

Aquí estamos y no nos vamos—Adelina Nicholls on the Fight for Immigrant Rights

July 2, 2014

On February 7, 2014, I sat down with Adelina Nicholls, executive director of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) in Atlanta, to talk about the organization's history and achievements, as well as to reflect on the political role of Latino immigrants in the United States today.

Until the 1970s, American Latino immigrants were concentrated in just a few regions: Mexicans in California and the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in New York and Philadelphia, Cubans in Florida. During the period from the 1980s until the 2000s, millions of Central and South American as well as Mexican immigrants, many of them undocumented, spread across the entire United States, significant numbers of them settling in new destinations such as the Southeast. Atlanta, the capital of the South, became as well a capital of the Latino immigrant population. Georgia today has over 856,000 Latino immigrants, most (530,000) in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Latinos throughout the region created new social organizations—families and communities, churches and hometown associations, labor unions and political organizations. With the rise of the anti-immigrant movement in the mid-2000s, Latinos responded by forming self-defense groups to advocate for their rights, in alliance with groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center, among others. The most important of these Latino groups is GLAHR, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights.

A sociologist from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), GLAHR's executive director, Adelina Nicholls earned her chops as a rural teacher in Mexico before moving to the United States, where she got immediately involved in the Latino community, creating networks of community leaders so they could join forces based on their shared experiences and common goals. A powerhouse of political astuteness and brainpower, Adelina—*adrenalina*—has forged alliances across the state, region, and nation, creating and supporting local groups, training and supporting local leaders, and organizing statewide and regional actions.

Adelina is not afraid, not for her reputation or anything else: she stands up. As a community organizer and leader, Adelina is a catalyst for solutions to the problems of the Latino community. She has motivated and inspired others, many of them afraid to act, to stand up, to speak out, or to take control of their own history and actions.

A description of GLAHR, including something about its history and achievements, provides a background to current thinking on the subject of immigration reform and the current political situation.

In the early 2000s, what was then the Coordinating Council of Latino Community Leaders collected more than thirty thousand signatures from Latinos statewide in support of undocumented immigrants' right to obtain a driver's license. I testified at one of the public hearings with data that estimated the total number of uninsured drivers on Georgia roads based on survey research in the Latino community. This organization gave rise to GLAHR.

GLAHR

GLAHR was founded by Teodoro Maus, former Mexican Consul General in Atlanta, in 2005. Since

then, GLAHR has grown in size, reach, reputation, and clout. GLAHR today is the largest *truly* grassroots Latino organization in Georgia—run by Latino immigrants for Latino immigrants. GLAHR has educated immigrants about their rights and defense strategies, and created a more organized, educated, and empowered community. By forging alliances, disseminating information about anti-immigrant actions and laws, and going to court on behalf of immigrants' human and civil rights, GLAHR has educated the general public as well as policymakers.

Specific actions include the mobilization of 70,000 marchers for immigration reform in 2006, in conjunction with the national movement calling for reform, as well as 20,000 on the Day of Non-Compliance (a national strike) in 2011. GLAHR's hotline receives 50-100 reports of detentions per week from detainees or their families. Each caller is supplied with information, referrals as needed, and follow-up, resulting in a massive database on detention sites, charges, outcomes, and abuses.

With allies such as the American Civil Liberties Union, GLAHR has served as plaintiff against anti-immigrant state laws, such as HB87 (which denies immigrants access to public higher education).

Adelina and I chatted in Spanish, as I taped; later I transcribed and translated our interview:

Marta: Can you start by giving us an overview of GLAHR?

Adelina: GLAHR supports Latino immigrants in developing local grassroots organizations to educate their communities about how to defend their human and civil rights. This includes seeking out alliances with other groups, training leaders, and creating a regional network of support and experiences. The main thrust of GLAHR has always been immigration reform for undocumented immigrants.

GLAHR's work over the last ten years and more has been to work with local communities in Georgia, to support emergent local leaders at the same time that we educate the public. Our work is based on local needs. We've created a network of participating groups—*comités populares*—where they get and give leadership training, and results in individual and community *concientización* (consciousness raising).

Marta: How many groups are there?

