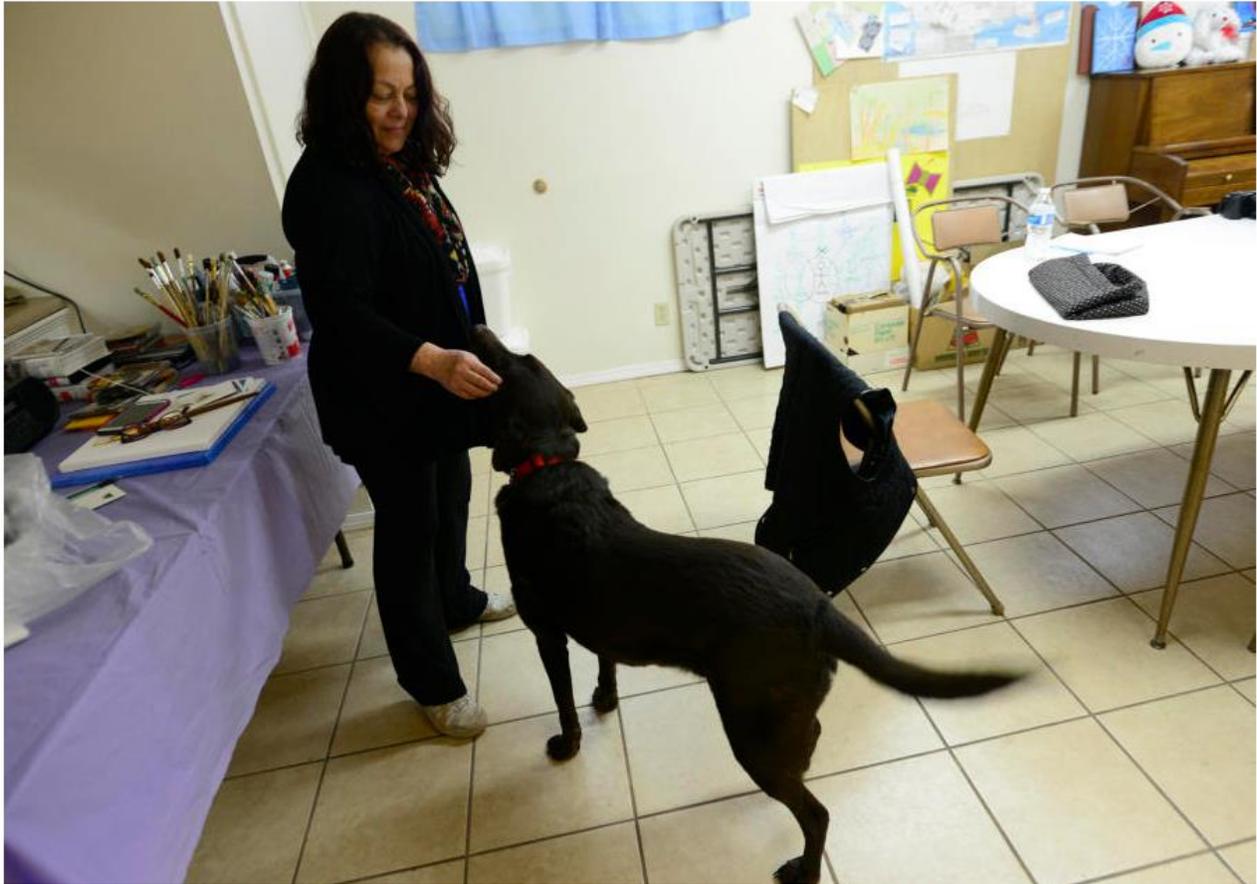


Local immigrants adapt to life in limbo

By Maggie Shepard / Journal Staff Writer
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Emma Membreno-Sorto, an immigrant from Honduras, pets her dog Hershey in the basement of the Albuquerque Friends Meeting House. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

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Emma Membreno-Sorto tries not to cook anything too strong-smelling in the basement kitchen of the Albuquerque Friends Meeting House.

The windowless kitchen, with labels on cabinets guiding congregants to the sugar or pots and pans, doesn't have very good ventilation, and Membreno-Sorto doesn't want any thing, or smell, to make her presence more of a burden than it already is.

For the last nine months, the Quaker congregation has housed her in the meeting house basement. And hundreds of Albuquerque residents are providing her with around-the-clock "accompaniment volunteers" as a layer of protection – and alarm – should federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents come to execute the standing deportation order for her.

Those same volunteers are also keeping 24-hour watch at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, where Kadhim Al-bumohammed has been living a basement life, too, for the last five months.



