

2009

Presentation at the Reform Immigration for America Immigration Summit, Gallaudet University, Washington DC, June 4, 2009

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Recommended Citation

McCauley, Mary, "Presentation at the Reform Immigration for America Immigration Summit, Gallaudet University, Washington DC, June 4, 2009" (2009). *Postville Project Documents*. 71.

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**Presentation at the Reform Immigration for America
Immigration Summit.....
Gallaudet University, Washington DC
June 4, 2009**

Good Evening,

I come before you humbled and grateful for the honor and privilege of being a part of this very special summit on immigration. Never before have I been in a room with so many people committed to the issue of comprehensive immigration reform. I am in awe and grateful for your commitment.

There is something in the lives of all of us that has served as the cause for our presence at this conference. Obviously I am here because of the tragic immigration raid that took place on May 12, 2008 at Agriprocessors in Postville, Iowa.

In the brief amount of time that I have with you I would like to share a bit of the Postville Story. I would like you to know some of the people who were directly affected by this devastating raid. I do this because I think knowing the people whose story I will share will continue to give you the energy, wisdom, patience, love and courage that is required of anyone who engages in dialogues or initiatives aimed at immigration reform.

Step back in time with me to May 12, 2008. We had heard rumors that there might be an immigration raid some place in Iowa, but like all normal people in such a situation we hoped against hope that it would not be our town.

I am in my office in Monona, Iowa, about twelve miles from Postville. At 10:03 a.m. on this infamous Monday morning I receive a phone call from our Hispanic Minister, Paul Rael. His words are imbedded in my memory....he simply said.....
"It's no rumor...the helicopters are here."

I immediately left my desk in Monona and drove to Agriprocessors hoping that I might see some of our people....what I thought I could do I do not knowI simply wanted our people to know that we cared about them and that the St. Bridget's Faith Community was here for them. Did I see any of them? Of course not...all I saw were helicopters, ICE agents armed with guns, State Patrol Officers, Sheriff Cars, local police, journalists, television cameras plus a number of very concerned and frightened Postville residents.

And had I been inside the plant I would have heard people shouting, "La Migra! La Migra! Immigration, save yourself, if you can! Some ran. Some tried to hide. Others stood paralyzed and followed the harsh directives of ICE. They heard themselves called "rats." They were searched, shackled on their wrists, ankles and waist, lined up and tied to fences. Fear and anguish pervaded their minds and hearts. They had to be thinking....Will I ever again see my children or spouse? And what will happen to my family now that I will not be able to provide money for food, rent or medical bills?

Also had I been inside the plant I would have seen “Rosa” grab her cell phone; call our Hispanic Minister, Paul Rael, and with a quivering voice say, “*Take care of my children.*”

After about an hour of standing outside the plant I returned to St. Bridget’s. The first woman I met was a parishioner carrying a few dozen cookies...and some lemonade...and she said: “*Sister, a terrible thing has happened to our town.*” How prophetic were her words! A terrible thing did happen to the town of Postville. Something we pray will never again happen to another group of people or town.

I then opened the Church door and saw a group of ten or twelve women huddled together...with their children. A small bi lingual boy prompted by his Spanish speaking mother approached me and said: “Can our friends come too?” My spontaneous response was: “Of course they can ...tell anyone who is afraid or alone to come to St. Bridget’s.”

Little did I know what those words would mean for by 7:00 that evening over 400 men, women and children were pouring into St. Bridget’s. They came to be with friends and family members. They came to see who was there and not there...they came to see who had or had not been detained. They came to cry together and pray together. They came to receive strength from one another. They were too afraid to be alone for fear that ICE officials might come to their home. They came trusting that the Church and the Postville community would guide and help them at this most horrible time in their lives.

To be at St. Bridget’s on that Monday evening was to see humanity at its best ...for assistance in the form of food, blankets, pillows, toothbrushes, cots, games, toys was coming to us like manna from heaven. To be there was also to see what happens when the law of the land does not keep up with need of the land...when the law of the land does not provide a means for our 21st century immigrants, who come here for the same reasons that our ancestors came to America, does not provide a means for them to “**regularize their status in our country.**” We accept their labor ...we need their labor...but we do not accept their presence. Instead we call and treat them as criminals. The tragedy of Postville calls out for our compassion, attention and continued involvement in immigration reform.

I now want to tell you a few stories about the people I have been privileged to know, respect and love. I do this because our 21st century immigrants cannot remain faceless and nameless. We need to call them by name, we need to know them and become familiar with their stories, for I believe that the first step in changing a law is to transform hearts. And in order for hearts to be transformed we have to know and appreciate the people who are currently being prevented from becoming documented persons.

