

Transcript – Ways & Means episode 100 – A Good Provider is One Who Leaves

Judith Kelley: Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. My guest today has written an important book. One reviewer called it "epic reporting, non-fiction on a whole other level." Jason DeParle was a young reporter when he moved to the slums of Manila and lived with a local family. He's followed that family now for three decades. Jason is a reporter for the New York Times, and a two time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His book is called "A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century." Welcome to Policy 360.

Jason DeParle: Thank you.

Judith Kelley: So, would you read for us, some of your book?

Jason DeParle: Yeah.

Judith Kelley: We pulled out a section that's from the prologue of the book. You were working with a local nun, sister Christine Tan, who said she would help you find a family to live with. You had talked with this sister previously, but on this day you met her at the slum.

Jason DeParle: Yeah, she told me to come back in a few days. I figured that sister Christine would use the time before my return to approach a potential host or two. Instead, she led me into the maze and auctioned me off on the spot. I knew just enough Tagalog to realize our first prospect was aghast. "Hindi pwede, Sister!" It's not possible. The second candidate smiled more but ducked as rapidly. The third was too astonished to respond. Tita Comodas was 40 years old and sitting at her window in an old house dress, selling sugar and eggs. A scruffy American looking to rent floor space had the appeal of a biblical plague.

Jason DeParle: Her thin patience exhausted, Sister Christine left. "If you don't want him, pass him on to someone else and don't cook him anything special. If he gets sick, too bad."

Jason DeParle: I don't know who was more frightened, Tito or me. Neighborhood entertainment was scarce, we drew a crowd.

Jason DeParle: "Ask him if he eats rice."

Jason DeParle: "Ask him if he knows how to use a spoon."

Jason DeParle: "Ask him if he wants to marry a Filipina."

Jason DeParle: Tita had a boisterous neighbor who fed her questions and whooped at the answers. But Tita struggled to see the humor. After all, it was her house. The reasons to decline were many. Her husband was working in Saudi Arabia. She

was busy raising five kids. She already had two relatives sleeping on the floor. Her English was limited in my Tagalog was worse. Who knew what problems a strange foreigner might cause? Then she surrendered to what she took as Sister Christine's request and said I could move in. I stayed on and off for eight months, and made a lifelong friend.

Judith Kelley: Thank you. So tell us a little bit more about Tina. What was she like?

Jason DeParle: Tina had two lives. On the one hand, she was a poor woman raising five kids, virtually no money, in the slums with a life full of drudgery. I would be on my floor mat in the morning at 5:00 AM listening to her boil the breakfast rice. I'd be back at my floor mat after midnight listening to her wrestle with the laundry. But she had another life altogether, which was the life of a seeker. She was taken by the liberation theology notion that God had a special love for the poor and she tried to live out what she saw as her responsibility to care for the God and others and had become very active in Sister Christine's slum uplift group. And her, her job was to distribute 2000 eggs a week to the co op stores. So she had a big pile of eggs on her breakfast table that she kept under a fluorescent light to keep away the rats. And they became a, a kind of metaphor, I thought for her fragile journey through life. You know, these eggshells that she was trying to keep safe from the rats.

Judith Kelley: She sounds like a unique individual for sure.

Jason DeParle: Well, I don't know what I was expecting to find in the slums, but it wasn't a woman in a worn housedress trying to live out the gospel under a tower of eggs.

Judith Kelley: Right. So there you found each other and you make your way to her home. And what do you find out on the first day when you first walk in? Do you have any memory of that day?

Jason DeParle: Well, the first few days were awkward because we were both on our best behavior. We were both being I think, overly polite with each other.

Judith Kelley: Right.

Jason DeParle: Plus there were the language gaps. I think our first natural moment with each other was when she asked me to help her glue some newspapers into paper sacks, and I botched the job so badly. She said [crosstalk 00:04:22] labeled the Made in USA. So my incompetence I think put her at ease and her humor put me at ease. And after that we weren't so formal with each other.

Judith Kelley: Yeah, that was a brilliant comment. So you stayed on a floor mat?

Jason DeParle: I did, yes.

Judith Kelley: Yeah. And five kids around the house?

Jason DeParle: [crosstalk 00:04:43] Well, the kids were mostly upstairs. There were a couple of other boarders, so she had some relatives in from the province. There were, I think four young men of whom I was one sleeping on the floor and.

Judith Kelley: What kind of size house are we talking about here?

