

—Slug:.....COMM-0860.bratt.immig_def_fund
—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net
—For section.....News
—Format.....News - byline and dateline
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....43443



Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Nonprofit raises funds to provide legal services for
2 immigrants in Vt.

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 'If somebody's rights can be violated, then anybody's
4 rights can be violated,' says Mike Pieciak, founder of the
5 Vermont Immigration Legal Defense Fund

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 As long as the United States Immigration and Custom
8 Enforcement (ICE) believes it has the freedom to kidnap, terrorize
9 and deport new Americans, attorneys will be necessary.

10 Which is why, in 2025, State Treasurer Michael Pieciak
11 — a Brattleboro native — found time away from his official state

12 duties to help create the Vermont Immigration Legal Defense
13 Fund (VILDF).

14 On April 2, Pieciak brought his traveling fundraising
15 appeal to the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, bringing with
16 him such distinguished guests as Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Sen.
17 Robert Kennedy and current president of the Robert & Ethel
18 Kennedy Human Rights Center, to speak to a crowd of about 100
19 potential donors.

20 Also speaking were attorney and law professor Jill Martin
21 Diaz, the inaugural executive director of the newly incorporated
22 Vermont Asylum Assistance Project, and Joe Wiah, the head of
23 the Ethiopian Community Development Council's Multicultural
24 Community Center in Brattleboro.

25 Pieciak said the impetus for the fund was the story of two
26 students in Burlington.

27 "We heard about two individuals who were going to
28 school up in Burlington who were given an order to self-deport
29 from the federal government," Pieciak said. "And their
30 superintendent reached out to everybody they could think of to
31 say, 'What should we do? What legal support is there for these
32 two young high school students?'

33 "They were terrified, and they decided to go back to their
34 home country even though, after the fact, it turned out that there
35 were a lot of legal remedies that they could have used to stay
36 here in this country."

37 When Pieciak heard that story, he said, he thought about
38 how terrifying the experience must have been for the students
39 and about "how much of an injustice that is that their rights
40 weren't able to be fully heard."

41 "But also, we need young people in our state," he said.
42 "So the idea that we were going to have two young high school
43 students that otherwise would have stayed and then been
44 productive members of the community go back to their home
45 country, just seemed totally ridiculous."

46 Pieciak created the VILDF, which is the only fund like it
47 in the country that he knows about.

48 "The idea was that we needed to raise money so that
49 organizations can receive grants to hire lawyers and to hire legal
50 professionals," he said.

51 "I don't have the skills of the lawyers, but I do have the
52 ability to bring people together, start the fund, raise money for it,
53 provide the grants out to the organizations, and that's what we set
54 out to do," Pieciak added.

55 The fund has now raised over \$850,000 and is hoping to
56 reach \$1 million by May from thousands of donors.

57 "We want to get more lawyers working on behalf of new
58 Americans," Pieciak said. "We want to have more legal assistance
59 so that those lawyers can focus on the job of protecting their
60 clients, and we want to make sure that we also get more legal
61 support so those experts have time to train all of the pro bono
62 lawyers that want to step up in this moment as well."

63 When these immigration attorneys are doing their
64 important work, they're not just simply standing up and
65 representing their clients, Pieciak said.

66 "They're really representing all of us," he said. "If
67 somebody's rights can be violated, then anybody's rights can be
68 violated. In that way, I think they are the heroes of this moment.
69 They are the heroes of democracy."

70 Money for the fund is donated to the United Way of
71 Northwest Vermont, which is the fund's fiscal sponsor.

72 "And then we have an advisory group that makes
73 decisions around grants," Pieciak said. "The Vermont Asylum
74 Assistance Project, the Association of Africans Living in Vermont,
75 the Vermont Afghan Refugee Association, and the Vermont Law
76 School have all won recent grants."

77 The museum event provided an opportunity for
78 Windham County residents to learn what is happening on the
79 ground in Vermont from attorneys deeply involved in current
80 immigration casework, Pieciak said.

81 “Vermonters want to see a justice system that operates
82 fairly, transparently, and in keeping with the democratic
83 principles that have defined our country for 250 years,” Pieciak
84 told the audience. “Because the presence of an attorney is not
85 required in immigration court proceedings, supporting this effort
86 is a direct way to make sure our neighbors and friends receive a
87 fair hearing on the merits of their case.”

88 **Think about what they feel** 89 **comfortable doing when nobody is** 90 **videotaping**

91 Within the past few years, approximately 600 immigrants
92 have settled in southern Vermont.

93 Many of them were fleeing from Afghanistan, where in
94 some cases their families remain trapped. People from Iraq, Syria,
95 Venezuela, Central Africa, and Eritrea have also settled here.

96 The new Americans now work in supermarkets, in
97 medical facilities, at factories, at restaurants, and in many other
98 places. They have made southern Vermont their home.

99 “It’s a privilege for this museum to support this important
100 cause, which is the welfare and well-being and the rights of
101 immigrants and beyond,” said Danny Lichtenfeld, the museum’s
102 director.

103 “This museum was founded by immigrants and the
104 children of immigrants. Our staff includes new Americans who
105 have come to Brattleboro within the past five years; I’m the
106 grandchild of immigrants,” he said.

107 Lichtenfeld called it “astonishing” that in the 250th
108 anniversary of the United States, “this is actually a cause we have
109 to be working hard for and advocating for.”

110 “That’s preposterous, but here we are, and we’re doing
111 the work because we have to, because that’s what Vermonters do
112 and New Englanders do,” he said.

