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Community Lawyering and the Immigration Project: An Ethnographic Study of Charlotte

Alvarez

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ANTH 380

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Introduction

Charlotte Alvarez, executive director of the Immigration Project, spends a majority of her time dealing with the consequences of immigration reform on her clients and community. She lives in Bloomington-Normal and splits her time working in the Normal, Champaign, and other satellite offices throughout the state. In addition to

immigration, Alvarez is concerned with raising her child bilingually and biculturally. She wants her daughter to grow up being able to communicate with her paternal grandparents and to feel comfortable with both sides of her heritage (*Figure 1*).

Her organization, the Immigration Project works in central and southern Illinois to provide legal services to the



Figure 1: One of Alvarez's current challenges revolves around parenting her young child and in this image she is bringing together American and Mexican ancestry. She wants to be a role model for her child like other strong women were for her. Alvarez's grandmother was a doctor during the 1950s, when women MDs were uncommon. Alvarez admired her grandmother's perseverance and it inspired her to work towards her own career. Image by author.

immigrant population, including assisting immigrant victims of violence and those navigating the immigration system. The organization services a number of rural communities with direct, or face to face, services. The Immigration Project originated from the Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Ministries, which opened an Immigration Project in southern Illinois in the 1980s (The Immigration Project, 2019). After the Immigration Project closed in 1994, two former staff members, Suzanne Brown and Daniel Juarez, reopened their own Immigration Project in Metro East St. Louis that served much of Illinois (The Immigration Project, 2019). At first, the Immigration Project worked mostly by mail and phone, until in 2004 they started to offer clinics on immigration law to individual communities (The Immigration Project, 2019). Now the Immigration Project is based in Normal, Illinois, with a satellite office in Champaign, Illinois. They combine direct services with other work in the community, often partnering with other community organizations to educate about immigration and to work towards

an immigration system that works. Their executive director, Charlotte Alvarez continues this by employing community lawyering in her work, creating networks, and by situating the Immigration Project as a middle ground organization.

Her passion for immigrant rights began when her now husband 'came



Figure 2: Charlotte speaking at an event discussing immigration in Bloomington. She is framed by the outline of a box that her husband made for her in high school. She feels that her relationship with her husband, who is formerly undocumented, is what led her to immigration law. In her work, she handles many roles, from managing the Immigration Project, to providing direct services, to educating and helping colleagues. She lifts up the voices marginalized immigrants in and around Bloomington-Normal. Image by author.

out' to her as undocumented and she realized how much immigration impacts him (Figure 2). Navigating the immigration system in order to gain his citizenship also taught her how flawed the system is. During her time at

Harvard Law School, she was a part of the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau (HLAB), a student run organization that caters to the needs of low-income people in the community. HLAB focuses on a number of case types, including family law, wage law, housing law, and Special Immigrant Juvenile Status cases (Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, 2019). Another part of HLAB requires working with other community organizations and maintaining strong ties to the Boston community (Harvard Legal Aid Bureau, 2019). HLAB gave Alvarez the chance to practice skills in direct services and to learn what she wants out of her career. She also spent time as a Legal Services Director at the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama, where she was



Figure 3: While some communication happened over email, Alvarez and I met to talk about the different parts of the project, including a poster, essay, and film. Her insight allows the project to be a collaboration and a more accurate representation of Charlotte Alvarez. Image a reconstruction by author.

frustrated about failing to make significant change in the community. At the Immigration Project she can fulfill her goals for a non governmental organization while serving her community directly.

Creating the Project

Charlotte Alvarez and I used visual ethnographic methods to create metaphors for important pieces of her life. Before we started creating metaphors, we went over the parameters of the project and got to know one another in a less formal manner. During this meeting, I talked to her about my interests and my past research (*Figure 3*). I also shared with her my autoethnography, in which I describe my life in terms of influences, what experiences make me unique, and what experiences I share with other college students. In the essay, I also created visual metaphors for myself, showing Alvarez the process of forming images to represent her. I also gave her examples of past projects through the digital commons that feature other community leaders, some of whom she

knows. Then I asked Alvarez to meet with me and bring photographs and objects that have significant meaning for her. We talked about what these images and objects represent for her, whether it be inspirations or challenges she has faced. I also used this conversation to understand more about her impact on the community and start to find ways to represent her visually. Later, we conducted an interview on October 19th, 2019 in which I asked a variety of questions about her life and career. For example, I asked about how she came to be where she is in life and how her work with the Immigration Project interacts with the rest of her life. After the interview, I summarized the two or three main points I got from the interview to confirm with her the direction she wanted the project to take. We then started to discuss how to visually represent different facets of her life through image, like her motivation for being an immigration lawyer.

Preliminary Research

When first beginning the work for this project, I was unsure about how the

work of the Immigration Project would function within the community. I did not yet know what type of cases they mostly took on or what their work within the community looked like. Therefore, my early research was quite broad. I looked at how immigrants were affected in a number of spheres. In labor, immigrants are more likely to be affected by harmful working conditions, with a higher rate of serious workplace injuries, and are less likely to seek medical treatment for their injuries (Delp, Guzman, & Riley, 2019). They can also be threatened with deportation for organizing a union in support of their rights as workers (Delp, Guzman, & Riley, 2019). In terms of constitutional rights, undocumented immigrants are also treated as less than documented immigrants or native born citizens. In addition to placing undocumented immigrants into detention centers, the Department of Homeland Security began issuing electronic shackles, or grilletes, to immigrants in order to monitor them (Suárez, 2016). The use of shackles is touted as an alternative to detention centers, but violates constitutional

rights, in this case the Fourth Amendment, just the same (Suárez, 2016). The language of the Constitution refers to personhood rather than citizenship, therefore constitutional rights should apply to undocumented immigrants, but the reality is different (Suárez, 2016).

