



**Reframing the Immigration Debate:**

How the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition

Retooled its Communications Strategy

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***Ali Noorani, Executive Director, MIRA Coalition***



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Anyone opening a copy of the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine* on May 20, 2007 was confronted with the photo of two-year-old Tomasa Mendez crying in her mother’s embrace. Her father, Hector, had just been carted away by US immigration authorities during a massive raid in a New Bedford, Massachusetts leather factory. “She is a girl who became a picture who became a poster who became an icon—or a piece of propaganda, if you like—in the push and pull over immigration reform,” reporter David Montgomery wrote in the *Post’s* story on the raid. “Some pictures mean exactly what they say, and that is why they are seized upon by shrewd adults to make into icons.”

The *Washington Post* article appeared in the midst of a national debate about reforming US immigration law. It was no accident that Tomasa—a US citizen born here to Guatemalan parents—became a poster child for immigration issues. Her photo was shot by *New Bedford Standard-Times* photographer Peter Pereira, who had been on the scene at the factory for two days in early March, taking photos of the more than 350 workers and their families who were detained in a workplace raid by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE). Pereira's photo of Tomasa didn't make the newspaper's cover at the time, but rather ran inside the paper, yet it brought life to the paper's chronicle of a town in turmoil and attracted national attention.

### **From Policy to Advocacy**

The story behind the story can be traced back to MIRA, the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, and their energetic communications operation. With more than 100 organizational members, MIRA is a dynamic, multi-ethnic, multi-racial coalition that actively involves grassroots immigrant organizations, human services agencies, legal service providers, religious groups and human rights groups in cooperative efforts to improve the lives of immigrants and refugees.

According to executive director Ali Noorani, MIRA has transformed itself over the last few years from a policy organization that provides services into an advocacy/activist organization pushing for fair and humane comprehensive immigration reform. "We're more intentional and cognizant now of building power," he says. Noorani, whose parents come from Pakistan, was born in the United States and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley. He moved to Boston to get his Master's Degree in Public Health from Boston University and became MIRA's executive director in 2003.

Increasingly, MIRA can be found working closely with similar statewide organizations outside of Massachusetts and with the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Community Change. In January 2006, MIRA joined with the Center for monthly meetings with the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, the New York Immigration Coalition, the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and others, which led to coordinated actions from 2006 through 2007. Visits to the organizations' websites reveal their shared strategy—placing children and families at the forefront—an effort that has clearly influenced the 2007 immigration reform debate.

MIRA's communications associate, Shuya Ohno, feels the immigrant issue very personally. "I came here from Japan when I was six years old and grew up in a lower-income housing project in Fort Lee, New Jersey," he explains. "That process of learning the language and gaining cultural literacy was the defining part of who I am. The work I'm doing now [I chose because] I want to tell these kids out there that it's going to be okay." Ohno's personal experience, resonating in his heart and in his gut, dominated his thoughts as he formulated a response to messages put out by the conservative, anti-immigrant faction. "I speculated that the other side was able to get in the news and shape a message by sitting in an office and blasting out press releases," he says. "The world knew what they wanted to say. The other side was out-communicating us. So, I wanted to make sure that we would drive the other side of this issue."

From the very beginning, Ohno aimed at making MIRA a major player in the immigration debate. "The first year that I was hired, in 2005, "the emphasis was on returning every press call and being part of the conversation, so that our profile went up. For a year and a half, we developed relationships with the local media, and the Washington, D.C.-based National Immigration Forum was very helpful with feedback and sharing contacts." Ohno's original assignment was program associate, but a grant from the state of Massachusetts allowed him to shift to communications work focusing on domestic violence in the immigrant community. Eventually, MIRA was able to use that same grant to support a general communications position, which he then assumed.

“Part of the purpose of the organization is to change the nature of the public debate,” he points out. “We did three things: advocacy, organizing and training. Now, we do four things,” with communications added to MIRA’s arsenal. “When press requests come in, I try to match the request to the community, for instance Haitian, Salvadoran. We strive to find the key community member. For larger policy issues, Ali (the executive director) will be quoted, but everyone wants the human side and I try to find a nice match.”

It’s more than a simple matter of calling up names from a list. For instance, press requests to interview illegal immigrants who may need to maintain their anonymity are a sensitive matter Ohno must handle with care. “We tell them that they don’t have to give last names,” he stresses. “We have to see if the person is comfortable showing his or her face, and some reporters are willing to use techniques to hide the face.”