Iraqi refugee Kadhim Al-bumohammed takes his evening round of medication for several serious medical conditions with a cup of Turkish coffee prepared by his wife, Reeham Majeed, in the makeshift kitchen in the basement of the First Congregational United Church of Christ where Al-bumohammed has lived for the last five months. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

The two, Membreno-Sorto from Honduras and Al-bumohammed from Iraq, are among about a dozen people nationwide living in religious buildings, an act called taking sanctuary, as their immigration cases wind through ICE bureaucracy.

Both are waiting for ICE to process immigration paperwork before beginning more complicated court proceedings with the hope of securing a green card for permanent residency.

Al-bumohammed, 64, who has several serious health issues, hit ICE's radar due to a misdemeanor charges from 1996 and a missed ICE court hearing. He has lost three appeals to reinstate the refugee status he earned helping the U.S. military in the first Gulf War in Iraq and at bases in California.

Membreno-Sorto, 58, is battling cancer and has essentially been undocumented since she arrived in the U.S. in 1991. She has regularly checked in with ICE since 2011 and has no criminal record.



Emma Membreno-Sorto, an immigrant from Honduras, holds a painting she made while living in the basement of the Albuquerque Friends Meeting House near Downtown Albuquerque. She paints to keep herself busy during her stay, which began about nine months ago. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

ICE spokeswoman Leticia Zamarripa said in a written statement that the “sensitive locations policy” guides agents to “generally” avoid enforcement at churches. But the policy says enforcement at a sensitive location can happen in an emergency, with supervisor approval or if other police action leads enforcers to the location.

So on the door of the Quaker’s meetinghouse is a sign alerting any law enforcers they must have a warrant to enter the premises.

Still, volunteers, who each take a four-hour day shift or 12-hour night shift, watch the locked doors at the churches and sleep on couches to listen for activity outside.



A sign on the locked entrance door to the Albuquerque Friends Meeting House, a Quaker church near Downtown, advises law enforcers they must have a warrant before entering. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

“The vast amount of volunteerism that is required to support them is mind boggling,” said the pair’s pro-bono immigration lawyer, Rebecca Kitson.

The New Mexico Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice has trained more than 400 volunteers, most of them members of local religious communities. The group also coordinates the shifts at both churches, in addition to donations, groceries, visiting doctors and media visits.

“It’s a sacred time for me,” said Sarah Malone, a Quaker meeting member and a member of its Sanctuary Task Force. “I put my phone down. I spend time getting to know her and be with her. It takes a lot of courage and faith to do what she has done, and she’s just precious.”

Loss of freedom

The affection is mutual.

Membreno-Sorto takes food to as many of the watch shift volunteers as she can.

“I get a lot of support from a lot of people,” Membreno-Sorto said in Spanish, and the food is her way to say thank you.

She attends the Sunday meeting for worship, where she says she has been fully welcomed.

Meeting members and people from the broader immigrant support community in Albuquerque visit her, bringing her paints and canvasses, sewing projects or just a few hours of conversation to break up the monotony of her days.

“I try to keep busy and grateful,” she said. “You can’t do much more than that.”

She takes the experience “day by day” as she waits for word about her immigration paperwork status.

Meanwhile, she continues to receive treatment for breast cancer, with physicians visiting her in the church basement.

Her husband, Robert, has moved in with her since their rented home in Albuquerque wasn't much of a home without his wife. They share common space with the congregation's children's activities, though the community created a special bedroom for them from one of the First Day School, or Sunday School, rooms. The congregation has brought them a Christmas tree, too.

Robert continues to work as a truck driver. But there are no dinner dates or walks for their dog, Hershey, who also lives in the basement with them.

There are no trips together to the grocery store, or filling up the gas tank to run errands together.

It's those freedoms, the easiness of coming and going, that Membreno-Sorto says she misses most.

“Not being able to leave on my own” is the hardest, she said. “The freedom.”

Life in limbo

Membreno-Sorto traveled from Honduras to cross the border into the U.S. when she was about 32. She applied for asylum but says she never received notice of a court date and went about her life, moving from Atlanta to Colorado to New Mexico.

During that time, she missed an ICE court date she said she didn't know about until 2011, when ICE agents contacted her at her and Robert's home in Albuquerque.

Zamarripa said in a email that ICE granted her supervised stay on humanitarian grounds in 2011.

Since then, Membreno-Sorto has been in a sort of limbo status that basically allowed her, and thousands of other similarly situated immigrants, to live in the U.S. as long as she checked in with ICE at regular intervals and didn't commit crimes. She obeyed, meeting all her check-ins and getting not even a traffic ticket.

But in the months after President Donald Trump's inauguration, media reports circulated of a change in ICE enforcement.

Immigrants in the limbo status were being called into check-ins before their regularly scheduled time, and some of them were being immediately detained and deported, according to news reports.

