Multicultural Journalism Class Visits Immigrant in Sanctuary at Denver Church

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Our multicultural journalism class had just arrived to interview Arturo Hernandez García and his wife, who had just received devastating news: A federal prosecutor had denied support for their petition to re-open Hernandez’s deportation case. He would have to remain in the basement of the First Unitarian Society of Denver, where he had been living since Oct. 21, 2014, when the church officially granted him sanctuary. More paperwork would have to be filed. More nights would have to be spent apart from his wife and daughters. Yet the couple insisted we continue with the group interview that Media, Film & Journalism Studies (MFJS) Professor Margie Thompson had scheduled as part of our Multicultural Journalism class visit.

Hernandez is the first person to take sanctuary in Colorado as part of the New Sanctuary Movement of the Metro Denver Sanctuary Coalition (MDSC). This initiative is an interfaith, multicultural effort to make a public statement of faith and commitment to stand with immigrant families who are suffering violations of their rights and fighting against unjust deportations.

On Nov. 20, President Obama announced an executive action on immigration policy that could make approximately four million undocumented immigrants eligible for work permits and protection from deportation, according to a Pew Research analysis. The largest affected
group includes individuals like Hernandez who has two daughters, one of whom is a U.S.-born citizen, has lived in the U.S. more than 15 years, and has no criminal record.

Others affected by this executive order include children of U.S. citizens, spouses and children of permanent residents, and those eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, specifically children who entered the United States before the age of 16 and have lived here since Jan. 1, 2010. Hernandez’s oldest daughter is applying for this program, since she arrived in the United States with her parents when she was just three months old. Initiatives to improve visa programs, promote economic growth, and public awareness of immigration-related issues were also included in Obama’s actions.

Many in the GOP met the announcement with outrage, claiming it was an example of executive overreach.

Hernandez and his wife, Ana Souzameda, came from Chihuahua, Mexico to the U.S. with work visas in 1999. In 2005, they petitioned the government for permanent residency, but it sometimes takes fifteen to twenty years to even get a response. They knew they were taking a risk when they stayed after their visas expired, but they were hoping to make a better life for their young family. “Chihuahua is known for drug cartel activity and the murder and disappearances of thousands of young women,” explained Hernandez, through a translator.

The basement room where we met was cold, despite the sunlight coming through the barred windows. Yet Hernandez smiled as he recalled fondly the family outings with his daughters, Mariana and Andrea, now 15 and 9. For years, their family enjoyed going to the movies, outings to the park, and eating together—just a normal life, he remembered. Hernandez owns a successful construction business with 8-10 employees. His daughters attend school.

Then, in 2010, Hernandez was falsely accused of threatening someone at a construction site, and was arrested. He was later found innocent, but U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had been alerted and he was transferred to a detention center. A four-year-long legal battle ensued, costing the family thousands of dollars, the loss of their house, a car and savings. In the end, Hernandez was issued an order of deportation.

“I’m not a criminal,” said Hernandez. He had obtained a valid driver’s license. He acquired a tax I.D. for his construction business and made sure all his workers held genuine Social Security numbers. Until his run-in with the police in 2010, he had only received a few minor traffic violations.

Since then, Hernandez has been fighting to stay in the United States, his home of fifteen years. He explained how difficult it would be to go back to Mexico, if he were to be deported. His family would have to figure out where to live and work. Professionally, he would go from local business owner to entry-level employee, assuming he could find a job at all, much less one that would pay to support a family. Personally, he would fear for his daughters’ safety in his violent-crime-ridden home state of Chihuahua. As for his daughters, they would have to adapt to a new and foreign culture. “We would have to start with nothing. Again,” said Hernandez.
Hernandez knows his case is not unique. There are thousands of people in this situation, he explained. However, because deportations are not usually announced publicly, many people do not know of the magnitude of people affected by these types of situations. According to the US Department of Homeland Security, 438,000 people were deported in 2013 or about 40 per day, over half of whom had no criminal record. This figure does not include those deported by Customs and Border Protection.

Over the next few months, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will release more information regarding the Obama administration’s new initiatives, which have not yet been implemented.

Despite Hernandez’s difficult situation, he and his wife were very welcoming and even eager to speak to the students in our class. As a class assignment, it certainly opened my eyes to the reality of the lives of undocumented immigrants such as Hernandez.

For more information on the recent executive orders, visit the USCIS website at http://www.uscis.gov/immigrationaction or the Metro Denver Sanctuary Coalition website at http://www.metrodenversanctuary.org.