

Engaging Impasse on Immigration

Most people agree that current U.S. immigration policies are not working as they should. Advocates have been trying for years to find a comprehensive solution that will fix our immigration system. But we haven't been able to get there. Conversations about immigration often turn into arguments, and don't move us forward in understanding how to address the issue.

This workshop was put together by NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, in an attempt to try something new to break through the impasse on immigration. Through reflection, role playing, and discussion, participants in the workshop will explore various feelings and fears surrounding immigration reform and ways to find common ground. The workshop uses biographies to explore the experience of individuals who live the reality of the intersection of immigration and our current failed system.

The following is the list of the characters used in this workshop:

Chip Morrison	Local Chamber of Commerce President, Maine
Gabriel Rodriguez	Undocumented Salvadoran-American? Student
David Cohen	Unemployed Italian-American Citizen
Sammy Nuko	Multiple Jobs - Togolese
Ryan Wolf	Corrections Officer - Citizen
Marta	Mexican Farmer
Laura Major	Immigration Judge
Mrs. Farnum	Single Mother & Widow
Amitola	Native American Teacher
Kaylan Sites	Irish Wife

Jon Kolnoski	Police Officer
Christopher Bartlett	Accountant
Ramon Lopez	Mexican Day-Laborer
Sister Edwina	Catholic Leader
Todd Wolf	Financial Broker
Catherine Colby	Immigration Specialist
Jose Julupe	Union Organizer
Nick Kryzalviek	Biologist and Environmental Planner
Liz Solomon	Legislative Staffer
Rob Rorhman	US Border Patrol Agent

Instructions for the workshop and the biographies are on the website: <http://www.networklobby.org/nep/ImmigWorkshop3-2010>

NETWORK's Executive Director, Sr. Simone Campbell, SSS developed this workshop following an Iowa workshop designed with Sr. Nancy Sylvester, IHM, President of the Institute for Communal Contemplation and Dialogue and based on the process of "engaging impasse" developed more fully in the Institute's "Engaging Impasse: Circles of Contemplation and Dialogue®." (See www.engagingimpasse.org) The workshop presented here was conducted with a group of staffers on Capitol Hill and was incorporated into the opening plenary session of the Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2010. More information on the initial workshop is in the May/June 2009 issue of NETWORK *Connection* magazine, which can be found at this web address: <http://www.networklobby.org/files/CnnctnMayJun09%20Web.pdf>

Name: Chip Morrison

Occupation: Local Chamber of Commerce President, Maine

Nationality: American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You live in a town in Maine, a town that has not prospered since the 1970s when it was primarily a mill town. Since then jobs and people have vanished and the center of town was affectionately named “the combat zone.” In 2001 a family of Somali refugees discovered your town and began spreading the word to fellow refugees and friends. The mayor worried that the few jobs that remained would be taken by refugees and that the social service costs would be sky high. You, the Chamber of Commerce president, were also nervous about where all of these people would work, or if there was opportunity for entrepreneurial activity in an already devastated town. Instead you have watched as entrepreneurs launched restaurants and small businesses providing translation services, in-home care for the elderly and other social services which have led to an increase in per capita income and a decrease in crime. In 2007 the city was named an “All American City.” These refugees were the revitalization that the town needed, but you wonder with all the negative economic arguments if this would work in other towns or not.

Name: Gabriel Rodriguez

Occupation: Student

Nationality: Salvadoran American?

Immigration Status: Undocumented

Story: Your nationality requires a question mark for this reason: You were brought to the United States when you were only a few weeks old. You have always considered yourself to be an American. You grew up here, you played here, you learned here, your life was here, but you were born in El Salvador. Now you are a senior in high school, you’re toward the top of your class, and you realize that you are indeed not an American, at least not legally. Despite having done everything like all of your other documented classmates, you are denied the same future. You cannot attend the same schools anymore, you’ve been denied access to the next step, the one that will help you get that job you want, the one that represents your “American dream.”

Name: David Cohen

Occupation: Unemployed

Nationality: Italian American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You had some bad luck when you were a teenager and as a result you were forced to drop out of school to take care of things. At the time you were able to get a job to help your family, but your employer closed and ever since then you haven't been able to find a job. Not having a high school degree, your options are limited and you really need the money to care for your family. You apply at a plethora of places, but everywhere you go you see undocumented, or presumably undocumented, workers. After months of looking you have not been able to find anything and you wonder if the reason you cannot find a job is because of the number of immigrants willing to take the low wage jobs that you're qualified for.

