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Left, William Nolberto, 16, Franck Nolberto, Ariany Nolberto, 2, Jenny Hernandez and Elieth Nolberto, 6 moved to Frankfort in March 2021 from Honduras.



Below left, Ticha, 14, Kathryn, Simeon, 12, Thiago, 8, and Orlin Urbina live in Versailles.



Below right, Elquin Omar Mayorga, Rafaela Hernandez and Zoe Arleth Mayorga Hernandez, 8, originally from Honduras, now live in Frankfort.

Welcome to
Kentucky

Frankfort Immigration Assistance
Network helping families get established

story by
CHARLES W. PEARL
photographs by
HANNAH BROWN



Elieth Nolberto, 6, Jenny Hernandez, Franck Nolberto, Ariany Nolberto, 2, William Nolberto, 16, Ticha Urbina, 14, Margaret O'Donnell, Kathryn Urbina, Becky Shipp, Simeon Urbina, 12, Orlin Urbina, Thiago Urbina, 8, Zoe Arleth Mayorga Hernandez, 8, (holding Violet), Elquin Omar Mayorga and Rafaela Hernandez pose for a photo at the Old Capitol in downtown Frankfort. Through the Frankfort Immigration Assistance Network, O'Donnell and Shipp are helping the families, who immigrated to Frankfort from Honduras, get established.

Margaret O'Donnell's name is on the Frankfort Interfaith Council's 2021 Ruby Layson Award for promoting the interfaith qualities of justice, compassion and human kindness. But the October evening she was recognized as the award recipient, O'Donnell quickly mentioned, in a kind way, that the plaque also should have included Becky Shipp's name.

Attorney O'Donnell, founder and executive director of the Frankfort Immigration Assistance Network (FIAN), thanked the council for recognizing immigrants.

"Migration is the human condition, folks moving to find better opportunities and to be safe," O'Donnell said. "Borders are unnatural barriers to that human condition. Immigrants are good, hardworking folks, who make this community better."

"Recognition of my work renews my hope for the future. But I can't do the work alone. Becky Shipp has been there since day one of FIAN's founding, and has attended almost every meeting. She works tirelessly to help immigrant families and has a good relationship with them."

Shipp was born in Mexico to Christian missionary parents, and lived in Mexico until she was 14 years old. She speaks fluent Spanish. She serves as an interpreter whenever she's needed, and does paperwork needed to help immigrant families apply for assistance through the Resource Office for Social Ministries (ROSM).

"The volunteer work I have done with FIAN has made my life richer and busier," Shipp said. "I've heard Margaret say, 'If we want to live in a safe community, everybody in our community needs to feel safe.' Immi-

grants should feel safe. We need immigrants. Our population growth is on the decline. Within our own community, state and country, we have room for immigrants. We need to supplement (the work force) to sustain our communities and our economy. That's a very practical look at it. Immigrants are very motivated to work to support themselves and their families. That's a good reason to welcome them. They have overcome many obstacles, and still have so many obstacles to overcome."

The award O'Donnell received is named in honor of the late Ruby Layson, a charter member of the interfaith council who died in 2017. She was a journalist, educator, environmentalist, world traveler, and tireless worker for peace and equality.

Evolution of FIAN

FIAN, staffed by about 15 volunteers, began in 2017 at the start of then-President Donald Trump's administration. A group of local citizens saw a need for a network to support immigrants residing in Frankfort and Franklin County, most of whom came from Mexico and Central America.

Since then, FIAN "has evolved to provide a broad range of services to immigrants," O'Donnell said. "We collaborate with local social service

nonprofits," such as ROSM and the Emergency Community Food Pantry of Franklin County; local schools and the Franklin County Health Department.

FIAN provides rides to immigration court meetings and medical appointments; and sponsors an English Learners program.

"We do a lot of interpreting," O'Donnell said. "We have FIAN volunteers who speak Spanish fluently. We have helped locate people, who have been detained by ICE (U.S. Customs and Enforcement)."

In addition to Shipp, other key volunteers who have helped local immigrants include Scott Rollins, senior minister at Highland Christian Church; Charles Howell, former pastor at Good Shepherd Catholic Church; and Pastor Yolanda Diaz at Iglesia Familiar Mana.

"Attorneys Zachary Horn and Jason Hart, as well as immigration attorneys in Louisville and Lexington, have helped me better understand immigration law," O'Donnell said.

Volunteers have donated furniture and housewares, and then transported them to where they're needed.

