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Principal Sees Injustice, and Picks a Fight With It



Jeff Topping for The New York Times

Yvonne Watterson, the principal of GateWay Early College High School, found herself enforcing a new immigration law.

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By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

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PHOENIX — One morning last August, Yvonne Watterson, the principal of GateWay Early College High School here, sat in her office, grimly scrolling through the database of its 240 students.

At the behest of a new state law she detested, she looked for which ones listed a Social Security number and which did not. Without a number, it was virtually certain that a child was in America illegally.

Ms. Watterson wound up with 38 names, many of them of boys and girls she had personally recruited to the school. Under the statute popularly known as Proposition 300, illegal immigrants could not receive in-state tuition at public colleges and universities in Arizona. Nor could school administrators like Ms. Watterson use state money to pay it.

GateWay's students, while still in high school, are able to take courses at a community college in the same building, with in-state tuition paid by the high school. Ms. Watterson knew her students could not afford to pay the out-of-state rate, generally \$280 a credit. And without the college classes, there would be less reason to stay in school.

So she made the list and sent letters home and began to call in the affected students one by one to tell them that their tuition was no longer subsidized. A girl named Karla crumpled to her knees in the principal's office, and said, "But I'm a good person." A few weeks later, Ms. Watterson heard, Karla was riding a bus back to Mexico.

Yvonne Watterson vowed to do something so she would not lose any more of her students. She made the vow because of what happened every July 12 back in Antrim, Northern Ireland, her hometown.

On that night, the local Protestants celebrated their forebears' victory over a Catholic army three centuries earlier in the Battle of the Boyne. Even in the Arizona desert, Ms. Watterson remembered the sound of Loyalist anthems and the smell of burning tires and the sight of the pope being burned in effigy. Though she was a Protestant, even as a child she had always cringed imagining how July 12 felt to her Roman Catholic playmates up the block.

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“I thought, ‘Here we go again, segregating kids, putting kids on a list,’ ” Ms. Watterson, 44, said recently in her office at GateWay. “It’s that hatred. It’s that separation. Not having to look someone in the eye. It’s a horrible, cowardly — I don’t know what to call it. I wouldn’t have believed I was in America.”

In her career as an educator, Ms. Watterson had been nothing if not decisive. When she became principal at GateWay in 2003, she threw out a progressive curriculum and replaced it with a traditional variety. She required all 10 teachers on the staff to reapply for their jobs and hired back just one. After visiting early-college high schools in New York City and Stockton, Calif., and seeing how well they served immigrant teenagers, she brought the model to GateWay.

So she went immediately into advocacy mode, giving an interview to The Arizona Republic, the daily newspaper in Phoenix. In the subsequent article, she was quoted describing the plight of her undocumented students and talking about her own experience as an immigrant after she came to America in the mid-1980s.

She mentioned Jose Razo, heading into his senior year, on track to accumulate more than 50 college credits in courses ranging from macroeconomics to video-game design. At home, he had a cologne box filled with certificates for the honor roll, perfect attendance, good citizenship. But he was not a citizen, and because of Proposition 300, he was already thinking about going to Mexico, a country he had left at age 2.

Ms. Watterson reaped the whirlwind of the blogosphere, as readers responded to The Republic’s article.

From Gilbert19: “These children are dishonest law-breakers; why do we want them going to our schools?”

From gbishop01: “You have totally destroyed your integrity.”

From AWhite: “All I have to say to these criminals is ‘DON’T LET THE DOOR HIT YOU ON THE WAY OUT’!!!!!”

The attacks attested to the vox populi. Proposition 300 had been approved with 71 percent of the



vote. It won alongside three other ballot measures denying various rights to illegal immigrants and declaring English the official state language.

“In my heart of hearts,” Ms. Watterson said, “I thought, ‘Honestly, people can’t vote for something that would hurt kids who are taking college classes.’ I thought they just didn’t understand. Honest to God, that’s what I thought. But the overwhelming reply was, ‘That’s exactly what we intended.’”

Still, the response was not unanimous. A lawyer who doubled as a television host, José A. Cárdenas, called Ms. Watterson and arranged for Jose Razo to appear on his show.

About a week later, GateWay received an anonymous donation of \$25,000 to help undocumented students pay their tuition. Mr. Cárdenas recommended that Ms. Watterson approach the Stardust Foundation in suburban Phoenix, and it gave \$50,000.

Ultimately, Ms. Watterson received \$83,000 from various donors. In January, she was named one of seven winners of a Phoenix-area award in memory of the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) After having her students write autobiographical thank-you notes to donors, she had the letters collected and published as a bilingual book, “Documented Dreams.”

Still, this ending is not quite happy. The donations came in too late for the affected students to take their college classes in fall 2007.

About \$27,000 of it went toward their tuition for the spring semester of 2008, and the rest will cover next fall’s needs. Beyond that, there is only uncertainty.

“I don’t wake up every day to steal purses,” said Noemi Ariza, a 17-year-old student at GateWay. “I wake up to try my hardest to succeed. And for people to despise me, to tell me I have no right to be here, to look at me like a murderer — it’s so dehumanizing. All I’m trying to do is make something of myself.”

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