Julie LeMaster on Advocating for Local Immigrant and Refugee Families

It was a hectic ride in at 9 a.m.: fluorescent buses, playground yells, untied shoelaces, and a handful of teachers guiding school kids towards Roberts Paideia Academy in East Price Hill. The school day was beginning. For many of these kids, this school is a second home, a place to feel safe and to know they are supported. But for some, it's even more than that.

Julie Leftwich LeMaster joined us in the main office, greeted us warmly, and guided us to the oasis of The Immigrant & Refugee Law Center (I.R.L.C.). Covered in tapestries of famous immigrants, the I.R.L.C. has been growing exponentially since its founding in 2017. We sat down with co-founder Julie to hear exactly what is happening around the world and here in Cincinnati, and why immigrant and refugee voices deserve to be heard.

Interview by Blaire Bartish. Photography by Alex Larrison.

Did you see yourself in a role like this when you were younger?

It depends on what you refer to as "younger." I've always been interested in everything international. I love learning languages, other cultures, and foods, so I always felt like I'd be working with international populations in some way. When I was very young I had romantic visions of traveling and writing and just kind of, doing that [*laughs*], but as I got older I found more interest in human rights. I thought, "If I'm going to travel and write, I may as well write about human rights." And then it became, "Okay, I'm actually going to do human rights work."

How did the I.R.L.C. come about?

I'm from Cincinnati originally. And I've moved back and forth several times, as people do. I never thought I would come back, but I did, two years ago. I'd been living in D.C. for many years and doing international work, mainly with women in conflict countries. [When] I came back, I was continuing to do that work, and then when I was thinking about what I wanted to do more locally, I thought working with the immigrant/refugee population would fit the bill.

So when I did come back, I worked at the Freedom Center to help develop their human trafficking program, and then unfortunately when we had the crash of 2008 they had to cut funding, and that's when I went back to D.C. [to start] working on women's peace and

security issues with women in conflict countries. So obviously I saw refugee issues. It just made sense to bring that international work back home.

So I moved back in February of 2017, and that July I sat down with Darlene Kamine, who is now the executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute (C.L.C.I.). We're both alumni of Brandeis University, so I knew her through an alumni club that we had many years ago here in Cincinnati. I hadn't seen her in 10 years, so we were catching up, and I was telling her about all my adventures over the years, and she asked me what I wanted to do now that I was back. And I told her I'd like to work with immigrants and refugees, and she said, "Well, let me tell you what I've been doing."

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She was instrumental in working with Cincinnati Public Schools to develop these community learning centers, which are really hubs of services for students and families, but also the broader community around the school. You really have a holistic picture of education and child and family welfare. [The C.L.C.I.] runs this community learning center; the one at our partner school The Academy of World Languages; and several others. They had been providing things like a health center. There are all kinds of classes that happen for parents and for kids, and all these different services. But really what they were identifying – especially the director of the Welcome Center, Antonio Fernandez, and the school resource coordinator, Carlos Guzman, here at Roberts – was the need for legal services. [Immigrant and refugee families] just couldn't get the help they needed. Most can't afford a private attorney, and there are a couple

of other agencies in town, like Catholic Charities and Legal Aid, that do some pro bono work, but obviously their capacity is limited, as well, so a lot of families were falling through the cracks.

[Darlene] had been trying for several years to figure out how to get the legal services into this network of service providers. So when she said to me, "Is this something you'd be interested in?" I said, "That's exactly what I'd love to do!" We just met for coffee – we had no idea that we were going to come out of it with this whole life-changing organization. I just took it and ran. The next month we were incorporated; I spent that fall doing behind the scenes work, building the board, and we opened our doors in February.

We decided to locate here in Roberts for several reasons: That's where we were identifying the need, but also [because] it's a trusted space. As you can imagine, especially now, it's a scary time for immigrant and refugee families, no matter your status. They're really feeling in danger and unwelcome in our country. But in the community, so many of them know the Welcome Center, so it was easy for me to just step in, and then they knew me. I didn't have to work on building that trust – which was really important. And again, it was still a safe space. Schools and churches are really the only safe spaces for people at this point – it's still very scary.

Principal Beauchamp has been really wonderful and so supportive. He sees the need for this; he likes to tell the story that the day after the 2016 presidential election, more than half of the students didn't come to school. So when people think that, "Oh, we lost some policies, whatever; they're just affecting people coming to the border" – no, they're affecting our kids and our schools. We're working to stabilize families so that children can thrive, because there is that instability. If all they've been hearing is hate about people who are from different countries, they may not know their status or what any of it means, but they're hearing hatred and they're hearing, "Keep them out." [Beauchamp] even says that other children – like black kids who are Americans, because they're different – are asking, "Am I going to get kicked out, too?" You can really feel the ripple effects on things like attendance. If kids are

always worried that their parents might be taken, it's very destabilizing. It's very difficult to concentrate.

There's also a lot of kids that have been through trauma before they even come to the country. The families that we've worked with have escaped horrible conditions. Those who are seeking asylum, for instance, by coming through the southern border, then are detained, and put through more trauma... Some have been separated. People hear about the border and family separation – but families don't stay at the border. They come here. A lot of the families we work with have been through that experience. I spent a week this past summer working at the Dilley Family Detention Center, which is a Texas detention facility for moms and kids that are seeking asylum, because I wanted to see what our families go through.

So it's primarily parents that you see coming to you with legal needs, but do you see the direct effect that the I.R.L.C. has on the students here in the school?

Yes, in a few different ways. Actually sometimes, it is the kids coming to us as our clients because there are kids that have come in unaccompanied, so they have made that trip on their own.

Wow. And they're here, so they must be elementary age, yes?