Adelina: We have 18 groups; some work more than others, but there are 18 groups. We just moved into South Carolina, we just formed a committee there. The result has been different kinds of actions, one of the most visible of which is the civil disobedience action last year when they arrested a number of activists. GLAHR decided, together with the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), to appeal to community members for volunteers to get arrested. All we had to do was make the call, the communities were ready. Fifteen people responded, including a few activists from here, from GLAHR. This was possible due to collaboration with the African American community, Project South, and the support of SONG (Southerners on New Ground) as well.

Marta: As allies?

Adelina: As allies. Preparations and logistics took two weeks; many of the activists were already trained to carry out this kind of action. We went to Washington, to Arizona. Sharing with other groups helped us a lot. Here in Atlanta, we went to the gates of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security) down on Spring Street, right in downtown Atlanta.

Marta: And in Washington, DC, at the White House?

Adelina: That was months before; that we did in collaboration with national groups—NDLON, groups from Arizona, and other sister organizations. That was the first action in which members of GLAHR participated, handcuffing themselves to the bars of the fence around the White House. It was a wake-up call to stop deportations, as part of the #Not1More campaign.

Marta: What happened when they were arrested?

Adelina: In Washington it was a simple arrest, they were all released in an hour or two.

Marta: Were they charged with anything?

Adelina: They were fined 50 dollars—that was all. President Barak Obama has been very careful to not escalate, to not allow civil disobedience actions to escalate and create a general rejection....

Marta: The arrestees in Atlanta were freed on bond?

Adelina: No, no. No. They were arrested and they were detained in the ICE building until seven o'clock at night, when everyone was released and given a ticket ordering them to present themselves in federal court. But almost three months have gone by and we haven't received a single notice, citation, or court date.

Marta: So, you think they're just going to let it drop?

Adelina: We don't know if they will take it up again in coming months. But we think, we understand from this that the struggle is political, not legal.

Marta: I have seen pride, growth, and more in the compañeros and compañeras who've been arrested, a transformation that moves me.

Adelina: That's so, and that's part of the leadership training. It isn't just the adrenaline of the arrest, of returning to the group after being arrested; it's the work of years. It's important, not just for those who've gotten arrested, but for the group. Currently, we've been holding meetings between the local police departments and undocumented residents. First, this is to break down the fear, the fear that "if I go to the police, they will arrest me."

Marta: Tell us about the meetings with local police departments.

Adelina: The federal government is working through the local police departments (through the 287(g) program that empowers local police as federal immigration officers). They use roadblocks as a strategy to enforce racial profiling, day or night, using the excuse that they are just enforcing the law. The police feel as if they can do anything, detain you at any time, for any reason. There's no defense against it. So, the community seeks ways to defend itself, and one of the mechanisms is to hold meetings with the local police. We've met with the police of Warner Robbins, Perry City, Athens, Doraville, Forest Park, and Fairburn. This all depends on what each community wants, be it a march, a meeting, or a discussion group. That's how we're working with the City of Albany, too, to see if the county stops working with ICE, by recognizing the Trust Act.¹

Marta: What is that?

Adelina: It is an agreement that the city of Los Angeles has accepted—to not collaborate with ICE, to not call ICE to pick up immigrants detained for misdemeanors—such as not having a driver's license, having a broken tail light, etc.

The police's first response to our concerns in these meetings is to blame others: "It isn't us, it's the county." And the counties blame the cities. They are racially profiling, and they know it, so they are very careful and a bit defensive. Some of them are open to working with the community. However, one meeting doesn't change a thing. But what it does do, is tell them, "We are organized, undocumented, and we're not leaving this place. I am a worker, so stop harassing me."

And they know it, we're there in front of them, and they say, "Well, this took a lot of guts," because just for coming to this meeting, we could be arrested, be thrown in jail for a few months, and be faced with deportation. This courage is our survival.

There are positive "results": in Fairburn roadblocks were cut by 90 percent; in Doraville, 95 percent. We continue to work in Warner Robbins, Perry City, and Albany to push for more change. We just met with the police in Forest Park—they've been one of the most aggressive departments. We also met with Clayton County police. They say it's not them, it's the city of Forest Park. The Forest Park police say, "No, we stop them, but we don't deport them." So that's the game they play.

But we all go in uniform, in T-shirts that say "GLAHR, Stand Up, Fight Back." For us, this is valuable; it leads to public acts of civil disobedience. It is a key moment in the process of consciousness-raising.

