

## **The Day I Had to Fire My Family**

In 1988, my immigrant husband and I started a tiny artisan bakery in Seattle. Slowly, slowly it grew and within 7 years or so we had about 20 employees, most in the "back of the house" baking, preparing and delivering our handmade loaves to area restaurants and retail stores. We helped them with all kinds of things outside of work -- finding an apartment, getting their children services at school and assisting them with medical needs. We were a "Mom and Pop" operation and our employees were like family.

In 1997, I received a letter from the Social Security Administration saying that the attached list of employees' social security numbers did not match their names. I had kept meticulous files replete with copies of their driver's licenses and social security cards along with their other employee records. I flipped to the attachment thinking I might find 1 or 2 mismatches that, with time and effort, I could resolve by providing the necessary paperwork. I turned the page over to find a list of every single employee in the back of the house. I could not believe my eyes. This was devastating, not only to our business operations, but to us personally. We knew these people, celebrated with these people, and worked hard together to build a better business.

We conferred with our employees who were honest with us. They could pay for new, false documents and prolong the process but, in reality, there was no possibility for them to get a work permit. I had to fire each and every one of them.

Overnight I had to figure out how to staff my operation, when unemployment was non-existent in Seattle – there was no one to replace them. It was a six month struggle to rehire qualified staff.

This experience opened my eyes to the conflict between our current immigration framework, which did not permit these workers, and the economic reality that our food industry is highly dependent on immigrant labor from the fields to your favorite restaurants.

**Please join me Saturday, January 23rd at 7 pm at Grace Church to hear Jorge Barón of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.** This will be the first of what we hope will be many Community Conversations, a collective project of several community partners including Lopez Island Family Resource Center, Lopez Community Land Trust, Leadership San Juan Islands & Transitions Lopez. Our goal is to practice coming together around issues on which we might not agree, to learn more about them and engage in civil discourse. Refreshments and childcare will be provided. Bring questions and an open mind.

**Kim Pasciuto, Lopez Island Family Resource Center Board Member**