113 Pieciak insists that immigration defense is not a partisan
114 issue.

115 "It's really an American issue," Pieciak said. "The fund
116 was created because we heard so many complaints from
117 Vermonters who were being targeted by the federal
118 administration. They were getting letters that said they had to self-
119 deport out of the United States. They were being detained on
120 their job sites."

121 He said that "so many of the folks that were being
122 detained are doing critical jobs in our economy."

123 "They are growing our food," Pieciak said. "They are
124 building our housing. They are running our manufacturing sites.
125 They are so critical to the Vermont economy."

126 He said that 30,000 Vermonters are foreign-born, and
127 they are critical to the state's economy.

128 "They represent \$1.7 billion of economic activity in our
129 state," Pieciak said. "They represent \$1.2 billion of spending
130 power in our state. They pay over half a billion dollars in taxes.
131 They pay more in taxes than any of them takes in benefits. Don't
132 let them tell you otherwise.

133 "They are more connected to the workforce than the
134 average Vermonter, and they are younger than the average
135 Vermonter," he added.

136 One near consensus is that Vermont needs more young
137 people — particularly, more people in its workforce, more people
138 contributing to the economy, and more people spending money.

139 "And that is exactly what the new American community
140 is doing every single day," Pieciak said.

141 "In fact, in my opinion, the only way Vermont is going to
142 be successful into the future is if we are open and welcoming
143 more new Americans into our communities here in Vermont," he
144 added.

145 The fund, Pieciak said, is like "planting a flag and saying
146 loudly and clearly, 'We need you. We want you to make our

147 communities better and stronger. And please, you always have a
148 home here in Vermont.”

149 **Cruelty on our own soil**

150 When she spoke, Kerry Kennedy told the audience that
151 she knew and loved Windham County because her sister
152 Kathleen had graduated from The Putney School.

153 “I said, ‘This is where I want to live,’” Kennedy said. “I
154 love this part of our country, and I spend a lot of time here.”

155 Kennedy spoke about the Human Rights Center that
156 bears the name of her parents. The organization traces its roots to
157 a foundation that was started in the aftermath of her father’s
158 assassination in 1968 and, according to its [website](#), “has
159 remained focused on the protection of civic space — the
160 freedoms of assembly, association, and expression; the right to
161 dissent without fear of reprisal or persecution; the most basic of
162 rights upon which all others are based.”

163 “We have an education program, and we have a program
164 where we work with the investment community so that they put
165 downward pressure on the companies they’re investing in to be
166 in compliance with human rights boards,” Kennedy said. “It’s not
167 easy to do that. And then the third part of the work we do is we
168 sue governments that are abusing people’s rights.”

169 Internationally, Kennedy said, her organization has about
170 40 cases going at any one time, and it has never lost a case.

171 “Then domestically, we have all these cases against the
172 Trump administration, some on anti-black and anti-brown
173 violence by police, and then the rest are all abuses by ICE in
174 detention,” Kennedy said. “So all of you know about the abuses
175 by ICE out of detention, because we’ve seen it.”

176 She implored the audience: “Imagine — they know
177 you’re videotaping it and they do it anyway.”

178 “Now, think about what they feel comfortable doing
179 when you’re in detention and there is nobody videotaping,”
180 Kennedy continued. “That’s what we cover, and none of our work

181 would be possible without organizations like the Immigration
182 Legal Defense Fund. We work with front-line immigration
183 organizations across the country, and this is the front line. This is
184 how we get change made.”

185 She detailed some of the abuses carried on in detention.

186 “We have about a dozen people who were raped and
187 sexually assaulted in ICE facilities by U.S. immigration officials,”
188 Kennedy said. “This is our government. This is not OK.”

189 Kennedy said there were cases of children “being
190 coerced into saying that they’re adults, that they’re over 18, so
191 that they can [legally sign] voluntary departure forms and be
192 deported right away. I mean, this is insanity. Why are we doing
193 this?”

194 She spoke about one woman she met at a facility near
195 New Orleans.

196 “I was in rural Louisiana a few months ago, and I was
197 talking to one of our clients,” Kennedy said. “She was explaining
198 that she’s from Honduras, and she had been a victim of sexual
199 slavery. She was brought over when she was 14, and she
200 experienced multiple rapes. You could imagine what she
201 experienced as a sex slave.”

202 The client “escaped when she was about 18.”

203 “She pulled her life together, and then she started an
204 organization to help survivors of sex trafficking,” Kennedy
205 continued. “She was running that in New Orleans, and she was
206 helping the police prosecute her abuser.”

207 About a year ago, her client went to see her doctor, who
208 suspected that she had colon cancer. Because of the aggressive
209 nature of the cancer, she was urged to get an immediate X-ray.

210 “A couple of days later, she gets picked up by ICE,”
211 Kennedy said, and the woman spent six months of detention in
212 ICE facilities, unable to get medical treatment.

213 That’s cruelty, Kennedy said, and this cruelty is being
214 done on our own American soil. That is why she said supporting
215 the legal defense fund is so necessary.

216 "What's going on in Washington?" Kennedy said. "This is
217 horrible. All of us feel like victims. Our friends feel like victims.
218 Every single one of the people in Vermont who were picked up
219 by ICE is a victim.

220 "We've got to stop that. We've got to stop feeling like
221 victims and start feeling like heroes. And the difference between
222 a victim and a hero is activism with a loving heart.

223 "That's what this organization is about," Kennedy said.
224 "That's why we're all here tonight, to support this work. And that's
225 why I'm here."

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

226

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

227

0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

228

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

229

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

###BEGIN LOGLINE###

###END LOGLINE###