

An Le
“Bringing Legal Knowledge to Community Organizing”
by David Terrazas, ‘06

Some immigrant workers seem to exist in some nether world. Housed in prison-like structures, forced to endure slave-like working conditions, and deprived of basic necessities, they live in a world separate from the lives of citizen workers. Ms. An Le, in her noon presentation on Monday, September 12th, demonstrated to attendees that inhumane working conditions for immigrants in the United States is plainly visible if one only makes the effort to recognize it.

Ms. Le screened a short video documentary entitled *Grass Roots Rising*. The video provided a modern perspective on the exploitation of immigrants in low-wage employment. The mainstream view would have us believe that slave-like working conditions could not exist in the United States. The video showed that, despite the legal protections offered to citizens, slave-like labor is thriving in communities within our borders. One male market worker described unsafe working conditions, with his being forced to continuously lift 70 lb. boxes. He was injured and lost his job after falling backwards onto a pallet jack while holding a heavy box of produce. Another woman described being forced to work mandatory 12-hour work days with no opportunity for legally-mandated breaks, meal periods, or fair wages. Only through the efforts of the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) did workers realize that labor laws prohibited the inhumane working conditions that they had endured. Ms. Le, referring to a “Father’s Day Action” shown in the video, described how “sweat shop” employers use race as a way to drive a wedge between workers. The action built a coalition across

racial lines; KIWA successfully bridged employer-established ethnic divisions through the collaboration of Asian and Latino immigrants around the central issue of worker's rights.

After the video, Ms. Le described the KIWA worker's center as a community space and support system for immigrant workers within the Koreatown area of downtown Los Angeles. The Center offers organizational training and case management services for immigrant workers who face incredible barriers with few options for relief. Generally, these workers are mono-lingual and work very long hours with virtually no opportunity to learn the English language, let alone fair labor practices.

Ms. Le described herself as an "Anti-Lawyer" pushing the envelope to inform employers what they *can* do rather than traditional preventative lawyering, which might tell them what they cannot do. She enjoyed the work, despite the long hours and low pay because she likes being a resource to the community and helping others. She was drawn to this work after witnessing the workplace exploitation of her parents when she was growing up. She did not want others to endure the same indignities.

Most citizens take for granted the protections of state and federal labor laws. Basic rights for citizens, such as scheduled breaks and meal periods, minimum wages, and safe working conditions are an illusion to immigrant workers. KIWA's work and the personal efforts of Ms. Le are examples of how one community and one person's ongoing efforts can create positive change in the face of an apparently insurmountable challenge. Programs like KIWA should exist in every community throughout the nation. It was an honor to learn about Ms. Le and her work. She is truly inspirational.