

Interview with Nora Sándigo

Director of Fraternidad Americana

Interview by **Dr. Margarita Rodríguez and Randy Salazar**

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Q. Some of us are familiar with your community involvement and organization since the times of the NACARA process when your organization played a very active role in promoting changes in legislation that eventually led to the passage of that important piece of legislation. Since then the organization was transformed and even the name changed from Nicaraguan Fraternity to American Fraternity. We know that you have been involved with helping children. According to a Pews Center report in 2010, there were one million undocumented immigrants in the United States under the age of eighteen. Additionally, there were about 4.5 million children born of undocumented parents in the United States. What do you think about these numbers and the human despair behind them and how this issue is reflected in your daily work?

A. Those statistics are correct, and there are probably even more children who are living during this terrible period of heightened deportations and incarcerations. There has been an increase in deportations, and the suffering has increased since there are more children and more households that are affected. We see this on a daily basis. We visit children from families that live in this terrible situation who see no way of resolving of it. Hopefully, everything that is being discussed regarding the topic of migration and the recent proposals will lead towards a complete immigration reform. I think that there has been more direct communication between both parties, and hopefully we will see a solution in the short term. Otherwise, we will continue to see more suffering from the children and the parents. The numbers mentioned in the above statistics could be higher.

Q. The statistics can be read anywhere but this issue requires greater awareness among members of our communities concerning the family tragedies involved in these cases and hence the importance of conversations with community leaders like you with so much experience and dedication to these issues.

A. That is correct. It is a tragedy. There is a lot suffering. It is an irreparable damage that stays in the minds of the affected children. There is a tremendous anguish of not being able to sleep,

eat peacefully, or having a peaceful moment even when they are playing because they are scared that at any time their father or mother may be taken away by immigration to be deported.

Q. Are the children aware of this? Do their parents tell them?

A. Yes they are told, the children themselves tell me about it. When they come to us, the children cry asking for help, asking for us to do something. They ask for us to send letters to the President requesting to stop the deportation of their mother or father. Since I have had to live this directly with the children during these unsettling moments, I can attest to the degree of difficulty that this situation imposes on them. It is heartbreaking to hear about their suffering where their lives and the lives of their families are being destroyed. On many occasions, the children go on for many years without being able to see their parents. It is a heartbreaking situation that is often misunderstood by many people because they have not experienced anything like this. We have instances where the parents have been deported many years ago, sometimes up to 6 and 8 years ago. The cases that we have documented include children who have had to continue to grow and develop as a person in this country without their parents, which creates horrible scars in their memories and absolutely every aspect of their lives. When these children become American citizens, they will be able to petition for their parents and eventually be together again. But no one will be able to cure the emotional and psychological damages that the separation has caused after so many years of uncertainty.

Q. Some people rationalize these issues by saying that if the parents knew that this was going to cause so much suffering then why did they bring the children in the first place. How do you respond to this?

A. I think that it is natural for any human being to seek a better and brighter future for his or her family, and I could not disagree with this. Most of these families are fleeing from persecution, desolation, economic and educational exclusion, abusive governments, and worst of all, they are fleeing from a future that has died for them. They come to the United States looking for all of the things they have been denied in their countries. They come with the hope in their hearts to be a united and happy family with a new lease on happiness. All they want is to be given the opportunity to work hard and bring themselves and their families to a dignifying way of life.

Q. There are people talking about “the anchor babies.” What are your thoughts on this?

A. Yes, I have heard of it, and unfortunately, as it is the case in generality, there is always the possibility of abuse. I feel very confident to say that I have not yet found one case where this phenomenon has taken place. We can clearly see that the children and the families we help are just victims of circumstances that are well beyond their control possibility. Even if somebody has a child for the purpose of becoming a resident, this does not mean that those parents have an automatic path to citizenship; it is just not that simple.

Q. Many immigrants, when coming to the United States, also leave children behind. There are interviews where children have said they receive money and gifts, but all they want is to have their father. What we have here is the other side of the coin. The children are over there and are separated. Nobody has been deported. The parents have decided that this is better for their children. How do you see this situation?

A. The purpose of these families is one and the same, is not that these parents leave their children behind as if fleeing their children, but they are forced to do so because of their limited resources. They leave with a plan, with a goal and purpose, they will struggle, work hard and save every penny they earn to be able to bring the little ones they left behind and be finally reunited in a country where they can live a life of dignity for themselves and their families as any other human being would wish for their own family. Let us not forget that the families of our founding fathers and other prominent Americans left their countries of origin seeking the many things that they were being denied in the land where they were born.

Q. Do you see a difference between cases in which parents leave as a result of critical circumstances and the ability to have a better future for the children and end up separated from their children for many years, and the other scenario where the children are separated from their parents as a result of a system of deportation. Do you see a qualitative difference here?

