

Immigration 101: A Lesson in Compassion and Mercy Values

As the nation and Congress prepare for another round of debates about comprehensive immigration reform, I have been reflecting lately on the intersection between how we embrace immigrants in the United States and the Catholic values that I learned at Mercy High School, Baltimore.

Leviticus 19:33-34 says “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be the same to you as the citizen among you.”

So what does this mean for me and why should I care?

To be honest with you, I am not sure how much I cared before 2004. Having just graduated with a master’s degree in sociology: international training and education, I cared; but I cared more about finding a job and doing something that I was passionate about. I began working as an international student advisor at the University of Baltimore under the direction of Katie Kauffman Class of ‘91. Most of my job duties involved immigration advising to foreign students and, suddenly, I was exposed to the world of immigration, from the complex legal regulations to interacting with immigrant students on a daily basis.

Whether I did it because I was hungry for knowledge or because I wanted to get away from my computer, I began to attend conferences and workshops around the state that were designed to help those of us “do-gooders” understand the populations we worked with each day.

I heard stories of immigrants who hadn’t been to their home countries or seen their parents and loved ones in five, eight or 10 years. I learned about Cesar’s family, who slept on the floor in a friend’s apartment for six months when they first came to the US. I learned that Jamila’s family entered the U.S. legally and wanted to apply for permanent residency but waited seven years simply for a court date (without permission to work) because of the backlog in our immigration courts. I learned that

Lucy, the quiet student in my adult English as a Second Language class, was a lawyer back in Poland but because she didn't know English well, was employed under the table as a cook in a restaurant.

I became passionate about the situation of immigrants in the United States and that passion led me into a career working to improve the lives of immigrants and refugees in this country. As assistant director for community integration at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, my job is to manage programs that are created to integrate immigrants and refugees into their new communities.

How does this relate to my Mercy values? I believe that when I take the time to learn and understand the stories of the immigrants and refugees that I work with, I am practicing compassion. When I advocate for the rights of ALL people to live in this country (just like the many thousands of European immigrants who came before), I am practicing service to others. When I discuss how Latino immigration affects the black community and I acknowledge that just like my ancestors were shown compassion, I need to do the same, I am understanding personal responsibility.

I encourage others to take the time to learn more about immigration, not by watching TV but instead by talking to immigrants themselves. Get involved, volunteer, ask questions, be compassionate, and most of all put a human face to the debate. I often wonder why I feel so compelled to do this work and then I think back to the bumper sticker that was on the back of the car of Sister Mary Anne Smith, R.S.M. This bumper sticker sums up the Mercy values that drive me and, today, it sits above the computer in my office - "Si quieres paz, lucha por la justicia." "If you want peace, work for justice."

And that's exactly what I have chosen to do.

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This article is also being published in the Mercy High School Alumnae newsletter.