

AN IMMIGRANT LIFE, by Sr. Ellen Orf

The Precious Blood Bold Action Committee for Immigrants and Refugees asked me to share a story about one of the families I have come to know in my work in Clinton County. Many people here because they are undocumented face the fear of deportation. Most of them, after years of living with the situation, go on working, raising their families and becoming part of the community.

Often when I am working with these families, I am approached with a need (sacramental preparation, translating, and connection to the school) and I get to know their situation. This is a good example of that.

A family, that I will call Jose and Maria, live outside of Breese not too far from Damiansville. They have three children 13, 7 and 4. They wanted the oldest to receive her first Holy Communion. Mom called to ask what they needed to do. In conversation I learned their daughter was in fifth grade and could attend the PSR at St. Dominic in Breese.

The couple has been in the US for about 14 years; Jose was 10 years longer. They had worked as migrant farm workers in California and Florida before finding work with family members on the dairy farm outside of Breese. Tracking down a Baptismal certificate was a challenge but it was found.

Both parents were working, milking approximately 300 cows twice a day and cleaning the barns. The oldest daughter was often responsible for caring for the younger siblings. About four years ago Jose was in a serious accident and sustained a brain injury for which he requires several medicines to be able to work. Because of being undocumented he does not qualify for health insurance and finds the medicine costly. With the help of family members and charity programs at the hospital he gets most of what he needs.

Last year someone told Maria that if she went back to Mexico she could get a visa that would allow her to live and work legally in the US. So she went to Mexico to apply, while the husband and extended family cared for the children and continued the work on the farm. At one time a visa may have been available but it is no longer true. So Maria continues to wait at the border.

Shortly before Christmas Jose was driving to work and was stopped by the police for a missing headlight. When it was discovered that he had no insurance he was arrested and taken to jail. Because of being undocumented he was taken to St. Louis to ICE to be deported. He was told he could pay \$5000 bail and be released to his family and with a lawyer's help he could apply for a legal stay to fight that decision and might be given a hardship exemption. Speaking with an immigration lawyer (Catholic Legal Assistance Ministry) we were given hope that since Jose is the sole parent in the home, that the three children are US citizens and that he has no criminal record, he would have a good chance for the exemption. This will require a lot of work.

The family with the help of a donation of \$1000 from the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Germantown were able to pay the bail. Through the Bold Action Committee he was given \$1000 to help pay the lawyer's fees. A large part of Maria's family lives in the area and is helping to meet the obligations of this situation. We continue to seek other donations.

Why did this family come to the US as undocumented? Like so many others they were looking for work. Their home state of Michoacán, offers few opportunities for people without land, money and skills. They look for hope and the promise of a better life for their children. For the most part it is better, but they do not have much security. However the children have a chance for a better education and a better life. They continue to do whatever is necessary to stay here.

Sometimes it overwhelms me to consider how real change might happen.

As I work with this and other families I must be grateful for all the blessings I have for being a citizen with rights and privileges. I could get overwhelmed by the needs of these families, but they enrich me with the depth of their faith and the generosity extended within the family. It saddens me that this great country does not want to share our bounty with those who need our help. I thank God for the people who are willing to help – the lawyers who do pro-bono and sliding scale work, the people who provide transportation to immigration visits and those who reach out as neighbors and friends.



For reflection and sharing about “An Immigrant Life”

Out of deep gratitude for all of God’s blessings, we respond by moving into our future with greater contemplative living that leads to global awareness. Impelled by the Gospel we commit ourselves as a community: to take bold action that transforms us, gives us energy, and unites us in working and praying for peace and justice in our suffering world and to deepen relationships with all of our Sisters and Partners in Mission in living our charism of Reconciliation. We pray to do this with renewed vigor for our life and mission.

Keeping in mind the Chapter Future Direction Statement, reflect on and share, by yourself or with others, on the following questions:

- From God’s abundant goodness, what have I received today? Would I be willing to share with those less fortunate? How often do I accept the opportunity to reach out to someone I don’t know?
- Clinton County dairy farms sell milk to Prairie Farms. If the milk you drink or the ice cream and other dairy products you eat come from Prairie Farms, stop and think of how many hands helped provide what you enjoy. What difference does it make to realize this connection to immigrant workers?

*Calabazas y frijoles, squash and beans
Too many days without rain
So few on the vines, what will we eat?*

*Dios mío, be with my family while I’m gone
Protect me from peligro along the way [peligro - danger]
Be with them here while I am gone
Help me find a work that I can do.*

*Leaving home, heading north
This mochila, what can fit? [mochila – backpack]
Will I ever come home again?*