

Immigration's One-Man Bandwagon; Washington Hears a Dogged but Lone Voice for Caribbeans

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Body

For the last four years, Russell T. Hicks has offered a rather personal course in political science for the Caribbean immigrants in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

They have immigration problems. He has political contacts. Together, they have embarked on a quixotic journey through the labyrinth of officialdom in search of favors.

Mr. Hicks has a lively correspondence going with the White House, senators, members of Congress, the mayor, the City Council, the Police Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

He keeps their letters back and forth in a neatly bound book that also includes the hard-luck stories of 46 men and women from Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago who have lived in New York illegally for years but fell through the cracks of programs to help illegal immigrants.

Mr. Hicks, an Army veteran born and raised in the United States, has taken on their cause as a personal mission, but so far has not reached his goal.

"I didn't know anything about immigration when these people started asking me for help," he said, "but I knew that wherever there's a law, there's an exception and discretion, and if you have a problem, you see your local representative."

Mr. Hicks, 45, is neither a lawyer nor an advocate for the big causes that occupy the professional immigration organizations. Instead he is a no-fee Mr. Fix-it for people who do not know their way through bureaucracy, a Republican with an improbable streak of 1960's-style activism and a knack for pushing himself onto politicians' radar screens and refusing to go away.

"He is unusual because he is tenacious and continues to push ahead," said United States Representative Major R. Owens of Brooklyn, who has been on the receiving end of Mr. Hicks's flood of phone calls and letters. "The word 'access' is usually associated with making contributions, and he does not have a monetary contribution to make."

Even officials at the immigration service, which would ultimately be the dispenser of the favors he seeks for his neighbors, have developed a grudging respect for Mr. Hicks's persistence.

"The fact that he has gotten responses from the people he has, well, I think it's impressive," said Alan Atkinson, a spokesman at the I.N.S. district office in New York. "So far it has not resulted in what he wants it to result in. But I have to admire his tenacity and his ability to bring his case in front of people of influence."

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But Mr. Hicks is tilting at a behemoth of a windmill. Congress has been ambivalent, at best, on the issue of illegal immigration. And immigration law as it stands is complicated, turgid and full of regulations that are exceptions to rules and rules that explain the exceptions.

As an unintended illustration of the complexity, the immigration service's own Web site, an exhaustive tour of immigration policy, lists almost 600 acronyms used in legislation relating to immigrants and would-be immigrants.

There is TPS (temporary protected status) and DED (deferred enforced departure). There are E visas and H visas and K visas and so on through the alphabet. There have been special visa programs -- like Nacara and CAP -- to benefit orphans, religious workers, Irish, Nicaraguans, Cubans and Canadians, as well as waivers and lotteries and amnesties and late amnesties.

Except for a limited program for Haitians a few years ago, Mr. Hicks said, there have been no special programs for people of the Caribbean.

"The government has become more restrictive as a result of the change in the skin color and ethnicity of the immigrants who have come in recent years, including the large inflow from the West Indies," Representative Owens said. "I think racism is involved, as Russell says."

Mr. Hicks once worked in mental health programs for veterans. Now his real job is running a tiny bookstore called Metropolitan Learning Associates, on Hillel Place near Brooklyn College, where he tutors students and sells material for schoolchildren studying for standardized tests. He opened it seven years ago with his Jamaican-born partner, Janet Lovell.

The store is practically invisible among the fast-food restaurants that line the street. Inside, it is just as nondescript. Multicolored workbooks are piled from floor to ceiling. A faded American flag hangs limp over a narrow desk.

To get to what Mr. Hicks calls his office, he has to duck under a shelf and ease himself into a cluttered space no bigger than the front seat of a compact car.

But Mr. Hicks lives large -- at least through his letters to public officials -- by lavish name-dropping, lofty language about his store's mission and loving tributes to American patriotism and justice.

"When they get these letters, they probably think there's really something big behind me, some big organization," he said. "But I'm like the Wizard of Oz. Behind the curtain, there's just this little guy with a typewriter."

A lot of people might consider the illegal immigrants championed by Mr. Hicks to be causes that deserve to be lost.

Some are people who missed deadlines. (An orphaned Haitian high school student did not know he could have asked for a special visa.) Others got caught up in the bureaucracy. (A woman filed her application for citizenship three months too early and, by the time she was told to file again, found herself at the end of a long backlog.)

One young woman from Trinidad and Tobago came legally as a student, found that she had cancer and stayed to get medical treatment. Others came under temporary worker visas and stayed on after their visas expired.

"His idea is helping people -- the Caribbean people," said a Haitian man named Pierre, who feared giving his last name because he overstayed his original work visa by many years.

"I went to lawyers and they told me they couldn't promise anything," he added. "They would say I had to file again and wait and I would pay them and nothing happened. Russell told me he would try to help, but he did it as a friend."

Mr. Hicks said he saw political activism as the best way to battle the immigration system.

He developed a strategy for spinning a pro forma letter from some politician's office into a battering ram to get through the next politician's door.

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Take his exchange with Hillary Rodham Clinton, while she was first lady and then a Senate candidate.

"As an honorably discharged veteran of the U.S. Army," Mr. Hicks wrote at the end of a letter making his case for special treatment for his Caribbean immigrants, "my sense of patriotism longs for satisfaction."

Mrs. Clinton's office responded with a noncommittal letter.

"Organizations like yours show that it really does take a village to raise a child, and to help new immigrants become acclimated to our state," the letter said.

"I applaud your efforts," she concluded.

Mr. Hicks pressed on, calling the White House.

"I'd call up and say, 'I'm calling from the Metropolitan Learning Center in New York about an initiative that's been endorsed by the first lady.' And that would be a click," Mr. Hicks said. "You have to get some names that trigger a response."

Finally, he reached the summit. A few weeks before President Clinton left office, a one-paragraph letter written on White House stationery arrived at Mr. Hicks's store.

It was signed by Irene B. Bueno, special assistant to the president, and reported that she had forwarded the requests for special consideration of Mr. Hicks's 46 clients to the immigration service. More important, in political dialect, she said she had requested that the I.N.S. meet with Mr. Hicks to discuss the matter.

The bound folder of requests to help Mr. Hicks's immigrants now rests with the immigration service in New York and has reached Mr. Atkinson, who is an aide to the director, Edward J. McElroy.

District directors have a certain amount of discretion, although much less than they had before restrictive immigration laws were passed in 1996, and can offer some relief to illegal immigrants who have not committed crimes and are not otherwise ineligible for resident status.

In some high-profile cases, immigration officials have bent the rules. Residence status was granted to the Honduran boy who charmed New York City two years ago with a made-up tale of walking to New York to find his father.

Mr. Atkinson said he could not comment on specific cases, like those in Mr. Hicks's file. But he said the Congressional liaison office at the district, which fields requests from politicians for status reports or help on immigration cases, already gets around 23,000 calls a year.

That means other people have the same idea as Mr. Hicks -- that political pressure might accomplish what the regulations do not. But he said he would not be deterred. The process, after all, is as instructive for immigrants as it is hopeful.

"We structure our government," he said. "We finance our government. Then we leave it alone like a lofty place we can't control. But what the founding fathers had in mind was an informed electorate, and that's what I'm working for."

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Graphic

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Photos: Russell Hicks has had the ear of senators, congressmen and the White House, all on behalf of illegal immigrants.; A letter from the White House is new ammunition for Mr. Hicks's cause. (Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)

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