"After a couple of years of hoping FIAN could have a relationship with Franklin County Public Schools, they reached out to us in 2019. School officials now contact us when they're planning functions for immigrant families," O'Donnell said.

"My biggest thrill, however, was getting a call in late February 2021 from the Franklin County Health Department, asking if I thought I could get 75 immigrants registered in four days for COVID vaccinations. I was more confident than Becky that we would accomplish that task. Four years of relationship-building came through. All I had to do was make inquiries to those in the community with whom we had relationships, and the word spread like wildfire."

When FIAN was launched in 2017, O'Donnell said she had no idea what could be accomplished.

"Volunteer Chris Schimmoeller and I agreed that creating relationships was the key," O'Donnell said. "But where Chris thought it would come about by planning gatherings, I believed it would come about one person/one family at a time. If FIAN helped one person, that person would tell another, and our work would spread by word of mouth. And that is what has happened. It confirmed what I have always known through everything I do — it is always about the relationships that are built along the way."

It's not only the interfaith council that recognizes and appreciates the compassionate work of FIAN and its founder. Three local immigrant families, who have ties to Honduras and came here to escape violence, recently expressed gratitude for everything FIAN volunteers have done to help them.

Franck Nolberto and wife Jenny Hernandez, and their three children came to Frankfort in March 2021. Nolberto said the FIAN volunteers "are amazing people. They give us furniture, and do everything to help us. It's a big relief to be here." In Honduras, "gangs tried to kill my family."

Elquin Omar Mayorga came here five years ago to help support his wife, Rafaela Hernandez, and young daughter, who were still in Honduras. They both joined him here two years later, "because it became too dangerous for them to be down there," Mayorga said, through interpreter Shipp. "Suddenly, things started changing and it got out of control. They were not safe. It's much better here. The primary thing is we feel safer." O'Donnell and FIAN have been a tremendous help to their family, Rafaela and Elquin said.

Honduran native Orlin Urbina, who has been in the U.S. for decades, said, "I am blessed having Margaret O'Donnell in my life. She has been so helpful to us when nobody else was willing to help with immigration paperwork, which is difficult to understand."

Although his life in Honduras was very hard, deciding to leave his home country wasn't easy. And traveling to the U.S. as a teenager was



Through the Frankfort Immigration Assistance Network, Margaret O'Donnell, left, and Becky Shipp are helping immigrant families get established in Frankfort.

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— Orlin Urbina

A heart hooked on helping the poor

O'Donnell, 61, was born in New Jersey but grew up in Vincennes, Indiana, where her father was a longtime executive director of Sigma Pi fraternity, founded at Vincennes University. Margaret's parents, grandparents and siblings were in fraternities and sororities.

"But I wasn't inclined to do any of that stuff," O'Donnell said. "I thought maybe something was wrong with me. So when I went to Indiana University, for my mother, I thought I should at least go through rush. It's very competitive in Bloomington, and I'm sure I sent off a vibe, how I was dressed, that I really don't want to be doing this."

"I did not get one single bid, and it broke my mother's heart — not that I didn't make it, but she felt she had forced me to do something I had no interest in."

Was O'Donnell disappointed?

"Well, nobody likes to be rejected," she said, smiling. "You would rather be the one to decline an invitation. But it's a good example of following your heart. Don't do something if your heart isn't in it."

She majored in political science and German at IU, and then went to IU's Robert McKinney School of Law in Indianapolis. In the summer after her second year of law school, she worked for the Marion County (Indiana) Public Defender Office.

"At that point, the office only represented clients charged with misdemeanor and Class D felonies, not the more serious cases, and I just fell in love with it. Still to this day, I can remember walking into a jail lockup behind a bench where the judge was sitting, and smelling things I had never smelled in my life. I now know it was the smell of poor people, who hadn't taken showers forever, or even brushed their teeth. That was a visceral thing, and I was hooked."

"I wanted to help people in that type of situation, poor people. I started out representing people charged with crimes. But in the whole trajectory of my law career, just trying to help poor people has been at the core of my work."

In 37 years as a lawyer, O'Donnell has mostly represented people in prison on death row. "I still have clients on federal death row in Indiana, and Kentucky's death row," O'Donnell told the interfaith council in March 2021 as guest speaker.

When she was a "very young lawyer," she was a public defender in Phoenix, Arizona, and "had to learn to work with interpreters," she said. She also had to learn basic immigration law. Despite being told not to worry about the undocumented people, and to focus only on legal permanent residents, she made it her goal "to treat all immigrant clients the same."

