to legalize the existing undocumented population and stop the continuing flow. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) included employer sanctions against bosses who knowingly hired illegal aliens and strengthened border enforcement. The border patrol began to tighten control at the most popular urban crossings with highly publicized border control operations. Most importantly, IRCA established the precedent of awarding amnesty to illegal immigrants who had lived in the U.S. for several years, which attracted even more hopeful migrants. Illegal immigration slowed for about two years but then renewed with a vengeance.

Border states like California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas became very concerned about the costs of illegal immigration to both their state and local communities. In 1994, California voters approved Proposition 187 which attempted to deny undocumented immigrants access to state social services including public schooling, medical care, and welfare. The California proposition was critically weakened by the courts and never really implemented, but the federal government was forced to respond. In 1996, Congress passed three laws designed to address the social and political problems associated with heavy immigration. First, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act denied both legal and undocumented immigrants access to federal public benefits, such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and food stamps. Second, the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act made it easier to arrest, detain, and deport non-citizens. Third, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act expedited the deportation of undocumented aliens who committed crimes in the United States, funded 5,000 additional Border Patrol agents, and authorized the building of a fourteen-mile-long triple fence along the border at San Diego, California.

One unexpected consequence of these American policies was the rise of vicious new international gangs known as *Mara*

The Houston Catholic Worker: Casa Juan Diego, 1981–2004

by Carol Ellis

On November 2, 1993, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) conducted a sting operation against undocumented immigrants living at Casa Juan Diego, a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality, in Houston, Texas. After receiving what the INS claimed was fifty "complaints a year for the past three years" from the Casa's neighbors, the INS moved in. Posing as employers anxious to hire the men of Casa Juan Diego, immigration officials appeared at 6:00 a.m. in an unmarked van. Some of the agents, according to Mark Zwick, a Catholic Worker and co-founder of the Casa, "chased his residents through his property and up to the center's front door." Meanwhile, other officials offered the immigrants five dollars per hour, loaded them in a van, and drove them to a staging area in Cleveland Park near Memorial Drive, where they were detained.[1]

The sweep conducted that day by INS netted them 111 undocumented aliens. A little more than a week after the sweep, protestors converged on the federal courthouse in downtown Houston to voice their objections to INS tactics. Zwick used the event to invite his business neighbors to help him in his long-held dream: building an employment center for the immigrants. That, he believed, would help cut down on the numbers of men milling about the street. His neighbors never helped him in that effort, but eventually, through a healthy bequest, the Zwicks bought an old steel-fabrication factory and turned it into another shelter for immigrant men called the Padre Jack Davis House.[2]

The immigrants who lived at Casa Juan Diego were refugees who had fled poverty or war-torn countries in Central and

Louise Zwick (r) confronts immigration officials after the arrest of guests as Casa Juan Diego.

All images courtesy Casa Juan Diego

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Salvatrucha or MS-13. Young, undocumented Central American men growing up in Los Angeles during the 1990s formed their own gangs to protect themselves from the rival Mexican 18th Street Gang in the barrio communities. When these Central American gang members were convicted of crimes in the United States, they were quickly deported to their home countries. These largely Americanized felons were penniless, unskilled, and unwanted outsiders in their homelands. Some did not even speak Spanish very well. They quickly exported their outlaw lifestyle sowing gang methods and culture in the fertile soil of small, unstable Central American nations. Officials estimate that at least 70,000 gang members operate in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.[25] These nations now suffer the highest murder rates in the world and have instituted major government crackdowns against all gang activity.[26] Under government pressure, the *maras* are now reentering the United States and establishing gangs in thirty-one states and several major cities, including Houston.[27] They are known for their machete wielding brutality.

Another unintended consequence of employer sanctions against hiring unauthorized workers was a booming black market in fake green cards and social security cards. According to law, employers could not "knowingly" hire illegal workers. Several types of documents were ruled acceptable by law. Workers provided their bosses with forged documents which protected the employers under the law. One immigration lawyer said that a fake document "only has to pass the laugh test."[28] Immigrants could easily buy fake papers at flea markets for $50-$150.

