

United Action Connecticut meets to prepare 2012 program

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St. Dorothy, a Benedictine nun, said that the greatest evil of the day is a sense of futility — what good can one person do? She said we must see that we are laying one brick at a time, taking one step at a time. We can be responsible only for one action at the present moment; it is God who can multiply them."

Verrett mentioned some successes that UACT task forces helped to get through the state legislature: (1) The Health Care Reform bill has become law, (2) Gov. Malloy has signed a bill that allows undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition rates for their children at Connecticut's public colleges and universities, and (3) a state earned income tax credit for low wage workers with families has been enacted.

Three brief presentations were followed by discussion groups on health care reform, immigration reform, jobs and economic support and other issues.

Dr. Steve Smith, speaking on health care reform, started his medical career at Boston University in 1966. He described the differences in patient treatment at that time between the private University Hospital of the medical school that treated white, middle class patients, and Boston City Hospital where the people of the south end of Boston got their health care.

City Hospital was a "hodgepodge" of 19th century buildings, "in various states of disrepair with dirty, cluttered and chaotic halls, and huge 30-bed open wards. Low-income people couldn't go to the University Hospital, because it didn't have an emergency room, and they could not enter that hospital without referrals. It represented to me the essence of a two-class system of health care; it was unjust."

He told of a 30-year old patient with a form of lupus and in kidney failure. Her kidney doctor and rheumatologist had "dumped" her because she couldn't pay them. Another man, a diabetic who could not afford to take the prescribed doses of insulin became eligible for Medicaid while at City Hospital. After he was discharged, he lost his Medicaid, because it only covered a certain number of weeks after a hospital discharge. Soon after, he died.

Now, 45 years later, Smith is working with UACT to bring some justice to the health care system. He quoted The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Smith related that today, the health care program is covering

more people. Smith hopes that the poor will now get help from some specialists. Smith encouraged the discussion groups to consider "how are we going to help the Health Care Reform Act survive? How will we continue to pay for the rising costs of health care?"

Lorella Praeli, of Connecticut Students for a Dream, speaking about illegal immigration, presented the tragic story of Joaquin Luna, an 18-year-old senior in Texas, who shot himself just after Thanksgiving. An illegal alien who had been brought to the U.S. by his parents as a newborn, excelled in high school and aspired to become a civil engineer. Luna despaired of fulfilling his dream when the U.S. Senate failed to pass the DREAM Act, which would provide a path to legalization for children of undocumented immigrants. He believed that even a college degree would make finding a job impossible because of his illegal status. His fears were augmented by recent crackdowns in Arizona, Alabama and Texas on employers who hire illegal immigrants.

Praeli, admitting that coming out as an illegal immigrant was dangerous, said "you have to come out and speak the truth if you want to see change." She said Luna's story presents two challenges: one, the need for pro-immigrant federal legislation; the second, which would bring about the first, is "the need to organize — to work on a one-to-one basis with the huge undocumented population in Connecticut and the rest of the United States."

She emphasized that UACT needed to empower them to take control of their lives and fight for the changes.

"Once you are in the fight," insisted Praeli, "you won't feel that there is no tomorrow."

"A year ago," reported Praeli, "most of us couldn't really speak about who we really were; we lived in the shadows and in fear. The fact that we are now coming out to talk about our undocumented identity, that's a victory." (Illegal immigrants have come out in rallies in New York City, Illinois, and Charlotte, North Carolina.)

Praeli sees two possible ways for things to be going in this country. One, illegal immigrants can continue to come out and fight for changes in immigrant laws. The other way is as it happened in Alabama where a tough new immigration law frightened parents into removing their children from elementary schools. "That is scary! That's an injustice!" emphasized Praeli. "I doubt that circumstances in Connecticut will be that extreme, but when we hear that

people in Alabama, or Florida, or Arizona are living like this, we can't just be spectators. When an undocumented worker has to take his kid out of school, that takes away the safe, happy childhood of his documented counterpart because that kid has now been filled with fear."

Praeli requested that participants remember Dr. King's words: "Our lives begin to end the day that we become silent about things that matter."

"So," added Praeli, "if you're not active in some way, if you're not listening to or not talking about the Joaquins, or the people in Alabama, or the students who want to go to college but can't, then there is something missing."

The third and last speaker was Peter Thor of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). He said, "America is indeed in crisis. It's foolish to think that a democracy can survive when any of the important parts are weakened. Corporations have wrested control over many elements of our society."

Corporations have changed the rules, making joining unions very difficult. Yet there is still "a tenacious desire of workers to form unions." Thor claimed that more than 40 million nonunion members would join unions if they could, but 80 percent believe joining would get them fired.

"Union workers in many factories," stated Thor, "could not support their families or buy houses," and he said there is no place in America where an apartment is affordable for a minimum wage worker with a family.

The occupy movement has been led mostly by America's children who became educated and then couldn't find a job. People say the occupy movement doesn't have an agenda. Thor rebutted that: "'I think 'We are the 99 percent' is very clear. We need to learn from them. 'We're the 99 percent' is as bold as 'right to work.' We need to balance the power of this country by reinvigorating unions and small business." Thor said the idea of community — each small business, and each union — working together has to be brought back to life.

The assembly separated into four different groups: jobs and the economy, immigration reform, health care, and "other" issues.

Reports from the Groups

The health care group suggested that every congregation share with their congregants where we are in the health care issues and build a strong health care task force to

educate others.

The Immigration group had great concerns about sending people back to their countries, causing hardships for many families. The group also wanted Medicaid care for immigrants. Two suggestions the group made were working with the state legislature and attending town hall meetings with candidates to keep the pressure on for improvements for illegal immigrants.

In the jobs and the economy, a large consensus held that advocacy must include staying in touch with each other and our elected officials, becoming more involved in every stage in the electoral process, at both the local and national levels. Others said people needed to do more networking to help each other, and to empower people to help themselves.

The other issues group suggested comprehensive election reform. Lobbyists' influence on politicians produced legislation that helped the richest Americans but not the middle class or the poor. The solution: take the money out of elections.

Another concern was homelessness, especially homeless children. This issue was basically brought up by Thor: minimum wage workers and their families often end up homeless. That needs to be changed, said the leader, especially for children living in cars, trucks and vans.

During the wrap-up, Roland Cockfield, a member of the NAACP, made a call to action, stating, "We are all people of some kind color or the other. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers." Even though racism still exists, during the hurricane and the snowstorm, we helped each other. Injustice somewhere is injustice everywhere. We have an obligation to continue to think about these problems and their solutions.

Ocean Pellett, of the Niantic Community Church: "We should see our teams as the core and our congregations as the whole apple; then we must be in the same basket together in order to see the fruit of justice come out of that." She encouraged people to choose task groups to join and exchange names and emails for keeping in touch with each other.

UACT will have a retreat on January 28, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Niantic Community Church, 170 Pennsylvania Ave. Anyone interested in learning more about the group or who would like to become active in planning the 2012 agenda is encouraged to attend. Questions can be answered by phoning 860-739-6208 or e-mailing lrigono@sbcglobal.net.