Jason DeParle: Oh, quite small. Maybe the size of a one car garage. Maybe.

Judith Kelley: A lot of people in there. So her husband, Emmett, he was off somewhere? Tell us a little bit about that.

Jason DeParle: I went to, I moved into the [inaudible 00:05:11] in poverty. I wanted to understand life in a shanty town. I wasn't thinking about migration, but migration was how the family survived. Her husband, Emmett, was a pool maintenance man living in Saudi Arabia, which was 5000 miles away, where he could make 10 times his Manila wage and he'd go away on two-year contracts. So he was gone from the family for years at the time. Come home for a couple of months, patch up the house, throw himself a party, renew his friendships and leave for another two years.

Judith Kelley: Was he home at all during the time you were there?

Jason DeParle: He did. He came back while I was there and [crosstalk 00:05:44] they discovered a strange American sleeping on his floor. Yeah. Worried about how he might react and he welcomed to me with very generous spirit.

Judith Kelley: And how did his kids adapt to this presence/absence of their father like that?

Jason DeParle: I think it was hardest on the younger kids, who one of them was still in diapers when he left. I don't think they ever fully bonded. I think it took a toll. And it was a both a point of pride and a sadness for Emmett. I mean, he took real pride that he had provided for his family, but he made a big sacrifice. Yeah, he's very genial guy. I never saw him very, very lost his temper. Except one time he heard somebody say that migrant workers must not love their children if they go abroad, if they leave their children. And he temper flared. He said, I sacrificed and he went abroad to really to save this child's life. His eldest daughter had a congenital heart defect and needed medicine that he couldn't afford. He fell to his knees and he prayed to God, "Lord take her or let me have her. Either cure her Lord, or put her out of her misery." And God answered in a strange way a few days later with this offer of a job in Saudi Arabia, so.

Judith Kelley: So how do you think that fits into people's conceptions of migrants? You know, I mean one now to being somebody who leaves is heartless, doesn't love their kids and the reality, in this case, being quite different.

Jason DeParle: I think it's fair to say that most people don't understand the importance of remittances in migrant's lives. And I'm not sure I fully did either, even when I

was living there. I mean, I knew it was a big thing in that family's life. It had trans-, one of the reasons I wound up at their house is it was one of the few in La Risa that had a toilet and Sister Christine knew that most Americans couldn't survive in a home that lacked sanitation. So, I was kind of steered to one of the more prosperous families in the area and it was because he could afford it by going overseas.

Jason DeParle: But the light bulb moment for me when I really understood the importance of migration globally was when I read, many years later, that remittances were three times the world's foreign aid budgets combined. I mean that blew me away. Cause three, if you want to think about what is the money going into the developing world? It's migrants or it's a self. Migration is the world's antipoverty program. It's the great self-help program. We often hear people say that poor people should do more to help themselves. Migrants do.

Judith Kelley: So speaking a number. So they're more than a million people leave the Philippines every single year.

Jason DeParle: Yeah, it's up to 2 million now,

Judith Kelley: 2 million now?

Jason DeParle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Judith Kelley: And all of their children, all of their five children and up leaving.

Jason DeParle: Yes. So, T and M had five kids. What started at his act of desperation became the family's way of life. All five kids grew up to be overseas workers, just like the father.

Judith Kelley: And you focus particularly on Rosalie?

Jason DeParle: She was the middle child. Yes. 15 year old school girl when I moved in with her in the slums. She's now a 40 year old nurse and a mother of three living in Houston, Texas.

Judith Kelley: She ends up in the United States. How does that happen? Why did you focus on her and did you think she was going to be the one that was going to end up in the United States? When you first,

Jason DeParle: If you just looked around the slum, you wouldn't have picked Rosalie as being the kid with the gumption to get out. There are other kids who were more outgoing, who seemed stronger, who were better in school. Rosalie went through high school with Bs and Cs, but the most revealing mark on her high school transcript wasn't her grades, it was her attendance. Through four years of poverty, dire poverty, and literal revolution in the Philippines, she never missed a single day. Later, she told me that I think in high school is when I got

grit and that's one of the interesting things about her. She's not, if you picked, filled a room with 50 immigrants and told the journalist to go find one to write a book about, nobody would pick Rosalie. She's self-effacing, she's quiet, she's not particularly articulate. She's kind of self-doubting.

