her give me pants to wear before they took me away since I was in my pajama shorts. I haven't seen my own daughter in ten years. My deportation traumatized her. Her mental health suffered all through her teenage years and into today. She didn't make it to college — her dream and mine too. It ripped my heart that my daughter was hungry — and I couldn't do nothing.

My son has had troubles with the criminal legal system. I blame myself. I wasn't there when he needed me most. Young men in America need their fathers. He had just turned 14 when ICE dragged me away.

Before my deportation, I fought my case for two years from immigration detention. I was moved around from one detention center to another: New Mexico, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania to name a few.

After I was deported, I got a pardon from the Virginia governor for my marijuana conviction but I still couldn't come home. The governor told me that his hands are tied and that he can't make ICE do anything. Today, because of a recent Supreme Court decision, the marijuana conviction would not even stop me from applying for relief from my deportation. But many people have tried to help. Even the senator from West Virginia. But ICE still won't budge.

Thank you for listening today. My name is Howard Bailey and I do love my country, the USA. Go Navy.