

Immigrants and Global Migration Initiative director in right place at right time

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Elle Fersan builds collaboration, activism around immigration on campus.

By Matthew Kredell

Two months after taking the job as director of USC's Immigrants and Global Migration Initiative (IGMI), a Provost Initiative housed in the USC Gould School of Law, Elle Fersan knew she was in the right place.



Elle Fersan, director, USC Immigrants and Global Migration Initiative (IGMI).

With reports of the U.S. government separating families at the border with Mexico, Fersan, a historian and activist, sent briefs to inform USC students, faculty, alumni and staff, expecting maybe 10 or 15 people to respond. Two hundred and fifty members of the Trojan community asked what they could do to help, leading IGMI to coordinate sending USC experts – lawyers, doctors and social workers – to border detention centers.

“When you start as an interdisciplinary initiative, the first thing you need to do is listen and find out what people need and want and find synergies and intersectionality,” Fersan said. “Because of this administration, our programming had to answer the call, which was to support families and children, upholding our values as a university.”

Personal immigration experience informs work

Fersan is an immigrant herself, having moved to the U.S. five years ago. She was born and raised in Lebanon during Syrian occupation.

As a prior immigrant to Canada, she can compare the experience of entering each country.

“When I first received my selection for Quebec, they sent me a congratulatory letter along with a letter about their values and what they believed in, and the steps I would need to start thinking about in order to become an active citizen,” she says. “I did not get any of that when I got my approval for the U.S. Entering the U.S. and going through the immigration system, I experienced discrimination at so many different levels.” Soon after joining USC Gould, she became a naturalized U.S. citizen through the school’s Immigration Clinic.

IGMI strives to coordinate and advance the immigration-related work being done around the University through research, advocacy, education and service. In the year and a half since its inception, IGMI has collaborated with 14 schools, eight departments and 13 student organizations, building a core of 150 Trojan volunteers.

As ICE raids created an environment of fear for many, IGMI took steps to collect updated information on campus resources for USC’s DACA/undocumented population.

Fersan also led the Initiative to organize four comprehensive asylum clinics and resource fairs in collaboration with civil society organizations, and host numerous talks, symposia, workshops and guest lectures.

Projects include immigration ecosystem map, court monitoring

IGMI is developing the USC immigration ecosystem map in order to link members of the USC community, external partners and other universities.

Another big project is the development of an Immigration Court Monitoring Program, deploying court observers to L.A. immigration courts to identify and analyze the procedures

required by due process in immigration courts, document and investigate practices of immigration courts in protecting the integrity of these procedures, and collecting original data on how court observers evaluate procedural fairness.

In collaboration with faculty at USC Annenberg and USC Dornsife, IGMI plans to invite U.S. presidential candidates on campus to discuss their immigration policy plans.

Ultimately, Fersan sees IGMI as a regional and national hub for thought leadership regarding immigration, migration and immigrant populations.

“USC’s strategic plan is to put the university at the heart of the community and really answer the call,” Fersan said. “That’s one of the things we’re trying to do with the Initiative by collaborating with organizations on the ground and being a responsible institution at the heart of L.A.”