

# The Strongest People on the Planet



ICE has an annual budget of around \$7.5 billion, which is spent in absolute denial of our interconnectedness. It “protects” the country by defining emigrants as aliens and denying them virtually all basic rights. (Photo: Ilias Bartolini/Flickr/cc)

By [Robert C. Koehler](#) | [Common Dreams](#)

“Send her back! Send her back!”

The chant: Is it merely a case study in collective stupidity or is it a signal of rising fascism? When I look at the viral video—the latest manifestation of Trumpism and the freeing of good old American racism from the constraints of political correctness—I can’t help but think of the 8-year-old girl I met the other day, who traveled two years with her mother to reach this country from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The child, whose name I can’t use because her asylum case is

still pending, lives with her mom, for the time being, at what is known as the House of Hospitality, a residence for refugees in Cicero, Illinois, just outside Chicago, that is run by the [Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants](#). This not-for-profit organization was founded a dozen years ago by two Sisters of Mercy to bring hope and crucial aid—legal, financial, spiritual—to emigrant detainees warehoused in various detention centers around Chicago.

The little girl is the face of struggle and courage, the embodiment of hope and interconnectedness. She is the refutation not merely of the chanting Trump supporters but of the nation's bureaucratic cruelty and indifference to the plight and humanity of the global refugee flow, to the people who are seeking not simply "a better life" in the United States of America, but, as ICDI development director Ed Pratt put it, a life . . . a life!

I met recently with Ed, along with the organization's executive director, Melanie Schikore, to learn about the work of ICDI and get a sense of the compassionate counterforce that exists in this country – a force in opposition to the concentration camps and ICE raids and "send her back" chants that dominate the news. A huge segment of the American population cares deeply about the refugees' fate and welcomes them in every way possible.

The two nuns who founded ICDI in 2007 did so after being denied admittance to a detention center in Broadview, west of Chicago, where they had hoped to connect with detained refugees, many of whom were separated from their families, and see how they could help. Undeterred, they worked with other religious organizations—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—and eventually got a law passed in Illinois that gave detainees access to pastoral visitation.

At present, ICDI has over 350 volunteers who last year made over 8,000 visits to detention centers to provide solidarity

and support to detainees. They have also been a court presence at immigration hearings. And the organization runs the House of Hospitality, which is currently providing housing for 15 refugees from 14 different countries.

Alas, ICDI recently lost its lease at the Cicero location—the building is a former convent owned by the Archdiocese of Chicago—and is now looking for a new site. They hope to find a building that will allow them to accommodate more families, which is currently the major need out there. Often families cannot be reunited unless they have housing and such housing is in pitifully short supply nationwide.

All of which brings me back to the 8-year-old girl I met last week. Perhaps I can call her “S.” Her story transcends anything I can imagine, even though only a small piece of it is known.

“S” and her mother fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo because her mother had been tortured there. They crossed the Atlantic (somehow: this part of their story is unknown) and arrived in Brazil. They then proceeded to walk from Brazil to the United States. In all, the journey took two years.

When they got here, rather than being welcomed with open arms, mother and child were yanked apart. The separation lasted four and a half months. They were only allowed to reunite because they had been able to attain housing.

“They reunited in our stairwell,” Ed said. The cries as they embraced tore people’s hearts. “They were like animal groans.”

Here’s what else I learned about “S”: She speaks five languages! Two of them, Lingala and French, are native to her home country. On the journey with her mother, she also picked up Portuguese, Spanish and, eventually, English.

The child I met was sheer 8-year-old—shy and charming and utterly huggable. Her English was flawless. So, apparently, is

her Spanish. As Ed noted, she once served as a translator for him with the Cuban cooks who work at the Hospitality House. His own Spanish wasn't adequate to convey something to them, but "S" stepped in as translator and did the job. As I listened to this, my sense of awe kept expanding. This child, who has spent a huge piece of her life journey with her mother, has gotten a global education. Her classroom has been the planet itself.

Being an immigrant, said Melanie "is an incredible journey. They're pioneers! We hear so many stories. I frequently have the thought, I couldn't survive that.

"Every story is different. All are heart-wrenching. Everyone has a story that, if you knew it, would break your heart. They are the strongest people on the planet. Who wouldn't want them? They chose to come and made it."

She added: "We're all interconnected. If we don't understand that we're global citizens and need to take care of one another, then we're doomed."

What if this were government policy? ICE has an [annual budget](#) of around \$7.5 billion, which is spent in absolute denial of our interconnectedness. It "protects" the country by defining emigrants as aliens and denying them virtually all basic rights.

In counterpoint to this sort of policy were the words that accompanied an elderly woman's \$25 donation to ICDI. She wrote on her check: "Your work is more important than my food."

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## About the Author



**Robert Koehler** is an award-winning, Chicago-based journalist and nationally syndicated writer. His new book, *Courage Grows Strong at the Wound* is now available. Contact him at [koehlercw@gmail.com](mailto:koehlercw@gmail.com) or visit his website at [commonwonders.com](http://commonwonders.com).

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