

CIVIL RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANTS

Arnoldo Gomez

Fix our immigration laws now

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Gamaliel's First National Issue



Teaching ordinary citizens to unleash power within themselves to collectively impact social, political, environmental, and economic decisions affecting their lives..

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In 2000, WISDOM learned of Arnoldo Gomez. Arnoldo was a documented, permanent resident of the United States. He owns his home. He has been continuously employed for more than 20 years. The of his children are United States citizens.

Arnoldo was being held in the Racine county jail. The INS rents from space from Racine County. Arnoldo's offense was Driving While Intoxicated. He received two citations for DWI. These were his only encounters with the law in 25 years in the U.S. He served a short jail sentence. Immediately upon his release, he was detained by the INS. He told he was to be deported. The draconian immigration legislation of 1996 essentially put him into same category as drug kingpins and murderers.

Arnoldo's family hired a lawyer who was able to halt the deportation, but nothing more. When Arnoldo's family came to WISDOM, he had spent nearly three years in jail. There had been no hearing and no hearing was scheduled. He was told that his only hope of release was to sign papers for a "voluntary deportation." This would result in a lifetime ban from the United States. When Arnoldo told his family and lawyer that he could not bear more time incarcerated and that he would sign the papers, they asked him to please let them try one more thing: reaching out to WISDOM for help.

After researching the issue and educating congregation members, WISDOM organized a prayer vigil outside the Racine County jail. More than 150 members, along with newspaper reporters and TV crews, gathered outside the jail to decry Arnoldo's plight. Members pledged to make phone calls to the INS, to federal legislators and others. Shortly after the vigil, Arnoldo was severely beaten by another inmate. The INS said that, for his own safety, Arnoldo was being moved to Illinois.

Two weeks later, more than 100 WISDOM members boarded buses and went to hold another vigil in Illinois. WISDOM was joined by other Gamaliel affiliate members from northern Illinois, and a new set of journalists.

Less than 10 days after the second vigil, Arnoldo was unconditionally released, as were 36 other detainees of similar circumstances. Under pressure from WISDOM, the INS had finally agreed to stop delaying Arnoldo's case. A U.S. Court of Appeals, in an immediate and unequivocal decision, found the portion of the 1996 law that was used to hold Arnoldo and the others indefinitely was unconstitutional.

WISDOM, Gamaliel's affiliate in Wisconsin, has been able to make changes in the treatment of immigrants through congregation-based organizing. In WISDOM's case, success has come through building a broad base of support. In every case, immigrant people were joined by African-American and Caucasian WISDOM members.

WISDOM learned early on that, while immigration issues are of great concern to the Latino community, many non-Latino people are also affected. For example, in the campaign to reform the Milwaukee INS office, WISDOM found a great ally in the Episcopal Bishop of Milwaukee. Bishop White is a British subject and was often exasperated by the rudeness and inefficiency of the local office.

WISDOM's African-American members not only found they had more immigrant members of their congregations than they had thought, but were keenly sensitive to civil rights abuses and discrimination. Finally, WISDOM's pastors have pointed to the biblical imperative, especially in the Hebrew scriptures, for just treatment of immigrants. This combination has allowed WISDOM to lift up people who have been ignored. This attention has resulted in justice