

# De Graauw studies the role of nonprofits on immigration

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

Immigration is, and always has been, a hot issue. And it's gotten even hotter in the last few years, both in Europe and in the U.S. More times than not, this topic seems to be discussed in emotional rather than rational terms. That is why we need scholars who look closely at the facts and tell us what we really need to know.

One of those scholars is Dr. Els de Graauw. An assistant professor in the Department of Political Science in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, de Graauw has an interesting personal story to tell. While growing up in her native Rotterdam in the Netherlands, she grew fascinated with American politics, "not that I liked everything that happens here, but I had a fascination with the things that I liked and the things that I didn't like."

Her fascination soon became a passion for learning more about the U.S. "When I was seventeen, I wanted to go on an exchange to the United States, which is what I did. I lived with a host family for a year in Minneapolis, I went to high school there, I got my high school diploma, and then I went back to the Netherlands knowing that I wanted to return and learn more about the U.S."

At that time only a few universities in the Netherlands had American studies programs. "I went to the one in Nijmegen, and ever since then, I've been kind of hooked. I've always been interested in the history of the United States, and more and more I became focused on immigration issues, political issues, so here we are."

Knowing that to really understand her subject she needed to live in the country she was studying, she moved to Berkeley, where she obtained both a master's and a doctoral degree in Political Science from the University of California.

In her latest book, entitled *Making Immigrant Rights Real: Nonprofits and the Politics of Integration* in San Francisco, she looked at the role of non-profits in that city, trying to answer the question of what kind of obstacles these small, community-based organizations face in supporting immigrant communities.

"They're often small organizations with limited budgets. Because they are incorporated as non-profits, they have restrictions on the amount and type of advocacy that they can do," says de Graauw, "and they operate against this kind of national background of concerns about



Dr. De Graauw at work.

Photo by Yulia McClemock

extending too many rights, particularly to those who are undocumented."

Her book is a window on how these nonprofits do what they do and details their successes in promoting language access legislation, creating municipal ID card programs, and fighting for fair labor rights for immigrant and other low wage workers.

It is clear to her that, although the U.S. is a country of immigrants, "we don't have a national or coherent integration program. It's kind of ironic, but we don't have a program, like, say, Canada to then integrate

these newcomers into our economy, into our social fabric, into our political system."

This is very important for the U.S., since our foreign-born population is about 42 million, of which about 11 million are undocumented.

Integration of immigrants is both an economic and a political issue. Study after study has shown that immigration helps to energize local economies, yet it is also a very sensitive matter. "In uncertain times for the economy, immigrants become easy scapegoats, which is also part of what's happening in Europe," says she.

In the last few years, the issue of immigration has defied many of the ideals of the European Union and was one of the contributing factors to Brexit. "The immigrants that they are receiving and responding to in Europe are different from those here in the United States. So there's a different dynamic there, but there's some consistency in how this is being expressed by the public and by policy makers who may build a campaign around those issues."

In her studies of nonprofit organizations that support immigrant integration, she was particularly struck by their resolve. "What I most admire about the organizations I studied is that they're so persistent and tenacious. The U.S. political system makes it hard to create policy change and social change, particularly for vulnerable populations like immigrants who don't have the right to vote, who often struggle with language issues, who work multiple jobs to provide for themselves and their families."

De Graauw, thinks that governments at different levels are starting to show more interest in the issue of integration. "It's really been kind of what we call from the grassroots, and I think that's now kind of percolating up to the state level and up to the federal level. New York is doing fabulous work; we have a mayor's office of immigrant affairs that is in the forefront of this; we have a city council that is supportive of this, a mayor who's supportive of this."

Another thing she has been noticing is that immigration is not only a matter of governmental concern in the typical American gateway cities such as New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, but something that is happening elsewhere in the U.S., particularly in the Midwest.

Her upcoming book will deal with the growing number of city and state immigrant affairs offices and focus on how they provide inclusive response to immigrants, not just the undocumented but all immigrants, regardless of their level of skills. "What are they doing and what impact are they having on questions of immigrant integration and representation?" she is asking.

Her work promises to be enlightening, especially for those who want to be informed before drawing conclusions of any kind about the topic of immigration.

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*The radio show on which these articles can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/188917321>*

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