



ENTERING THE CHAOS OF IMMIGRATION

BY JAMES FOREMAN

Over the last few decades, the United States has opened its doors to 3 million refugees. The rate of intake has decreased in recent years, but the worldwide demand is high and shows few signs of abating. Refugees are a special kind of immigrant, and the United States has the highest population of immigrants of any country in the world. Statistically speaking, you might know an immigrant family or two.

If you don't, you're not alone. While immigrants might be common in our country's population, we aren't all exposed to their lives or know their struggles. Jessica Friedrichs, assistant professor and director of the undergraduate social work program, seeks to change that by engaging students across all disciplines at Carlow with her service learning course titled Immigration in the United States.

"I wanted to reach beyond social work majors to help educate students what Carlow's values on this subject are," Friedrichs said. "Carlow's position on immigration is very clear."



Carlow University is a Mercy institution, but the definition of “mercy,” as it’s used by Carlow’s founding order, the Sisters of Mercy, is not a passive thing. As defined by James Keenan, S.J., “Mercy is the willingness to enter into the chaos of another.”

Friedrichs exemplifies this critical concern with direct engagement with immigrant and refugee populations and the social justice efforts being made to integrate immigrants and refugees into our society.

A good way to learn about the struggle of others is simply to talk to them. As part of this service learning course Friedrichs and her students visited the headquarters of Literacy Pittsburgh to meet people from all over the world learning English as a second—or third, or fourth—language. Carlow students and English students paired up just to have conversations. The Carlow students got to practice speaking to people with limited English proficiency, while the latter got to practice their English, all the while sharing stories about the refugee experience and their lives here and abroad.

That connection to the lives of actual refugees and immigrants continued with the Somali Bantu Community Association, which represents hundreds of Somali Bantu immigrants living in Pittsburgh. When she reached out to them for a tour of Carlow’s campus and some quality time with her students, “They said they didn’t want a standard tour that they got at other universities,” Friedrichs said. “They wanted to know what it was really like to be Muslim on campus, or to be black on campus, what it was like to be the first in their family to go to college. We had students who could relate to those experiences, and we put together a tour.” Panel discussions during the tour were illuminating for both Somali Bantu students and Carlow students, as they learned that their experiences are not so different.

This sense of camaraderie with immigrants continued with what Friedrichs called a “solidarity” project, also a part of the coursework. Her students took what they had learned and brought it back to their home communities or wherever they spent their spring breaks. They were free to decide for themselves what this meant. For some, a book report

on an immigrant-related subject was enough. For others, like Chandler Stockwell and Katie Baum, it was a little more involved. They drove from Pittsburgh to Michigan and back again as their normal college commute at the beginning and end of semesters, but this time with a twist: They stopped at immigrant-owned restaurants and stores along the way and left favorable reviews about the establishments on websites like Yelp. It seems like a small investment—a 5-star rating and some nice words on an app—but the benefit to a small business is enormous. Some students kept “microaggression journals” using the class’s social justice focus as a way to measure the tiny, almost imperceptible ways in which those around them talked about people from disadvantaged communities.

A major part of the course involved an awareness-raising project, for which the class was divided into groups. One group set up a table in the University Commons, an area of high traffic perfect for spreading the message of the immigrant experience. Another group made buttons with messages such as “Immigrants Make America Great,” “Different Does Not Mean Dangerous” and “Proud to Protect Refugees” and handed them out at Undergraduate Scholarship Day in A.J. Palumbo Hall of Science and Technology.

Friedrichs enabled her students to enter into the chaos of others, and they emerged with greater understanding.

Student Jessica Strochs reflected on her participation in the class: “At the beginning of the year I dreaded this whole experience. I wasn’t comfortable having a discussion about immigrants and refugees. I wasn’t ready to discuss the political aspects that play a part in it as well. ... As the days passed on, it became more and more exciting. I attribute this to the fact that it pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me become aware of my own beliefs and allowed me to grow as a person. I am thankful for the challenges this class presented and thankful I had the opportunity to learn and grow.”

Jessica Friedrichs will be offering this class again in spring 2019. ■



Opposite page: Buttons created and distributed by students with messages of support for immigrants and refugees.

Right: 1. Professor Jessica Friedrichs MSW, MPA.
 2. Shaelyn Cole '20 shares contact details with Isha, a member of the Somali Bantu youth who toured Carlow.
 3. Friedrichs with the leaders of the Somali Bantu contingent—Doudi, Omar, Yussef and Abdulahi.