Yes. [*Author's note: Roberts Paideia Academy serves students ages 3-13*.] Sometimes we have siblings – maybe one was 15 or 14, an older sibling. But we have some that come that are the ages they would enroll at Roberts. So in those cases, it is the students who are our clients… I'm sitting down and talking to them and getting their stories. In other cases, it is the parents we're working with, but we have team meetings. So if we know a particular family has issues – for example, one of the parents was just deported, or is about to be deported – us and the other service providers have regular meetings to talk about a case. For instance, there was a case last year where one of our kid's father was deported back to Mexico. So we kept an eye on him; he spent a lot of time with Antonio. We really work as a team, talking about the cases. [Antonio and Carlos] have a lot of background info since they've really worked with the families to see what they need, but that's something special about our setup. Other organizations that provide immigration and legal services, as they grow, have to add social services staff. But we don't have to do that, because it's already available through all the partners that we have here. And if it's not here, we bring it here. As attorneys we sometimes become the first people [clients] have told their whole

stories to. I've sat here for three and a half hours and they're crying, saying, "This is the first time I've told this whole story." But we really want them to have the ongoing support that they need so we can focus on their legal cases.

Who are the most influential women in your life?

Of course I have to start with my mom, right? [*Laughs.*] My mom kind of urged me to go to law school. And for a long time I kind of resented all the pushing. But she always said, "At least you'll have that degree to fall back on."

At first I was kind of like, "Whatever!" But now I can see that was her way of ensuring that I would always be independent no matter what happened, and that has served me well. So for that, I am certainly grateful to my mother.

One of my favorite memories in terms of "big women" is: Years ago, Madeleine Albright came to speak here in town, and she is my hero! I just found being able to hear her talk in person was so inspiring. And she was really one of the pioneering women. Because she was Secretary of State, because of my passion for the international work, I was just really in awe.

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And then I'd say the women I've had the privilege of working with over the years. When I was in D.C. and doing international work around gender equality and women's rights, I had the privilege of

working with amazing women around the world. One of the projects I was working on for several years was in Africa. I was based in Uganda and did work in Rwanda and South Sudan. We were looking at the international women, peace, and security framework, looking at countries that had experienced horrible conflicts that had really affected women in horrible ways. In the conflicts we've seen in recent decades, women are used as weapons of war. After the conflicts were over, how do [the women] put their systems back together? So on paper, at least, they have the constitutions like the international bill of human rights; we have laws in place that protect women, [but] we really wanted to see how they used these frameworks. So we spent all this time with women that had been involved in their constitutional processes… and it was just amazing to hear their experiences and what they had gone through. Especially in Rwanda, because we know about the genocide that happened there. Talking to the women there and hearing how they had fought back after this horrible genocide… Basically they said, "There was nobody else left. All of our men were dead and we had to find a way to come together and move forward." And they did, and that was just amazing to hear their stories.

One of the last consulting jobs I did, I was working with the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. They sent me near the border in Syria, and I was working with a group of Syrian human rights defenders training them to advocate around sexual violence and conflict. In the room with us we had a group of women that were Syrian refugees living in Turkey. And then by a video conference we had a group of 19 people. They were in the middle of a war; there were literally bombs going off outside of their conference room. And yet they wanted to learn how to talk about sexual violence in conflict and how to document the stories of what was happening in their communities so that one day there could be justice. But again, these women were living through the most horrific [things]. We can't even imagine what it's like to live through these kinds of wars or the violence that happens. And yet, they wanted to learn how to be advocates.

What are other major issues in the lives of the women that you work with?

A lot of these women have saved their children. [Many] of them don't have a partner; they're widows if they're coming from conflict countries. They've fled with their children; sometimes we have moms from Central American countries who have had to leave their children. So this whole concept that we hear from the administration of, "These people are putting their children in danger…" They're actually doing everything they can to save their children. And sometimes that means leaving them behind. Sometimes if [they] make that trek, it can take weeks or months. It can be very dangerous with all kinds of extortion and violence. Some of the women come from very conservative cultures. Some of the cultures we work with, the women don't have their freedom.

One issue that comes up a lot is when there is a bad marital situation or domestic violence, and the woman needs to leave. And it's hard because they come from these environments, where it wasn't like me; their mom wasn't telling them, "Go be independent." And [in those situations] the husband isn't going to let them leave. And that can actually affect their immigration status. For instance, if they need to move forward to get their green card, they need documentation or consent from their husbands. We see that with our moms across the board trying to get passports, because the U.S. requires consent from the father. And a lot of women we work with, either the father got them pregnant and took off, or hasn't been around in a long time, or in many cases is abusive, and they might not be in the country. We have a lot of women who are here who suffered domestic violence, and then their partners were arrested and deported. And then they're trying to get passports for their kids, but they have to show why they can't get the father's consent. It's very challenging.

Why are immigrant/refugee issues Cincinnati's issues?

Because they're families that are part of our communities. They're in our schools; they're in our neighborhoods. As I mentioned before, this is not just a border issue; people don't stay at the border. Not everybody even comes through the southern border. We have so many families here; the estimates are around 30,000 refugee families, and they've come in with refugee status. They've gone through the immigration process before they come to this country. But they're here. Their kids are studying with our kids. They're working. One thing that's really important to understand is that they're helping support our community. If you actually look at the numbers, immigrant/refugee families contribute billions of dollars to our system and they take out much less than they contribute.

They build businesses. They're part of our community, just like any of us.

Most people I know don't go back further than our grandparents. And our grandparents came, and they built lives, and made sure we all got an education. That's what these families are trying to do. They want to make a better life; their kids are in school, they're trying to learn English, and they want to be a valuable part of society. And they're the future. Those kids are here, as much as my child is. They're part of us.

Do you know an awesome woman of Cincy? Nominate her here! New features launch every Monday.

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