

Putting a Human Face on Immigration Issue

By Bonnie Hobbs

Tuesday, December 22, 2009



Right from the start, the Centreville Immigration Forum wanted to get as close as possible to — not just the immigration issue in Centreville — but the immigrants, themselves. Here, both doors and hearts were open, and the members realized they could better help local immigrants if they knew more about them.

CIF member Al Fuentes teaches a course on Conflict, Trauma and Healing at GMU and, as part of it, he had his students interact with the Centreville day laborers. They talked with the men outside the Centreville Regional Library and learned about their struggles, hardships and challenges in this place far from their homes and loved ones.

"The experience with the day laborers put a human face on what we'd been studying in class," said Fuentes. "It gave the students different perspectives and understanding. They learned their plight, what they're going through and how they're coping with it."

Most are from Guatemala, with some from Honduras and Mexico. The students spoke with them, one morning a week, plus one Sunday afternoon a month when the men attended a free, English-language class at the library. One of the students, John George-Wheeler, an International Affairs major, shared what happened with the CIF.

"I lived and worked in the Dominican Republic for five months, so I was eager to use my Spanish again," he said. "I met with the day laborers twice and, at the end, we played a soccer game."

INITIALLY PARTICIPATING were 15 day laborers in the ESL class, eight GMU students, Fuentes and Spanish-speaking CIF member Connie Rojas. "In the beginning, we weren't all comfortable," said George-Wheeler. "But the day laborers' interest and eagerness to learn English made it easier for us to teach them."

"We wanted to delve into their stories and backgrounds and find out about their countries and families and how they liked the U.S.," he continued. "At first, they were reluctant to answer, but eventually they opened up a bit. They said things I could relate to when I was away from home. They missed their families, foods, weather, mountains or beaches, depending on where they were from."



GMU student John George-Wheeler (on left) addresses the Centreville Immigration Forum while his teacher, Al Fuentes, listens.



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The students found out why the men left their homes in the first place and, said George-Wheeler, "That really gave the immigrant problem a face and more depth. Later, during the soccer game, we stepped into their comfort zone because they were so much better at it than us — and that was cool."

Fuertes said the students and day laborers were able to establish rapport and, at the end, "The ambience between them became very warm and friendly."

"I wasn't surprised that we could have some camaraderie," said George-Wheeler. "But I was a little surprised that we were trusted and accepted by the day laborers as people who didn't want anything from them, except to learn. That was also the best part."

THROUGH TRANSLATOR Rojas, Guatemalan immigrant Jose Luis Lucas said the day laborers weren't afraid "because they were students, so they knew they weren't going to turn them in to the police."

Also via Rojas, another day laborer, Jacinto Sanchez, called it "a nice, pleasant experience — not strange in any way. It's a blessing from God that we're able to learn English for free. We can't pay you money for it but, someday, God will pay you."

Similarly, immigrant Domingo Guzman expressed his thanks, saying he believes God sent the CIF members to help him with food and medicine. In exchange, he sent them all "many blessings." And Fuertes said the whole discussion inspired him to continue studying the local immigrants in another class he's teaching next year.

Alice Foltz of Wellspring United Church of Christ, which sponsors the forum, said hearing the day laborers' stories was "also a way we could know each other and heal. We learned some of them had fled from difficult situations and seen family members killed. Another man came here so he could get money to send his children to college. I think it's a way of respecting each other as human beings that we listen to each other's stories. It makes for a healthy community."

Fuertes said the experience made his students question themselves and think again about their advantages and what it means to be an American. "Many said they had previously identified with their parents' positions on the [illegal] immigrant problem in America. But once they got to know the day laborers, they saw them as human beings. Some also said there should be a day laborer center where they could gather."

Lucas said he thought amnesty would be best because "then we could start paying our taxes and supporting our community." Add Rojas: "You don't leave your native country if you can survive. You leave because you're poor and it's dangerous there."

VOLUNTEER ESL teacher Jennifer Timmons said, "I think the

compassion is here for undocumented people without papers. But there has to be some kind of protection for them. If they're sick and need treatment, they need to be able to get it, or we're doing them a disservice."

Agreeing, Foltz said, "Sometimes they work and don't get paid, so that's not humane and not good. Something should also be done to help their home countries to better them so they won't have to flee. We need to do this by changing our policies so we can help their countries."

Locally, she said, there are four churches that offer ESL classes, but more Spanish teachers are needed. She also noted that the Jeannie Schmidt Free Clinic is expanding and moving to Old Centreville Road in Herndon, "so it'll be closer to Centreville and more accessible for people here. But it mostly serves children."

Now that the weather is so cold, Foltz told the forum members, "There's also a need for shelter, so we should think about where the day laborers can go during the day, to keep warm, if they can't get into their homes 'til night. Think and pray about this and maybe we can come up with some solutions."



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