NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Undocumented Immigrants: A Teacher Remembers a Raid

By Darrel Hoagland

It was so cold on that day in March 2007, even native New Englanders were complaining about the freezing temperatures. In our classroom, near the end of the school day, the principal addressed the students on the public address system saying, "Students, if you go home and your parents are not there, and you can't get in, come back to school." That was all he said, and, even though I thought his comment odd, I assumed it was precipitated by the frigid New England temperatures and let his comment slip out of mind. School ended and I went home.

Later that day while driving down Rodney French Boulevard, traffic was exceptionally slow and two or three white school buses passed me going in the opposite direction. They weren't the usual yellow buses, and the windows were darkened. As my car crept to the intersection, I heard the loud rumblings of one or two low flying helicopters. I looked around and saw crowds of people. Frightened men, women, and children were in the frigid New England cold looking and pointing to the factory. I saw others trying to put coats and blankets around people who seemed to have rushed out of their homes with no outerwear. I kept driving, snarled in slowly moving traffic as people were darting and running about, most of them sobbing.

More of the white buses I saw earlier were parked in front of the factory and cordoned off by the plastic yellow bands that police use to block off the scene of a crime. People were prohibited from crossing the yellow bands by big men wearing bulletproof vests and jeans. Some were shouting and restraining children who cried and pleaded as they attempted to reach the people, mostly young women, being led from the factory. I realized a raid for undocumented immigrants was in progress and detainees were being driven away from the factory in the white buses.

My car crept further along Rodney French Boulevard and I heard voices from bullhorns, people promising to reunite families as soon as possible. Aid organizations, churches, and social service workers were distributing warm cups of coffee, cocoa, and food as they assisted family members and friends of the frightened detainees being paraded from the building. There was so much going on as busloads of people were being driven away. Media people were everywhere reporting on the activities and the desperation frozen in the air. New Bedford police officers directed traffic to cut down on some of the confusion, panic and hysteria. As the car crept past the factory, I felt helpless, hopeless, and very upset. I felt for the traumatized fellow humans who were being ripped from the fabric of their families, forcibly separated from their babies and their loved ones. I felt sick, my stomach knotted by sympathetic anguish.

For weeks after the raid there was a barrage of media coverage; politicians gave interviews. *The New Bedford Standard-Times* newspaper wrote that Senator John Kerry visited the city and called the treatment of detainees an abuse of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's discretion. Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank and Senator Ted Kennedy made public comments against demonizing immigrants and lamenting the negative consequences of the raid. Of course immigration officials fired back saying they acted appropriately. All kinds of stories were circulating. We heard about a woman or two who broke their bones when they jumped from factory windows trying to avoid detention. These formerly Southeastern Massachusetts-based mothers were now separated from their children in places as far away as Texas. Attorneys, many from Boston, provided great help. Churches, community workers, and many different organizations helped anyone and everyone affected by the raid.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel/Shelter at New Bedford's St. James Catholic Church was a monumental force for those traumatized by the raid. Many immigrants worship there, and the church was a mobilizing force for them, especially after the raid. The church collected and distributed supplies, monies, information, and other emergency services needed by families in crisis. A friend and I drove to the church to donate money and supplies. The parking lot was full of cars and people. The church basement was gigantic, and tables were loaded with food, pampers, toiletries, everything. Many immigrants stood, talking, collecting supplies, and waiting. Many school-aged children were there, and some had not seen or heard from parents who were being detained. The youngsters were being cared for by friends and relatives. A community activist said The Massachusetts Department of Social Services had been asked to take and place 125 children; they refused and worked to keep the children with family members and friends of the detained undocumented immigrants. As my friend and I walked in and out with our donations, we realized the immigrant community gathered at the church for their necessities and to cope and ease their fears, troubled minds and souls.

The raid on the Michael Bianco Inc. factory netted 361 undocumented workers, mainly women. The newspaper said they were sewing backpacks and vests for the United States military while their children were at home with babysitters or in school.