Name: Sammy Nuko

Occupation: Multiple jobs

Nationality: Togolese

Immigration Status: Asylum case, now U.S. Citizen

Story: In 1998 you were captured by the military for participating in a demonstration protesting election fraud by the government and were forced to undress and placed in a dark, filthy cell without food or water for days. During your interrogation, a soldier struck you in the face so hard that you're now blind in your right eye. Three years later, in 2001 you suffered another attack, being severely beaten, but managed to escape. As you no longer felt safe, you fled Togo for the United States, with your pregnant wife and four children moving to Ghana where they were safe from violence but exposed to malaria and poor water conditions. After two years of applications and hearings you were granted political asylum, and after working three jobs and going through more intensive paper work, the rest of your family was granted asylum in 2006. While you know that you'll never be able to get those five years apart from your family back you are glad you're safe. You know that some who apply for asylum aren't so lucky and are detained. Working three jobs was not exactly prime time, but you couldn't imagine having to leave the violence and jail time to just be placed in a different jail in a different country.

Name: Ryan Wolf

Occupation: Corrections officer

Nationality: English American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You live in a small town in Virginia and were hoping to stay there. You have an associate's degree in criminal justice and you decided it would be a service to your community to work at the local jail. At first the local jail was just persons convicted of a crime. You were proud of your job, keeping the streets safe and hoping that those in jail would learn their lesson upon their release. Now the local authorities have started to detain immigrants. It only costs them 75 dollars a day per person detained, and the federal government pays the local law enforcement nearly \$100 per day for each immigrant detained, so the local community is making money on this. You started this job because you wanted to protect your community. After working with the detained immigrants you realized that for most their only crime is crossing illegally. On one hand you are an officer of the law, and they broke the immigration laws, but on the other you wanted to keep your community safe and you realize that almost all of the detainees are not harmful to the community in any way.

Name: Marta

Occupation: Farmer

Nationality: Mexican

Immigration Status: Mexican Citizen

Story: You live in a small highland rancho called "rancho sin hombres" (a town without men) with your three small children. You have a husband but he is in the United States. You do get to see him—at Christmas, every other year. You work with the other women and children in the fields in the field, trying to sell the crops, but the market is extremely weak. You miss your husband terribly but know that with the weak market it is necessary for your husband to be in the United States, looking for work and money to send home. Even with your husband sending money home, you need more. The money coming from the United States is not enough for the oldest child to go to school. You are saddened every day that your husband is gone and you wonder if your children will even remember their father, but you know that this is the only way you can provide for your children. It's in their best interest, or is it?

Name: Laura Major

Occupation: Immigration Judge

Nationality: American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You have been an immigration judge for about twenty years now, but over the past few years, with the Bush administration's immigration crackdown, hundreds more immigrants have been arrested and prosecuted. Despite the fact that the arrests of these immigrants were funded, you recognize that funding for the increasingly burdened court system is non-existent. There is no argument, immigration judges are overwhelmed. Last year the nation's 214 immigration judges oversaw 350,000 cases. You spend 36 hours a week on the bench, just trying to keep up, and you don't even have the basic resources that other judges take for granted, like a law clerk. As an immigration judge you get 1/6 of a law clerk. When thinking about a normal week you often replay the Lucy Ricardo on the chocolate-factory line scene, except the chocolate is defendants seeking refuge from persecution. It upsets you that for some people these are the equivalent of death penalty cases and it's conducted in traffic court setting. You do your best to try to help people, but you know that being over burdened and under-resourced, you are essentially sending some to their death.

Name: Mrs. Farnum

Occupation: Single mother, Florist

Nationality: American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: Your husband, Larry Farnum, was killed in a traffic accident in January 2000. The other driver, responsible for the accident, was an undocumented worker who was using an alias and a fake driver's license. Now you are left to raise your two children by yourself. You hear both sides of the immigration argument. On the one hand you know that you're not alone, as immigrants are involved in a higher percentage of crashes than ever before, leaving other families saddened like yours. If the number of immigrants is decreased, theoretically the number of fatal crashes because of misunderstandings on the road will as well. On the other hand you suspect that if we were to deal with the immigration system then things such as driver's licenses with adequate driver's tests and information might prevent crashes like this in the future. You don't know which argument would truly protect more families from incidents like this, but you do know you want to do something to protect other families from losses like yours.

Name: Amitola

Occupation: Teacher

Nationality: Native American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: The immigration debate is one that baffles and hurts you and your community. If one does not become a citizen then one is not legal, but you ask yourself how the original immigrants, now making the decisions, became legal. If a wall had been put up during the time of Christopher Columbus, would anyone have been able to enter? Would generations of those who make up the United States of America be here? Due to the history, you see this debate as somewhat hypocritical. You are also upset that you and your community are once again being forgotten and disrespected. You live on the border and have little land left of your vast nation. Now this land is being interrupted, without consultation, in order to build a wall to keep immigrants, some of whom come from the same ancestors, out. It was your land, and a little bit of it still is, and yet even that is being taken away for a cause you don't believe in.

