Events Analyze 2008 Raid in Postville [Northern Iowan article]

Rachel Zidon
Almost a year has passed since the largest workplace raid in Iowa's history hit northeast Iowa.

On May 12, 2008, Postville made national news after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested nearly 400 workers at the Agriprocessors Inc. slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant on charges of identity fraud and immigration violations.

One year later, many Postville residents and others are still struggling to understand the events that led to the raid and the impact it has had locally and globally.

A conference and teaching event at the University of Northern Iowa yesterday and today will give students, faculty and community members the opportunity to have an open dialogue about what happened in Postville and the implications of these events.

"Postville: Past, Present and Future" will feature a variety of speakers and performers, including local journalists, lawyers who have advocated for immigrants in Postville, a documentary filmmaker and several of the workers who were arrested in the raid.

Jennifer Cooley, a Spanish professor at UNI, came up with the idea of having an event about Postville at UNI last fall after she saw "a really urgent need for more information about Postville." Because of Postville's close proximity to UNI, Cooley said she found a great deal of interest in the topic.

"There are so many people who want to engage in a serious conversation about this," she said. "People don't just want to talk about it. They are anxious to talk about it and to make sure it never happens again."

The conference began yesterday at 7 p.m. with director Luis Argueta showing segments of his docu-
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umentary film "AbUsed: The Postville Raid" in the Communication Arts Center Room 106, seven of the arrested workers will perform a play dramatizing their experiences.

Today, there will be a welcome reception in the Russell Hall lobby at 8 a.m. and events will go on throughout the day. These discussions with UNI and Luthert College professors currently writing books about Postville, attorney James Benzonii, an immigration lawyer and journalists, teachers and volunteers from Postville.

From 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., items from Postville, including traditional Guatemalan woven goods, will be sold in Maucher Union with all proceeds going to organizations in Postville.

At 4 p.m. in CAC Room 106, Cooley, along with immigration activists Sandra Rybachek, Guatemalan immigrant and Postville resident Alma Chavez de Perez and UNI students and graduate assistants will present "Nuevo Amanecer: Weaving a New Beginning," a play Cooley is currently writing based on Guatemalan women in Postville.

These women turned to weaving traditional Guatemalan items after the raid when they could no longer work and could not leave Postville without risking deportation.

"I spent a lot of time with them," Cooley said. "I was really intrigued by them and how they managed to find a new beginning when they had no work and no legal status. I really wanted more people to know their story."

Elena Dobrila, a graduate assistant for the Department of Modern Languages at UNI, will be one of the performers.

"I got involved in the Postville project ever since last May when the raid happened in Postville," Dobrila said. "Seeing all these people affected by the events in such a way moved me deeply. When I was offered to take part in (the play) I did not hesitate (to take it)."

At 7:30 p.m. in CAC Room 106, seven Guatemalan and Mexican workers who were arrested in the Postville raid will present their original play "Historia de Nuestras Vidas," which means "The Story of Our Lives." It will dramatize their experiences of coming to the U.S. and how the raid affected their lives. The play will be in Spanish, but English translations will be provided for the audience.

Yulia Vorobyeva, a graduate assistant for the Department of Modern Languages who will be performing in Cooley's play, said that learning about Postville has changed her worldview and that she hopes the event can do the same for others.

"I think that every person ought to learn more about this dramatic reality and get involved in attempts to make a change," she said.

Students can find a complete schedule of events at www.uni.edu/studyabroad/news/downloads/pvilllefinafinaldraft.pdf.