

my name is tania, and i am undocumented

My LSE degree was in Comparative Politics, but whether I was studying terrorism with James Hughes, or international development with Peter Loizos, or local power with John Sidel, the same lesson arose. In organising, we call it the Iron Rule: never, never do for someone what they can do for themselves, writes **Stephen Smith**.

Tania Unzueta is a young woman who is standing up for her rights. She is speaking to 800 people gathered in Chicago's Federal Plaza, a hundred yards away from federal agents with guns whose job it is to arrest and deport people like her. Immigrants without papers. But when she says those words: 'My name is Tania, and I am undocumented', the crowd cheers. This is why she and seven other undocumented youths are telling their stories. To come out of the shadows. To say to their parents, to their public officials, to men with guns: we will not live in fear.

There are between 11 and 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States – more than the entire population of Greece. Many work long hours. They pay taxes. They go to church. They own businesses. But on the nightly news they are vilified as 'illegals' – somehow responsible for everything from swine flu to violent crime to stealing jobs. My name is Stephen Smith, and my job is to fight alongside immigrants and their allies to build power and battle legislation to make life better for them and for the country at large. I am a community organiser and a graduate of LSE.

The night before Tania's speech, I was in a computer lab in a building in Chicago's Pilsen neighbourhood that serves as a local radio station and community centre. The computers had been pushed to one side of the room. Newspapers were still scattered on the floor from the night before, when students painted signs with slogans like 'Undocumented and Unafraid'. We were using the room for rehearsals. When you are preparing to risk being deported (at worst), or losing your job (at best), you want to get the words right.

These young people are at the vanguard of the national immigrant rights movement because of their courage. Because, as one student put it in his speech: 'we can no longer try to fight for our rights in the third person'. This is what LSE taught me: when it comes to governing, no one can do it for you. You need to have the courage of your convictions.



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The field of international development provides the most horrific examples of what happens when well-meaning outsiders and elites try to take government into their own hands. In Somalia, aid gets diverted. In Botswana, innovative anti-AIDS programmes borrowed from Uganda are implemented by foreign aid workers – and largely as a result, they fail. Worse yet, history teaches us that terrorism and political violence emerge when legitimate means of political engagement are denied.

Understanding these lessons is one essential step, but implementing them is the hard part. I am a white man who grew up in the American south and went to fancy schools. Like many of my classmates, I want to make the world a better place, but I am aware of the ways in which 'do-gooders' can do more harm than good. In my work, I try to be a good ally. I try to agitate, and I

try to listen. Sometimes I am out front, but more often I am following the courage of people like Tania. When possible, our campaign uses my privilege as an asset; it is sometimes helpful to have a white guy in a suit.

I love my job. ■



Stephen Smith

(MSc Comparative Politics 2008) is an organiser with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. He is the author of *Stoking the Fire of Democracy: our generation's introduction to grassroots organising* (ACTA Publications, 2009).