

Washington Post

Immigrant yearns to leave the shadows

By Petula Dvorak

March 19, 2010

Sam is staying in the shadows.

He used to be the guy you'd say good morning to at the bank and the dad who came to school with his daughter, greeting everyone along the way.

After years of living in the bright light of hope, of building a life in the United States with a wife he met in Montgomery County and girls who were born and raised in a neighborhood between the Beltway and a shopping mall, the immigrant from Sierra Leone melted into the darkness, because his presence in this country suddenly became illegal.

His temporary protected status was yanked in 2005 by the U.S. government after the war in his homeland ended. What also ended: Sam's American dream.

Never mind that he had a good job with D.C. prisons and a side job at a Wachovia bank branch and was part of the fabric of his community.

And forget that his family's home in Sierra Leone was burned down and that forcing him to rebuild life in a war-ravaged country he has been away from for 18 years is inhumane.

"Now, to me, it appears that I have no place here and no place to go back to. I cannot get a driver's license. I cannot work legally. I have to live in the shadows," Sam said. "I am not asking our government for a handout. I just want to be a law-abiding person."

Gone are his tax dollars and his dignity. He went from being a tax-paying resident to being relegated to the crowd of 11 million undocumented immigrants living a dodgy existence in this country. These are the people President Obama was speaking about when he vowed to take on immigration reform during his campaign.

Sam told his story last week to more than 500 people crowded into Bethel World Outreach Church on Georgia Avenue in Silver Spring. There were Catholics, Protestants, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Jews and many more -- a new coalition of immigration reform supporters emerging from the region's houses of worship and their increasingly diverse services, church dinners and Bible studies.

These churches are often where immigrants who need help and comfort are opening up, telling their stories, explaining the torn-apart lives that hide behind the smiling fronts of waitresses,

nannies, landscapers, construction workers -- the people who keep our everyday world running, but are scrambling to survive once the table is cleared and the azaleas have been planted.

As the child of immigrants myself, these are difficult stories to hear.

Not because I remember when my parents' village was burned down or because my family members were executed in the town square or because there was no food in the motherland.

My parents' exit from Soviet-dominated Czechoslovakia wasn't a matter of life or death, but rather oppression and fear vs. opportunity and freedom.

Their struggle -- through language barriers, discrimination, the difficult process of becoming legal citizens, the constant fear that our family would be torn apart, and years of backbreaking work -- has brought them to a weird place.

They are among those today who think America shouldn't help undocumented immigrants. In fact, I am pretty sure my mom would join the Minuteman patrol along the U.S.-Mexico border if she was needed.

Just as many Americans have quickly forgotten that they, too, are here because some great-grand a few generations ago was looking for a better life, immigrants like my hardworking parents can sometimes find it easy to let the door close behind them.

But that antagonism was absent among those who gathered that night in Silver Spring.

Providing spiritual sanctuary to the undocumented isn't enough, said the Rev. Rebecca Brillhart of Sligo Seventh Day Adventist Church. They need legal sanctuary, too.

"This is morally right and it is also economically smart," Brillhart told members of the faith-based advocacy group Action In Montgomery last week, during one of their "actions."

AIM plans to bring about 700 marchers to a protest rally on the Mall this Sunday, part of an effort by faith communities across the country to push for immigration reform.

The group decided to back this cause because many folks in Montgomery -- a place so conscientious and careful, it was the first county in the nation to ban trans fats -- are hearing increasingly angry rhetoric against such reform. People affiliated with the Minuteman Project are patrolling and photographing workers at county job centers, and a group called Help Save Maryland is demanding cuts in social services to illegal immigrants.

This is a hostile act in a diverse county where 40 percent of residents are foreign-born and a sizable chunk are wonky liberals. But discontent over budget cuts, high unemployment and strains on social services agencies makes even Montgomery ripe territory for focusing blame on the undocumented.

For those who aren't persuaded by an appeal to basic human compassion, AIM drops the morality-speak and points to the economic benefit that bringing 11 million people into the legal economy could have.

Now that's a language even my mom can understand.