

Interfaith, Immigrant, Justice: Blanca Pacheco and The New Sanctuary Model

Michael Matza 13 September 2017

Ask Blanca Pacheco where to meet and she suggests a bread-and-roses-style cafe where the menu features the "Anti-War," the "Anti-Racism," and the "Pro-Redistribution" sandwiches. As assistant director of New Sanctuary Movement (NSM) of Philadelphia, a decade-old, interfaith support group for undocumented immigrants, Pacheco, 35, not only talks the talk of social justice but walks the walk, and makes a meal of it.

A native of Ecuador, she is the youngest of 12 children. Her mother wove Panama hats and her father was a subsistence farmer. She completed sixth grade, worked in clothing mills, married, and had a son, all by the time she was 16.

Seeking job opportunities unavailable in Ecuador, her husband set out undocumented for the United States in 1999. Six months later she left their toddler with her in-laws and made the risky trek too. She turned 18 the day after she slipped into the United States without papers in 2000. Her plan, she said, was to stay for three years,

"make money, and come back to my family."

But after working a series of menial jobs, it took her more than five years to pay the \$14,000 of debt to the coyote who led her from Ecuador into Texas. By then her second son was born and not long after she and her husband separated.

In 2008 she joined NSM as a volunteer. In 2016 she was appointed assistant director.

Funded by private donors and a few foundations, NSM has an annual budget of \$220,000. Comprised of 24 religious congregations and assorted allies, it provides social support services for immigrants facing deportation. The organization provides someone to accompany its clients to immigration court and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement for probation check ins. In addition, an NSM hotline authenticates reports of ICE raids.

Its rapid-response program, Sanctuary in the Streets, conducts know-your-rights trainings and sends NSM members to hold a vigil wherever an immigrant faces imminent arrest. "Since a family cannot seek sanctuary in a congregation if their house is raided," the group says, "we will bring the congregation to them by holding an interfaith service to prayerfully" and non-violently "disrupt the raid."

While Pacheco fled poverty, not the violence endemic to Central America, there are parallels with many of the

people NSM serves. "Our stories are very similar. We left our families behind. There is nothing you can say to someone who lost a loved one back home and can't even go to the funeral. I went through that [four years ago, when her father died]. You just support them however they need support. Talk to them. Build community around them."

The strict enforcement policies promoted by President Trump "pulled back the curtain" on the plight of undocumented immigrants, said Pacheco. "One good thing is that people, seeing the reality," are organizing. "We can't just be fighting against things. We need to be fighting for something." At NSM that includes a campaign to approve licenses for all eligible drivers, regardless of their immigration status.

"In this crazy moment, we need to dream what we want the city to look like, and build the steps needed to get there. It could be slow. Maybe I don't get to see it [in my lifetime]. But we need to be planting those seeds...I grew up on a farm. To be able to harvest you need to plant seeds."

Author Bio



Michael Matza covered immigration, national, international, and local news for the Philadelphia Inquirer for more than three decades.