Jason DeParle: She doesn't come across as the striving immigrant, self-selected for ambition. She's a little bit of an anti-hero and I think in the end it makes people pull for her cause they can relate to her a little bit.

Judith Kelley: Right. And the journey, her journey that you're describing is [crosstalk 00:09:56] it's a little bit like wandering in the wilderness, it's a very long journey for her.

Jason DeParle: One of the conservative critiques about immigration these days, it came from Samuel Huntington, the Harvard political scientist, wrote the immigration had gotten too easy that in the past, our ancestors had to vomit their way across the ocean in a day to get here and now it just doesn't take [inaudible 00:10:19]. Well, Rosalie spent 20 years sustaining that. That was her. Her story is so at odds with that idea that it's too easy to immigrate.

Jason DeParle: She became a nurse. She used her father's room [inaudible 00:00:10:32], to make the leap from the slums to nursing school was difficult both financially and academically. She almost flunked out. She barely got through. She then spent 15 years in the middle East, Saudi Arabia and in the Persian Gulf trying to get a visa. When she finally passed all the tests, then the great recession hit and there weren't any jobs left. And finally, 20 years after she graduated, 20 years, 20 years after she graduated nursing school, a hurricane had hit Galveston, Texas, and destroyed the hospital. It was trying to rebuild and couldn't attract enough American nurses to come even with \$5000 bonuses. And so it resorted to hiring 20 overseas nurses. And she had her chance.

Judith Kelley: Right. And even then, she had to start out with, you know, she didn't move into a nice house and have an eight to five job. Right? I mean, the nurse,

Jason DeParle: She came by herself ahead of the family for six months. She was alone and she had built up the idea of coming to the US for so long that it was mythic in her mind. She thought she was going to Disneyland. She expected an idealized vision of America, where she, but Galveston's a blue collar town and the Texas Gulf Coast with lots of vacant lots [crosstalk 00:11:50]. So yeah, low income, struggling community. There's very little public transportation. She didn't drive, English idioms were hard for her to understand.

Jason DeParle: She struggled with the language. When we first got there, somebody suggested we go have lunch at a little hole in the wall and she got very alarmed. How are we going to eat at the hole in the wall? She just was lost for a long time and at various points broke down crying and said she wanted to go home. She didn't want to, she made a terrible mistake. She'd always lived abroad for all these years. She lived abroad, but she always lived in the cocoon of Filipinos. There

are so many Filipinos and Abu Dhabi where she was living that they do mass in Tagalog and she gets to Galveston and there weren't other Filipinos. So she, [crosstalk 00:12:36] yeah, there were a few, the nurses were it, but there wasn't a big Filipino community. There weren't Filipino restaurants. There wasn't a Tagalog Mass. There wasn't Tagalog. Aside of the other nurses, she was by herself.

Judith Kelley: But she was literally a lifesaver in that hospital and worked incredibly hard.

Jason DeParle: She was great for the hospital. But I also think the hospital was good for her. It became the first place in America she felt competent. It was good for her, not because the work was easy, but because she felt equal to its difficulties. She knew how to be a nurse and she could go, she could be of use to other people and she could gain her confidence in her and start to meet people. And you know, I think it's one reason why historically the U S has generally had a better record of integrating immigrants than say Europe as it has. The immigrants have higher employment rates because there's so many low-skilled jobs here. It's easy for immigrants to become employed and work becomes a vehicle for assimilation for lots of people as it was for Rosalie.

Judith Kelley: So you could have written a book about immigration reform and made statements about what it is you think Americans understand or don't understand about immigration, but you chose to write a book or a story. A story of a family, extended family. And to tell it in great details. Why did you choose to write it? That book, in that way?

Jason DeParle: I fell in love with the family first. I didn't set out to write a book about immigration and then try to find a family that illustrated what I wanted to say about immigration. I was just struck by the level of sacrifice that two generations of this family had gone through in terms of leaving their home to go abroad, to make money, to sustain other people in the family. And the grace with which they did it and the faith with that they sustained while doing it. And the resilience they showed to the adversity of it. That was to me was the story I wanted to tell. And the fact that it turned out to play into the 2016 election or Brexit and all that kind of came after words. I mean, the story I set out to tell was their faith, fortitude and grace, not the politics of immigration. That,

Judith Kelley: Yeah. And I mean in some ways it was a perfect timing for a story like that, given the politics and history of immigration in this country. And the head that the issue has come to at this time.