Noorani, too, is cautious when it comes to the lure of press coverage. As he describes it, “You get sucked into the moment and you want to get the best story to the reporter. But we have to take a step back and remember that we are not putting our people at risk.” Indeed, he elaborates, “we have two goals, the larger policy issue and advocating for the person—and the two goals don’t always line up. Establishing trust is key.”

### **Focusing on Immigrant Families**

All MIRA’s concerns came together in one newsworthy event: the New Bedford factory raid. Early on the morning of March 6, 2006, the Boston-based staff got a call: “We were tipped off that a raid at the Michael Bianco Inc. garment factory was going to happen. We got calls from the community and we had relationships with the media,” recalls Ohno.

This tip gave the team an opportunity to put all their communication smarts to the test. Immediately, they called reporters in mainstream and ethnic media. Community leaders were identified and given talking points. The main message coalesced around the forcible separation of families and the impact on children, echoing messages from a MIRA event on February 14<sup>th</sup>, which had featured postcards with silhouettes of missing parents. MIRA was ready to hold a press conference denouncing the raid by 3:30 that same afternoon.

Ironically, the leather factory in New Bedford had recently received an \$88 million contract from the U.S. military for a rush order of bomber jackets for soldiers in Iraq. Landing the contract meant they needed more workers quickly, and most of the new hires were Central Americans, Guatemalans, Brazilians, Cape Verdeans and Salvadorans—the ethnic mix that makes up New Bedford. Meanwhile, military inspectors were in the factory to approve the jackets.

But on March 6, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) led a massive strike on the plant. According to Ohno, “ICE put out a press release; they were proud of it.” Coast Guard helicopters hovered overhead and 300 federal agents and other law enforcement officials stormed the factory. Documents later revealed that the raid had been in the works for months. When it was over, at least 350 workers had been arrested. These were “350 mothers and fathers,” according to the MIRA press advisory, immediately reframing the language of the debate from “illegal workers” to parents with children.

As soon as the MIRA staff was alerted, they sprung into action. “We transformed from a policy shop to an organizing shop. We were seen as a trusted convener and advocate. Without that, we would have been another outside organization,” Noorani, the MIRA director, explains.

Ohno rallied the press while two staff organizers made their way to New Bedford. After the initial news of the raid, MIRA's goal was to steer the story in a direction sympathetic to the arrested workers and their families.

"There were the first day articles," recalls Noorani. "We were able to get our response into those stories. We came to a realization that press would be there another day and we had to give them a story. We saw during the Swift raids [in December 2006 when about 1300 immigrant workers at six Swift meat processing plants in Colorado, Nebraska, Texas, Utah, Iowa and Minnesota were rounded up by ICE] that kids were left alone, and we were hearing that kids were showing up at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in New Bedford. So we decided that would be the next day's story. In the morning, we sent an advisory about a press conference to be held at the church. We framed the March 7 press conference with a headline: "March 6: The Day That Destroyed the Immigrant Family."

Ohno continues the story: "We were able to set up a central location in the church for the press that didn't have local contacts. We had a plan, so that while the media looked for interviews, the Church—which was also the central address for support services—had a dual role as the press center. By the time of our March 7 press conference, we were thinking about the next day's press...."

"I thought of how the Red Cross kept the focus during Katrina on individuals, so we kept the focus on individuals, not on immigration policy," elaborates Noorani. "We had the visual of diapers and food on a big [collection] table. We found a key community leader to do the press conference so that there was local leadership buy-in."

"The decision not to talk policy was important due to the rancor on both sides of the immigration debate. So we'd been thinking, with our national colleagues, what does move [opinion] and what does resonate? Children and mothers..." Ohno adds.

### **The MIRA Message During the New Bedford Crisis**

Children are being hurt, traumatized, and separated from their parents. This resonates with the American public. When confronted with the images of crying babies, children and mothers, almost everyone has a strong, direct, and sympathetic emotional response. It is this resonance that overcomes the politics of fear propagated by anti-reformers.

It is important to find and maintain this resonance to affect the public consciousness. The continued coverage coincides with spontaneous requests and notices from unexpected communities throughout Massachusetts who are involved in fundraising for the relief fund. Right now, an unprecedented level of interest in the issue among the more affluent suburban communities continues to build because of MIRA's message.

A clear challenge in communications is how to capture and grow a new interest among these key political constituent groups. The concerted effort to engage area NPR reporters was one of the strategic choices we made to try to begin this process. The website plus e-newsletter is an identified priority. The YouTube video piece featured on the MIRA homepage and its corresponding DVD's are also proving to be powerful individual tools in this effort.