In addition, I also investigated other non government organizations that deal with immigration to determine if the Immigrant Project was similar or different. For example, the Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights (WICIR), a volunteer organization in Washtenaw County, Michigan. The organization does different work than the Immigration Project, focusing on helping community members who are raided by Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE), rather than on legal assistance (Sanders et al, 2013). Although their core functions differ, the two organizations have similarities. Both have their roots in religious organizations, though the Immigration Project has left those roots in the past. They also both incorporate community education into their work and strive to change local policy to make the lives of immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, easier (*Figure 4*). The WICIR focuses more on community organization by sponsoring events and sending out information on Listserv (Sanders et al., 2013). The Immigration Project, on the other hand, specializes its direct services to the needs of clients, it does not react to raids like the WICIR does. The WICIR provides advocacy and referrals to immigrant community members after a raid has happened, whereas the Immigration Project focuses on preventing those raids through legal, such as applying for visas. (Sanders et al., 2013).



Figure 4: Alvarez is participating in a rally for Keep Families Together, a coalition of a number of community organizations that works for immigrant justice in Bloomington-Normal. She feels that improving the lives of immigrants in her community is an important part of her work. Image by Maria Nagle and author.

Creating Networks

The Immigration Project, and Charlotte Alvarez by extension, need other community organizations to survive. They also encourage smaller organizations to insure that services reach more people who need them. First, the Immigration Project uses a referral system that connects those in need with the right kind of services. For example, the Immigration Project might refer a client to Prairie State Legal Services, if they have a legal problem that the Immigration Project cannot help with. Second, the Immigration Project works with activist groups pursuing projects that are important to the immigrant community. According to Alvarez, there are two main networks, the group within Bloomington-Normal and another in Champaign. In Bloomington-Normal, they recently joined a coalition of many non profit organizations to create change in the community (*Figure 5*). The coalition was striving to pass Welcoming City Ordinances in both Bloomington and Normal. The Welcoming City Ordinance would



Figure 5: Part of Alvarez's work in the Immigration Project includes thinking carefully about the needs of her clients in the community. To reflect these needs, she incorporates education and activism into the Immigration Project, working with other community organizations to incite change in the community. Recently, she worked with Black Lives Matter, the YWCA, and others in Keeping Families Together, which strove to pass a Welcoming City ordinance in Bloomington. Image by author.

require police officers to never release information about status to or cooperate with ICE. This measure would make immigrants in the community feel more comfortable coming forward as witnesses or victims of crimes. As Alvarez says, "If you have a really clear distinction [between ICE and police] you can build up trust with the police without the leaching fear about immigration status." The ordinance was passed in Normal, but was not passed in Bloomington.

Community Lawyering

In her work, Charlotte Alvarez incorporates the idea of community lawyering. Essentially, community lawyers tailor their practice to the needs of their local clientele as closely as possible. Alvarez summarized the goal of community lawyering saying it represents “good people doing good work for good reason.” For the Immigration Project, community lawyering can take several roles, from providing the best direct service they possibly can, to educating the larger community (*Figure 6*). Community lawyering, especially of marginalized groups, may also include a process

called participatory lobbying (Morales-Cruz, 2012). Participatory lobbying is the act of including both those in organizations and the people that the laws affect in attempting to change the laws (Morales-Cruz, 2012). It places those within marginalized communities at the forefront of the movement and allows the participating lawyers to back them up and provide resources (Morales-Cruz, 2012). Although many organizations, including the Immigration Project, are facing new challenges from increasingly complex laws and regulations, community lawyers can combat this problem by keeping updated and bringing the



Immigration Project. Her overall goal for the organization is to increase in services and to “keep doing good work” in every community that the Immigration Project serves. Image via <https://www.facebook.com/theimmigrationproject/>

marginalized community and the overall community together (Jacobs, 2015). Charlotte Alvarez speaks at events, sometimes with clients, to show the community how immigration works in their community and how immigrants are neighbors, parents, and business owners. She also insures that the politics of the Immigration Project are fitted for central and southern Illinois, which often means they do not always align with her personal politics. About the Immigration Project she says “[the Immigration Project is] a source that can be trusted from both sides to be impartially telling the facts” and that “it’s not quite a reflection of my values, but is getting to the same goal.” She sees this as a way to make a large impact on a smaller community scale.

Conclusion

The purpose of the project was to examine Charlotte Alvarez’s role in the community and to investigate her experiences and thoughts. I was also interested in the struggles that immigrants face and how we deal with immigration today. In the first goal, I was

successful. The interview with Alvarez was especially useful in illuminating how Alvarez works within the Immigration Project and how the Immigration Project works in the community. I was less successful in the second goal; I did not delve deep enough or get follow up questions answered by Alvarez to better understand immigrant rights. I also came into the project with a limited understanding of immigrant rights and the legal system. Much of my experience was driven by the news cycle and the national scale immigration issues. While this study looks at a very specific and narrow view of an immigration rights lawyer and an immigration services organization, further studies can look at those directly affected by the policies Alvarez deals with in her work. Alvarez herself seeks to uplift the everyday courage of undocumented people to fight for their own rights or to speak Spanish in public spaces.

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