Marta: Consciousness-raising for the actors, but also for the police?

Adelina: Sure. But for us, what's important, for our community, is to ramp it up. Ramp up our action, that's the most important thing for us. We know what the police reaction is. We already know that.

The chief of police in Forest Park said, "Show me the cases of abuse. I asked (GLAHR organizer) Miss Morales to give me your abuse complaints." I told him, "If you want cases, I'll just send you an open records request, and I'll show you the cases. What we've come for today is for you to hear the voice of the community, to hear what's happening with respect to the police." The police are worried now, desperate even, because the immigrant communities do not collaborate with the police.

Marta: What kind of collaboration do they want?

Adelina: They want people to report crime, but that is something that not even the *comités populares* will do. People will trust the police once they stop persecuting them. As simple as that. We haven't discovered the *hilo negro* (reinvented the wheel), but they're crazy if they think we'll collaborate with them as long as they're stopping us all the time. It's not going to happen. They're worried that people don't report crimes. Some people do report crimes, but it isn't what it should be. The Forest Park police have a Citizen's Academy that includes ride-alongs, translating, and volunteering with the police. They passed out a lot of applications, and not one Latino applied to be a volunteer.

Marta: How could they think that they'd get volunteers?

Adelina: There are some people who do. But the majority of the community, given the high level of detentions, says no. We told them, "People are not going to go for this." For sure, people say, "We're not going to cooperate, we're not going to do their work for them, we don't have to go around helping anyone out, or investigate. We want them to stop detaining us. Then we'll think about it."

Everyone knows you went to see the Sheriff, and if you get arrested, you are a hero. But the important thing is not the individual change, but the change in the community that results from these actions.

Marta: Have there been other accomplishments of GLAHR, specifically in terms of accusations of police abuses?

Adelina: Since 2007 we have had a hotline that has allowed us to know where detentions are happening. There was a case of a person who had been beaten by the police, and they wanted to cover it up. It was reported to us and we called in the Southern Poverty Law Center to help. He won the case, and they paid him compensation.² However, this was not enough to get the 287(g) program cancelled.

But these are achievements. Others include getting immigration officials to use prosecutorial discretion to let people out of detention, especially people with families—we got four to six people out in the last three weeks. We are fighting for this space for mothers and fathers of U.S.-citizen children.

Marta: With prosecutorial discretion, they let them go?

Adelina: Sometimes without any proceeding; with others, the proceedings continue. But we are appealing the August 23, 2013, memorandum of the Department of Homeland Security,³ so that families with parents of U.S.-citizen children aren't broken up. For others, it depends on what kind of record they have. But sometimes these are infractions that have been judged, and paid for.

Marta: What are the serious offenses that you haven't been able to get discretion on?

Adelina: Shoplifting, that's a felony, or domestic violence, or a DUI. But we question this, because these people have paid for their offenses, but that's not even up for discussion. Their goal is to fill up the jails. They take them from the counties, to the courts, or to probation offices, where they move them to a separate room, and from there ICE detains them. Obviously it's Big Business—immigrants are a commodity, a commodity that brings profits to big corporations, at the cost of incredible suffering, separation of families, and the trauma.

There are 30,000 beds in the detention facilities. That's why we know that since 2009 there's a quota to fill of 400,000 people per year across the country. So the police, working with immigration officers, look for people. So, to deny that this is racial profiling is to lie, given this complicity.

They don't have adequate health services. If you get sick they just give you a couple of Advils. Obviously this is to keep costs low, since the owners of the jail have to pay for health care.

Marta: How much does the government pay per day to detain someone?

Adelina: Between 80 and 120 dollars.

Marta: Like a luxury hotel.

Adelina: You can't contact them; they have no telephones.

Marta: That's a violation of their civil rights.

Adelina: I don't know what criteria they use, but the jails are in very remote places, where it takes families three or four hours to get there, and they are in places with no services, no place for families to stay. It's a serious problem. There are people in ICE's Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia, who've been detained for driving without a license.

It's a jail, cold, no health services, bad food. Because they are detained temporarily, they can't work,

but you can work in the kitchen, even if you don't even know how to cook beans. So, you fill up the jails with people, then you send them on and you fill them up again. The most contradictory part is that you're inside supposedly because you were working illegally in the United States, but in jail you can work.

Marta: How do they determine if a person is going to get out or be deported?