Most importantly, these policies did not halt or even slow illegal immigration. The social and economic forces driving migrants were seemingly unstoppable. Instead, migrant pathways simply changed. A Mexican consul said, "The migrant flow is like the flow of water. When it hits an obstacle, water seeks its own path. The same

South America. They arrived in Houston with few possessions and required almost everything to sustain life—food, clothing, a place to live, medical treatment, diapers for their babies, as well as shoes for their feet. Unlike governmental welfare agencies that operated during normal business hours, where ticket-clutching patrons filled out forms as they waited to be called so that their needs could be determined, the items given at this refugee station were not supplied in a regulated fashion. The Casa was not open only from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. because immigrants did not arrive by some pre-determined timetable. They came night and day, seven days a week. The founders of the House, Mark and Louise Zwick, were there to welcome them and provide all that they needed, regardless of the hour or the want.

The Zwicks have operated Casa Juan Diego for twenty-four years. It is one of dozens of Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality in the United States.[3] They are its primary caretakers. The work is not glamorous. The hours are long. There is no pay. The job is often dirty and underappreciated. Accepting people into Casa Juan Diego means admitting all of their problems as well. Nevertheless, Mark and Louise Zwick are dedicated to the undocumented immigrants that show up on the Casa's doorstep. Their job, as they see it, is not merely to work for those in need, but to put their love in action by serving the poor. The Zwicks believe that the filth, the danger, the worries are all worth it. As Mark Zwick once told a newspaper reporter, "[T]hat is where the fire is needed—born with the love of the poor and of the refugees, not just love of ideas."[4]

Mark Zwick's sentiments toward Houston's most abject population, and his association with the Catholic Worker movement, sprang from the life's work of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Born on November 8, 1897, in Brooklyn, New York, Day's concern with life's downtrodden led her to join the Socialist Party in the late 1910s. In 1927, after the birth of her daughter, she converted to Catholicism but she never lost interest in the plight of the poor. Maurin, born May 9, 1877, in Oultet, France, had once been a member of the pious De la Salle Christian Brothers. He subsequently left the order and migrated to the United States in 1908. Day and Maurin founded the Catholic Worker movement in New York City in 1933.[5]

The couple began by publishing a newssheet called the *Catholic Worker*. Day's and Maurin's periodical expressed a radical concern

The first purchase of Casa Juan Diego was at the corner of Durban and Rose in 1982. It burned in 1985 with the second fire.

for social equality and reminded Catholics that the church's social program rebuked unrestrained greed and placed the interest of workers above that of corporations and states. Equally pervasive within the pages of the *Catholic Worker* were the three overarching principles upon which Day and Maurin built their movement: personalism, pacifism, and voluntary poverty. Established at the height of the Great Depression, New York's citizens responded positively to the broadsheet.[6]

Personalism is a radical doctrine that stresses an abandonment of materialism, an absolute renunciation of violence, and a commitment to a system of just labor. Catholic Workers voluntarily take on the involuntary poverty of others. They believe this shows respect for the poor, and dedication to the works of mercy.[7] Christian anarchy rather than secular hierarchy is another tenet of the Catholic Worker movement. Workers eschew government bureaucracy. They have no bylaws or articles of incorporation. They elect no officers, hold no elections, and write no constitutions. They live a communal existence.[8]

Such an existence, Day and Maurin believed, demonstrated love for the poor. One way in which the Catholic Worker founders expressed their love for those in need was in their house of hospitality. They opened their first one in a former barbershop in Manhattan in New York City several months after beginning publi-

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cation of their newspaper. The building accommodated women and men and held kitchen and dining areas, as well as the offices of the paper. The founders of the movement housed the poor, distributed meals, prepared the newspaper, created a maternity guild, started a workers school, and collected and dispensed clothing and other items.[9]

