

Immigrants in Action

by Kerala Goodkin, '02

Members of the Comité de Inmigrantes en Acción Santa Teresa (the St. Theresa Committee of Immigrants in Action) look solemn this evening. It is Friday, 5:00 PM, in the basement of St. Theresa's Church. The basement boasts a distinctly cafeteria-like atmosphere: fluorescent lights, linoleum floors, folding chairs, bare walls, and long institutional tables. Appropriate, a church volunteer later informs me, as the room also functions as a soup kitchen for homeless and low-income families.

Outside, red late afternoon sunlight diffuses through the air and low-bellied cars cruise the streets, bursting with hip-hop beats. But neither the music nor the sun can penetrate the brick church walls. Inside it is quiet, except for the buzzing of blue-white lights.

The sparseness of the large space makes the Comité look small. There are ten members present this evening, huddled around one table near the entrance. They straggle in during the first half hour of the meeting, nodding hellos, hanging jackets, pulling up chairs.

Juan García, the Comité leader, has positioned himself at the head of the table. Beside his chair rests a bulging black briefcase and spread out before him are folders, binders, pamphlets, papers, all in neat stacks. The words Puerto Rico promenade merrily across his T-shirt, the "e" and the "r" interrupted by the ever-present gold locket that hangs around his neck. It is splayed open, as usual, *la Virgen Maria* holily presiding over the Comité.

García started the Comité in 1999, with the support of St. Theresa's, a Catholic church on the West side of Providence, Rhode Island. The church secured him a paid position as an *organizador comunitario* - a community organizer. The Comité's most immediate mission is simply stated: to assure permanent residency for the 6-9 million some-odd undocumented immigrants in the United States.

García, himself a documented Guatemalan immigrant, collaborates with the Latin American community in Providence and the surrounding areas to raise awareness about the most recent immigration policies and proposals and to encourage the people to *organizarse*. Organize themselves. As the Comité is part of the National Coalition for Dignity and Amnesty, a nation-wide network of similar groups, García also keeps tabs on events and advancements in other parts of the country.

The size of the Comité is forever fluctuating: at the moment, it includes about ten members, documented and undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America. They meet every other week to consider legislative proposals, to plan protests and community awareness events, and to discuss future courses of action.

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This week, the Comité must begin to grapple with severe and unforeseen threats to their cause. It is September 14, three days after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centers. The principle suspects are of Arab descent, and the blossoming of a newfound patriotism has simultaneously given way to fierce anti-immigrant sentiment. While people of Middle-Eastern descent are experiencing the most acute prejudice, many U.S. residents are generalizing their anger toward all darker-skinned peoples. An ever-lurking fear of "foreignness" has reared its head to the surface: Middle-Easterners and Latin Americans alike must confront its harsh glare.

The meeting, as usual, begins with a moment of prayer. Metal chair legs scrape across the floor, as members stand up and bow their heads. They stand in silence for a full minute, in commemoration of Tuesday's victims.

The Comité members take their seats, folding their arms across their chests as they wait for García to collect his thoughts. He pinches his chin between two pudgy fingers, then leans over the table, folding his hands in front of him. He clears his throat. "*Bueno...*" he says. Well... The first topic of discussion: what to do about upcoming planned events, in light of the recent attacks? Carry on as normal? Cancel them? Suspend them? First, there is the issue of a trip to Washington DC that all agree should be postponed. Then a weekend of parades and festivals to promote Latino pride.

"*Este tiempo no es para festejar,*" one woman says definitively. This is not a time to celebrate. Everyone nods.

"We need to wait until these feelings of rage, anger, and sadness simmer down," García says. "Otherwise we'll bring hate."

There is much talk of hate. All members are uneasy about recent hate crimes toward those of Arab descent. "Don't go carrying around any machetes," García warns. "They're going to think you're a terrorist." He is referring to the Sikh (of Indian descent) who was detained at the Providence train station for wearing a knife - one of the seven ritual pieces of metal that Sikhs are required to wear.

Everyone laughs, but it is a nervous laughter.