The first person I want you to know is **Pedro** possibly you have read about Pedro because I talk about him all the time. Pedro was twelve at the time of the raid. He came to Postville when he was about three with his mother, father and older sister. Within a few years a younger sister, Samantha was born. On the Thursday following the raid I met Pedro and said: “*Pedro, How Are You?*” He responded by saying, “*I am sad, very sad because they have taken away my mother.*”

I would also like you to know **42 women and three men** who during the summer months walked the streets of Postville with GPS devices on their ankles. These women and men were arrested on the day of the raid but were released with electronic tracking devices so that they could care for their children. They were not able to work and were totally dependent on charity in order to feed and care for their family. Each week they came to St. Bridget's... often with tears in their eyes... and asked to have their rent, utility, phone or medical bills paid. They did not want to ask for charity. They wanted to work.

On the days immediately following the raid these women were so embarrassed and humiliated that they did not want anyone to see that they had a bracelet on their ankle...they would pull their slacks down so no one could see...but on the Sunday following the raid when we joined many other concerned people for a prayer and walk in Waterloo... they rolled their slacks upstood tall and carried signs that read: **We are not criminals...We came to work...We came to feed our families...We are mothers.** I call these women the Rosa Parks' of our broken immigration system. It is for these women and their children that I urge you to double your efforts in working toward immigration reform.

One woman with an ankle bracelet told the story of her little daughter, "Ana," who looked at her leg and said, "**Mommy, what did you do?**" No mother should have to look her child in the eye and try to explain to her daughter that her mother and father loved her so much...that they came to the United States, yes without the proper papers, but because they felt they had no other choice and they wanted her to have a better future.

You now need to know "**Gloria**", a woman from Mexico, who resides in Postville. She is tall and dignified. She, too, walks the streets of Postville with a monitoring device on her ankle. She also walks the streets with pain and anger in her heart. Her anger stems from the labor law abuses, injustices and sexual harassment that she and others allege they experienced while working at Agriprocessors.

On July 26, the day that three United States Congresspersons came to Postville to listen to the testimony of our people, she spoke spontaneously. I had seen her early in the morning in Church in front of a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe ...tears streaming down her face. At that moment I knew I was looking at a woman in great pain...in intense anguish and with outrageous courage.

Within an hour or two that pain, anguish and courage would turn to words and shouts of honest anger...as she vividly described the abuses that our people, especially the women and the minors had endured while working at Agriprocessors. She reminded me of the story of Hannah in the Old Testament who poured out her heart to her God and to her people. Just as Hannah's prayer was prompted by her deep sorrow and misery, I believe that "Gloria's" plea was prompted by the hurt, the pain, the humiliation and shattered dreams experienced by so many in Postville. She was not speaking just for herself...she was speaking for an entire community who had come to Postville with the hope of a better future. They knew they had come without the proper documentation...but for survival

they did not know what else to do. On behalf of Gloria and all whom she represented in her agonizing prayer and plea to the Congresspersons I beg you to maintain your commitment to comprehensive immigration reform.

I have another story that is simple and short, yet poignant. It is about “**Carlos,**” a man who spent the summer in a Florida jail. This man was from Guatemala. He had come to Postville so that he could send money back to his wife and children who had remained in Guatemala... and this is what he faithfully did every single month.

Naturally when he was arrested and jailed he was no longer able to support his family. Finally toward the end of his jail sentence he was able to talk to his wife in Guatemala...According to the interviewer his wife told him that she did not have any money and his children were hungry. This is the advice he gave to his wife... “*Sell whatever we have in order to feed the children.*”

And now one final story! It is the story of **Je sus**. The first day I met Je sus was the day that Rigoberta Menchu visited Postville. He was going to offer a testimony describing his experience of the raid and then his five months in jail. His story was difficult to listen to for he spoke of the harsh treatment he received from the ICE officials...of how he was kicked to the ground and beaten...of how they were often called rats...made fun of, shackled and searched, the latter causing great humiliation every time he was moved from one jail to another and for Je sus this happened about four or five times. He described the anguish in his heart when he feared he would never again see his wife or three month old daughter. He told about being in solitary confinement for ten to twelve days. He told about sharing a jail cell with hardened criminals, with murderers, burglars, rapists. He found this very hard for he knew the only crime he ever committed was to work without proper documentation.

Any day that you might become discouraged with all the challenges and the criticisms that are integral to our work for comprehensive immigration reform, remember Je sus. Remember Pedro; Remember little Ana; Remember Gloria.....Remember Carlos; Remember the town of Postville!

Permit me now to make a few comments on both the support and the criticism we received and continue to receive for responding the way we did to the needs of our immigrant community.

First of all the support. This support came in the form of people. What did they do? They brought food...prepared meals...served meals...played with the children...doctors and nurses set up a free clinic...counselors came...immigration lawyers and non immigration lawyers came to offer help...people provided transportation...representatives from various immigration advocacy groups came and offered wisdom and support.

And as you know many sent financial aid. They could not be there in person but wanted to offer their support. We have received over \$1,200,000 from people across the country...and with each donation came a beautiful note....I'll read just a few...

- Please accept this small donation for helping our mothers and sisters in need. We are all immigrants. In solidarity...
- All I want to say really is...I keep you in my prayers and I want to stand up and be counted with all the others who are saying, "NO...NO...NO, this must not happen in the United States of America...treating people like this...."