Mark Zwick did not initially embrace the Catholic Worker movement. Zwick, the ninth of twelve children, was born in 1927 and raised in a devoutly Catholic home in Canton, Ohio. Mark later earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Chicago and spent time in that field in California. While working there with farm laborers, Mark, a priest, met Louise, who was attending Berkeley University. Born in 1942 on a farm in western Pennsylvania, Louise had been a non-practicing Methodist. Earlier, while attending college at Youngstown University, she took a philosophy course that piqued her interest in Catholic teachings. She converted to Catholicism and, after meeting Mark, who left the priesthood, the couple married and she went on to earn a master's degree in children's literature and library sciences.[10]

Increasingly dissatisfied with their comfortable material culture, the Zwicks sold everything they owned in 1976 and went with their two children as missionaries to El Salvador. They wanted to learn the Spanish language and culture as well as discover what was being done there about social justice for the poor.[11] In El Salvador they found war, assassination, and chaos. When they left that country, they were, according to Mark, "a changed people." Their faith "would never be the same."[12] The Zwicks moved to Houston in 1980. At first they performed social work at St. Theresa Catholic Church near Memorial Park, but increasingly found that type of service unfulfilling.[13] Eventually, after viewing Latinos living in cars in the parking lots around the Heights area of the city, on February 18, 1981, they opened the first Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in the southern United States at 4309 Washington Avenue in a largely Hispanic section of Houston. By far the largest Catholic Worker organization in the United States, the Zwicks gave their house the name Juan Diego because Diego, a sixteenth-century Mexican peasant, was one of the first to evangelize in New Spain. Zwick later said that Juan Diego represented the "paradox of the powerless being powerful."[14]

Believing that many Central American refugees and battered Hispanic women were receiving little or no help from existing social service agencies in Houston, Casa Juan Diego became the only U.S. Catholic Worker House of Hospitality that catered to immigrants, legal or otherwise, and the Spanish-speaking.[15] With the opening of the Houston House of Hospitality, Zwick embraced the Catholic Worker ideology. The house he and his wife founded was patterned after Dorothy Day's and Peter Maurin's House in New York. No one at the Casa earned a paycheck, although volunteers did receive a ten-dollar stipend per week, and no Casa guest was expected to perform work for their room and board. Instead, the Zwicks encouraged men to find work as soon as possible. The number of full-time staff and volunteers fluctuated. In 1998, there were twelve full-time workers and seventy-five part-time volunteers, while in 2004, there were nine live-in staff and approximately twenty-five volunteers. Besides the Zwicks, idealistic college students and seminarians made up the bulk of the Casa's full-time staff.[16]

In the early days, the Zwicks ran a loose ship. "We're disorganized deliberately," the founder of Casa Juan Diego said eight years after the house's opening, running what he called "organized chaos." The couple was also determined to help undocumented aliens by imposing as few procedures as possible. Personalism for Mark and Louise Zwick meant "improving the lot of our fellow man rather than relying on impersonal institutes to provide this assistance." Also dedicated to the Catholic Worker philosophy of voluntary poverty, yet aware that she and her husband had to support their two children, during the first ten years of the Casa's existence, the Zwicks maintained a dwelling separate from the Casa. Louise Zwick, with excellent Spanish skills, acquired a job at the Stanaker branch of the Houston Public Library, located in a Hispanic enclave, as a children's librarian.[17]

Unlike state or federally run welfare programs, Mark and Louise Zwick did not call the people who came to their door "clients." They considered them guests, people merely passing through on their

A refugee who lives at Casa Juan Diego.

way to a better life—the reason they left their homes in Guatemala, Nicaragua, or El Salvador in the first place. Nor did they consider the Casa a mission, since they did not proselytize. They accepted people whether they were Catholic, Protestant, or had no faith at all.

