

BORDER NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

“We can do better than criminalize immigrants. We can’t treat others in a way that undermines their humanity.” This is the vision of Fernando Garcia, founding executive director of the El Paso-based group Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR), which receives funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). With fifteen years of experience serving the needs of immigrants, BNHR has much to offer the public debate as the United States turns serious attention to comprehensive immigration reform.

BNHR defends human rights and secures economic and social justice for marginalized people who live in border communities. The organization helps families and individuals understand their constitutional and human rights. It also dialogues with enforcement agencies to ensure that immigrants and migrants are treated humanely and that border enforcers operate with accountability and oversight.

Fernando says BNHR could be a model for national immigration reform. “We have experience on the ground with border communities, building coalitions with law enforcement, academia, and civic organizations. We have the opportunity to warn others that the national trend toward criminalizing immigrants is short-sighted,” he says. “We cannot just have legislation at any cost—we have to look at the human consequences.”

Since 1998, BNHR has recruited community members to learn about the U.S. Constitution and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. “People were living in profound fear of taking their kids to school or going to the store to buy groceries,” he says. Fernando explains that this is because vigorous immigration law enforcement created abuses



Photo courtesy of Border Network for Human Rights, 2013

and misunderstandings. He says BNHR is successful because it grew from informing people about their rights to helping them organize and work together for solutions. “It’s neighbors talking to neighbors, building trust in churches and living rooms. It’s an organization that belongs to, and is led by, impacted communities,” he says.

More than 800 families, including 4,000 individuals, belong to BNHR. Most are Hispanics living in West Texas. The group’s small human rights committees meet weekly with trained organizers. At its annual assembly, BNHR members choose several priorities from an ongoing list of “Points of Struggle.” This year, the three-pronged focus is on comprehensive immigration reform, protection of civil and constitutional rights, and health care.

“America was built on the shoulders of immigrants, forced and otherwise,” Fernando says. He affirms that new immigrants still seek freedom, liberty, and happiness. He explains that BNHR works for the reform of punitive border enforcement

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Comprehensive immigration reform is receiving overdue attention at the state and national levels. The Catholic Church has long been a leader in immigration advocacy and a persistent voice of conscience in a country built by and for immigrants. Our bishops have taught consistently that the United States is a place for both justice and law, compassion and common sense. Catholic social teaching recognizes the dual duty to welcome the foreigner with charity and respect, and to enforce laws for the sake of the common good. The U. S. Catholic bishops embody this teaching by committing significant resources to Migration and Refugee Services, the largest non-governmental resettlement agency in the world.



In this issue, we profile Border Network for Human Rights in El Paso, a visionary organization that receives CCHD funding to promote justice for people living along the Texas-Mexico border. The organization's work reflects the concern of the Catholic Church for the dignity of all people, especially the poor and marginalized.

BNHR brings together small groups of immigrants to learn about their human and civil rights and discuss how to secure them. By networking tirelessly with other groups, and engaging law enforcement, academia, civic, and church organizations in dialogue, BNHR has become a calm and persistent example of how comprehensive immigration reform might be structured at the national level.

Msgr. Arturo Banuelos, pastor of two parishes in the Diocese of El Paso, says that life along the border looks and sounds different from the popular image seen elsewhere in the country. "Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, are two lungs of the same body. We're very linked and immigration is a no-brainer for us," he explains. Msgr. Banuelos says BNHR puts a human face on the immigration discussion, with the dramatic, true stories of families split up by aggressive enforcement practices.

The work of BNHR mirrors the Church's responsibility to be in solidarity with those struggling to survive. "Immigration reform is part of the spiritual journey of our parishes. It gives us a better focus on the Eucharist and reminds us that all are welcome at the table," Msgr. Banuelos says.

CCHD's support of Border Network for Human Rights is another indication of our deep commitment to the many facets of Catholic social teaching. If we truly believe in the dignity and value of all people, we have a mandate to respect and protect them wherever the encounter with injustice occurs.

Thank you, as always, for your interest and enthusiasm.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ralph McCloud'.

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Photo courtesy of Border Network for Human Rights, 2013

techniques that contribute to the death of 500 migrants each year. “We propose an enforcement vision infused with American values and rights,” he says.

Fernando says BNHR’s work in El Paso is a model of successful engagement between the community and law enforcement. He notes that it moved beyond finger-pointing and denunciations to a dramatic and difficult conversation about abuse and civil and human rights conducted in joint community forums. He says people on both sides listened and learned about the authority of the border patrol and the rights of the people along the border. Fernando believes the improved relationships enhanced public safety and reduced the incidence of abuse—a goal shared by all the participants.