***Ali Noorani, Executive Director • Shuya Ohno, Communications Associate***



## **Every Minute Counts**

In the first 12 days after the raid, MIRA coordinated a total of 11 press conferences and 4 large events, drawing hundreds of people. They were able to maintain a “push” on media outlets to focus coverage from different angles, while also finding compelling stories, voices and visuals to build public support. At the same time, MIRA staff members were busy learning the art of rapid response op-ed writing. After a request from the *Boston Globe* for an opinion piece with a turn-around time of only a few hours, Noorani was sitting at his computer in the church urgently drafting the op-ed with the organizers on the ground, with Ohno back in the Boston office doing the fact checking. It paid off. The framing and message of Noorani’s *Boston Globe* op-ed was followed up by editorials in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, along with entries on popular blog sites like *Daily Kos*, *Huffington Post* and elsewhere.

On the third day after the raid, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick showed up at Our Lady of Guadalupe church with his Secretary of Health and Human Services, fully briefed in advance by the Coalition staff. MIRA decided to close the church basement to the press during the governor’s visit, except for an *NPR* reporter to record the interaction, along with one video and one still photographer from the pool to capture the visuals. “The Governor being surrounded by 300 people, women handing him babies saying ‘find the parent;’ it was brutal,” says Noorani. We had to do it this way, balancing press needs and community needs . In his public response, the Governor used the phrase “humanitarian crisis,” which led to more press and more headlines.



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On Sunday, Massachusetts' best known politician, Senator Ted Kennedy, came on the scene, leading a state congressional delegation. A photo of the Senator surrounded by women and children soon appeared on the MIRA website homepage. By engaging local and Congressional elected officials, MIRA staff garnered additional coverage and built momentum. They had two goals: to keep the coverage on the crisis strong and to give the elected officials an opportunity to enjoy positive media coverage while advocating for immigrant families.

MIRA publicized the need for donations for the New Bedford families, and the media broadcast the request. In the middle of one night that first week, an enormous truckload of donations showed up at the coalition's Boston office. The staff suddenly realized they needed a system for collecting and distributing goods, so the website became a focal point through which MIRA could let the public know about the crisis and explain how to help.

The website logged over 15,000 hits that first two weeks following the raid, allowing information to spread quickly and efficiently. The MIRA website has received on average five new subscribers

every day for its weekly e-newsletter. With the increase in public involvement MIRA organized actions in Boston in front of the ICE office, and held a rally to attract media attention and get the Latino community engaged. And they thought about next communication steps.

#### **MIRA's Communications Strategy: A Snapshot**

- The message was consistent and prepped from day to day. Key community leaders were identified as spokespeople and kept in communication with MIRA each day and night.
- The media were provided with a range of readily available, knowledgeable speakers to interview, tape, photograph, etc.
- Different angles to the story—affected children, legal issues, cultural issues, etc—were anticipated so the response time to press requests could be kept to a minimum.
- Each day, the media plan for the next day was anticipated and outlined.
- As a result, the media came to see MIRA as a credible source for continuing stories on developments and events.

“Over the weekend, we met with the local community foundation to set up a way to do money collection, and we had a press event on Tuesday,” Ohno recounts. “By this time, I was getting several calls on my cell phone each morning to check in, and the symmetry to this was that every evening the community folks would call asking what to say the next day. Meanwhile, the media were still clamoring for stories of real people and I had to consider how to keep feeding the beast.” Then, when a volunteer’s video of the remaining workers and families appeared on YouTube, the story quickly spread across the web.

But It was the *New York Times* lead editorial mentioning New Bedford that “kicked it up to a different level,” according to Ohno. Enter Bill O’Reilly. His staff was interested in the *Times*

editorial's claim that the ICE agents ripped a baby from a mother's breast. They wanted Noorani to come on the show and spar with O'Reilly, who thought that this incident was fabricated. "This goes back to fact checking," Ohno emphasizes. "Everything you say, you have to back up."

In this case, MIRA had video coverage of the baby who had been breastfed and refused to drink milk after the mother was hauled away, becoming dehydrated as a result. But the health center caring for the child didn't want to get involved despite Ohno's spending four hours on the phone with them asking for documentation for O'Reilly. They finally agreed to say that the baby was suffering from pneumonia, which appeased O'Reilly.

According to Ohno, "on the whole, progressives do a really bad job in communicating because we are rational and assume that our opponent is rational. But in this case, they went straight for the heart. Normally, local Massachusetts right wing radio blasts attacks on immigrants, but MIRA was also able to quiet them with a frontal attack. We were able to generate the sympathetic frame first."

"I think that reporters have seen the human side of this, that people are living under siege," Noorani comments. "Most reporters don't have a desire to hurt the individual or put them at risk."

