

Immigrants in Kingston

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Father Frank Alagna (Photo by Dion Ogust)

Father Frank Alagna looks taller than he is, but it could be his black jacket and trousers. He's got silver hair, large hands and speaks with an earnest demeanor. Recalling examples of injustice or holding up for admiration examples of brave human beings, he get gets a little teary-eyed. When he gets worked up and curses, he uses the word hell as a placeholder, an amusing choice for a Catholic priest.

Father Frank explains his opinion on the motivation of immigrants.

“You don’t get up one morning and say, I’m gonna leave the country I was born and raised in, where everything was familiar to me, and move somewhere else where I don’t know the language, where I don’t know anything, just for the hell of it.”

Or when he remembers when the services of the Ulster Immigrant Defense Network (UIDN), the organization he helped found, became so sought after that it brought him to a moment of self-doubt.

“At one point, very early on,” says Father Frank, “I thought, how the hell am I going to stay on top of all of this?”

The “all of this” to which Father Frank refers was started by a 2017 letter presented by the Kingston Interfaith Council urging the City of Kingston not to cooperate actively with the federal agency of deportation, known as ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

“After the 2016 election, with the air obviously becoming rapidly more toxic at that time for undocumented people in the community,” remembers Father Frank, “I asked the Kingston Interfaith Council if they would join me in petitioning the City of Kingston Common Council to have Kingston declared a sanctuary city.”

Dignity and respect

The resolution the common council came up with didn’t go quite that far. Declaring one’s intent not to cooperate with federal authorities brings with it substantial financial penalties.

“The council passed and I signed a memorializing resolution for Kingston to be designated a ‘welcoming and inclusive community,” explains Kingston mayor Steve Noble, “The resolution reaffirmed to the community that each and every person who lives here will be treated with dignity and respect, and that our local law enforcement would not put local taxpayer dollars into immigration-related civil enforcement.”



The Ulster Immigrant Defense Network table. (L-R): Sarah Cunningham, Kim Touchette, Leslie Gallagher and Madre Filomena Servellon. (Photo by Rokosz Most)

Father Frank says he was told the meeting had the highest attendance in the history of the common council. “The room was filled with people to overflowing,” says Father Frank. “There was that much feeling in the community, both for and against.”

Longtime Kingston police chief Egidio Tinti noted that an unwritten policy had already existed. Where no serious crime had been committed, his officers didn’t inquire about immigration status.

This was in contrast to the philosophy of the Ulster County sheriff’s office under Paul Van Blarcum, sheriff Juan Figueroa’s immediate predecessor. “At that time, the state and the county law enforcement functioned as auxiliaries to ICE,” says Father Frank. “And so we had created a rapid response team. If we knew that an ICE action was bound to happen, the group of people got the call and went to that location and advised immigrants of their

rights in terms of whether or not they had to let ICE into the house. You didn't trust ICE to do that. They would show up without the required court order that a judge had to sign."

After the meeting of the common council, Father Frank called another convocation of the interfaith council on his own turf to see what the churches should do to provide sanctuary in the ancient sense of the word. He had printed agendas for maybe 20 religious and community leaders, When the day came, 120 people showed up. From their number would eventually emerge the Ulster Immigrant Defense Network.

"We began with our focus on caring for undocumented people," says Father Frank. "And then began this influx of asylum-seekers. They're on the radar, you know. The government knows them and knows where they're at, and all of that kind of stuff."

The food pantry

An easy laugher with a voice that dances and quavers, Madre Filomena Servellon has been in the States 38 years. While she is a reverend, most people call her madre. Madre Filomena is from Honduras.

"If they are from Mexico," says Madre, "they are from Oaxaca. But mostly they are from Guatemala."

Madre doesn't think many of the migrants in Kingston are doing farm labor. "Not really here," says Madre. "In Rhinebeck. Here, it's more construction. And in hotels, cleaning house."

"And restaurants," chimes in Leslie Gallagher, co-lead of the weekly UIDN Food Pantry

The women answer questions in the parking lot of the Holy Cross Church where once a week an all-volunteer staff sets up tables to provide food, clothing, household items and various other essential goods and services. The event connects asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants with the community at large, those already hip to the legal scenarios unfolding and the shifting geography of assimilation.

Food is handed out to hundreds. Half-gallon containers of milk are dispensed from stacked crates. There are bags of Maseca, a corn flour preferred by the immigrants from the Northern Triangle — the collective regional name which includes El Salvador, Honduras

and Guatemala. This area, according to members of the UIDN, is where most immigrants coming to the Hudson Valley are from.

Migrants in a drug corridor

The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service estimates that an average of 377,000 people have left the Northern Triangle every year from 2018 through 2021.

Of the varied causes for such a large number of people to emigrate from their home countries, none approaches the significance of the basic food insecurity caused by a series of droughts from massive crop failures.

Many poor farmers and laborers who had suffered through a regional drought which had destroyed their harvests in 2015 had already begun migrating north in search of food and water security when drought struck again in 2019.

The confederation of charitable organizations known as Oxfam estimates that in 2019 78 percent of maize crops and 70 percent of bean production in the region was wiped out.