Fernando states that BNHR’s focus on a combination of dialogue and pressure has attracted national notice. He is also confident that the grassroots appeal of family unity, economic development, accountability, and oversight will be reflected in comprehensive immigration reform discussed in the U.S. Congress. Already, BNHR advocacy has helped shape Texas legislation regarding immigrants.

BNHR’s sustainability stems from its investment in those served. “In order to be successful, you have to have long-term participation and education, not just a focus on rapid results,” Fernando says. He also notes that CCHD funding is vital to the BNHR, because it allows the group to reach the most marginalized and help them become leaders who determine their own future. “BNHR stands out because it invests in human development and empowers people to participate and have a voice in their own community,” says CCHD Grants Specialist Kate

Dorsett. She says of BNHR, “They support the Catholic bishops’ call for comprehensive immigration reform, while sharing their lived experience of what it would actually look like.”

Msgr. Arturo Banuelos is the pastor of St. Pius X Catholic Church in El Paso, which is a member of BNHR. He confirms the organization’s impact. He says, “BNHR is the leading immigration organization in El Paso. It has established itself as a serious, credible presence, networking with various segments of the community to build a broad base of support for immigration reform.” Part of the organization’s strength, he says, is that “they have hundreds and hundreds of people involved in small community reflection groups led by trained people who are well-versed in the issues. They are not a fringe radical group.”

Msgr. Banuelos continues, “Here at the border, we see issues differently. Immigration is an everyday reality for us. Immigrants are not the problem. They are part of the solution. We’re not talking about a group of terrorists; we’re talking about hard-working people who come here to contribute to the economy.”

“The role of the Church is to be in solidarity with those struggling to survive,” Msgr. Banuelos adds. “No one has done as much for immigration reform in Texas as BNHR.” He noted that BNHR works closely with his parish, which is deeply involved in immigration reform and social justice issues. ☪

VISIT THIS WEBSITE TO SEE THE U.S. BISHOPS’ POSITION ON COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/churchteachingonimmigrationreform.cfm>



Photo courtesy of Border Network for Human Rights, 2013

PROFILE: IRMA CRUZ

BY BETH GRIFFIN

In 2002, Irma Cruz emigrated from Chihuahua, Mexico, seeking a better life for her family. Her American-born daughter needed medical care that was available to her in El Paso. Irma worked as a housecleaner and took care of children and the aged. But she was still afraid. "I had a border-crosser visa, but no legal status, and I was afraid of being stopped and deported," she says.

Irma learned about Border Network for Human Rights at a presentation in her apartment building. "It really caught my attention. I didn't know I had rights. I was skeptical, but I became more involved and started to learn about the Constitution and how it works."

As Irma's interest grew, she joined a BNHR human rights committee and became a promoter, organizer, and educator. "Taking the information I knew to other people," she describes, "I felt more confident about myself. I'm not breaking laws. I'm not doing something criminal. I know the Constitution applies to everyone who lives here and those rights are also for me," Irma says.

"Learning about the U.S. and how the government is set up and trying to get more involved in my community, I know I can make a difference by teaching others about our rights. It helps us to be integrated into the U.S.," she says. Irma became a BNHR regional coordinator in 2006. Simply put, she says, "It changed my life. I didn't feel afraid

anymore . . . BNHR is a valuable organization for the community. We're trying to accomplish a better life for everybody, even beyond immigration reform. We're working for dignity and rights for everyone, including access to health care and education."

She thinks it is important to involve people in decision-making and allow their voices to be heard. In the national discussion on immigration reform, Irma says, "People talk about securing the border, but nobody asks how people who live near the border feel about border security. We don't believe the border is insecure. El Paso is a very secure city and we believe our voices need to be included in the discussion."

BNHR encourages members to become citizens and exercise their right to vote. Irma says a first-ever citizenship fair last year was a "super success" and voter registration drives enjoy modest, but increasing participation.

Irma says the example of BNHR's growth from the activism of one man, Fernando Garcia, to a broad-based movement speaks to the values of hard work and commitment. "Fernando had a vision that he could change the society and the abuses that were happening in our community. It's proof that if you get involved, you are going to make a difference," Irma concludes. "We started with one person and now we are working nationally." 

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led,

community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



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