

# No One will Solve our Problems for Us

*Julissa Villa*

No one will solve our problems for us. We have to do it for ourselves. We may have come here for a dream, but we have to keep fighting for ourselves, and for the people who come after us.

My start as a community organizer came with adult education. When my youngest son was born, I decided to leave my work and dedicate myself to studying English. Just when I started taking classes, though, I found out that there was a threat to cut state funds. So I joined my teacher in attending a meeting of our local association, Friends and Students of Adult Education. I participated in a rally supporting adult education, and later I joined the Student Council to work with other adult learners to improve opportunities to study.

From there, I saw many chances to learn more about leadership and community issues through trainings and meetings. I participated in campaigns for our governor's re-election, for our congressman, for issues like domestic violence. I saw that it all connects with my community. I live in a neighborhood just south of the city, and there I see so many immigrants, afraid, living in limbo, unaware of their rights and of all the opportunities around them. I'm an immigrant too, and it frustrates me to see the lack of health care, education and housing in my community. I'm the kind of person who takes all the opportunities given to me and tries to bring them back to my people.

My pillars of strength are my family. I've been so fortunate to have their support. Every time I've come home talking about a new project, they say – *echale ganas!* – go for it! They know that it's part of who I am to participate in the community. I get them involved, too; my son was two years old when he participated in that first demonstration supporting adult education.

I volunteered for two years with our local broad-based organizing group, Pima County Interfaith Council. Then I

got a job as a full-time organizer in the immigrant rights organization, Border Action Network. When I make presentations about immigrant rights, I point out that my own English isn't great, so that participants know that they don't have to speak perfect English to get involved. Now I've been able to bring together immigrant rights and adult education; we've prepared volunteer teachers and organized Human Rights English Classes at our center.



*"We are part of the solution," says a sign at this Border Action Network demonstration.*



*Julissa Villa speaking at the Southside Poverty Summit, 2004.*



*Julissa Villa with other activists at the Southside Poverty Summit, 2004.*

The best training I've received was when, on a work trip to Washington, D.C., I was detained at the airport so that immigration officials could verify my documents. I decided not to tell them that I am part of Border Action Network, and just see what others experience. The conditions were terrible in the detention centers where I was held for the weekend: it was very cold, dirty, and they weren't giving us food. The women in the room had crossed through the desert to come to the U.S. and desperately needed first aid for their feet.

When I got out, I went home and cried for hours, but this experience made me more determined. Soon after, our organization had a community forum with the Border Patrol and I talked about my experiences. We're demanding that the Border Patrol provide first aid and food, and allow pastors in to visit people in the detention centers.

I want people to step out of the shadows — don't give up! Take the opportunity to study and participate. Don't get caught up in material things — knowledge and education are what's important. Even if we won immigration reform right now, there are still many things we need to make better — housing, health, and education. We are each important in the fight to make things better.

*Julissa Villa has always loved public service, and after taking classes at Pima Community College Adult Education in Tucson, Arizona, she learned how much she could offer. She studied English and became certified as a Community Health Advisor/Neighborhood Coordinator. She currently works as a community organizer with Border Action Network in Tucson, Arizona. She says that achieving the American Dream is "not about obtaining papers but about helping others less fortunate than us. With papers alone we can have work but not satisfaction, a house but not a home, allies but not friends. It's best to forget about papers and live happily as we have always done."*



### **For Discussion**

**Have you** ever felt strongly about something in your community? Did you get involved? Why or why not?

**How does** Julissa's experience affect your perspective?

**Describe a** community group that you are part of.