According to the World Food Program, the number of food-insecure people in the Northern Triangle nearly tripled from 2019 to 2021. An estimated 7.2 million Guatemalans and Hondurans were food insecure as of mid-2022.



A volunteer at the food pantry with Maseka and corn flakes. (Photo by Rokosz Most)
Two hurricanes, Eta and Iota, struck the same region in 2020

With the pandemic, the region's stressed economies contracted further. In 2021 486,600 people emigrated from the region.

Whether or not climate change was directly responsible for the severe droughts hardly mattered to the farmers. It's rain or no rain, grow crops or starve.

No more than 30 percent of the land along a strip of this Central American land called the Dry Corridor is fertile. This long strip through the isthmus from Panama to southern Mexico is also the most practical route for narcotics distribution operations radiating north from Colombia. Criminally inclined transnational business operations wage long-running battles against one another to secure choice trafficking routes. Neighborhood turf wars result. Extortion schemes, prostitution rings, and campaigns of intimidation against the innocent proliferate. Positions in local governments are infiltrated.

The only options left to the powerless are fight or flight.

And so along the same route, both half a million migrants and the land-borne portion of an UN-estimated 1400 tons of cocaine produced in Columbia travel north annually to the same destination. In the United States, life is full of contradictions.

Not supposed to work?

The young thought warriors of the activist crowd in Kingston detest the word combination “illegal immigrant.” “Undocumented immigrant” is the preferred nomenclature. Simply “migrant” often stands in. The term “unauthorized” is also used. An emigrant is one who leaves a country, a migrant is one who frequently moves around, and an immigrant is one who stays in a new country after leaving their old country.

It’s not easy to get an estimate of the number of unauthorized immigrants in Kingston. The Migration Policy Institute estimates there are 5000 in Ulster and Sullivan counties combined, which though a nice round number doesn’t paint a very detailed picture.

No one here at the UIDN food pantry cares to speculate about the number of undocumented immigrants in Kingston, primarily, they say, because they think the number will be incorrect. The undocumented don’t seek out the census takers, and sometimes those previously counted have moved on to other locales.

A woman in a black beret, Kim Touchette, is one of the original members who started the UIDN, She is co-lead of the food pantry.

“If I have to estimate, on average [at the food pantry],” says Touchette, “it’s around 180 to 185 families that come through in that two-hour window. There are some single men. But it’s mostly families. The single men are here to work, and sometimes then some of the rest of their family arrives later. So we have a lot of families that start out with, you know, maybe a father and one child, and then more of the family arrived later.”

“The numbers are growing,” adds Gallagher. “The numbers of immigrant families, if I would give a percentage over the past year, I’d say it was 30 percent.”

Whatever the number, most in the city are here as asylum-seekers who will have crossed the border legally into the United States.

After paperwork and bureaucratic minutiae, asylum-seekers are released and allowed to travel within the United States. While they don’t have citizenship yet, they are documented,

which makes all the difference in perception. Counter intuitively, however, that status prevents them from finding work, because until they have a court date which will decide their permanent status — which can take years — documented immigrants are not supposed to work.

Their own best advocates

“You want to make sense out of this?” asks Father Frank. “ It’s set up to be an obstacle course that makes people fail rather than to humanely process them, whatever the final resolution is going to be. You have to attend to people’s needs along the way! You can’t tell them you can’t work and then expect them not to What do you expect them to do?”

Father Frank and the UIDN started with a focus on caring for undocumented people, but then this influx of asylum-seekers began.

“So we began to relate to that,” explains Father Frank, “And so we began this food and clothing distribution, we also provide help to people set up their households with essentials like beds and things like that. And we have various support group organizations in the community tabling at the market, in terms of networking people into healthcare and networking them in the into the other services in the community that are available to them. We help people get their kids enrolled in school and get the vaccines that they need to have to go to school If there’s a need, we try to meet it.”

While the food pantry’s mission is geared towards those strangers in a strange land, Father Frank notes that those others in need will not be turned away.

Father Frank is self-effacing when it comes to taking credit for the functioning of the operation, constantly pointing out how the volunteers are beyond belief in terms of energy, enthusiasm, commitment and passion for making this operation hum along. When it first began, the UIDN was an organization under the fiscal sponsorship of the church, but in 2019 secured its own 501c3 status.

“We have two sources of funding,” says Father Frank. “One is we see grants from various organizations that have a heart for the work we’re doing. And we seek individual contributions. We have only two paid people in this whole operation. One is a half-time caseworker who deals with the difficult situations and sees people in person to talk about

their cases. And the other is a part-time fundraiser who does a lot of the work soliciting grants.”

As the purpose of the UIDN expands to meet the needs of larger and larger numbers of those in need, the services it offers evolve. Father Frank says the group is now working in the direction of providing training and educational programs to empower people to be their own best advocates.

“One of the things we’re launching,” says Father Frank, “is teaching people how to form cooperatives, so they can be their own bosses rather than be at the mercy of somebody who will exploit them.”

So he’s teaching socialism?

“Socialism is the economy of the gospel,” answers Father Frank, without missing a beat. “We’re just preaching the gospel.”