People who came to Casa Juan Diego did not have to fill out endless forms upon which to prove their poverty and need. "We keep no records, no secretaries, no administrators," Zwick once said. "We save ourselves a lot of grief," he added. The couple wanted the Casa to have a face-to-face environment, and be at least one place in Houston "where a person [could] get immediate assistance without having to fill out application forms, present certificates and wait days at a time" for help. "We learned early on that it was very difficult to discern who were the so-called 'deserving poor' because in our culture those who tell the best story [to welfare officials] are the 'deserving poor,'" Mark Zwick told a newspaper reporter.[18]

The Zwicks never brought people to the Casa. Those who reached it found their own way there. Knowledge of the house traveled by word of mouth, from one immigrant to another, or from people within the Hispanic communities of Houston who found an immigrant on the streets. Another way refugees discovered Casa Juan Diego was through the city's social welfare and governmental agencies. Hospitals, schools, police, and even INS directed immigrants to the Zwicks. Although welcoming the immigrants arriving at Casa Juan Diego, Mark and Louise were not in favor of illegal immigration. As they repeatedly stated: "We oppose undocumented immigration because it destroys families." It was not the immigrants' fault, however, the couple

Literacy was emphasized at Casa Juan Diego from the earliest days. The co-founder, Louise Zwick, was a children's librarian with an emphasis on children's literature.

stressed, that war, strife, violence, and unemployment forced them to leave their homes in search of better opportunities. The couple felt that, once such immigrants reached Houston, they could not just tell them to "'[g]o away.' We can't give them a stone when they need bread."[19]

Mark and Louise Zwick ministered not only to the immigrants' spiritual needs, if the immigrant so desired, but to their physical, emotional, mental, and financial ones as well. The Zwicks or their volunteers would take guests to the airport, translate English into Spanish for the immigrants, and make trips to the post office for guests who had material arriving from family members they had left behind. The Houston Catholic Worker House of Hospitality bought bus tickets for those guests who wished to move on to other cities in the United States. And, because many financial institutions in Houston would not cash checks for refugees, the house also acted as a bank.

Additionally, Casa Juan Diego received and protected battered women, whether they were undocumented aliens or American citizens. They took refugees to hospitals (usually Ben Taub, the indigent aid facility) or medical clinics, picked them up, and gave them free legal advice, free English lessons, bond money, start-up cash, dental service, and medical help. They initiated work cooperatives for immigrant men and women and a shoe repair business for disabled men. Volunteers at the house frequently drove to Western Union outlets to receive monies sent for refugees, and the unpaid workers cleaned and maintained the kitchens, bathrooms, sleeping areas, dining rooms, and yards of the houses the Zwicks managed. And, in what Mark Zwick considered one of the house's most important functions, Casa Juan Diego pursued employers who hired undocumented aliens and then refused to pay them.[20]

A typical day in the life of Casa Juan Diego included Mark, Louise, and/or one or more members of the staff waking at 6 a.m. to prepare a breakfast of oatmeal or something similar. This would feed the refugees who had slept at the Casa the previous night. The dishes would then be washed and for the next hour the phones turned off so that the staff could spend time renewing themselves spiritually. Then they would meet to plan the day's activities, as much as was possible. Someone volunteered to receive guests. Another unpaid worker drove to local stores to collect donated food. Others would offer to help residents with their medical, family, employment, or legal problems. This could involve visiting a job site to ask an employer why he did not pay a refugee-employee, or it could mean a trip to the hospital, the bus station, a medical clinic, or the immigration office. The other volunteers divided up the additional tasks, including preparing lunch and dinner. If it was a Wednesday, there would be mass for those who wished to attend.[21]

In the meantime, a Galveston, Texas, nurse called to ask if Casa Juan Diego would take a long-time undocumented immigrant who had no legs and needed dialysis. One border guard wanted to know if the Casa could accommodate an immigrant youth whose leg had been run over by a train,

while the United Way asked if the Zwicks could provide counseling for an elderly man. Another family wondered if the Casa could furnish colostomy bags for an immigrant teenager. A private hospital in Houston asked Mark if he could supply shelter for a female refugee who had just given birth, and a Houston housewife called to see if the Casa would accept rice with weevils as a donation. Another homemaker phoned to apologize for accusing her live-in immigrant maid of stealing her jewels. She said she was sorry that her husband pressed charges against the female refugee. The jewelry had only been misplaced. A refugee mother wanted to know if the Casa could help her teenage son with his skin disease. She was unable to get help from any of the traditional social agencies because she was an undocumented alien. The Methodist Hospital called to get the Casa's address so that, in the future, all indigent patients could be referred there. To all of these requests, save the weevil-infested rice, Mark and Louise Zwick said yes.[22]