Later, when she moved to Frankfort in 1991, O'Donnell had the opportunity to represent two or three immigrants, and made a huge difference in the outcome of their cases because of her knowledge in immigration law.

About 10 years ago, she represented Edwin Chandler, a Black man who was wrongly convicted in Jefferson County and served nine years for a murder he didn't commit.

"I was part of the legal team that sued Louisville Metro Government," O'Donnell said. "There was egregious police misconduct and the case was settled. I was financially compensated in a way that allowed me to say I don't have to worry about getting paid any longer for representing people. I still have my death penalty cases. But I decided then to do volunteer-type things, and FIAN is one of those."

In the spring of 2019, FIAN learned that some people, who had been in custody at the border and knew people in Frankfort, could be released if they had a place to come to.

"But we found out they had no furniture or housewares, nothing," O'Donnell said. "So we started a collection, and Scott Rollins volun-



Charles W. Pearl presents Margaret O'Donnell with the Frankfort Interfaith Council Ruby Layson Award in 2021. Pearl is chairman of the council. (Photo submitted)

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— Margaret O'Donnell

teered the Highland Christian Church basement as a place to store things."

Rollins also wanted to learn more about local immigrants, and speak to his congregation about helping them. Now Highland Christian Church has been the site of two immigrant festivals.

"We don't know how many immigrants are in Franklin County, but my guess when people ask is around 2,500," O'Donnell said. "A lot of them are undocumented and have fled violence. We have a lot of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients, young people who were brought to the United States and got a temporary status through President Obama."

"Most are from Mexico and Central America, but not all. We have immigrants from Africa, South Asia, the Far East, and I'm sure other places. It's all about making the connections, and we have pretty much affiliated with the Spanish-speaking immigrants. I've always hoped we could get a foothold, an introduction, into other immigrant communities, and then COVID hit."

The Frankfort Interfaith Council has three Islamic members, including the president of the Islamic Center of Frankfort, Ashiq Zaman. The local Islamic Center has a diverse congregation. Besides the United States, their native countries include Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Morocco, Nigeria, Tunisia, The Gambia, Canada



Zoe Arleth Mayorga Hernandez, 8, and Margaret O'Donnell give O'Donnell's dog Violet water while visiting recently in downtown Frankfort.

and Bosnia.

While speaking to the interfaith council in 2021, O'Donnell said, "If you could help FIAN in outreach so we can have a relationship and start conversations with immigrant communities beyond Hispanic communities, we would be forever grateful."

She said someone, who has worked with Kentucky Refugee Ministries, told her Frankfort hasn't had a history of really reaching out to refugees who come to this country. However, with FIAN and ministers like Scott Rollins, that seems to be changing, she said.

"There are a lot of communities of faith that I think would be interested and want to help refugees, and we now have people in the community who have reached out to me, who have that experience," O'Donnell said.

Kentucky, overall, "has a reputation of being one of the best places for refugee families to come, especially in cities like Lexington, Bowling Green and Louisville," she said.

When Trump was president, she said, "people were being picked up by ICE and detained who were no danger to this community or anyone. I have friends, who were in a van going to work. They were stopped, and four of them were detained and taken to Louisville. Many have lived here for more than 10 years, their lives are here, and they are intertwined with Americans and their families. We know immigration reform is greatly needed."

Becky Shipp, who is retired from the Kentucky Heritage Council, says

O'Donnell "sees injustice very clearly. She's a problem solver. She sees things coming ahead of time, and she rises to the challenge. Every person is worth her attention, worth receiving help. I think that is reflective of her compassion and sense of justice, and finding solutions."

"She cares, and she is willing to search for and find the people who can deliver the service that is needed, if she can't. That could include looking for other attorneys who have expertise that maybe she doesn't have, or finding counselors, or finding people in the community who have too much furniture and would like to share."

In addition to her work with FIAN, she is the volunteer lawyer for the Kentucky Poor People's Campaign, and is a member of Focus on Race Relations: Frankfort. She serves on the Franklin County FAIR (family, accountability, intervention and response) Team; the advisory council of the Wanda Joyce Robinson Foundation, which serves children and youth impacted by incarceration; and is president of the Capital City Chorale Board.

O'Donnell has one son, Liam O'Donnell, 26, of Frankfort, who was a National Merit Scholar at Franklin County High School. He studied American Culture at Washington University in St. Louis, and is currently a substitute teacher for Franklin County Public Schools. 

Charles W. Pearl, a retired State Journal staff writer, is a freelance writer, author and chairman of the Frankfort Interfaith Council.