Then Membreno-Sorto got called up for a check-in. Zamarripa did not comment on the nature of this irregularly scheduled check-in.

With her family and the Quaker community, which had agreed to welcome any immigrant in need, Membreno-Sorto decided instead to take sanctuary.

“We’re coming up on a year. That’s a long time to live in a very small space,” attorney Kitson said. “It begs the question what would compel someone to do that.”

Because it is a civil – not a criminal – court process, lawyers are not provided to defendants, as they are in criminal proceedings.

‘A type of jail’



Reeham Majeed prepares Turkish coffee in a makeshift kitchen in the basement of the First Congregational United Church of Christ. Her husband, Kadhim Al-bumohammed, has taken refuge in the church since July in order to address his deportation order. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

It has been about five months in sanctuary for Kadhim Al-bumohammed.

He and his wife, Reeham Majeed, and their daughter, Courtney Al-bumohammed, a 17-year-old Manzano High School student, have done their best to make a home out of the cinder-block basement at the First Congregational United Church of Christ.

They brought in some rugs and chairs. There's a dining table and make-shift kitchen. Turkish coffee is served to guests, and three beds are set up in a room for the family to sleep should Majeed and Courtney decide to spend the night.

At first, after Al-bumohammed chose to go to the church instead of his irregularly scheduled check-in, Majeed would stay every night in the church basement with him, leaving their daughter home alone.

"I got scared one night," Courtney said.

"So I went home," Majeed said.

That leaves Al-bumohammed alone in the basement for hours until Majeed brings daily meals or one of his children or friends visits. He watches a lot of TV.

"All that time, I'm not talking. At least in jail I would have someone to talk to," he said, with a tinge of regret for his decision to take sanctuary. "I don't have the moon at the night or the sun in the day. It's a jail, a type of jail."

But he says at least he has access to medicine and doctors – which he needs for numerous, serious health problems, including diabetes, heart and breathing problems.

And most importantly, he says, he has his daughter and his wife and other children.

He says his wife would likely return to Iraq with him if he eventually is deported. Courtney says she would go with her dad, too.

"But she would be killed," he said, because his daughter is too Americanized and wears shorts.

"I don't let her (come) because of the militia (in Iraq). She speaking English, she wearing shorts," he said of Courtney, who plays basketball at Manzano. "Over there they shoot her, they kill her. Honestly ... I just want peace, for my family, for freedom."

(continued)



Prescription drugs and a Quran crowd a desktop in Iraqi refugee Kadhim Al-bumohammed's room at the First Congregational United Church of Christ. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

He says, and others agree, that he, too, would likely be killed if he returned to Iraq, for collaborating with the U.S. military during the first Gulf War. He'd been a prisoner under Saddam Hussein and aided the U.S. military in Iraq, which helped him secure legal refugee status in the United States in 1994.

He lived in California first, marrying an American citizen and starting a family as he worked on a military base helping with language and cultural education.

“If I thought I faced deportation, I would not serve the Army one minute, because now I'm a traitor to (Iraq),” he said.

Two years after arriving in the U.S., Al-bumohammed was charged with two misdemeanor domestic violence charges, triggering an immigration hearing, which would not have necessarily resulted in a deportation order – if he had attended. But he says his lawyer failed to alert him of the hearing, scheduled at the same time as he was teaching classes on the military base.

Al-bumohammed lost three rounds of appeal to stay in the country and was ordered deported in 2010. But Iraq wasn't accepting deportees, so he was allowed to stay as long as he checked in annually, which Kitson said he has.

Changing status

That changed earlier this year in March when Iraq agreed to begin accepting deportees in exchange for being taken off the list of countries on Trump's travel ban.

That triggered an ICE roundup of more than 1,000 of Iraqi immigrants who have criminal records – including Al-bumohammed.

Zamarripa, with ICE, did not comment on Al-bumohammed's case.

He was scheduled for his annual check-in in September, but he was called up for a check-in in July and told to bring a packed bag.

He instead went into sanctuary.

A federal judge in Michigan has since halted the deportation of all Iraqis pending a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of about 1,400 Iraqis nationwide, including Al-bumohammed and another Albuquerque-based man, Abbas Al-Sokaini.

Al-Sokaini, who had also been in a type of limbo status triggered after he was convicted of drug possession in 2000, was taken into ICE custody in June. He remains in custody – where isn't quite clear – despite the federal court ruling.

It is not clear when, or if, he will be released. He had lived in Albuquerque for more than 20 years with his wife and family.

“If there is any good points to all of this, I'm really glad Kadhim did what he did because he would still be in jail,” like Abbas, Al-bumohammed's attorney Kitson said, noting Kadhim's extensive medical needs. “It very well might have saved his life.” ■