Adelina: The judges, immigration agents are there.

Marta: Another important topic is the development of art.

Adelina: Yes, really beautiful. I think that that is part of the work of community leadership, the work of organizing. Our banners, signs—in every possible color. And this has generated and inspired our creativity in the *comités populares*. And it's also a way of making community within the movement itself, and of expressing it through theater and art. Obviously none of us are actors, or ever took acting classes. It is street theater, with a direct message. And it comes from the same communities that are being affected by the detentions.

Marta: They're really cool, the ones I've seen.

Adelina: The last one we did was on November 15, in Plaza Fiesta, and it was on immigration reform.... That was the last presentation that we did. We will be preparing others.

Marta: And this is to warn people about those who are trying to take advantage of the community, saying that they can arrange immigration papers, when, in fact, they can't?

Adelina: Sure. Art and street theater are part of the group's internal development, as well as to inform others—done by the very people affected by abuses, and telling others how to protect themselves against it.

Immigration Reform

Marta: What do you think about current proposals for immigration reform?

Adelina: We think that these proposals are political grandstanding; this do-nothing Congress (either the House or the Senate) has no intention of passing a law that will bring relief to our community. They broke a thirty-year record of legislative (in)action, by spending their time forging political discourse to the detriment of immigrants, women, and workers as well.

In addition, President Barak Obama has made it clear that immigration reform is not a priority on his agenda by continuing to insist on an imaginary bipartisan solution that we know he will never achieve. He continues to insist on this route, and almost two million deportees have paid the price.

Marta: Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner says they don't trust President Obama to enforce any law that the House might pass, even though, in enforcing the law, he has deported more immigrants than any other president.

Adelina: Personally, I feel that this lack of action by the House isn't just about immigration reform, but, as we have seen, any proposal that President Barak Obama puts forward will be and has been rejected, not just in their discourse, but also their actions. Conservatives and the Republican Party have the slogan to vote "no." They refuse to support any initiative Obama puts forward. It is an open secret that virtually no Republican will support any proposal by an African American president. This is a problem of racism.

What Boehner says is right! They will do nothing until the next administration enters office. President Barak Obama minimizes the extent of the racism, or maybe it doesn't matter to him, but the immigrant community is paying the price.

Marta: Do you think he could have stopped the deportations?

Adelina: For sure. For us, it has been in his hands, ever since his first term. We know that he has been caught up in an extraordinary confluence of political events. We understand the context, but we do not justify or forgive his lack of action with respect to immigration reform. He had the chance and he let it get away and he continues to play the bipartisan card. He could have signed an executive order in his first term, but he did not place a priority on immigration reform. It is not a priority for him, he is not interested, and he only exerts his presidential power at election time.

When he began his first term, he had a chance to pass immigration reform as he had promised he would on the campaign trail. But he didn't do it. We understand the context. However, the context in which he came in was extraordinary: a serious economic crisis. And we understand that there are priorities, but immigration reform was a campaign promise, a priority, but for the president, it isn't.

In fact, almost six years have gone by, and it is still not a priority for the president. He's not campaigning, and he's not working for immigration reform. We've seen this in the campaigns for immigration reform. We don't believe that immigrants are a priority. Until election time.

Well, the community continues to grow, demanding a stop to deportations. In the last few years, we've seen an increase in marches and actions, but also a movement for civil disobedience has begun to grow in the community. Some might think that our community isn't prepared for civil disobedience, but we've seen, particularly in Georgia communities, people are prepared: "Go ahead and arrest me, you are lynching me anyway...."

Marta: How did they come to be prepared for civil disobedience actions?

Adelina: This is to the credit of GLAHR and the *comités populares*, as well as our alliance with NDLO with their technical support in linking groups.

Marta: Changing the subject a bit, what do you think of the proposed immigration reform laws that include a pathway to citizenship? Because many allied groups mention this as an important part of the law.

Adelina: We, from the very beginning of the discussion on immigration reform, always had two proposals in mind: One is what immigration reform should be in a perfect world. And the other is what communities need now. The challenge for all of us who are involved in this is to try to juggle the immigration reform proposals with what our community really needs.

Marta: What does the community need?