Jason DeParle: Yeah, I'd been a reporter, but before going to the Philippines, I've been a reporter in new Orleans covering poverty. And the central issue in that context was why in a society of plenty are some people left out, why are there pockets of poverty in a society of opportunity where the Philippines was kind of the opposite question. It was how did people manage to create opportunity in a society where it essentially didn't exist? And that to me was the story of Tita and

Emma and of their children that somehow they found the faith and the strength to pull themselves out of this dire poverty and did it with so much charity to each other and also to me as their guests to boarder later friends. That to me was the heart of the story, not the politics of immigration.

Judith Kelley: Right. And, and so when you do think about the politics of immigration or the way that immigration has played into the American narrative, is there something, when you look at this story that you think was under appreciated in our understanding of immigration or that you wanted to call attention to, and if so, what was that?

Jason DeParle: Oh, lots. So, I think most illegal immigration receives a disproportionate share of the coverage. For understandable reasons, it's the most controversial. The crisis at the border of the family separation, these are all very compelling stories. There's a humanitarian crisis that obviously needs to be covered, but in the process, we sort of forgotten that 70% of the immigrants in United States are here legally. And for the past 10 years, Asians actually outnumber Latin Americans and immigrants are increasingly middle-class, educated, like Rosalie and a majority now come with college degrees. Many more are female-led. The women are coming as the breadwinners, the majority live in the suburbs. So it turned out that Rosalie really was, I think, a very representative characteristic face of new immigration. That wasn't what originally drew me to her story, but it happened that that was the case.

Judith Kelley: Did you change your mind yourself in any ways about immigration over the time that you got to know?

Jason DeParle: I think I deepened my understanding of how difficult it was so, when Rose, you know, I kind of thought once Rosalie finally got here, that was the crowning triumph, I had known her for 20 years. We had lived, I went to Manila, and we flew to Texas together. I mean, I, you know, here we were, and then to see her so unhappy that that was kind of stunning for me. I actually felt guilty that somehow I had brought her to the wrong place.

Jason DeParle: I don't know if it was a surprise, but it was a gratifying thing to see what a great nurse she was. That was another thing you asked. What contrasts some dominant images of immigrants well, I mean, is there anyone more of use to a community? There's a stereotype that immigrants take, right? That they are taking our jobs, they're taking our welfare benefits, they're taking our money. They're taking, they're taking. Whereas who gives more than a nurse? Right? I mean, you see Rosalie among her patients, she's, for her, it wasn't just a job, it was a calling. She almost became a nun and it was, I think a form of religious duty. So that was lovely to see unfold as well.

Judith Kelley: Are there some - What do you think are the most important steps that the US government could take in addressing issues of immigration right now?

Jason DeParle: Take away Donald Trump's Twitter account? No, seriously. I think the thing I worry probably most about is the coarsening of the narrative. The, you know, if you tell people long enough and loudly enough that they're not wanted, they may come to believe you. We have by and large avoided the kind of reactive ethnicity that some parts of Europe have had of people living in a country where they deeply feel like they don't belong, they're not wanted by the majority. I think that's endangered by the kind of rhetoric that talks about immigrants as literally snakes or criminals or rapists. It's that, I think that's a real threat to what we've enjoyed in America for 200 years.

Judith Kelley: But from a sort of a policy perspective, are there any things that were really obstacles for the family as they were coming here that could have been different or it should be examined from the perspective of how we process and deal with [crosstalk 00:20:13]?

Jason DeParle: I think the policy challenge is less of an ethnic challenge as it then an economic challenge. I think the challenge, the biggest challenge facing immigration is low skill. The children, particularly the children of low skilled immigrants because the low skilled immigrants themselves have lower expectations and so are willing to take entry level jobs and feel like they've made some economic progress, but whether their children are going to be able to gain the education they need to sustain a sense of upward mobility is the thing that I worry most about, but I don't think it's a particularly immi- I don't think it's because they're children of immigrants. I think it's just, you know, in that they share the same problems as a low income children of natives if they have a class problem that I worry about more than an immigration and ethnic problem.

Judith Kelley: So you, at the end of the day, argue that immigration has been a successful story for the United States. And I think most people can probably identify with that sort of narrative when they look at the history of the country. But you say specifically that it's been an underappreciated American success. So what do you, why, why do you think it's been underappreciated?