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Before the famous twin towers were ripped from New York's skyline, things had been going well for the Comit . They were busy planning their protests and parades and festivals, concocting new ways to *educar a la gente* -- educate the people. Garc a was optimistic about their trip to Washington and their progress on a legal proposal called FREEDOM (Family Reunification Economic Expansion Documented Organized Management), which was designed to tackle the problem of illegal immigration at its roots.

The Comit 's hopes for securing their most urgent goal - permanent residency for the States' undocumented immigrant population - ran high. President Bush had designated U.S.-Mexico relations as one of his top priorities. Over the summer, an internal Bush administration report expressed interest in legalizing the nation's three million undocumented Mexican immigrants.

The report generated heated debate within Washington and across the country. To the Comit 's delight, it pushed the issue of permanent residency into the national spotlight, far beyond St. Theresa's bare white basement walls. Opponents argued that such a legalization program rewards lawlessness and unfairly favors the interests of undocumented immigrants over those waiting to enter the country legally. They also worried that it would increase incentives for future illegal immigration.

Supporters pointed out that after the last legalization program in 1986, which granted legal status to three million undocumented immigrants, the across-the-border flood that opponents feared never materialized. Furthermore, they argued, legalization is a means of *addressing*, not resolving, the problem of illegal immigration. It is a short-term treatment, intended to improve the quality of life for the millions of undocumented immigrants who contribute to the U.S. economy but enjoy no legal rights. Garc a emphasizes the importance of pairing a legalization program with other policies designed to remove the motivation for illegal immigration in the first place.

The government has dubbed the prospective legalization program an "amnesty," which means forgiveness. Thus in granting amnesty, the U.S. government believes itself to be "forgiving" the undocumented immigrant population by giving them legal status. Yet according to Robert Fuchs, a New York City immigration attorney who collaborates with Garc a and other groups in the National Coalition, "Amnesty is really the wrong word. It implies that someone has done something wrong which should be pardoned. But [the undocumented immigrants] haven't done anything wrong. It's the system that is flawed."

Garc a emphasizes the need for a new system of immigration, which, he says, is their "second project." Under the legal proposal FREEDOM, immigrants would enter the country as documented temporary residents with legal rights to fill U.S. labor needs. The program would allow residence for up to three years.

Fuchs distinguishes between a temporary resident program and the temporary worker program that has been proposed in Washington DC. A temporary resident, he says, "has rights and can go to court," while a temporary worker "cannot legally protest and can be deported with no explanation." Fuchs explains that the temporary worker program instills a sense of powerlessness in the immigrant, "creating a victim from the beginning." It "promotes a form of legalized slavery."

Nevertheless, the increased attention surrounding the immigration system at the very least indicated to the Comit  and other amnesty groups that Washington was actively recognizing the need for a change in policy beyond increasing border control. Now, after the terrorist attacks, White House attention toward immigration issues has taken quite a different turn.

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Fuchs says worriedly: "Things don't look good." While the Bush administration was previously leaning toward an ongoing, two-way discussion with Mexico, which included Fox's support of more relaxed cross-border restrictions, it now seems to be reversing its agenda.

Now, says Peter Andreas, an assistant professor of political science at Brown University, all the United States wants to know is, "Is Mexico helping us in the anti-terrorism effort? All the hard work that went into creating an open and tolerant pro-immigration spirit is undermined, thrown off balance. Now there's an overlap between 'problems' of immigration and problems of terrorism." Amnesty, the "hot" political issue of the summer, no longer seems to be an issue. U.S. citizens want to detain undocumented immigrants, not legalize them. In their quest for retaliation, these citizens regard a war against terrorists and a war against immigrants as one and the same.

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During the week following the attacks, Juan Garc a becomes increasingly aware of their lasting implications for the amnesty movement. Tuesday, September 18 finds him looking particularly somber, the deep set grooves that run from nose to mouth tugging the corners of his lips into a kind of worried frown. He sits at an electric typewriter, typing a document using only his index fingers. He must pause briefly every now and then to scrutinize the keyboard and search for a letter. Painted popes and Christs and Virgin Marys rest in glass frames against the window behind him, basking in the white early morning sun.

