

Interview with Francisco Portillo

President of Organización Hondureña Integrada Francisco Morazán

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Volunteers of the Organización Hondureña Integrada Francisco Morazán at a stand while promoting immigration reform. Calle 8, Miami, 2013.

Photo by Margarita Rodríguez

Q. First of all, please let us know when was Organización Hondureña Integrada Francisco Morazán established and what is the purpose of the organization?

A. We were established on November 7, 1996 with the fundamental purpose to stop the deportation of Hondurans. At the time, Hondurans were being hit hard with deportations. As a result, 15 people gathered underneath a tree. There we made the decision to form the organization with the purpose to travel to Washington, D.C. and ask President Clinton to put an end to the deportations. That was the principal objective as well as to continue to work towards new legislation. That was a time in which many immigrant organizations were doing that, mainly organizations of Central Americans. We had great solidarity at that time. Many people were involved, and that big involvement led to the passage of NACARA in 1997. In 1999, we participated in a protest in front of the White House for 15 days. We, working collectively, were able to achieve the objective of stopping the deportations of Hondurans.

Q. What is the focus of the organization currently?

A. We have a structure that is focused on immigration issues, and aside from that, we have also done numerous writing campaigns for our people with courses that have taught them how to write and read a bit. We have also worked in areas of sports, culture and education. We are all focused with this structure to always help our people and help them understand that they are in a different country with different laws and culture.

Q. What are some of the initiatives or programs your organization has accomplished locally?

A. Between 2000 and 2005, we launched a program to assist young Honduran women whose poor insertion in economic activities left them with very poor options for their future. We managed to get educational assistance for them. About 200 young women benefitted from this initiative, which we coordinated with local educational institutions. We have also coordinated with Miami High, a well-known high school here in Miami, to develop programs to have young male and female students involved in activities that are positive for the communities and avoid deviant behavior. We have a group of young people who are involved in supporting us. Some were born here and some were born in Honduras and are undocumented.

We have developed initiatives to improve the literacy levels of some Honduran residents in South Florida. Classes are held weekly. In two years, we have helped 300 people that originally had some literacy gaps. These are individuals who come from very marginal areas, usually rural areas of Honduras, and they have a very low educational background. They know they need to know the basics to understand and sign applications such as TPS and other documents here and we assist them with that.

Other humanitarian programs have consisted of helping poor children and the elderly. Since December 1997, we have distributed toys and medicines.

Now we set our work agendas based on priorities. For example, on November 22, 2012, which was Thanksgiving, our organization started a campaign to collect one million signatures in support of an immigration reform. We are still working on that now. We have united with the Coalición de Organizaciones Latinas Unidas for an integral reform by collecting signatures. One of the fundamental goals currently, is to work very hard for an extension of the TPS for Hondurans and Nicaraguans, which expires on July 5, 2013, because we do not know if a reform will be approved. If a reform is not approved, then we do not want these people to be in a state of limbo where they would lose their driver's license and many other necessary resources, so our fundamental priorities right now are the immigration reform and the TPS.

Q. You mentioned Temporary Protected Status (TPS). What are your impressions on the TPS program in the case of Hondurans?

A. It is a humanitarian TPS that was approved after the disaster caused by Hurricane Mitch affecting Honduras and Nicaragua. It is going on 12 years now. Every year and a half, it is renewed with a worker's permit, which allows an individual to obtain a driver's license and legally work in the country on a temporary basis. The concern right now is that the TPS expires on July 5, 2013 for Hondurans and Nicaraguans. If an extension is not approved, then these people will be in limbo and a process of deportation may start. So we are doing campaigns to collect post cards, where you put your name and signature, to be sent to President Barack Obama asking him for an extension on the TPS for precautionary purposes if a reform is not approved.

The TPS for Salvadorans expires September 10, 2013, so we are also including them. Everyone talks that the reform can be approved, but the reform is still in diapers. It still has not taken the steps that need to be taken, because once a bill is created, it has to pass through committees, and those committees will revise and make changes and then it will pass to the House of Representatives and Senate for approval. They too will also make their revisions, so there is still a long road ahead of us.

Q. From what you have seen in the past, how long would the process of approval for extending the TPS take?

A. Generally, it is given a year and a half, and it has to be approved 60 days before it expires. If the TPS expires on July 5, then it has to be approved before May 5, which is 60 days before the expiration according to the law. At the latest, by May 5, there has to be something approved before we can inform people to begin filling out their applications that cost \$380 for the permit and \$85 for the biometrics. If it is approved before May 5, then it gives them a year and a half to work without any concerns.

Q. Does the TPS really work for Hondurans?

A. There are 65,000 Hondurans who are under the TPS. There are also 6,000 Nicaraguans and 200,000 Salvadorans who benefit from it. In reality, it brings them great benefit because they work legally even though it is temporary, but they work legally with a permit, they have a driver's license, a social security number and can pay their taxes. The benefits are good.

Q. What are the consequences that deportations have had on Hondurans?

A. In 2011, immigration authorities deported over 20,000 Hondurans. Sometimes it is said that the majority of immigrants being deported are criminals and that is completely false because they detain people that may have been driving out of necessity and are stopped by police officers. The police functions as part of immigration when an individual does not have any documents. What they do then is send them to court. In court, they immediately put an order of deportation, and the biggest and most traumatic consequence is the separation of families. The immigrants either

have kids or spouses. That is where they lose, and it is a severe problem. There are people who come here to work and come with the American dream while leaving their country because there are no jobs back home. The precarious conditions in our countries are huge and the return is very traumatic. It is a problem that happens as a result of deportations.

