Advocated for immigrants from Central America

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Body

Saul Solorzano, who escaped the bloody tumult of civil war in his native El Salvador and became a seasoned leader of an advocacy organization for ***Central*** American refugees in Washington, died Aug. 17 at Washington Hospital Center. He was 49.

Since 1994, Mr. Solorzano had been the top executive of the ***Central*** American Resource Center, known as Carecen. His death, after falling down steps at his home in Northwest Washington, was confirmed by Milly Rodriguez, Carecen's board chairwoman and an official with the American Federation of Government Employees.

"Carecen is the most important anchor organization in our region for ***Central*** Americans and, more importantly, Salvadoran ***immigrants***," said Lori Kaplan, executive director of the Latin American Youth Center in Washington.

"Without Carecen and Saul's leadership, many of our Salvadoran residents would not have had a pathway to citizenship, would not have had access to affordable housing and would not have been able to get the services and support that Carecen provides them," Kaplan said. "Saul's long-term leadership was critical to the strength of Carecen and its ability to help thousands of people over the last several decades."

Mr. Solorzano helped expand Carecen's mission from helping ***immigrants*** seek political asylum to helping them become permanent residents and U.S. citizens.

In addition to promoting civic engagement and economic development among the region's tens of thousands of Salvadorans, Mr. Solorzano helped ***advocate*** successfully for legislation that sought to improve the immigration prospects of ***Central*** Americans, particularly refugees.

Most of the measures were imperfect, he said, but provided "a window of opportunity to help people find a permanent solution."

Mr. Solorzano was one of the roughly 1 million Salvadorans who fled to the United States and neighboring countries during a 12-year civil war between violent leftist guerillas and a U.S.-backed military regime that engaged in human rights abuses.

Before a truce in 1992, an estimated 75,000 Salvadorans died. Countless families were torn apart.

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Carecen was formed in 1981 to address the compelling needs of a generation of Salvadorans who found themselves in the Washington area after being granted temporary refugee status because of the war. Many lacked the skills or resources to find housing, jobs and health care.

Long involved in aiding refugees, Mr. Solorzano joined Carecen in the early 1990s. He battled strong political forces intent on curbing immigration under any circumstances, including an effort by some in Congress to end a 1990 program that offered temporary refugee status to Salvadorans during the civil war.

"In El Salvador, they came here because five factions were going in and chopping each other to pieces," then-Sen. Alan K. Simpson (R-Wyo.) said on the Senate floor in 1994, soon before he was poised to become chairman of an immigration subcommittee. "And now that is all over. You have democratic elections. Have one of them gone back? Not one."

The Clinton administration ended the temporary refugee program for the 200,000 Salvadorans living in the United States. Immigration officials said that there would not be wide-scale deportations.

Regarded as a skilled political strategist, Mr. Solorzano formed partnerships with members of Congress and other ***immigrant***-rights groups to shape laws that would provide chances for a green card.

He continued to oppose periodic efforts, most recently by the Bush administration in 2005, to end special protections for Salvadoran ***immigrants*** stemming from the 1980s civil war.

The initial protections were ordered by a federal judge after a class-action lawsuit claimed that U.S. immigration officials had used threats and other forms of rough treatment to discourage Salvadorans from applying for political asylum.

At times, Mr. Solorzano expressed the bitter feelings of many Salvadorans toward the baffling standards used in deciding who achieved special rights in the immigration process. Some, he said, thought that Nicaraguans seeking asylum from the left-wing Sandinista regime were favored.

"In the 1980s, President Reagan said the Salvadorans were coming for economic reasons, that we weren't political refugees," Mr. Solorzano told the Star-Ledger of Newark in 2000. "Any Nicaraguan who showed up at the border and said he hated the Sandinistas was granted asylum."

Saul Antonio Solorzano MagaÃ±a was born Oct. 14, 1961, in the capital of San Salvador. His parents sold goods in a marketplace.

Rodriguez, the Carecen chairwoman, said Mr. Solorzano was studying to become an electrician when he left to live with an aunt in Los Angeles. He sold tamales and became increasingly drawn into refugee-aid efforts. He later became a U.S. citizen.

Over the years, Mr. Solorzano was an outreach worker for a refugee center in Hempstead, on Long Island, and a volunteer coordinator at the Spanish Educational Development Center in Washington. In 1992, he was hired at Carecen as associate director and soon became the public face of the organization as its leader.

He sat on civil rights review panels in the District, raised money for earthquake victims in ***Central America***, campaigned against gentrification and predatory lending practices that threatened the livelihood of low-income Latinos, and spoke out against immigration raids on undocumented restaurant workers.

He received a bachelor's degree in business management from the University of the District of Columbia in 2002 and a master's in public administration from American University in 2005.

Having long worked in advocacy and politics, he made an unsuccessful bid in January for an at-large seat on the D.C. Council in a special election to replace Kwame R. Brown (D), who became the council's chairman.

Survivors include his companion, Wendy Ramirez, and their daughter, Joan, both of Washington; and four sisters.

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In interviews, Mr. Solorzano spoke of the profound impact that ***Central*** American ***immigrants*** have had in the larger community. Many of them play vital functions in the service industry, in hotels and restaurants, or mowing lawns and cleaning buildings.

Allowing them a way to achieve citizenship, he said, would improve their lives by permitting them to make more money, buy homes and attend schools. "It means more stability in the community," he told The Washington Post, "and less abuse."

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