

Queens Church Vigil Protests Arizona Immigration Law

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Body

It was 3 a.m., and the three young men in devil costumes with faces painted black and white danced wildly and cackled wickedly in a church basement in Queens. One of the dancers later said what everyone who watched them seemed to understand: that they were embodying the tough new immigration law in Arizona.

Marco Peralta, a construction worker and former amateur boxer, clenched his fists with his Popeye forearms bulging and said he would like to meet Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona, who on April 23 signed the law making it a crime in her state for an immigrant not to carry documents.

Yet Mr. Peralta, 56, like others at the all-night vigil for immigration reform at the Church of St. Leo on 49th Avenue in Corona, did not have violence in mind.

"I would like to pray with her, to change her heart," said Mr. Peralta, 56, an undocumented worker who added that he moved to New York from Peru a decade ago to send his son and daughter to college.

Queens Congregations United for Action, a religious community organization, had planned the vigil weeks ago. But the passage of the law in Arizona seemed to heighten the fervor of those who attended.

Rather than demonstrate in a large public space, as many others did across the nation on Saturday, the group focused on St. Leo's for a marathon of songs, dances, stories and prayers.

"People of all faiths are invited to participate," read a stenciled sign on white canvas outside the Roman Catholic church, behind a statue of Christ on the cross.

About 100 people began with a religious service in the main part of the church. "What is going on in parts of our country is not good," the Rev. William M. Hoppe, the church's pastor, said. "We must work to change unjust laws."

Everyone then moved downstairs. A succession of costumed dancers and guitarists kept the crowd on their feet. Amid pleas for reform, participants ate hot dogs and pizza and drank coffee and cola to fight yawns. A few lost that battle, and as the sky turned pale a young woman slept on a table. Another woman dozed in a chair.

The crowd by that time had dwindled to a fatigued few. Come sunrise, though, their ranks swelled to several dozen.

What seemed to be absent was the anger that has characterized much of the debate over the Arizona law. When about 60 people finally did take to the street, for a sleepy 7:30 a.m. march around the block, the only sound was that of the mariachi band bringing up the rear of the procession.

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Diana Avellanneda, 14, who was born in Queens and is in eighth grade at Louis Armstrong Middle School in East Elmhurst, said she wanted immigration reform for the sake of her parents, who are undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

"We live in constant fear that one day we might be separated from each other," she told the gathering.

Congregations United wrote down her story and those of many others, and Father Hoppe said they would be collected in a book to be given to public officials.

"We all want the same dream, the American dream," said Eddy Fernandez, 21, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, who works at a supermarket. "We want everyone to see that we're all the same."

Through the night, it was delicately acknowledged that nearly all those present could arouse suspicions if they set foot in Arizona.

"Arizona is the motivation," said Rosario Perea, 38, a legal immigrant from Peru who runs a housecleaning service.

A few expressed more lighthearted motives for attending. Diana Lopez, 9, said she was excited to be allowed to stay up all night.

"It feels fun," Diana said, adding that the dancers were "really cool."

Bertha Sarmiento, 44, Diana's mother, said it was important to her to show solidarity with illegal immigrants, many of whom she counts as friends.

"We're legal, but a lot of people don't have the same opportunity as us," she said. "We will make a sacrifice by staying up all night praying."

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Graphic

PHOTOS: The participants in an interfaith vigil on Saturday night at the Church of St. Leo in Corona included legal and illegal immigrants.

Marco Peralta, an undocumented worker from Peru, said at the vigil that he would like to pray with the governor of Arizona. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GOLDMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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