Name: Kaylan Sites

Occupation: Wife

Nationality: Irish

Immigration Status: Undocumented – now U.S. Citizen

Story: You came to the United States at the urging of your U.S. citizen husband Andrew. You didn't need a visa so this wasn't hard. Andrew promised to file a lawful permanent resident application of your behalf. Once you arrived, Andrew regularly beat you, routinely threatening to kill you and keep you in isolation. You avoid seeking help because you fear reprisal by your husband and deportation. Finally Andrew breaks your jaw and three ribs, sending you to the emergency room where medical staff referred you to law enforcement and a local Catholic Charities immigration program. There you were presented with legal, social service and immigration options. You entered a shelter with your two children, pressed charges and had Andrew sent to prison. Additionally you applied to be a lawful permanent resident without Andrew's assistance and your application was approved. While you are happy that your situation has improved, you worry that there are many other women and children scared to get out of abusive situations. You would not have been aware of this program had you not been in the emergency room. Other women might not be as lucky, if you could call it that.

Name: Jon Kolnoski

Occupation: Police Officer

Nationality: Italian American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You live in a small town in Arizona, one that like many towns in Arizona has its fair share of undocumented persons. Your local police department was given an order to start enforcing federal immigration policy and bringing in undocumented workers. A few weeks after this mandate your department gets a call reporting a burglary. You and your co-workers show up at the burglarized house and, instead of asking for details of the robbery, ask for documentation. It's your orders after all. Several individuals were undocumented and brought in for detention and deportation. As it is a small town, people found out what happened and when the next burglary occurred it was not reported. Suddenly you hear that there have been even more burglaries, in documented and undocumented homes. You find out that nothing has been reported. Now in your own neighborhood some homes have been burglarized and eventually your house gets hit. As word gets around, it becomes known that nearly every home in the town was burglarized. You feel somewhat responsible; the fear that you caused in that first arrest caused no one to call for help. Your job is to keep the town safe and instead you made them vulnerable. But what could you do? It was your orders.

Name: Christopher Bartlett

Occupation: Accountant

Nationality: German American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You were born and raised in a border town in Texas and have great pride in your country. It upsets you to see so many people passing through illegally, after all your grandparents went through Ellis Island and filled out their papers. The town that you grew up in has changed dramatically over the years. It has grown at a tremendously quick rate. The schools have had to expand and a lot of the resources at your daughter's school are now going to the English as a Learned Language program. You are frustrated that you're paying taxes to school the children of people who entered illegally. It doesn't seem fair that you've followed the rules and are paying for them not to. You called Congress for years, wrote letters and went to rallies, but you have seen very little response. The problem is still huge and getting bigger. Not knowing what else to do, you found out about the Minutemen. You have decided that since Congress will do nothing, you will help protect the border. You won't kill or shoot anyone; in fact you've sworn against violence. You will just be there, a presence at the border, to let others know that America is watching and an illegal path will not be allowed. It's your patriotic duty to protect your country, the resources Americans have paid for, and the towns all across the country being stretched. Since Congress won't act, you will.

Name: Ramon Lopez

Occupation: Day laborer

Nationality: Mexican

Immigration Status: Undocumented

Story: You live in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Six days a week you wake up at 2:00 am to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to El Paso. Once there, a farm labor contractor recruits you for work so you, with other laborers, cram into an unsafe bus without seats. The bus departs El Paso for a two hour journey to the chili fields of Dell City, Texas, arriving at 5:00 am. When you arrive you assemble in the cold and wait for an hour for the trucks carrying chili collection buckets. You receive a bucket, about 3.5 feet high, and being working diligently, hunched over and picking chilies. You will receive fifty cents per bucket, but when you bring your bucket to the truck to empty it; your supervisor steps down on the chilies and sends you back to the field to fill the bucket even more. You work all day, making less than \$5.15 an hour. There are no restrooms or portable toilets and breaks are few. At 4:00 pm you start the long journey home just to go to bed and get up to do the same thing the next day. Sometimes it is hard to convince yourself that this terrible work is worth it, but as you leave each day you see the town and think to yourself, “Are there any alternatives?”

Name: Sister Edwina

Occupation: Catholic leader

Nationality: Polish American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These are listed as rights in the Constitution, and you’re convinced that every human is also endowed by their Creator with those equal rights. You see that while our Constitution gives us (U.S. citizens) those rights, our immigration policies do not give them to others. Our trade policies force people into economic despair but our immigration policies bar them from entering our nation to pursue the happiness and economic dignity we have eliminated from their nations. This is not what God wants, and while you understand laws, you also understand that the laws of unjust system will be broken, and should be. The unjust system has also caused ramifications for your congregation – your food bank demands have increased as undocumented persons do not have access to assistance like U.S. citizens and the waiting list for your English classes are over a year long. You don’t hesitate to continue purchasing books and food and working with volunteers because you know that until Congress acts it’s up to you to give others their human rights. You just hope that Congress will recognize this before too many rights are violated.

