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Brother-sister team named CCHD Cardinal Bernardin award recipients

Dennis Sadowski Catholic News Service | Nov. 14, 2013
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Two advocates for worker rights received the Catholic Campaign for Human Development Cardinal Joseph Bernardin New Leadership Award during the U.S. bishops' annual fall general assembly in Baltimore.

Jose and Ana Aguayo, a brother-and-sister team instrumental in the success of the Northwest Arkansas Worker Justice Center, were recognized Monday for their advocacy efforts on behalf of low-wage workers.

Jose serves as the center's executive director and Ana is its director of development and communications. Natives of Guadalajara, Mexico, Jose, 27, and Ana, 25, made their way to the United States in 1997 as children with their parents who dreamed of a prosperous life once they could reunite with family members who had resettled in Arkansas.

At the center, which has its headquarters in Springdale, Ark., the Aguayos have helped construction workers fight wage theft, sought legislative reforms to protect workers and served as a conduit to federal agencies guarding worker rights, health and safety.

The center has received CCHD national grants for its work for the past five years. CCHD is the U.S. bishops' domestic anti-poverty agency.

Ana and Jose told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview that when their family arrived in northwestern Arkansas, there was a period of adjustment as they faced challenges similar to those faced by workers who come to the center for assistance.

"It was welcoming, but in the end it was scary," Jose said. "It was a new place."

The Aguayos were unable to attend a reception planned by CCHD during the bishops' meeting, but explained via Skype to those at the reception how their work builds dignity among the workers trying to establish a new life in Arkansas.

Ana began volunteering at the center in 2008 and later got her brother involved while both were students at the University of Arkansas. They served as translators for 12 Latino construction workers who wanted to get paid for their work at a local firm. They eventually were hired into leadership roles at the center. To date, they have helped workers recover more than $580,000 in lost wages.

At the statehouse in Little Rock, their efforts also have led to stronger standards for hundreds of employees in poultry processing plants.

Jose also has been an advocate for comprehensive immigration reform and for passage of the DREAM Act, which would give millions of young adults a quicker path to citizenship.

Ana and Jose recalled to CNS their arduous trek through the desert of Baja Mexico and into California. They said their parents repeatedly told them and their other brothers and sisters on the journey to make a wish every time they saw a shooting star. Because they were crossing the desert at night during the peak of the Perseid meteor shower in August 1997, they had plenty of wishes to make.

After arriving safely in California, brother and sister said only then did they realize that their parents were trying to keep them from being afraid because of the dangers a desert crossing poses to unprotected people.

Today the entire family -- parents, a grandparent, eight siblings and now 11 grandchildren -- is settled in Arkansas. Some of the Aguayo family members run their own construction firms. Jose said he plans to enter medical school in January. Ana, who studied international relations and broadcast journalism in college, will continue to work at the center.

"It is in our nature and our teachings to give back," she said.

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