Once a week, Louise Zwick would meet with the battered immigrant females, while Mark would spend time talking in the evening with the newly arrived guests. He enjoyed doing that because the stories they told kept him focused on his work. In the evenings there might be an unexpected fire, or an unforeseen birth, a knife fight, a battering husband or partner trying to get into the building, a murder, or a drunk who had to be calmed down and taken to a cheap motel for the night.[23]

Operations at Casa Juan Diego began slowly but spread by word of mouth. Every evening in 1982 approximately twenty refugees sought shelter in the house, and the center's operating budget was about $36,000 per year. Nine years later, Mark and Louise Zwick managed a $300,000 budget. By 2004, that figure had increased to almost $1,000,000 per year, only a small portion of which went for volunteer stipends, none of which was slotted for salaries or administrative costs, and all of which came from donations. In 1987, the couple bought one-half ton of rice and beans every week. And every week one-half ton of rice and beans was given to the families that came to the distribution center, regardless of race, sex, age, or whether the person arrived by bus, foot power, bicycle, or automobile. By 1989, the Zwicks freely handed out, to more than six hundred new Houstonians, two thousand pounds of beans and rice weekly.[24] In addition, they gave away clothing, free of charge, as well as beds, diapers, furniture, eyeglasses, and medical care.

At first, Zwick imposed very few regulations on his guests. By 1990, however, as a trickle of refugees took advantage of the lax authority in the Casa, he had to establish some ground rules. Because a few male guests preferred to sleep all day and stay out all night, Zwick issued a regulation that males had to look for work during the day. They were given aid for only fifteen days unless they had not found jobs in that time. Because many women arrived either pregnant or with one or more children, they were unable to aggressively seek employment. Instead, the Zwicks helped women find jobs by announcing in their publication that immigrant women were available as domestics. Since many of the arriving female immigrants had either been battered by the men in their lives before leaving home, or were raped and/or abused on the trip to the U.S., Zwick also initially insisted (when the couple had only one house) that the male guests sleep downstairs and refrain from going upstairs into the women's quarters. He also instituted a prohibition against weapons and alcohol. "We welcome them with one arm," he told a reporter, "and give them the list of rules with the other."[25] The couple had few illusions about serving the poor. They realized that immigrants, just like everyone else, have faults and vices.

In addition to instruction in the English language, the other way the Zwicks tried to educate refugees was in their bimonthly publication, the *Houston Catholic Worker*. The paper began shortly after the opening of Casa Juan Diego. There were no editorial offices, no reporters' salaries, no costs for upkeep. The Zwicks wrote the stories and a volunteer couple did the typesetting and mailing. The couple imparted their views on how refugees should be treated by America's society. They instructed the refugees in Catholic Worker philosophy. And they confessed theirs and their guests' failings, celebrated their victories, and offered insight into their devout faith. They sold no advertising, but they did recount their trials and joys as well as those of the Casa's guests.[26]

Little did the couple know when they started Casa Juan Diego in 1981 that it would become "the Worker movement's first major multinational operation." What began as a small effort with a single house had become a far-flung concern. At one time the Zwicks had as many as ten different houses that served the immigrant community of Houston. As of 2004, they ran seven different welfare facilities and they had launched three in Mexico and one in Guatemala.[27] The couple supervised the house in Matamoros, Mexico, which sheltered migrants from Central America.

In Houston, the Zwicks had a facility for up to one hundred battered, pregnant, or Spanish-speaking women and their children, who were allowed to remain for as long as they needed. The women's shelter also served as Casa Juan Diego's headquarters and, since the Zwicks' children left home, as Mark's and Louise's home. An eighty-person men's shelter, known as the Padre Jack Davis House, was located a block away from the original Casa in an old steel-fabrication factory.[28]

Did you know?