Q. Is there an estimate on the number of Hondurans in South Florida?

A. There are close to 60,000 Hondurans in Miami and 90,000 in the state of Florida. Our organization has a motto: “One for all and all for one.” We help everybody, not just Hondurans. People come to be advised about different issues.

Q. Do you know of other organizations that help Hondurans in South Florida?

A. We have Unidad Hondureña led by Jose Lagos but he passed away a few years ago and apparently things have changed since he was very well known and connected. Other than that one, the rest do not seem to be that active. **A.** After their leader died, things changed. They would work on one side and we would work on the other. However, there was always communication between the two when Lagos was alive.

Q. Did the two organizations work for the same cause?

A. Yes, definitely.

Q. What are the primary sources of funding for the organization?

A. Honestly, we do not have any funds coming from the United States nor Honduras. We do not want any compromises with the economic funds from the governments because they try to control you. What we do is to collect voluntary donations. We also carry out activities to raise funds such as selling food in order to back up our work. We do work with the community and educational institutions, etc.

Q. Do other organizations do what yours is doing?

A. Many organizations are only out there when a TPS extension has been approved. They go out and fill out paper work and charge. It is that simple. I am very blunt. That is the only thing they know how to do. The TPS is over and they close their offices. However, we do have an excellent relationship with the Honduran Consulate in Miami. The Consulate helps with orientation concerning people who arrive without their documents and they provide passports, identity IDs and Consular IDs. They help organize Honduras Independence Day celebrations every 15th of September. To assist possible beneficiaries with TPS, the consulate has organized the “mobile consulates” initiative to coordinate with the population and assist with how the applications should be filled out among other things. They would like to see more assistance from the Honduran government in their efforts to lobby in Washington for immigration reform.

Additionally, we also have excellent relationships with the Florida members of Congress such as Mario Diaz Balart and Joe Garcia. They keep us posted on immigration reform and the progress being made. They have called for meetings with all the organizations. They called 40 or 50 organizations from all the communities including Nicaraguans, Colombians, Venezuelans, Hondurans, El Salvadorans, Peruvians, Bolivians and others to meet with them. At the national level, we do have volunteers in New Orleans, Houston, New Jersey, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. There we have communication with similar organizations at a national level. Everything is coordinated via telephone calls. We have phone conferences where we address problems and work to set up an agenda for everything.

Q. Do the branches help one another for the different campaigns?

A. Yes, right now we are collecting a million signatures. We are working together on that. We also do what we call walk or march on the route to victory, where we visit various cities in Florida, Atlanta, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Virginia, and we end in Washington, D.C. all together with the signatures that we were able to gather. On April 6th, we had a march here in Miami.

Q. Could you elaborate more on this initiative?

A. The organization participated in the coordination of demonstrations in 2006 and 2010. In 2006, we did a march that included thousands of people. Even the chief of the police marched in front with us because he liked what was going on. Helicopters were flying above us. They never thought that so many people would show up since the permit was only for 3,000 people but many more showed up. It was a historic moment.

In 2010, there was a demonstration in Downtown. People also showed up in the thousands. We have done vigils and demonstrations in front of the offices of the Congressmen in Miami. On April 6, 2013, we held a march here in Miami from Jose Marti to Bayfront Park in favor of immigration reform. We had over five thousand people who participated.

Q. What do you think will happen in terms of immigration reform?

A. After 16 years of hard work, I have never been so optimistic about a possible reform and some relief for undocumented immigrants. There is great interest by both Democrats and Republicans. Remember that President Barack Obama, in his first electoral campaign, urged to resolve the immigration reform problem, and that was when the most deportations have occurred under a government with approximately 400,000 people being deported. It was a record bigger than his predecessors, and that was very concerning. So, in an analysis of the presidential candidates of Romney and Obama, we saw that Romney was really against a reform for undocumented immigrants. That made us change our strategy to once again elect President Obama but with the condition that an immigration reform be approved.

Why do I say I am optimistic? Because after President Obama's speech to the nation, when he mentioned the topic of migration, we saw actions taken by both parties, Republicans and Democrats, of which have not occurred before. We saw Republican and Democrat congressmen stand up and applaud when the topic was mentioned. It is a very complex topic, but at least for now we have a light at the end of the tunnel. We know that Congress has its own bipartisan project, which gives us hope that something could happen. Logically, we have to fight, and that is what we are doing as an organization.

We have been calling our Florida representatives asking them to approve a reform with a path towards citizenship because there is a group in Congress that does not want undocumented immigrants to have a path towards citizenship. I think that it is going to be very difficult to say that permanent residencies will be given right away, because being a realist, there are people who have been following the current laws and have been waiting for years, petitioning for their family members, spouses and kids. So people with legalization problems cannot jump ahead of those who have done things properly. I think that at least a worker's permit with aspirations of a residency will be given. We ask for a short period because they are talking about it taking 10 to 12 years to obtain a residency, but I do think something can be achieved from what is occurring now.

It is scary also, because when we were struggling for a bill on immigration reform in 2001, we experienced 9/11. We were so close to approving a good bill, but we had that event. Now that the Senate is precisely dealing with the bill, we had the bombings at the Boston Marathon bombings. I am worried because after 9/11, the laws became tougher. The government made it tougher to get a driving license and many other things, but I am optimistic that this time we will get it done.

Q. As an organization, what is it that you would like to see in a reform?

A. Well, we definitely want the residency to be given, but we cannot ask for much. Something that is very important they say that 66% of the American people are in favor of the approval of a reform. Those who are against it are anti-immigrant Republicans such as Lamar Smith, the former president of the Judiciary Committee of Congress. But we know that if Republicans want to achieve the presidency in the United States, then they have to get closer to the Hispanic community. They have to pass a reform so that they can gain votes. Otherwise, they will be waiting until who knows when.