

High fences and denied visas: Migration policies restrict solidarity

The following story is shared by Kim Nagy, a Maryknoll lay missionary currently serving in El Salvador. Kim wrote the piece for her spring 2008 newsletter, shared with friends and family in the U.S.

... Our parish has had a sister relationship with a parish in Alabama for a number of years, and that parish is particularly interested in supporting the arts and the music program here. To that end, they pay for the salary of our music director Manuel, who is one of my closest friends here in El Salvador. The parish in Alabama invited Manuel and Oscar, the parish administrator and a great singer, to come to visit their parish this April.

The purpose of the trip was to promote a more equal exchange (since their parish sends a delegation here to El Salvador each year and so far no one from El Salvador has visited Alabama), and to deepen the sense of solidarity between the parishes by allowing Manuel and Oscar to share their musical talents and Salvadoran perspective with the U.S. parish. It was to be an all-expense paid trip for Oscar and Manuel, who despite their professional level training and good jobs, would never be able to afford the journey.

I had always heard that it is difficult for Salvadorans, and really all Latin American people, to receive visas to visit the U.S., but accompanying Manuel and Oscar in this process, I have learned a lot more about the details. First of all, they each needed formal letters of invitation from the parish in Alabama – letters that indicated their names, and the dates and purpose of the proposed trip. They also needed to provide bank statements showing that they had a certain amount of funds in their personal accounts (an amount which the parish lent them for this purpose). With those documents and others, plus a non-refundable \$134 application fee, they finally were able to get appointments for an interview at the U.S. embassy in San Salvador where the decision on the visa would be made.

When the day arrived, Manuel and Oscar trekked over to the other, wealthy, side of the city to the U.S. Embassy where they had to wait for five hours before they had their individual 5-7 minute interviews ... all of that hassle, to be told their visa requests were denied, and no clear reason was given. All they received was the same photocopied sheet that everyone else got, saying that they were denied, that the embassy could not be sure that they would not decide to remain in the U.S. illegally once their tourist visas expired.

I am deeply saddened, and frankly angered, by this response. I knew denial was a real possibility for them in this visa application process, but it still came as a great surprise for me and for all of us. Perhaps I am most surprised because they had all the right paperwork (they even hired someone to look it all over for them ahead of time to make sure), they have professional jobs and families here in El Salvador, and knowing them, I know they had no intention of staying in the U.S. They just wanted to visit!

I am also disappointed because I was hoping that they would have been able to visit my home in Connecticut. I had even planned my trip home a bit earlier this year to be sure to be there when they were visiting. It would have been nice to share a bit of my homeland with them in return for the great hospitality they and others have shown me here.

Beyond the personal level, this experience for me also speaks to some of the problems that exist within our immigration system, and relay a perspective that is not

often heard in mainline U.S. media. Part of my strong reaction to this issue is rooted in the injustices that it brought up to stare me right in the face.

Do you know how easy it was for me to come to El Salvador? I didn't need to do anything other than buy a plane ticket and make sure my passport was current. When I arrived here in the San Salvador airport I talked briefly with an immigration official, paid my \$10 for a 90-day tourist visa, and I was on my way. I even have temporary residency now, and I think, "How hard would it have been for Manuel and Oscar to get residency in the U.S. (if they had wanted it)? They couldn't even get tourist visas."

I understand that our countries have different opportunities, and that North Americans are not lining up to come to El Salvador in droves, but I still feel uncomfortable when I stand face to face with my friends here and become aware of the deferential treatment that I receive as compared to them. That injustice hurts me because I see us as equals, and our immigration policies apparently do not.

As we in the U.S. continue to prepare for the presidential elections, with immigration reform as one of the key issues, I invite you to reflect with me about what kind of world you want to live in ... One with high fences that divide us, or one in which we have the opportunity to know our neighbors? The U.S. is a land of immigrants (my ancestors come from Ireland and Hungary), but often the immigrants have not received very neighborly treatment. There are no easy answers to this issue, but let's think about how we can work together for the benefit of all.