- **In the first ten years of existence, Casa Juan Diego had been the temporary home of approximately 13,000 Central American refugees.[1]**
- **In 1988, it took a minimum of $10,425 monthly just to pay for utilities, gas, insurance, and taxes, and to supply food, medicine, transportation, and rental assistance.[2]**
- **By 1991, Casa Juan Diego gave away at least $5,500 per month in rice, beans, flour, milk, medicine, and cooking oil alone.[3] It also was distributing more than 200,000 meals annually.[4]**
- **By 1993, the Casa housed 150 guests nightly, while a separate facility boarded another fifty per evening.[5]**
- **In early 1996, Casa Juan Diego had provided aid to nearly 30,000 refugees.[6] It had also given away three hundred thousand meals per year.[7]**

During its existence, Casa Juan Diego has twice been destroyed by fire. Fire investigators ruled the first one, on July 7, 1982, arson. The second, on June 20, 1985, was blamed on an electrical malfunction. Within several months, the Zwicks rebuilt, this time with concrete and steel, making a third blaze less likely.

Accompanying the men's house was St. Joseph the Worker hiring hall and a shoe repair school the Zwicks set up for immigrants to run who had become disabled in the process of crossing the border.[29] In addition, the Zwicks once housed in a separate building known as Casa De Las Familias y Los Jovenes (the house of families and the young) for immigrant youth who had, for one or another reason, reached Houston alone.

Financial backing for all that the Zwicks and their volunteers accomplished came from many sources. Parishes, religious congregations, religious orders, and individuals, 75 percent of whom were from Houston, donated amounts ranging from a pittance to as much as $5,000. On two occasions over the twenty-four-year life of Casa Juan Diego, the Zwicks sponsored what they called a Jubilee Fund. They asked their readers to refrain from buying new clothing for an entire year and to donate the savings to the poor. Other than that, the only appeal for contributions that the Zwicks made was in their annual Christmas letter published in the *Houston Catholic Worker*.[30]

From its beginning, Casa Juan Diego operated "in flagrant defiance of U.S. foreign policy" by housing refugees that the INS routinely deports. Initially, Zwick was very reticent about commenting publicly on his work, and with good reason. In his occasional talks to church and civic groups, he could sense the growing tension and uneasiness within the audience as they finally grasped that he was discussing his work with and requesting funding for undocumented people. He faced the anger of neighbors who expressed discontent over the numbers of people on the streets in front of their homes and businesses, voiced dissatisfaction over the debris "those people" left scattered about, and evinced fear that the Houston Catholic Worker House of Hospitality was "a plot of the Pope to bring more Catholics into the United States."[31] Even more so, every year INS received dozens of complaints from nearby residents of Casa Juan Diego about the numbers of men milling about Rose and Washington Streets.

Louise Zwick (r) welcomes a new guest.

By 1986, Zwick became less reticent about discussing his work, in part because of the public outcry over the forced closing of Casa Oscar Romero in south Texas and the jailing of persons associated with the Sanctuary Movement.[32] He began to talk openly about his immigrant-aiding operation. He continually reminded his neighbors that immigrants were just as human as anyone else, just as hopeful for a better life, and just as in need of jobs. And he stressed that the employers who drove around the area in search of immigrants to hire attracted just as many native street people as undocumented workers. Then he assigned crews to pick up trash daily and asked his guests not to frequent the shops or areas of complaining neighbors.

Despite his efforts, as we saw, the INS targeted the immigrants of Casa Juan Diego in November 1993. In spite of the stress of trying to avoid immigration officials, dodge complaining neighbors, and cope with the myriad crises and needs of refugees, the Zwicks continued their work. In their opinion, laws would not stop immigrants from coming to the United States. Thus, they would not stop the Zwicks either.[33]

Immigrant men display the altar for The Day of the Dead at Casa Juan Diego in 1997.