Other church workers pass through the office, nodding a "good morning" or "*buenos d as*." Garc a moves from his desk to a table in the center of the room, massaging his face in his palm. "They [the immigrant community] are not educated about their rights," he says, "as people, as human beings. They must be taught to organize themselves." Now, he emphasizes, is a more crucial time than ever. Immigrant communities must unite.

Later that morning, Saul Urbina, a recent immigrant and Comit  member, echoes Garc a's concern. He asserts that

perhaps one of their most dangerous threats to the amnesty cause comes from within the immigrant community itself. "It's not opposition, but rather disinterest," he says. "This is the biggest problem. [Many immigrants] don't know how to read, how to write. They don't have preparation. During their free time they want to have fun, they aren't interested in organizing themselves."

García reminisces about his earlier years in Guatemala, recollecting the strong sense of unity he experienced there. His eyes become thick and distant as though lost within the shimmery edges of a long buried memory. "The [Guatemalan] way of life is *comunitaria*," he says. Community-based. "The people are more supportive."

In 1954, the Guatemalan military overthrew popularly-elected President Jacobo Arbenz, launching thirty years of social turbulence and armed conflict. Before immigrating to the United States, García helped organize the campesinos - the peasants - against the repressive military regime. When comparing his work there to his present work with the Latin American community in Providence, he sighs nostalgically. "The people [in Guatemala] had a greater fighting spirit," he says. "They were more eager to organize themselves."

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In 1976, García left behind his parents, two sisters, and six brothers to try his luck in the States. Why did he leave behind such a spirited community? When it comes to more personal details about his past, García's voice drops and his eyes harden. "I didn't find myself well [in Guatemala]," he says, using a Spanish phrase that doesn't exactly translate. "And so I came here." He won't say more. Perhaps his departure was related to the devastating earthquake that struck in the same year, killing 25,000 people, injuring 70,000, and leaving 1.25 million homeless.

García made it across the border after two failed attempts. He says he crossed "like everyone does": by paying coyotes, who earn a living off of smuggling Latin Americans to the United States. He settled down in San Antonio, Texas, where he worked as an electric welder and gained legal status by marrying a U.S. citizen. They had two children, a girl and a boy. García smiles slightly as he speaks of his children's educational success. His daughter, the eldest, is now a post graduate, while his son recently enrolled in college to study criminal justice.

The look of triumph in his eyes flickers and then dies out, as García remembers the "grave discrimination" he faced in San Antonio. After he and his wife separated, he saw little reason to stay. While other immigrants living in the Rhode Island area were driven to the East Coast by the prospect of better work opportunities, the reasons for García's migration seem almost spiritual, accentuating his ever present aura of mystery. "The compass led me here," he says.

García arrived in Providence in 1988, and for eleven years, he worked in various construction jobs. In 1999, he finally struck up a deal with St. Theresa's church, which allowed him to earn money for the one thing he loves most: luchando por la justicia. Fighting for justice.

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Saul Urbina and Juan Ayala, both younger Comité members, have only good things to say about Juan García's leadership. "I think that all of the members respect him," says Ayala. Fuchs agrees, designating García as the "driving force" of the Rhode Island amnesty movement. Within the Comité, according to Ayala, "we are all equal." But in many senses, García is "the leader, the boss. He's the one who brings us the information on the national and international level." Urbina and Ayala are grateful that García is able to work full time as the *organizador comunitario* because the other members of the Comité have jobs that require as many as fifty hours per week.

Urbina and Ayala, both undocumented immigrants from Mexico, work at a company that manufactures dry-erase boards. Ayala migrated from Mexico in 1993 for "different reasons" that were primarily economical. He met Urbina at St. Theresa's five months ago and invited him to join the Comité. Urbina had crossed the border seven months previous to escape "family conflicts." Like Ayala, he lived first in California but left for Rhode Island upon hearing that "there were more work opportunities."