Adelina: Our community needs permits. A permit that allows them to get a driver's license, so the police will stop persecuting them. Our community isn't so complicated; we leaders sometimes make up elaborate narratives, when the thing is really very simple. Even so, we understand the necessity for a path to citizenship. But this rhetorical game of citizenship for 11 million, it's a lie, it's a fallacy in itself, ever since they started it last year—the campaign for immigration reform. Because when you see that proposed immigration reform law, citizenship not only isn't for the 11 million, but it isn't an immediate thing, but a long-term thing that will take from 13 to 15 years. In this process, they wipe you out.

Marta: And they continue creating two categories of workers.

Adelina: We understand that, in terms of protection, for our community, total protection is citizenship. As a citizen, you can't be deported; you have access to legal defense, and rights. But at the same time this is NOT a demand that comes from our community. They want a permit that will allow them to come and go, to see their families. It's not that complicated. They want a mechanism that will keep them from being bothered by the police. Then, truly, you realize when you look over these proposals for immigration reform, it's nothing but a rhetorical game. A rhetorical game that they use to try to fool our community, but national organizations push the citizenship item, for the 11 million. But it isn't the same community, today, not even the same as the one that existed in 2006.⁴

Marta: How?

Adelina: In terms of consciousness, of recognizing their own basic needs. But they also don't believe the line about the 11 million, about citizenship for 11 million. That's a lie. They don't tell you that either. There isn't a stipulation that your past offenses, your criminal background won't count against you as a crime that can get you processed for deportation.

People who had a DUI ten years ago are now being processed for deportation because today they were caught without a driver's license. Or a shoplifting charge, or whatever. We consider that this is double jeopardy. You're judging a person and punishing them for an offence that they committed and paid for. And this is not covered in the proposal in the Senate, for example. This is a serious problem. And that's why they say that 80 percent of the people who've been detained are criminals. Criminals? With a DUI ten years ago, that they paid for with jail, or social service, or a fine? Well, this is the discourse game, again.

But they're detaining people because they don't have driver's licenses.

Marta: As you say, it's double jeopardy, that's a no-win situation, because you can't go to work without a license, you can't get a license, you get caught en route....

The Current Situation

Adelina: That's why we think that if something is going to come out of the president and the Democratic Party, it will be before the 2016 presidential elections. Because I don't think they want to risk losing the elections. The voting Latino community plays a role, for both the Republicans and the Democrats in national and all elections. That's why I tell you that these attempts are *llamaradas de petate*.

Marta: Lllamaradas de petate?

Adelina: A palm mat, like the ones in Mexico, that when you set it on fire, it burns for a second, and then dies out. It doesn't catch fire. These immigration proposals are *llamaradas de petate*.

Marta: So, the effect of this is Latino support for Democrats?

Adelina: No. We think that that's the political game that they're playing. We say, "If the president, if the Democratic Party, Obama, wants to win the next election, they will have to do something before, make some change before." We don't know if they can win. Congress is not likely to come through. An administrative measure might help the Democrats win.

Footnotes

1. Facilitating Parental Interests in the Course of Civil Immigration Enforcement Activities:

“...California law enforcement will not submit to requests by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to hold people who have been charged with or convicted only of minor crimes so that agents can buy time to transfer them to immigration authorities.”

2. With information and support from GLAHR, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Immigration Project, and civil rights attorney Brian Spears filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against two Cobb County police officers over the stop, arrest, and beating of an unarmed Latino man. They called for an end to the county’s 287(g) agreement due to the civil rights abuses perpetuated by the program. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Angel Francisco Castro Torres, who was riding his bicycle in Smyrna when he was stopped by Cobb County police officers Jeremiah M. Lignitz and Brian J. Walraven. According to their own account, the officers, who are the named defendants in the complaint, stopped him after observing his race. The officers immediately demanded Castro’s identification and questioned his immigration status. He was also beaten, resulting in a broken nose and eye socket, and arrested. The officers attempted to cover up the attack by transporting Castro to the Cobb County Jail, which has a 287(g) agreement that feeds arrested individuals into the federal immigration system. After being held for four months, Castro was released when the two officers named in the lawsuit failed to appear at a hearing regarding the charges they brought against him. He required surgery to repair the damage to his eye [see here].

3. Facilitating Parental Interests in the Course of Civil Immigration Enforcement Activities.

4. A year of massive immigration marches, totaling millions of people in Los Angeles and many cities around the country.