

## **Sanctuary: Respecting our common humanity**

**By Bob Morse**

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As an undocumented immigrant, Ricardo Lujan recalls, “living in the shadow and telling lies in high school to cover up the reason for my not having a driver’s license.”

Now an SOU pre-law student, Lujan is an organizer for Unite Oregon, working to create sanctuary.

Lujan was joined by community activists and other immigrants at the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, exploring sanctuary. Typically, people entering the ACPC office reflect on feeling seen, heard and safe. How to sustain safety for all our neighbors during these times of increased deportations formed the crux of our discussion.

Immigrants shared their stories, and I listened, discerning how non-immigrants can be supportive without being intrusive. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, don’t feel recognized for who they are and all that they offer our community, when they are noticed only for the color of their skin or residues of foreign accents.

Ines Diez, a teacher who has held a green card for decades, has recently re-thought traveling to Cuba, reliving the uncertainty from which her parents escaped when leaving Spain during its Civil War. “It took years to heal those traumas.”

Lujan also revisited the feelings of doubt experienced at age 9, when he was new to the US and unsure that this society would accept him. “Sanctuary,” explains Lujan, “is when someone listens to understand my culture, community, and needs—and not just the hardships of being here but those of getting here. Sanctuary starts with helping those struggling within.”

Lujan lamented that not being understood caused a fellow immigrant and close friend to recently commit suicide.

Community activist Allen Hallmark spoke to how sanctuary relates to addressing unmet housing, nutrition and mental and physical health needs.

SOU Professor Alma Rosa Alvarez, co-founder of the Racial Equity Coalition, addressed the many missed opportunities in our society “to connect with people different from ourselves.”

For Alvarez the basis of sanctuary is real, not paternalistic, connections. The action of sanctuary is starting conversations and building relationships based on, “I honor you because I believe in your humanity.”

Alvarez adds, “Sanctuary is not one size fits all.”

Mori, a long-time peace activist, aware that she’s a white woman who doesn’t speak Spanish, “wants to know from immigrants what they need.” Mori’s wise counsel reflects the values of respect and inclusivity in which a culture of peace is rooted.

Alvarez concurs that the way to circumvent the “white savior complex” is to dialogue directly with people of color. It is important that white folks build relationships with organizations run by people of color who are already impacted by immigration and potential deportation, such as Unite Oregon, Unete, and NW Seasonal Workers.

Lujan noted that these organizations are currently undergoing the “uncomfortable conversations” toward becoming centralized, a process that can’t be hurried. This is a time for everyone “to wait and listen.”

Lujan describes the push-pull within the immigrant community, wanting to both stand up to and hide from territorial-based hate groups and militias. “People don’t want to go to public settings, raise their hands, and ask questions.”

Unite Oregon would rather teach immigrants’ rights in smaller, safer venues such as house parties or churches where immigrants feel comfortable enough to role play scenarios where they are potentially confronted by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents.

Sanctuary has many faces, including the extreme scenario of providing safe refuge, traditionally in churches. Alvarez hopes that sanctuary through neighbor-to-neighbor support remains sufficient in our community, reducing the likelihood of resorting to hiding people away.

Jennifer Schloming, co-coordinator of the Immigration and Sanctuary Coalition, recognizes the significance that sacred networks of extreme trust are being set up within the Hispanic community among known neighbors, family members and friends. The coalition realizes how immigrant children are especially vulnerable and remains committed to allowing Unete and Unite Oregon to articulate how the larger Southern Oregon community can be supportive of their developing “sanctuary neighbors.”

The Portland-based Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice reminds us that immigrants of color have no days off from being afraid. They urge us to develop courage while allowing our fear to be a pathway to empathy.

Lujan speaks out telling his and others’ stories so as to not “go back into the shadows.” His courage provides inspiration for all fortunate enough to hear his voice.

— *Bob Morse is an ACPC peace ambassador. The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission website is [www.ashlandcpc.org](http://www.ashlandcpc.org); like the commission on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission](https://www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission); follow [twitter.com/AshlandPeace](https://twitter.com/AshlandPeace) on Twitter. Email comments and questions to [ashlandcpc@gmail.com](mailto:ashlandcpc@gmail.com). All are welcome to join the ACPC’s Talking Circle at 11 a.m. each Tuesday and Community Meeting at 4 p.m. each Wednesday, both at the ACPC office, 33 First St., Suite 1, diagonally across Lithia Way from the Ashland Post Office.*



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