The people who sent these notes and supported us financially saw the need of our Hispanic brothers and sisters. They recognized the need for reform in our law.

I also received notes that were highly critical of the fact that we were assisting people who were here in the United States without proper documentation...they of course always referred to our people as "illegals." People tried to warn me that I could be in serious trouble for "*harboring illegals.*"

In all honesty I was never afraid ...I never second guessed myself nor did anyone else on our staff for we were doing what we knew was right. We were responding to people who were traumatized and terrorized. And we were doing our best to comfort, encourage and empower them. We were giving them a safe haven when our government...because of our flawed immigration system...was treating them as criminals.

I was often asked the question...especially by news reporters.... Do you support people who break the law? My response would be and continues to be ...I do not support the breaking of a law but I wholeheartedly support reviewing a law when it is not in accord with the values of our country or it is no longer meeting the need of the day, for I knew that there is a law within our human heart, the law of love and the law of justice, that at all times must direct our thoughts, words and actions. These convictions come from my family and my faith.

I'd like to share a little story about my family heritage. My father served as District Attorney of Milwaukee County from 1944 until his death in 1964. In the fall of 1964 he was engaged in another election ...he was also engaged in a struggle with cancer. Just a few days before he died he spoke with our pastor, and said this, "*I want to die in office and go out with my head held high in vindication for the principles for which I have fought...I have tried to lend dignity to my office and as a public servant to defend the rights of the little people*"..... These words came to my mind during the days following the raid. They stayed with me, gave me courage and motivated me especially when I was asked about helping "illegal immigrants...and my support of those who broke the law..." I was secure in doing what I was doing for I was doing what my father had taught me....I was defending the rights of the little people.

Many times during the summer as various families were leaving Postville I would be there as they boarded the bus for O'Hare Airport to say good bye. I would hug them and say: *"I am so sorry for the way that our country has treated you....I am so sorry for what happened to you at Agriprocessors."* They would look at me, shrug their shoulders and say, "It's ok...we understand!" But I say.... *"It's not ok."*

In closing I want to share and recall a passage from Scripture that occurs in the Acts of the Apostles. I suspect that it is one that is familiar to many of you. It is the story of Peter and John going into the temple area for the three o'clock hour of prayer. While there they encounter a man crippled from birth, who in accord with his custom was asking for alms. Peter saw the man. He heard his request and said,

**"I have neither silver nor gold but what I have I will give you....
In the name of Jesus Christ rise and walk!"**

Peter took the cripple by the hand.... The man leaped up, went into the temple with themwalking...jumping and praising God!

The people were amazed. In fact they were quite impressed so impressed with what had happened and with the teachings of Peter and John about Jesus that they came to believe.

Needless to say the elders and the Sadducees were not impressed. Rather they were perplexed. They did not know how to handle Peter and John because their actions and their words were stirring up the people. So..... they conferred among themselves and came to the conclusion that the only way to dilute the power and the presence of Peter and John was to tell them to stop speaking, SO..... They turned to Peter and John and said:

"Never again are you to speak to anyone in the name of Jesus!"

Peter and John heard their words and said...

"It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard."

Because of what happened in Postville on May 12, 2008 and has happened in innumerable other towns throughout the United States, with Peter and John I stand before you and say:

It is impossible for me not to speak about what I have seen and heard!

- I am impelled to speak about the needs and the fears ...the hopes and the desires of our immigrant brothers and sisters.
- I am impelled to tell the Postville story ...to tell the story about the pain, the anguish and the suffering of so many people.
- I am impelled to speak about the underlying causes of migration.

- I am impelled to speak about the alleged injustices that many of our people, especially our women and minors experienced while working at Agriprocessors.
- I am impelled to speak about the devastating effects of a raid on people and on a town.
- I am impelled to speak of the man at the Cattle Congress who said to the guards...
“God knows you are just doing your job so you can support your families and your job is to keep me from supporting mine.”

I accepted this invitation to be with you so that I could share the Postville story, a story that impels us to speak for and on behalf of God’s little people.

Oh how I hope that not only you who are in this room but hundreds of others will join us in speaking a word of justice to our Congresspersons and Senators as well as to our neighbors and in so doing we will be speaking a word of hope to our 21st century immigrant.

Tonight I pray that all of us and many more will continue to have the conviction and boldness of Peter and John.

- When we see and hear stories of injustice..... may we speak out!
- When the poor and the helpless are deprived of their rightsmay we speak out!
- When children wake up with night mares because they fear that their mother or their father will be taken away..... may we speak out!
- When hard working and needy people are exploited and disrespected in the workplace..... may we speak out!
- When families are broken apart and towns destroyed...may we speak out!

Yes, may we speak out and may the words that we speak be so strong.....so clear...so compassionate...so authentic...so just.....that hearts will be transformed and laws revised.

Then with the crippled man may all of us enter into our temples....wherever those temples may be...walking and jumping and praising God!

Mary McCauley, BVM
June 4, 2009