

Advocate honored on King day

Her cause: helping immigrants feel safe at work

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Judy Elliott, who runs the NH Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, will receive the Martin Luther King Award today.

Judy Elliott begins her lessons with words such as safe, dangerous, caution and watch out, simple but crucial terms for the immigrants she helps prepare for jobs in their new country.

Over the last several years, Elliott has given tools to hundreds of newcomers to make their workplaces safer and to help them avoid exploitation.

She offers tips on asking for safety goggles, gloves or hardhats, and information on workers' rights. Today, Elliott will receive the Martin Luther King Award, which is given annually by the Martin Luther King Coalition, a group advocating nonviolence, compassion and equality.

But the prize isn't the only thing propelling Elliott, of Canterbury, into a more public role. She and her colleagues on the Immigrant Rights Task Force are taking a prominent stand against proposed state legislation that would give local police sweeping powers to enforce immigration law. Elliott fears such laws would unravel the work she and other activists have done to make people from around the world settle successfully in New Hampshire.

"What's happening in New Hampshire is part of a wave of assaults on the rights of immigrants nationwide," she said in an interview last week. "A wave of rhetoric targeting immigrants, trying to convince people that every immigrant is a potential terrorist. I think the level of hysteria and totally unsubstantiated fear of immigrants is rising. . . . Immigrants are a part of society and we need to work it out."

Elliott grew up in Detroit and came to New Hampshire in 1978 to protest the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant as a member of the Clamshell Alliance. That experience led to two things: She met her longtime partner, Arnie Alpert, and she became fascinated with the local economy.

"New Hampshire has a relatively good economy, compared to other states," she said. "Because of

that, we blind ourselves to the economic stress that so many of our families are under. . . . Job quality is declining, wages are declining, benefits are getting worse, pensions are going away."

She earned a master's degree in labor economics from Northeastern University and held a string of work force related jobs. About five years ago, she took over as the administrator of the NH Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health, where she's become increasingly involved with immigrant workers.

Elliott talks to students studying English at adult education classes around the state, explaining workers compensation laws and leading skits on dealing with sexual harassment.

"Immigrants are a piece of the whole picture of a declining economy," she said. "Immigrants, regardless of their status, have jobs where the working conditions are really harsh. They work really hard, long hours. Some employers are responsible, but we've also heard a lot of stories about abusive employers."

Her colleagues say Elliott is especially good at helping newcomers speak for themselves and lobby state leaders for better treatment.

"She's one of the people who's secure enough in herself to get out of the way and help others have a voice," said Martha Yager, a local housing advocate.

Chris Wellington, an attorney with New Hampshire Legal Assistance, knows Elliott through the task force and is "thrilled" she's getting recognized for her achievements.

"Judy quietly does great and significant work," she said. "She's every dedicated to justice issues."

It's been several months since Elliott discovered she'd won the King award, and she has a lengthy list of people she plans to thank for helping her spread King's message of equality and respect.

"Knowing the history of Martin Luther King Day in New Hampshire makes it mean a lot to me," she said.

"A lot of people in New Hampshire who care about justice worked really hard to make it a state holiday. So the holiday has real meaning in New Hampshire that it might not have in other states."