

“We must take care of each other: Local pastor protects immigrant facing deportation”

by Tia Gillespie

From being an ordinary pastor at Forest Hill Presbyterian to hosting an illegal immigrant in the sanctuary of the same church, Pastor John Lentz has become an important figure in the fight for immigration reform in Cleveland, Ohio. Currently, Leonor Garcia, a Mexican Latina, is staying at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church to avoid deportation. Her four children, ages 3 to 19, are staying at their original house without the need of sanctuary because they are natural-born American citizens, but they visit their mother on weekends. After taking Leonor in during November of 2017, Pastor Lentz and his church grabbed the attention of nearly every news outlet in Northeast Ohio.

The topic of immigration is very controversial in today’s society because there are millions of illegal immigrants currently in the United States, mainly from Central America and Mexico. Chief complaints about undocumented aliens are that they take jobs from Americans or legal immigrants, they use Americans’ taxes and healthcare system, and they commit crimes or join gangs. However, many illegal immigrants are actually struggling to survive, working hard at their jobs, paying taxes, raising children, and sometimes even supporting family members still outside the U.S.

As Pastor Lentz himself puts it, “Immigrants do not increase crime, do not hurt the economy – in fact they help the economy by working and buying things, and studies show conclusively that immigrants do not increase crime.” According to big news outlets, like the New York Times, “immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than people born in the United States. And experts say the available evidence does not support the idea that undocumented immigrants commit a disproportionate share of crime” (Pérez-Peña). Immigration without documentation is illegal, but not all undocumented immigrants are here to bring mayhem and become dangerous criminals. Immigrants like that *should* be deported because many Americans just want a safe, happy, and healthy country.

However, the challenges that come with hosting an illegal alien are unique for Pastor Lentz. Although his church has been incredibly supportive, some of the general public has not. “There have been negative reactions in the larger community. Not so much in Cleveland Heights, but from folks who respond to newspaper articles and Facebook postings,” says Lentz.” He’s also had to make renovations for Leonor to stay at Forest Hill Presbyterian Church, such as creating an apartment out of two classrooms and installing a shower for her.

“Our ultimate goal is to find a way for Leonor to stay in the US permanently. She has four American born children – hence they are citizens. Families should not be separated.” Pastor Lentz and his congregation stand firmly behind this belief, and are trying to give Leonor status to legally stay here, though the government stands against them. “We are all children of God, we must take care of each other. We are especially concerned for those who are marginalized, particularly we include folks that others exclude and those who are labeled ‘the other’ we have to defend. “

Leonor grew up in Mexico with the dream of living a better life in the United States. She left when she was only a teenager. Since then she has been an active member in her community, a great neighbor, mother, and cook. She hasn’t even committed a traffic violation. According to Pastor Lentz, “she wasn’t trying to be a criminal, she just wanted a life.”