Jason DeParle: [inaudible 00:21:18] particularly about post 65 so in 1965 we changed the immigration laws. President Johnson and signing the law said the new law was not going to increase the number of immigrants and it wasn't going to change the demographic composition of the immigrants. Well those are two profoundly wrong statements, right? So we hint headed down the path that we've been assured by politically as we're not heading down. I think on the whole, America's handled it pretty well.

Jason DeParle: I mean if you had told me in 1965 that we would have, that there'd be Hindu temples and in the suburbs of Houston and that Houston would become the most ethnically diverse country. When I was growing up, Houston was home to honky-tonks and rodeos and if you were going to tell me that you know, it was going to be the most ethnically diverse city with via Cajun fusion cuisine and Hindu temples, I would've thought we'd have a lot of ethnic conflict, which by

and large, at the local level, I don't think we've had. We've had a national conflict driven by an impassioned minority, but the lift level, I think most Americans have accepted immigrants probably better than we had a right to expect, given the scope of the change.

Judith Kelley: Which kind of speaks to the whole point of your book, which is written on a human level. Once you get to know people, once you interact, we're just all people.

Jason DeParle: I think we've got two narratives going on in America that are really at odds with each other. It's hard to sort them out. At the national level, we have this Trump driven level of conflict over immigration. But, at the daily lived level in Houston and scores of other communities, I think it's largely love cooperation. Obviously there are points of conflict in lots of communities, but people kind of work through them. And by and large, I don't think we've had the ethnic clashes that we've had in - you've seen in lots of other countries; Europe, Australia, by and large avoided that.

Jason DeParle: We shouldn't let the conflict narrative overshadow the other narrative, which is I think by and large been one of the accepting ethnic change. I think largely because it grew up - immigration grew up in concert with the civil rights movement. I mean it was the 1965 act was passed as a piece of civil rights legislation and I think America had a benefit by processing the immigrants in the post civil rights age. I think that helped us.

Judith Kelley: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So, at the end of the book that you've written about this family, Emmett has a stroke and the family returned to the Philippines and you went with them just like you had come with Rosalie here. Why did you go with them?

Jason DeParle: Oh, I wanted to see their first trip. It was the first time back and they had been gone for four years. I wanted to see how they reacted to being in the Philippines and how their family reacted to them.

Judith Kelley: And how did that go?

Jason DeParle: Well, it was lovely, but the kids had forgotten to speak Tagalog, so the kids couldn't, they had trouble communicating with their grandparents, but the grandparents were proud of their kid's ability to speak English. I think the, everybody was really happy to be together. So for Rosalie and Rosalie's kids, it was a great vacation. For Tita, I think, and Emmett, it was a little bit of reminder of what they had lost cause in the life I think they had envisioned for themselves, Rosalie our kids would be next door and not an ocean away.

Judith Kelley: And on that tone was it hard for her to leave him again when it was time to go back to the US?

Jason DeParle: So, Emmett had suffered a stroke and as Rosalie gets in the car to go to the airport, Emmett chokes up and says "I may not see you again," and you can tell cause of his ill health that there's, that could well be the case. And Rosalie assures him, she'll come back and see him and they say goodbye and they get in the car. And we're driving to the airport, I think this is going to be a heavy moment in the car. And instead Rosalie, five minutes into the ride turns to me and says "you know, I feel like I'm going home. Houston's now my home." She had established, she'd felt, she waited to go back so long because she wanted to feel fully adjusted to the United States and go back solid and strong.

Jason DeParle: And I think she had done that. For her, I think it felt like a mission accomplished.

Judith Kelley: So kind of came full circle.

Jason DeParle: She stunned me. Yeah. This woman, who had arrived and within a few months was weeping about wanting to go home, could four months later, bid her father farewell and say, Houston's now my home. I think it's a reassuring moment for Americans who have doubts about assimilation or who have doubts that immigrants really want to belong.

Judith Kelley: Or about loyalty.

Jason DeParle: Yeah. Loyalty. Right? Exactly. Yeah, it was. That was what was profound about it. "Houston is now my home."

Judith Kelley: Well, thank you so very much for joining me today. Your book is fascinating.

Jason DeParle: Thank you.

Judith Kelley: Jason DeParle was a reporter for the New York times. His book is called "A Good Provider is One Who Leaves. One Family and Migration in the 21st Century." Jason is on campus today because he'll be delivering the crown lecture in ethics and Phil Bennet from the Dewitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy will be interviewing him later today and we look forward to that lecture later today. Thank you. I'm Judith Kelley.