

OTHER THOUGHTS

A real-life story of a family torn apart



SUE ONTIVEROS

sontiveros@suntimes.com

If only the reality people wanted to watch was the real deal. Then maybe things could change in our country.

That foul-mouthed Snooki, those vapid "Housewives" - different cities, same shallow attitudes and all the other goofs on reality TV. We can't get enough of them. But real lives with heartbreaking drama? We don't want to see that.

But boy, it would be great if people would make time for the reality of "Tony and Janina's American Wedding," which is having its world premiere Sunday at the Chicago Film Festival. They'd see that immigration is anything but a black-, and-white issue - and how much our system needs overhauling.

The documentary, by Oak Park filmmaker Ruth Leitman, tells the story of Tony and Janina Wasilewski, two Polish immigrants who met in Chicago and married. Like so many immigrants before them, they work hard to achieve the American Dream.



Janina and Tony Wasilewski and their son, Brian, when he was 6. Janina took Brian to Poland when she was deported, and Tony has been trying to bring them back. A movie about them premieres Sunday at the Chicago Film Festival.

Every time I write about immigration, people self-righteously respond that people should get in line and do it the right way, as if that path to legal citizenship is the same clear one they or their ancestors followed in the past. It isn't.

Leitman said she hopes by telling Tony and Janina's story it will "open the conversation on what is wrong with our policies."

Many don't recognize that there

are those who didn't start out here illegally. But with so many flukes in the system, even those who try to do everything right can find themselves snared in a nightmare, like Tony and Janina.

They come here legally in the 1980s - he on a work visa, she seeking political asylum - start a cleaning service, buy a house, have a son, Brian. Through family videos, we see a happy life.

It all starts unraveling when a notice arrives saying Janina is being deported. Her status had changed, which they hadn't realized. She must leave and, despite their life here, cannot ask to return for 10 years. Wanting to do everything legally, Janina decides to go back to Poland with Brian while Tony stays and fights for her return.

It's pretty hard not to get choked up watching Tony at the airport in

the documentary, pretty much wild with grief, trying for one last hug and kiss for his wife and child. Or when you see Brian's little hand grasping daddy's shoulder, not wanting to let go.

And with that, an unbelievable odyssey begins. He struggles to make sense of the system, fills out forms, pays thousands in legal and government fees, struggles to maintain their home and business, while paying his family's expenses in Poland. As often as possible, he travels to see his family.

He seeks a hardship waiver for Janina - he has suffered a heart attack and developed a liver problem, the business is falling apart, Brian is suffering psychologically - but is denied twice. Makes you wonder what more needs to go wrong in their lives to get a waiver.

As the mm ends - all the while with our national debate over immigration in the background - three years have passed, and Tony is filing yet another waiver request.

The Wasilewski family remains in limbo, like so many other immigrant families.

I wanted to go out and meet Tony before I wrote this. Couldn't.

He was in Poland visiting Janina and Brian.

See the documentary at 7:15p.m. Sunday and at 2:15p.m. Oct. 17 at AMC River East, 322 E. Illinois.