

Chicago Rally Draws Evanstonians

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At Le Peep restaurant in downtown Evanston, kitchen staff were short-handed Monday after at least seven or eight employees traveled to attend the massive rally on immigration in Chicago's Grant Park.

Noe Perez, 26, the kitchen manager at La Peep, stayed behind to help out, but his heart was with those at the rally.

"We work hard here, so we deserve something for us," he said in an interview the following day.

A number of different groups and representatives from Evanston carried the same message, in different forms, traveling to the rally that drew hundreds of thousands of people.

Besides Le Peep, several other Evanston restaurants made accommodations so employees could attend. At Trattoria Demi, 1527 Sherman Ave., a sign on the window informed customers the restaurant was closed in support of its work force.

Evanston, along with many other communities in the Chicago metropolitan area, depends on immigrant labor, both legal and illegal, as an important part of its work force, said Jonathan Perman, executive director of the Evanston Chamber of Commerce.

The chamber hasn't taken a formal position on the national immigration question now before Congress, Perman said.

On the local front, though, he surmised, "I would imagine that if we were to hypothetically truly have a day without any immigrants in Evanston, our economy would suffer greatly."

A number of people from St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church in Evanston traveled to the rally, including its pastor, the Rev. Robert Oldershaw, and Sister Christine Fuller, the church's religious education director.

The 1,400-family church, at 806 Ridge Ave., has been home to several waves of immigrants over the years -- first German-speaking parishioners from the Luxembourg region, then Polish members and, in more recent years, Hispanic and Filipino parishioners.

Fuller described the rally as "powerful" and "very humbling."

"People conducted themselves very beautifully," she said. "I hope it raises the dignity of every person."

"To have a more just and open border will work for everyone. We can figure this out," she said. "We don't have to build higher walls."

Student absences up

Unusually high absenteeism at Washington Elementary School Monday suggested that a large number of Hispanic parents kept their children out of school to attend the rally.

All told, 111 Washington students were out, compared to about 10 students on a typical day, officials said. About 215 of the school's 500 students are Hispanic, or 43 percent of the school's enrollment. The school has the largest percentage of Hispanic students in School District 65.

"My gut sense is it definitely was related to the rally," said interim principal Karen Evans. "Families were attending and they decided to include the kids."

Evans believes children could potentially learn some valuable lessons about civics, politics, law and economics from participating in the event.

"As long as students understood what it was they were participating in and they didn't think of it as just having a day out of school, it could have some value" Evans said. "As long as it doesn't happen every week.

"I have often felt that all learning experiences don't have to take place in the classroom."

2006 turnout larger

Oldershaw said the turnout appeared larger than 1979, when as a young priest, he helped in some of the arrangements for Pope John Paul's visit here.

Oldershaw described the immigrant parishioners in his own congregation as "hard-working people, people out there doing a lot of jobs, despite what people say -- a lot of the jobs other people don't want to do."

He said the existing system divides families, with parents working illegally while their children are here legally.

"What kind of sense is that?" he asked.

Oldershaw belongs to Priests for Justice for Immigrants, a group of priests in the Chicago area who also have a large number of immigrants in their parishes.

"Basically what they are asking for is legislation that would first of all secure our borders, and then a pathway, an ability (for those already here) to remain here, to stay here, with a path to legalization," he said. He said bringing families back together is a third major concern.

"The fact of the matter is the system isn't working," he said, "and I think what people are asking for is a comprehensive change that allows people to earn their citizenship, have a pathway to citizenship."

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, of Evanston, who spoke at the rally in Grant Park, said the changes advocated have been misconstrued as "amnesty."

To earn citizenship, immigrants will have to learn English, "they'll have to get back in line behind others who entered the country legally, and then apply for citizenship," she said.

Ultimately, legalization will make the country stronger, said Schakowsky, whose speech at the rally moved Oldershaw and others.

Schakowsky, a first-generation American, talked about her own family and their escape from persecution in Europe for a better life.

Looking out at the crowd, she declared, "This is America. We are all Americans, and what we need is comprehensive immigration reform that will bring people out of the shadows where they are being exploited."