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Last Row Party – Deadline News #2

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INDIANAPOLIS — The prayers were said and sent up to Dios, and now it was time to do what they could for themselves.

The families, packed on bleachers inside the gymnasium of Saint Monica Church and praising the padre, Hijo y Espíritu Santo, observed mass in Spanish. They dipped their hands in holy water and waited in line to shake hands with the priest as they bounced babies on their hips while older kids played tag in zany spirals.

Many were Latino immigrants, and they’d been on the wrong side of promises in President Trump’s campaign. In the first week of his presidency, he has already made moves to keep people like them from entering the country.

On Sunday morning, the families crammed into a tiny room in a building on the edge of the church property. Lawyers were coming to teach them about their rights under this new administration that had made them all vulnerable to deportation. Most were immigrants, likely undocumented, but some were white members of the congregation who’d come to learn how to help. The chairs went quickly, so many of them sat on the floor with children fidgeting in their parents’ laps.

“Que bonita misa,” a young mother commented to another as she settled into her seat. “What a beautiful mass.” It was snowing outside, and the room was filled with the sound of zippers and coats being wrestled off.

A few made calls to give directions to families still trying to find the building.

“No te preocupes,” a man said into his cell phone while a little girl tugged on his hand. “Los abogados no están aquí ya.” “Don’t worry. The lawyers aren’t here yet.”

Juan Anaya, 33, sat in the front with his wife and his three children. He looked younger when he smiled, showing the gap in his two front teeth. The room was getting hot. Anaya mopped the sweat from his forehead and toyed with the delicate gold chain around his neck. He tried to talk to his young son, who looked just like him, with shiny, inky hair and big dark eyes, about school.

“Estás emocionado para escuela mañana?” “Are you excited for school?”

The boy looked up from the “Peppa Pig” book he was reading, smiled sheepishly and shrugged. Anaya reached out and mussed his hair.

Anaya came to the United States 17 years ago from Jalisco, Mexico, an area fraught with cartel violence. The oldest of 10 siblings, he spent his first decade in the U.S. earning money to bring his siblings over one by one. He saw it as his duty to give them a chance at a life where they could work, have families and not fear for their safety every day.

Anaya was undocumented but considered himself an American. His three children were all born in the U.S. He started his own business cleaning houses with his wife, an undocumented Guatemalan immigrant, in Indianapolis. He paid taxes and sent his children to public schools.

When Trump caught the country by surprise with his executive order Jan. 25, Anaya knew things would be different. When he left for work in the morning, he couldn’t be certain he’d return home. What if he got pulled over or got into an accident? What if the police asked for his papers?

“I’m always worried now. Everything is a risk,” Anaya said in Spanish. “My kids could lose their father or mother over something that wasn’t their decision. They didn’t choose this situation.”

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When the lawyers arrived, the room went silent.

Kevin Muñoz and Emma Mahern, two attorneys from Muñoz Legal, took their places at the front of the room.

“To start, who here doesn’t speak English?” Muñoz asked after he introduced himself in English.

Almost every Latino in the room raised a hand.

“And who doesn’t speak Spanish?”

More laughed as nearly every white hand went up.

Muñoz and Mahern grinned at each other.

“Okay, that’s great. It means I get to make all the bad jokes twice,” Muñoz said.

For the rest of the meeting, Muñoz and Mahern cut back and forth between English and Spanish.

They began to unpack the details of Trump’s order — how he’d changed the rules for what put people in the priority deportation group. Under Obama’s administration, only people with serious or violent crimes were considered priorities. Now the list included those with minor crimes or even past brushes with law enforcement that didn’t result in charges.

Obama oversaw more deportations than any other president. “The Trail of Tears,” Muñoz called it. However, under Obama’s administration, activist and humanitarian efforts had begun to convince the government of the human toll.

“We’re moving backward several years,” Muñoz said. “This is not a Trump versus Obama thing. This is a human rights thing.”

The reality was there was little advice Muñoz and Mahern could offer beyond telling people to keep to themselves and stay out of trouble. Even something like a noisy lover’s squabble could lead to cops showing up, taking someone away and putting them on the path to deportation.

The lawyers said to fight the instinct to over-explain when in contact with police or immigration officials. Law enforcement can’t tell someone is undocumented just by looking at them, Muñoz said. Too often people give themselves away trying to talk their way out of tough situations.

The order meant Immigration and Customs Enforcement would try to keep people as long as possible, Muñoz explained. ICE would raise bonds for smaller crimes or try to deny bonds altogether. He recommended every family start putting away money for bonds and legal fees.

Couples exchanged tense glances at the mention of such financial burden. A few people looked close to tears.

As the meeting dragged on a half hour past its supposed end time, Muñoz and Mahern asked members of the crowd to comment on the frightening situation they found themselves in. When each person spoke, Muñoz nodded intently and translated their answers for the rest of the group.

Not one person cursed Trump. Many tried to rationalize the order. They said the president was just trying to build a country where people respected the law, unlike the countries many of them had fled.

Anaya spoke up and said he knew Trump was trying to keep families safe. He gestured at his family and said he wished it didn’t come at the cost of their security.

Toward the end, a man named Pedro Flores stood. His face was tanned and carved with wrinkles, relics of years of laboring beneath the sun. In Spanish he told the crowd he was not a man of many words and had little education, but he had something he needed to say.

Flores explained he’d left behind five children in Mexico 17 years ago. He gave up the chance to see them grow so he could support them financially from the U.S. He said he knew the pain that came from being separated from family, and he wouldn’t wish it on a single soul.

His voice was clipped, and he choked back tears. He’d come here because he wanted to be an American, Flores said. However, under the new order, the years he’d spent living and working in this country meant nothing in the eyes of the government.

Flores scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. He knew the president wanted to keep the country safe, but he hoped Trump could see that the people he was trying to keep out were also deserving of safety and empathy.

“Somos personas también.” “We are people too.”