

TESTIMONY OF BJORN BILLHARDT BEFORE THE SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

Tuesday, March 17, 2015

Good afternoon Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Leahy, and members of the committee. My name is Bjorn Billhardt. I am an immigrant from Germany. I came to the United States as a high-school exchange student and have spent most of my adult life in the United States. I studied at two American universities before founding a software business that employs dozens of talented professionals in central Texas. I live in Austin, Texas with my wonderful wife and three beautiful children. In 2012 I had the incredible privilege of becoming an American citizen.

It is an honor to address the committee today. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my story, which I believe demonstrates the significant contributions immigrants make to our country every day, as well as the shortcomings of our current immigration system, which I submit is badly broken and fails to live up to the promise of this country.

I came to America when I was 15 as an exchange student in Pflugerville, Texas and instantly fell in love with this country. I knew I wanted to build my life here. After high school, I won scholarships to the University of Texas and then Harvard Business School. At the age of 26, while at Harvard, I started my own company, Enspire, without outside funding or family help. After 14 years in business, Enspire has over \$5 million in revenue, employs more than 30 Americans, and sells leadership development programs and e-learning software to dozens of brand-name organizations such as GE, MIT, and the World Bank. Last year, our educational software was used in over 20 countries.

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had in the United States. I believe my life would be very different had I remained in Germany. When I arrived in the U.S. in the 90s, America allowed me to dream big. My parents never went to college, and as an introverted teenager without connections, I was not able to thrive in my home country. Studying in the United States allowed me to gain the education and confidence to prepare for a career in entrepreneurship. If I had stayed in Europe, I know I would have followed a different and less fulfilling path.

That said, it was extremely difficult for me to remain in the U.S. My family did not have the money to support me in college, and while I had earned scholarships it was hard to make ends meet given the limited work opportunities available to students on F-1 visas. I was able to stay in the United States after I graduated thanks to the study extension visa.

After my study extension visa expired, I applied for an H-1B visa in order to grow my company. This was an extremely difficult process, even though at that point

my company was already generating revenues far in excess of my salary. Without the H-1B visa program, Enspire would not exist today and create jobs for dozens of Texans.

In 2006, I was able to apply for a permanent green card – and eventually citizenship – based on extraordinary ability.

While I have found great success in the United States, my story is far from unique. Immigrants or their children have founded over 40% of Fortune 500 companies. Without immigrant entrepreneurs, the United States would not be home to companies like Google, eBay, and Yahoo! – and it is easy to imagine that if those companies aren't grown in the U.S., they would have been created overseas, and we would have missed out on that innovation and those American jobs. Skilled immigrants also boost our economy by creating new jobs for American workers. Studies show that for every 100 H-1B workers, an additional 183 jobs are created for workers born in the United States.

I count myself lucky that I came to the United States when I did. Today, my story would have been impossible due to the current cap and restrictions placed on H-1B work visas.

Just last week, I spoke with a recent Ph.D. in Chemistry from Notre Dame University who was hired as a management consultant in my home state of Texas. He told me that through government-sponsored scholarships and grants, the U.S. had invested approximately half a million dollars into his education here in the states. As a foreign national, he was excited to accept a job offer in Houston, and bring his expertise to bear helping U.S. energy companies succeed in the global marketplace.

Yet, despite his brilliance, his PhD, and his strong desire to stay in the United States, he pegged his chances to win a slot in this year's H-1B lottery system at less than 60%. If he cannot stay, he said, he will move to London, Shanghai, or somewhere else where his talents are valued – and we will lose out on those skills for our own economy.

The truth is that the world is not standing still. When I graduated from high school in the 1990s, there was only one country that allowed people to dream big – the United States. So I fought very hard to come here and stay. But my younger cousins in Germany point out that there are now vibrant startup communities in cities like London and Berlin - and Singapore, and Dubai. When faced with the obstacles the United States currently presents to talented individuals, I am unfortunately not surprised that more and more entrepreneurs decide to establish their companies elsewhere rather than fight to stay here, even after they have earned educations invested in and funded by U.S. taxpayers.

America is still the land of opportunity for many people like me around the world. But if we don't fix our broken immigration system now, I also know that other countries will step in to fill the void.

We cannot let America become complacent. We cannot turn away talented, hungry, and hard-working individuals who want to put their passions to work here. We need to expand opportunities for immigrants to contribute to this great country, so we can continue to be the country that attracted me to come here in the first place – the country that represents freedom, liberty, and opportunity across the world.

There should not be a random lottery system that decides whether a brilliant U.S.-educated chemist can start his career in Houston or has to move to London or Shanghai against his will. These are the types of people the United States has always attracted, that have built our country since our founding days through their hard work. These are the people we should fight to attract and keep – not turn them away. But that is what is happening today. And it is hurting the competitiveness of the country that I love.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share my story with the committee today. I hope Congress can step aside from partisan politics and find a compromise that will take steps to modernize our badly broken immigration system. I know all of you on the Senate committee are committed to finding a solution to this problem. I am honored to have the opportunity to testify today.