

Coming to America: Desperation Trumps Deportation for Hunterdon County Immigrants

By Melissa Quintero

When she walked into the Hunterdon County Family Success Center for the first time, she was pregnant. She had been raped in Mexico. She had no family here. She was 14 years old. This was not shocking to Judith Buday, the bilingual coordinator at the Success Center; these are the stories she shoulders every day. During the last year Judith has helped a young man who witnessed his father gunned down by gang violence. And a woman who came for help when her husband beat her— she didn't know the police would help her, because in Mexico they do not.

Judith is comfortably seated in the conference room of the Center. Her small frame and beautiful dark skin are contrasted only by the weight of the stories she tells in her buttery Puerto Rican accent. She has been an advocate and bilingual coordinator in Hunterdon County for more than 13 years. After the birth of her first child in 2002 she responded to an ad in the local paper for a bilingual community resource specialist to field phone calls from the steadily increasing number of Hispanic immigrants to the county. In 2012, The Success Center opened its doors and Judith was brought on as the Center's bilingual partner.

The quaint two-story office of the Center feels more like the warm home of a family member, than a non-profit organization. Outfitted with plush couches, a substantial kitchen table for gathering, a play room and a "treasure chest" where families can find anything from a warm winter coat to a new set of dishes.

Of the 905 families the Center helped in 2014 a little more than 200 were from the Hispanic population, offering no-cost assistance to anyone. Some of the services include child abuse prevention, access to information on child and maternal health, referral services, parent-child activities, budgeting, nutrition and parent education classes. But they also help people find basic necessities for life, simple things like sanctuary, community, food and clothing.

“In the past 10 years there has been a great majority of undocumented individuals moving to this county,” Judith said. The state’s demographics are changing and the immigrant population is growing. In 2013 and 2014, 55,000 residents left the state, however they have been consistently replaced by nearly 51,000 immigrants to the Garden State. As legal immigration has ticked upward, so too has illegal immigration. New Jersey has the highest rate of illegal immigration in the nation and over 500,000 undocumented residents call the state home.

Many leave to escape shocking conditions in their home country. Some have lived in huts and slept on dirt floors, some have witnessed or been victims of extreme violence and corruption, some have no one left. “When coyotes [human smugglers] drop off people here they come with nothing...no clothes, maybe a phone number—maybe,” Judith said. They eventually find their way to the Center, mostly through word of mouth— sometimes through a church or the Hunterdon Helpline.

The violence they escape is indeed rampant. While Latin America holds eight percent of the world’s population, it experiences 40 percent of the world’s homicides and 60 percent of the kidnappings. In fact, 41 of the 50 most murderous cities in the world are located there. It comes as no shock that people would seek to escape these conditions and need a helping hand once they reach their destination.

Even children that were part of 2014’s highly publicized “Children at the Border” crisis have found their way to New Jersey and to Judith — their troubles aren’t over when they get here. “[It’s] an alarming situation— alarming...,” she began with a pinched brow, letting out a labored sigh— she continued, “what they have seen, how many have been raped, witnessed killings and if their stories are true, what they witness in their countries of barbarism and gangs...it’s an incredible amount of stress on those children.”

The arduous crossing of the Hispanic community to the U.S. does not end once they cross the border. “When these families come to this country, they face a lot of challenges because there is a

number of things that affect them. Language is number one, but it's culture, it's immigration status, it's— being afraid," said Judith. Though many come with no luggage, no family and no food, the undocumented first-generation immigrants continue to endure under the looming shadow of deportation.