Both men are both good-natured: when asked if they have had any formal education, they laugh and exchange amused glances. "No," Ayala says smiling. "No, not much." Ayala even smiles when talking about his undocumented status. "I have nothing," he says. "Still nothing." But beneath their laughter is a deep-set pain that surfaces every now and again. Urbina's narrow eyes slant sadly as he speaks of his desire to revisit his family. Ayala nods vigorously and says gravely that for him, achieving amnesty is most important because it would let him see his family without "the risk of guarding my life at the border."

Neither Ayala nor Urbina laughs when discussing the recent attacks. "We were on the point of winning [amnesty]," says Ayala. "Now we've gone back a few steps." Yet while solemn, they are far from defeated. "*Tenemos esperanza*," they say, nodding. We have hope.

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The flyer that hangs in window of St. Theresa's advertises *areunión* - a meeting - on Sunday, September 23 at 1:00 pm. A cartoon of a wavy-haired man graces the front of it: one of his hands clutches a newspaper while the other cups his mouth to amplify his words. "**AMNISTIA GENERAL INCONDICIONAL PARA TODOS LOS INMIGRANTES INDOCUMENTADOS!**" he shouts. (Unconditional general amnesty for all undocumented immigrants!) The upper half of the flyer calls all immigrants to "Unite in the fight."

It is to take place in Saint Michael's Church in South Providence, a predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood. The church takes up a full block and boasts lofty brick steeples that preside over the wide residential streets. In the

basement, Juan Garc a has arranged folding chairs in a perfect circle, wedging them in the space between four purple and gold columns. Carved cherubs perch at the tops of the columns, smiling serenely over the guests.

It is 1:10 pm, and most of the chairs are still empty. "It's always like this," Saul Urbina says. "We put flyers up everywhere and still hardly anyone comes." He glances around at the smattering of people, recognizing most faces from church.

Garc a takes a seat, resting his hands atop his rotund belly. His locket is hidden today: the gold chain disappears into the neckline of his red button-down shirt. He waits quietly for a few minutes, then checks the time on his cell phone. 1:20 PM. More guests trickle in. By 1:30, the chairs are almost full. Garc a smiles in satisfaction.

"*Bueno*," he says finally, his low rumbling voice commanding attention. "This is just a *charlita* (a little chat) to see how we all are feeling. It's important now to educate our community. The situation is fragile."

As guests continue to arrive, Juan Ayala scrambles to set up more chairs on the outskirts of the circle. Garc a nods approvingly around the room and comments that this may be the largest turn-out yet. Over forty people have shown up by now. "We all need to reflect," he says. "How are we going to continue? How are we going to keep on with this struggle without being attacked?"

Most everyone resolves that "we must continue to fight." *Hay que seguir luchando*. The phrase becomes a refrain throughout the meeting, punctuating every comment and triggering a chorus of nodding heads.

Garc a has shed the deflated solemnity of the previous Tuesday: his words bounce urgently off the linoleum floor and fade into resonating echoes. He fidgets continuously, weaving his fingers together and pulling at the buttons of his shirt. With every call for solidarity, three creases emerge at each side of his eye as his doughy cheeks lift to accommodate a smile. At the end of the meeting, Garc a lays out the "plan." They will postpone their forthcoming events, but they will carry on their fight. The meetings, the planning, the national collaboration: all will continue as usual. He asks the group to remember three things: 1) they are part of a community, 2) their rights must not be trampled because of other people's actions, and 3) they will not be overcome.

Not all has been lost. Even on a national level, despite the White House's renewed emphasis on border security and law enforcement, many government representatives remain unwilling to throw previous immigration policy proposals by the wayside. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, remarked to the New York Times that "we need to move forward with our other immigration agenda, and that includes uniting immigrant families and uniting workers with employers."

Garc a reminds the group of the classic Latin American protest call: *El pueblo unido jams ser  vencido*. The united people will no longer be defeated. This afternoon, the resolve swells in the musty church air: it burrows between elbows, between folding chair legs, between palms folded in prayer.