A. These two types of separations can be measured in equality only when we speak about children being separated from their parents. A separation is a separation. The inequality comes in when we compare what the separation entails when the parents leave their countries. They are leaving a detrimental system of things that they hope they can cut short by taking their children in the shortest possible span of time from out that country. The parents usually also have family members who can look after the children while they are gone. There are countless cases when parents, after not being able to get their children out of their countries, go back to their children at least with some money they earned. But for them, that is back to a dead end. On the other hand, there are families that have already established themselves in the United States. Children have had the opportunity to go to school, mom and dad have a decent job where they can have enough money to buy and eat decent food. They have tasted freedom and greatness after finally having the opportunity to live, grow and be the best they could ever possibly imagine they would be. These families are usually composed of a small familiar nucleus made up of mom, dad and children. But if the parents get deported, there will be no family member left to look after and care for the children.

Q. The argument posed by anti-immigrant groups is that undocumented immigrants know they can be deported at any time.

A. Wouldn't any parent who loves his/her family take any risks? When a parent is fleeing a hopeless life he or she is not thinking of some remote possibility that could happen in the future when their upmost concern is the wellbeing of their families. These immigrants believe in their

hearts that not everything has been lost and they can find hope in the greatest country on this earth. They believe that they will find refuge for themselves and their families from a heavy life. They do not stop hoping that they will somehow resolve their undocumented situation. In the meantime, they go about their business of making a life for themselves and their families.

Q. What do you think about DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals)?

A. DACA was implemented back in June 15, 2012. What it basically does is it allows for the practice of prosecutorial discretion by various immigration agencies. This initiative would benefit those individuals who were brought to the United States as children. It seems that the Gang of Eight is trying to put together new proposals. We are hoping that they can be discussed very soon.

Q. What can you tell about the so-called Gang of Eight?

A. It is a group of senators made up of Republicans and Democrats who have come together. They are led by Senator Chuck Schumer (Democrat) and Senator Lindsey Graham (Republican). These senators are providing the most information about the immigration discussion in Washington. The latest they have reported is they have gone to the border to see the advancements that are being made in terms of border security regarding national security, which is part of previous agreements that have to be completed before beginning a project for a new immigration law. We all remember that in the past, one of the reasons there has not been a project that really advanced in Congress is because Republicans have said they would not agree to anything until there is better border security, better internal security and better regulation for immigrants in order to prevent anymore illegal immigrants in the workforce. The other very important requirement was the agreement with SIEU, the labor union. This has been the best thing that has occurred prior to the discussion in Congress. I think the conditions right now are right for a reform to take place. We hope the politics are set to the side, and we can see both Democrats and Republicans work seriously in favor of the immigrant community. I also think there was a big lesson to be learned in the last presidential election. The American community and politicians realized how important the Hispanic community and Latino organizations can be since they voted for one party to prove that they can mobilize as an organized group if necessary. They want the rights of immigrants to be respected.

Q. What is the main focus of your organization now?

A. We continue to work with the 800 children that we have nationally. We are their legal guardians.

Q. Could you elaborate on that? Where did the 800 children come from? How did they get in contact with you?

A. The children came to us because they hear about us in the news, on the Internet and by word of mouth. We represent them as their legal guardians. What we do is try to care for them. I cannot say that we cover all of their necessities, but we do as much as possible for them within the realm of our resources and possibilities. The majority of them come from parents who have been deported. Generally, it is one parent that has been deported and the child is in the United States with the remaining parent or a family member.

Q. What is the primary country of origin for the children?

A. Generally, they are from Central and South America, but we also have children who are from Asia, Africa and Europe. Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador are the main origins of the Central American groups. From South America, the majority is from Colombia, Venezuela and Peru. We have some children who live in New York, including two children who are from China and children from the Caribbean too.

Q. Does your program work in Florida and New York exclusively?

A. We have children as far as Washington, D.C, California, Texas, Atlanta and Chicago.

Q. Are these children hoping to go back to the countries of origin of their parents?

A. They are American citizens, and they do not usually show any interest in visiting their parents' countries.

Q. Do the parents prefer to have the children here or there?

A. I would say that one hundred percent of the parents I have spoken with want their children to live here.

Q. Do the parents have any hope in returning and reuniting with their children?

A. Yes, they do have big expectations. Right now we are requesting that in the current proposals the reunification of the family should be the center of attention. Asking for reunification of the family entails having parents who have been deported from United States be readmitted, especially those who have no criminal record, who show good moral character and who have at least one minor child who is an American citizen.

Q. Is the children's program managed by your organization or in cooperation with other organizations?

A. We manage the program ourselves, but we welcome the support that we sometimes get from different other organizations as well as some private and local business donors.

