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Immigrant supporters march in Morristown

Participants in vigil call for reforms, recognition of laborers' dignity, identity

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MORRISTOWN -- Participants at a vigil on the Green Monday evening called for comprehensive immigration reform and the need to recognize the dignity of immigrants' labor and identity.

Some 40 people attended the vigil organized by Wind of the Spirit, the local immigrant resource center. The event occurred exactly one year after a boisterous, anti-illegal immigrant rally in front of town hall on South Street.

At Monday's gathering, participants formed a human chain, wearing T-shirts sporting a large capital letter. Standing in a semi-circle in the middle of the Green, they spelled out "No human being is illegal." A song titled "Deportee" played in the background.

"Some of us are illegal and some are not wanted," the lyrics said. "Our work contract's out and we have to move on; six hundred miles to that Mexican border; they chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves."

"This is a special night for us," said coordinator Maria Vargas. "We are not here to whine, but to organize. We are people of the world in one place (Morristown)."

After the group got organized, the participants walked nearly a mile in silence from the Green to town hall and then returned.

Stuart Sydenstricker, one of the leaders of Wind of the Spirit, said such policies as 287G -- Homeland Security's program to deputize police officers as immigration officers -- are the result of the government's failure to bring about comprehensive immigration reform. He said an overhaul in immigration policy is necessary to prevent raids and breaking up families.

Aimee Sostowski, Wind of the Spirit's program development coordinator, said Monday's event recognized that one year had passed since the anti-immigration rally and a counter-protest and separate prayer vigil.

She said that while much of the anti-immigrant hoopla has died down from a year ago, there remains an awareness that things could always take a turn for the worse.

"Things have quieted down, but there is still a possibility that 287G could be put in place," she said. "Raids are still taking place, although it goes largely unreported."

Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in Newark were not able to verify any recent raids in Morristown.

Last year's rally, which was organized by Robb Pearson through his ProAmerica Society Web site, was attended by about 500 people and included a speech by Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello.

Five people -- all affiliated with counter-protesters -- were arrested and others were ticketed for disorderly conduct.

Simultaneous to that rally, a much quieter prayer vigil took place outside St. Margaret's Church on Sussex Avenue, about a mile away. About 100 people took part in the vigil, sponsored by several immigrant support organizations.

Morristown and Cresitello became part of the national debate on immigration after the mayor applied to the Homeland Security Department in March 2007 to have several town police officers deputized as immigration agents. The effort has thus far been unsuccessful, after county officials declared in February they would not support such a move, citing the potentially high cost of housing detainees in the county jail.

Pearson, who was a resident of Mount Olive at the time of the protest, has since moved to Pennsylvania and changed his views on immigration. He said earlier this month that he was "caught up in the ultra-conservative fervor that surrounds the illegal-immigration camp."

Looking back on the rally, Cresitello said he wasn't particularly proud of speaking there, given the vitriol surrounding it. However, he said the rally did make the point of stressing the need to secure the country's borders, to prevent people from illegally crossing.

"That was the reason why I ultimately spoke," Cresitello said. "It was unfortunate we had to resort to that."

Regarding Monday's Wind of the Spirit, he said he supports the organization's right to rally.

Cresitello, however, said that personally he believes the organization would be more effective in helping to "educate people to not violate the laws of the country," and helping to prevent such practices as stacking, or overcrowding.
