



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
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The Minnesota/Dakotas Chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) is pleased to announce that it has selected **Olga Zoltai** and **Victor Contreras** to receive its 2012 Immigrant of Distinction Award. The award will be presented before a naturalization ceremony at the University of Minnesota on Friday, March 2, 2012. The event, co-hosted by the Immigration History Research Center, will be followed by a reception honoring the award recipients and newly-naturalized U.S. Citizens.

The immigrant of Distinction Award honors immigrants who have made substantial contributions to their communities or professions through exceptional leadership, high achievement, or moral courage.

Olga Zoltai has spent over 50 years in public service, helping refugees and other immigrants settle in Minnesota. While her husband Tibor ran the geology department at the University of Minnesota, she raised three children and kept a home, but was very active with the local Hungarian diaspora, later founding the Minnesota Hungarians, which both helped Hungarian immigrants acclimate to US life and helped them preserve their culture. The level of her activity was evident in 1989 when she was invited to attend a White House ceremony announcing Hungary's grant of Most Favored Nation Status by the U.S. In 1971 Ms. Zoltai began work as the sole immigration counselor at the International Institute of Minnesota, eventually managing and expanding the program over her 22 years there. Among the many thousands of immigrants she assisted was the first Hmong immigrant to settle in Minnesota, but it was her tireless activity in seeing the "impossible" cases through to success that her community and peers found so remarkable, as illustrated by a Star Tribune article reporting her retirement in 1993 entitled "Area Immigrants Are Soon To Lose Their Patron Saint." She also has been active with humanitarian projects with the Unitarian Church, specifically helping repressed villages in Transylvania and helping to establish sustainable agriculture there.

A refugee herself, Ms. Zoltai escaped war-torn Hungary in 1945, fleeing to Austria where she met her future husband, Tibor. After several years they ended up in Alberta, Canada, working the sugar beet fields as indentured agricultural workers. After Tibor was later accepted into and then finished a graduate program at MIT, they finally landed in Minnesota in 1959. Tibor, a distinguished immigrant in his own right, passed away in 2003.

In addition to serving as matriarch of her family of three children and six grandchildren, at 80 years old Ms. Zoltai remains an active volunteer in service to refugees and the underprivileged, most recently helping illiterate girls and repressed agricultural workers in India.

Victor Contreras is a third-generation migrant worker from Mexico who began coming to Minnesota on a seasonal basis in 1990. Originally undocumented, he benefited from the legalization program established under Ronald Reagan and achieved U.S. Citizenship in 2000.

Mr. Contreras directly experienced and witnessed the poor conditions imposed on such workers by agricultural corporations, and in 1997 he and a few others began organizing the workers in Owatonna, forming Centro Campesino, which was later incorporated in 2000. That same year, and after years of persistent effort, they won concessions from Chiquita Canning for the workers – specifically the construction in the workers’ camp of a childcare facility, hot water, new beds and appliances, separate bathrooms, and a storm shelter. Mr. Contreras was an active leader and organizer for Centro Campesino until his retirement from that position last summer. During his time there, Centro Campesino achieved additional successes for migrant workers, including improving conditions at different companies, securing passage of the Improving State Protections For Migrant Workers Act which formalized worker protections into law, and through a lawsuit securing relief for over a dozen families who were discriminated against and displaced by a city in Southeast Minnesota. Mr. Contreras has also guided Centro Campesino to assist students, winning passage in 2009 of the Flat Rate Tuition Bill, ensuring in-state tuition to all residents of the state, regardless of background. In addition to advocating on behalf of migrants, Centro Campesino also provides a range of services, including health services, education workshops, assistance in filling out applications and other paperwork, and referrals for professional help.

Mr. Contreras lives with his wife Gloria in Owatonna, and has two children and one grandchild. Although he retired from Centro Campesino, Mr. Contreras’s activity assisting immigrants in Minnesota has continued unabated. His vision and drive in striving for justice and dignity in the face of adverse circumstances makes him a stabilizing force in Southern Minnesota. His story is an American one, and a successful example both of the benefit of a practical, humane treatment of our migrant neighbors from the south, as well as of the long-term, ongoing benefit we receive from immigrants in Minnesota.

To members of the press:

For more information about the Immigrant of Distinction award, past awardees, how to attend this year’s ceremony, or AILA, contact Dick A. Zonneveld, Chair, American Immigration Lawyers Association, MN/Dakotas Chapter, at (651) 209-8302 or dz@zonnlaw.com.

AILA is the national association of over 11,000 attorneys and law professors who practice and teach immigration law. Founded in 1946, AILA is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that provides continuing legal education, information, professional services, and expertise through its 36 chapters and over 50 national committees. The Minnesota/Dakotas Chapter comprises approximately 250 Members who represent U.S. families seeking permanent residence for close family members, as well as U.S. businesses seeking talent from the global marketplace. Our Members also represent foreign students, entertainers, athletes, and asylum seekers, often on a pro bono basis.