Q. Could you name some of the organizations that have been supporting you with this cause?

A. Some of the originations outside of the state of Florida that we work with are: Familia Unida from California, Mexicanos Por La Reforma also from California, Centro Sin Frontera from Chicago, Lincoln Methodist Church from Chicago, Mexicanos Unidos in Atlanta, Coalicion de Salvadoreños in Atlanta and many more. Locally, we have worked with the Peruvian-American Coalition Inc., The Hispanic Coalition, Unidad Hondureña, Salvadoreños Unidos en el Exterior, Latin American Voters League and many more.

Q. Do you have a full-time staff and where do you obtain your funding from?

A. We have a staff of two part-time workers, but we rely very heavily on volunteers, which is what makes the bulk of our operation. We get a discrete annual amount from the Office of Grant Coordination of Miami-Dade County, and we try to get donations from other organizations as well as from the general public. The only grant we get is the funding that is provided by the Office of Grant Coordination of Miami-Dade County.

Q. So you do not have a place where the children live but instead they live with the people who are caring for them? And you are in charge of redistributing the help?

A. For children at the local level, we distribute the help ourselves. For the children who live in other parts of the country, we do our best to coordinate the help with other organizations that are local to them. In many occasions, we have taken some children into our home in emergency situations, for example, when their parents are being deported and the children are at school with no body to pick them up.

Q. Do you have the permits for that?

A. Yes, we have legal guardianship. The parents provide the permits. They sign a form that is notarized, which states that we will do whatever needs to be done to meet their basic needs until we are able to contact a family member. We can bring the child to a family member or neighbor who the parents authorize.

Q. How busy is your day in situations like these?

A. It is very busy. Many times it is not only the children from American Fraternity that I have to take care for but also my own family. Sometimes I have to run to appointments with my girls and then have to run to help other children who may have a problem. Many times they call me from school and tell me that one of the children has a toothache, a fever, or is vomiting. I have to run to pick up the child and bring the child to a doctor. There are doctors who have volunteered to see the children without charging. In other instances, I have had to bring a child to the hospital or a private clinic. This is when there is the most urgency, but this happens every day. If we talk about our numbers in Florida alone, we have 450 children. The other 350 children are from other states.

Q. Are the Floridian children primarily from South Florida?

A. Yes, they are primarily from South Florida.

Q. If you have a child in Broward or West Palm Beach, do you have someone who will go attend to them?

A. If we do not have a volunteer in the area then I have to go myself.

Q. What about kids who have parents that work in the fields?

A. If the school can't contact one of the children's parents, they will call us and let us know of any problems. The child is usually the one who tells the school to call us if his/her parent cannot be reached.

Q. How many years have you been working with the children's project?

A. We have been doing it for eight years now.

Q. So these children come to you through the community organizations that know you?

A. Some do. Others come to us because these families become aware of us by means of news via different media and/or by word of mouth. We get many calls in a day ranging from a wide spectrum of many different reasons. We always do our best to help in any way that we can.

Q. How does the jail process work? You had mentioned that you also assist in that area.

A. We receive calls from Immigration holding facilities. Usually, an immigration officer will call us advising that they are holding a person who has been detained and who has told them to contact us so that we can look after his/her child until their situation is resolved.

Q. How do they know that your organization is out there with a potential to assist them?

A. One important factor is that we have been helping the community for over 20 years and we offer our services absolutely free of charge. People usually hear about us through different media and by references from friends, family members, churches and other organizations.

Q. Many Nicaraguans and other Central Americans have been deported. The number of deportations has grown tremendously. Unfortunately, there has not been a movement as seen with NCARA. What can you tell me about this?

A. I think until very recently, there has not been the necessary "momentum" of action agreed upon by many organizations. But this is rapidly changing as we see all of these organizations, churches, students and the Hispanic community in general come together as one voice that will unite as it did with NACARA against the deportations of Nicaraguan nationals.

Q. What would you like to see in an immigration reform?

A. First, I would like to see the immigration problem at hand resolved as soon as possible. I wish to see the reunification of families, which is a very important issue to me. I wish waivers to be issued to families so that the wait for petitions will not be as long as it is now. I wish to see that workers can have the liberty to work with work permits legally and have their labor and professional rights respected. I wish to see the children live peacefully, with liberty, and have the right to having a family. I wish to see peace and harmony in every household. I want to see the children smile because they are with their families. That would be sufficient for me. The day that we no longer have to run to pick up a child that has been abandoned at school or daycare because their parents have been deported, I think is vital. It is very sad to find a child who is alone screaming, "I do not want to go with you. I want my mom or dad. Help me bring them back." It is very hard. I hope that we achieve all this, and I hope that the Latino community can unite as one big family.