With all the activity at MIRA, Noorani, the Executive Director, had to act as press point person, which was frustrating for Ohno, who wanted to be where the action was. But he understood the division of labor: With legal and media faxes coming in and the need to write up talking points and get them out to their allies, having Ohno in place at the Boston office was key. "Once mobile technology gets to the next level, it will be easier," he predicts. Meanwhile, MIRA incurred around \$2000 in cell phone bills to spread the message—all the while remembering to keep it simple and avoid talking about advocacy if possible.

MIRA activist/organizers Michelle Rudy and Carlos Saavedra who were in New Bedford at the time, recall that “In the beginning, it was chaos.” Rudy remembers family members pleading, “‘Help me. Help me. Where is my wife?’ It would have been good to sit down with twenty families, to have their bios, but it was too chaotic to do that,” she says. “It was too traumatic to have someone tell their story again and again, so you had to spread out the press requests.”

The organizers were grateful for the media training MIRA had already given them. They knew media etiquette, that they could push back the press if necessary, but they also understood what the media needed and how to be helpful. “We tried to channel it,” Saavedra says. “We do this a lot, talking to families to prep them for the media, telling them [that it is okay] not to answer, or saying no for them, translating for them, being there for them.”

At first, the workers were anxious to talk to the media because they thought that it would help their situation. But a month later, when their circumstances were unchanged and press requests still came to MIRA, the immigrant families were less willing. Rudy recalled their words, “I did all this media and my husband is still detained.” She also pointed out that in the midst of the press onslaught, these families were struggling to pay rent and buy food, and other necessities, so it was essential that they not feel exploited. “The key is getting the message out in a way that makes people feel dignified and supported,” she stressed.



## Lessons Learned

Ali Noorani

While on many levels the community response—both locally and nationally—to the March 6, 2007 immigration raids on the Michael Bianco Factory in New Bedford, MA exceeded our wildest expectations, in hindsight there are four actions we should have considered from the start:

- 1. Nationalize the response through existing networks.** In the heat of the response, we did not think of making New Bedford a national cause until nearly three weeks after the raid. While having the contribution of an organizer from the Center for Community Change helped, if we had moved more quickly to form a “Stop the Raids” campaign, we could have transformed national curiosity into national action. The national networks exist to make such a call to action and, increasingly, effective communications channels also exist but we need to jump at future opportunities to motivate our supporters from reading the news to acting in response to the news.
- 2. Engage bona fide crisis response organizations such as the American Red Cross.** Within hours MIRA and partner organizations were transformed into humanitarian aid organizations working on a 24/7 social, political and media cycle. Time allowed for only a limited effort to engage the local Red Cross, to no response. If the Red Cross had engaged, the raid response would have been “mainstreamed,” and the plight of the women and children would have been impossible to ignore. Locally and nationally, we need to make sure the Red Cross understands the impact of the raids on communities and lead them to realize this is a crisis to which they must respond.
- 3. Connect the political with the legal.** As the response moved into weeks three and four, the humanitarian aid side of the story subsided, and a legal team led by Greater Boston Legal

Services crafted an innovative strategy that disputed ICE's authority to transport detainees out of state. Over the course of their case, however, we missed several opportunities to highlight the legal battle for due process and human rights. With major legal battles looming in the years ahead as litigation becomes a central strategy to fix the nation's immigration system, it is imperative that community organizations, organizers and communications experts partner with legal teams so court victories are highlighted and issues are correctly framed.

4. **Engage African-American and other religious leadership at a national level.** Today's immigration raids are reminiscent of historical conflicts between the police and marchers of the civil rights movement. The extreme conditions of the New Bedford raid – and predictable large scale raids in the future – are an opportunity for leadership of key constituencies to advance the cause in a symbolic way that educates their own membership.

### **What Can Philanthropy Do to Improve Grantees' Communications Skills?**

***Geri Mannion***

Director of the U.S. Democracy Program and of the Special Opportunities Fund  
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1. Ask prospective grantees what communications plans they have in place for the project you are being asked to support. If there are no such plans, consider it a "red flag."
2. Inquire about their ongoing institutional support for communications. Do they have a communications office? Or do they contract with communications professionals?
3. Provide communications training for the executive director and members of senior staff.
4. Bring cohorts of grantees together to discuss their communications plans and strategies around particular issue campaigns. Not only will it hone their individual skills, but exchanging ideas encourages team building and networking. Grantees, such as MIRA, will have a team to call on when an opportunity emerges.
5. Support communications activities as an essential core to any proposal budget.

