

Immigration not abstract debate but family story

At the Institute for Contemporary Art in downtown San Jose, a striking sculpture by Wendy Maruyama hangs from the ceiling. Four massive clumps of tags, 120,000 in all, symbolize the tags given to Japanese-Americans in the internment camps during World War II. "Executive Order 9066: The Tag Project" recalls some of America's darkest days of civil liberties.

I went along Wednesday night to the discussion after the exhibit at San Jose Stage — a panel that featured U.S. Rep. Zoe Lofgren, Santa Clara County District Attorney Jeff Rosen, playwright Luis Valdez and Maha Elgenaidi, the founder of the nonprofit Islamic Network Group.

Guided by moderator Larry Stone, it was a luminous group talking about a thorny topic — immigration and racial fear.

The discussion duly saluted the topical: Lofgren explained how immigration reform was stalled in Congress. Rosen described how his office dealt more compassionately with the undocumented. Elgenaidi described Muslims' fear of



SCOTT HERHOLD
COLUMNIST

about borders and employment checks. As the Maruyama piece suggests, it very much reflects our family story: How does our thread fit in the fabric that is America?

At one point, playwright Valdez asked Rosen, an Orthodox Jew, where his parents were from. "Bergen-Belsen," replied the 46-year-old DA, whose mother and father were Holocaust survivors.

On this raw turf, Valdez was the optimist. His new play, "Valley of the Heart," tells the story of a young Japanese-American woman and a Mexican man who fall in love in Cupertino before Pearl Harbor. When she becomes pregnant, they marry secretly, only to be separated when her family is sent to Heart Mountain and his family takes over as caretakers of the Japanese ranch.

Love story

"It's a love story. It's a story of two families, it shows the impact of war," Valdez said. "But the main theme is that it's a story of the heart. Ultimately, all these social problems we have eventually get solved by the human heart."

repression.

What struck me most about the evening, however, was how personal it was. Our take on immigration is not just a foggy debate

Just as firmly, though on different ground, Elgenaidi was the pessimist. She talked about how neighbors opposed new mosques, how governments tried to ban Sharia law, how Muslims wound up on no-fly lists with no recourse.

Her story was personal, too: After 9/11, she said, she counseled Muslim women not to abandon wearing their hijab, or head covering. If it happened again, she said, she wasn't certain she would give the same advice. In that admission you could sense the fear of losing identity and pride.

I was struck most by a statement from Rosen, a DA whose ethical interests go beyond the penal code. Talking of people who condemn new arrivals, he said, "There's this idea that people who came here 50 or 100 years ago had pristine paperwork, all kinds of certificates and documents."

"I find that very amusing," he said. "In my own family's experience, if you needed to lie to get here, if you had to say you had a relative, a brother, or you'd never been arrested, people lied. I always say, 'Who am I to pass judgment?'"

If everyone embraced that humility, I'm confident America will accept a new wave of people with the generosity it has shown to those before. We can afford a little compassion.

Contact Scott Herhold at 408-275-0917 or sherhold@mercurynews.com. Twitter.com/scottherhold.