

Immigration Center Ministers to "Strangers in a Strange Land"

CAMDEN – There has been an accelerated increase of immigration raids all over the country and Camden is no exception, according to Eirene Immigration Center, the GNJAC-sponsored agency devoted to providing multiple services to the immigrant community in New Jersey.

Early in the year immigration officers dressed as civilians went into a house and asked for a specific name. When the man of the house responded that that person was not living there, they asked him if he had any legal papers to stay in the country. Unable to produce the required credentials, he was taken to a detention center. The officials gave the man's wife a hearing notice.

They were taken to the Elizabeth center, where an issue over the treatment of immigrants has been raised.

"They are treated worse than animals," said one Eirene staff member. They were released after posting bail. "These families have been good neighbors and persons of good character, hard workers and good parents," Eirene reports. "Their children are U.S. citizens."

Unfortunately, these clients do not have a visa and are deportable. From Eirene's perspective, this is when the local church is called to become a moral support. They need pastoral care and counseling along with many other sorts of services.

"Not all the cases are sad cases. Many of the clients have been granted "green cards", have become citizens of this country and/or have been able to reunite with their families, the Eirene staffer declared. "Many have legalized their immigration status."

EIRENE, which means "peace", was born in 2002 as a faith based, not-for-profit organization established for the purpose of providing services that include legal advice and counseling, family petitions, assistance in filing immigration forms, employment authorization (TPS), and immigration status adjustment and information. Also among its services are classes that range from English As a Second Language, to basic computer skills, graphic design, and pastoral care.

The center's primary mission is to reach out to the immigrant community from a Judeo-Christian perspective. With satellites in Toms River, Tuckerton, Asbury Park, and Elizabeth and Dover soon to be added, the center provides a safe and welcoming environment for undocumented persons. The center sees more than 300 clients per year.

Eirene's senior attorney is Adam Solow, recruited by Julio DeSanctis, a student in his last year of law school at Villanova University. Mr. Solow comes faithfully to the Camden office every Wednesday evenings, and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. He speaks Spanish, Italian and French, as well as English.

Pastoral care and counseling is offered by the Center through the ministry of the Rev. Irving Cotto, senior pastor at Asbury Church, a board member and husband of the Rev. Lilian L. Cotto who directs the center.

The Cottos have offered a seminar for pastors and laity interested in caring for immigrant families. The seminar explores five key stages involved in the migration cycle as articulated by Dr. Carlos M. Sluzki, a psychiatrist who has done research and teaching in this field. The seminar is mostly based on the premise that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures strongly call people of faith to care for the foreigner, the stranger, the poor and the outcast.

A key paradigm sustaining the Center's vision is that Jesus and his parents were themselves strangers in a foreign land, seeking asylum in Egypt because of a violent policy enacted by the government of King Herod. Thus, Eirene Immigration Center is determined to extend its help to people of all backgrounds seeking to have a safe haven and a promising future for their families in the United States.

"Eirene's Board of Directors would like to thank the churches in the GNJAC that have been supporting the Center in the past," says Ms. Cotto. "The Board of Director's prayer is that more sponsors may be added to the ones already supporting Eirene in order for the center to continue its ministry."

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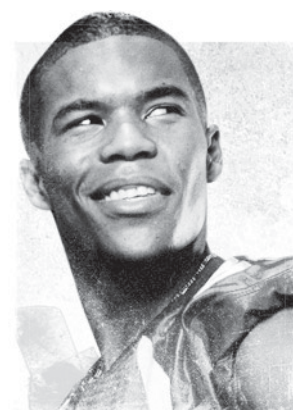
Friday evening – April 20 from 6 pm to 12 midnight

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*Gaius Charles
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