There are many immigrant chil-

dren at our school, and over the years many were in my classes. According to The New Bedford Sunday Standard-Times, "there are approximately 6,000 to 8,000 Central American immigrants living in New Bedford, making up about 8% of the city's population" (Evans, Spillane, 2008, p. A1) . As cited in the paper "most have come from Guatemala, El Salvador or Honduras, with as much as 70% living in the city illegally" (p. A1). It is reported that in Xicalcal, Guatemala, most residents can name a relative now living in New Bedford, and wages sent there are helping families to build modern housing. In the New Bedford School System, 26.2 percent of the student population is listed as Hispanic "and a high majority of those students, recent immigrants or not, speak Spanish as their first language, and their parents and siblings speak it at home" (Urbon, 2008, p. A6). Spanish (in several dialects) is only one of the foreign languages spoken at home by the students in my classroom.

New Bedford is a seaport town with a rich maritime history. Regarding catch profits for its scallop fishery and other fishing, the city has been "America's Number One Fishing Port" for the past several years. And at the height of the whaling industry, "The City That Lit The World" with whale oil had one of the highest per capita incomes among all the cities of the world. The first chapters of Moby Dick, a classic American novel by Herman Melville, are set in old New Bedford.

New Bedford has a legacy of welcoming people. Many immigrants and marginalized peoples come to work even in very substandard conditions. During the practice of chattel slavery, the slavery of Black Africans and people of African descent from 1654-1865 in the United States, many enslaved people escaped to New Bedford. They could live here, despite status as an illegal run-away, and work to get equitable pay. For example, they could ship out on whaling vessels and get equal pay as crew members. And the community often protected them from slave catchers who traveled to New Bedford to recapture and return them to slavery. Frederick Douglass, the most famous person who ever lived in New Bedford, was an escaped slave who settled in the city and worked for several years in the late 1830's and very early 1840's. People of all kinds still come to New Bedford seeking to advance themselves and to send their children to school.

Schools work to accommodate all children, and in 2002 a Massachusetts ballot eliminated "bilingual education" in favor of "full immersion". Full immersion is when "students are no longer taught academic subjects in their native language, only in English with course material simplified to account for their early grasp of English" (Urbon, 2008, p. A6). They are immersed in regular education classes. In compliance with this new ruling, my classroom is representative of New Bedford and its very diverse population. Portuguese, Brazilian, Cape Verdean,[1] Puerto Rican and other Latino immigrant children, as well as White, Black and other so-called children "of color" sit side by side in my regular education classroom and "the understanding that it is best to educate everyone ...has firmly established itself" (pp. A6, A9). State mandates for "full immersion" classrooms have resulted in a rich diversity of students, and interspersed among them are the children of undocumented immigrants.

The school staff is very diverse because of efforts to represent the city's population. Even though staff, by and large, support the state mandated "full immersion" and everyone wants students to be successful, there are varying opinions about the undocumented immigrants who settle in New Bedford. Some believe current immigration laws are intentionally class based. And like the race based laws which legalized chattel slavery, made it illegal for African Americans to learn to read and write, and to compete in business with Whites, these laws perpetuate oppression and forced labor. Other staff members believe Americans cannot afford to share limited resources, the high numbers of undocumented immigrants strain the infrastructure of cities and towns, and the country's first obligation is to its present citizenry. One or two of my colleagues believe America's trade and economic policies create situations that force undocumented immigrants to come here looking for work, opportunities, and resources.

On September 3, 2008 the New Bedford Standard Times conducted a forum to discuss issues related to undocumented immigrants. Of course, one topic of the forum was the raid. More than one year and a half has passed since the raid. Some families are still not reunited. When I think about our students who are the children of undocumented immigrants I think about their overwhelming secret fears and unseen pressures. I continue to adapt, to redefine, to modify and to reconstruct my role as their teacher in response to their manifest needs and my own professional standards

Every teaching career has an unforgettable moment or two. I will always remember standing in my classroom looking at the children when the principal said, "Students, if you go home and your parents are not there and you can't get in, come back to school."

I could never have dreamed his prescient advice foreshadowed coming catastrophic events that would dramatically impact so many lives.

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ENDNOTES

1 People/culture from the archipelago nation off the coast of West Africa with a Criolou language derived from a mixture of Portuguese and West African languages.

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