Name: Todd Wolf

Occupation: Financial Broker

Nationality: Italian American

Immigration Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You have a great pride in your country. You love your town, your job, and your country, or at least you did before it was invaded. You work in New York and have seen an influx in people not speaking the language. Your town became a haven for people not speaking English, the language of your nation. You are often confused by what people are saying. Several times now you have sat down at restaurants only to have trouble being served because of language barriers. This is America, English is the language. It frustrates you that in your own country you have trouble ordering food. Now the problem has expanded; it's in your home town too. Your town's school just inherited the English as a Second Language Program. Students from other schools are being brought to your children's school. Surely the school's scores will go down and what will that do to funding? Your tax dollars are paying for something that will bring down funding and increase crowding in a school that's already overcrowded. America already has enough problems to fix, and it doesn't have the resources for more people. The immigration system already allows in is more than enough, the rest should wait in line, and if not they should be arrested and deported. Congress had it right the first time and if the law isn't enforced it's quite a precedent to set.

Name: Catherine Colby

Occupation: Immigration specialist

Nationality: American

Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You work in the HR division of a large tech firm in California's Silicon Valley. Almost 10% of your company's staff work on temporary visas; hundreds more are foreign-born and have permanent residency status. As a member of the company's "global mobility team," you provide valuable support and assistance to current and prospective employees seeking to stay in or come to the United States. There are recently hired Chinese engineers who will be starting in August and Indian engineers who already work for the company in the US and want to apply for green cards. You console workers whose visa applications are denied, and arrange for them to continue working for the company elsewhere. You also coordinate the logistics for employees who actually occasionally commute to your headquarters from Canada because they are unable to live together with their families in the US. The legal fees, lobbying, and administration costs associated with this process cost your company \$20 million a year.

Name: Jose Julupe

Occupation: Union organizer working with employees of a local meat-processing plant

Nationality: Peruvian

Status: Legal permanent resident

Story: Your impact can be limited, because the company notifies Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) regarding the illegal status of its employees in retaliation for their attempts to organize. Such communication violates labor laws, which protect all workers legal or not, but are hopelessly unenforced. One night, you helplessly watch as ICE officials raid the trailer park where the workers live. You do your best from a distance to quickly inform the individuals of their rights and reassure them, but it is of no use. They are arrested and taken away, guilty for coming to this country in order to work and provide cheap pork and ham for American citizens.

Name: Nick Kryzalviek

Occupation: Award-winning and respected biologist and environmental planner

Nationality: Russian American

Status: U.S. Citizen

Story: You are concerned about the ecological impacts of population growth. As a former Peace Corps volunteer you witnessed overpopulation in the city where you served. You worry that a similar situation is developing in our country, since foreign and immigrant families are growing more rapidly than the families of U.S. citizens. Americans consume greater quantities of natural resources than citizens of developing countries, so a legalization program that creates more Americans will only lead to more urban sprawl, greenhouse gas emissions, and dependence on foreign oil.

Name: Liz Solomon

Occupation: Legislative staffer for a Christian Senator from a “purple” state

Nationality: Kenyan American

Staus: U.S. Citizen

Story: Raised Catholic, you are sympathetic to the advocates and lobbyists that visit your office from faith-based advocacy groups and coalitions. On the other hand, your office regularly receives hundreds of calls from constituents instructing you to “oppose amnesty” and “protect our jobs” whenever a prominent group that favors lower immigration levels issues an action alert. Polls show Americans support components of immigration reform such as pathway to citizenship, but you wonder whether the vocal minority could have a disproportionate influence in the campaign. The Senator supported comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) in 2007 and is up for re-election this fall. Can you count on the growing immigrant population and its CIR allies to turn out the vote in your state? Is co-sponsoring and leading a comprehensive package of legislation worth the risk?

Name: Rob Rorhman

Occupation: USBP (US Border Patrol) agent

Nationality: American

Staus: U.S. Citizen

Story: You are responsible for 125 miles of border between the United States and Mexico. You patrol the desert, border fence, and various sewage tunnels day and night, on the look out for potential drug and human smugglers, terrorists, and illegal immigrants. It is dangerous work that puts you at risk for dehydration and dangerous run-ins with armed criminals. You knew an agent who lost his life on the job, and you think of your children constantly as you go about your shift. By detaining these individuals in remote areas and underground spaces you prevent them from reaching neighborhoods and communities where they can put others at risk.