

National Civic Review

MAKING CITIZEN DEMOCRACY WORK



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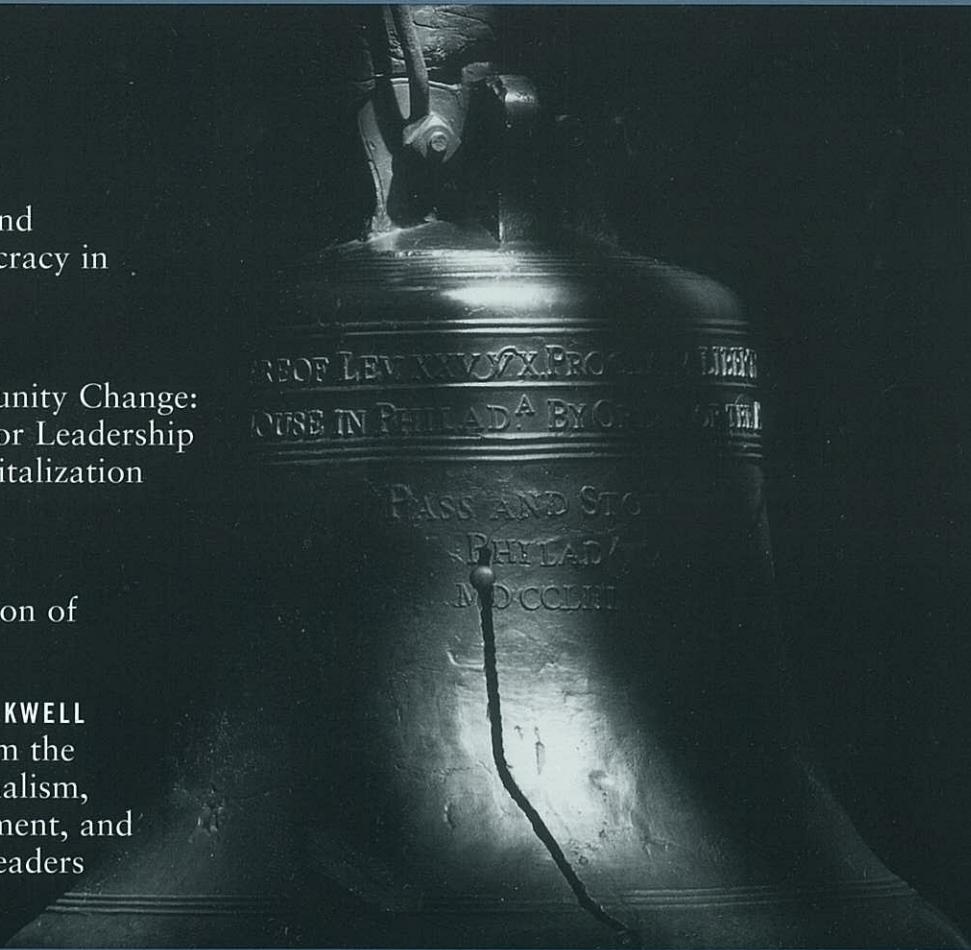
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Networks in a New “Gateway”

BY CRAIG MCGARVEY

Enter the building at 201 West Main Street in Durham to learn how this area of North Carolina has handled the explosive growth of its immigrant population.

To the left of the expansive foyer is the three-year-old Latino Community Credit Union, community-owned and controlled, with more than eight thousand members, \$12 million in assets, a statewide award for excellence, and a \$1.3 million grant from the U.S. Treasury Department to open new branches.¹

Straight ahead is the bilingual police substation.

Turn right into the membership-based community organization El Centro Hispano (ECH), and across from the receptionist is an office of Durham CAN, the Industrial Areas Foundation's local faith-based organizing affiliate. Further along the side of a large and inviting space is the local school district's Welcoming Center for non-English speaking students.

In the far corner, beyond the couches and congregating members, is the Cafe de Mujeres, where women are developing lead-

ership skills through organizing on domestic violence issues. The office for Youth Leaders in Action is down the left wall. Signs around the room identify the English-as-a-second-language classes and the office for assistance in obtaining a federal tax identification number, necessary to open an account at the credit union or to obtain a driver's license.

To find the makeshift office of the new Latino Community Development Center (created to help other North Carolina immigrant organizations become membership- and civic participation-based and link them statewide), it's necessary to take the elevator to the basement.

A decade of networked leadership and institutional development is on display.

A decade of networked leadership and institutional development is on display in the building housing El Centro Hispano.

Kohar Ivan Parra, an immigrant from Colombia with an organizing background, led the transition of ECH from the roots of its founding,

in 1992, in faith-based service delivery to civic participation. The ECH board hired Parra in 1996 and incorporated as a membership-based nonprofit in 1997. A crisis of robberies, assaults, and home burglaries in the immigrant Latino community spurred the transition. Interracial conflict infused the situation; the perpetrators were African American. ECH defused the community anger (350 people came to the first meeting), organizing a series of forums with the police and City Council that led to hiring bilingual police officers, a victims' support group, and a biracial conflict resolution team.

The Latino Credit Union, when it opened in 2000, was a joint project of ECH and the African American-based nonprofit financial institution Self-Help. The credit union's first member made his deposit from a wheelchair; during the crisis, he had been shot and robbed of the \$500 he was carrying.

One of the leaders who helped to bring Ivan Parra to ECH, John Herrera, an immigrant from Costa Rica, is a founder and the current director of the credit union. His civic participation began in the

early 1990s with another project to integrate recent immigrants. From their living room, Herrera and his wife and a phone tree of more than three hundred volunteers organized the first Fiesta del Pueblo in 1994. It was to be a place for the invisible Latino population to become visible, for inter- and intracultural exchange to bloom: family-oriented, alcohol- and tobacco-free, with healthy recreation, food, music, dance, arts and crafts, cultural exhibits, community outreach, and education.

Three thousand people attended the 1994 Fiesta—African Americans, Latinos, and Caucasians, rich and poor, politicians and business leaders. The 2003 attendance was closer to fifty thousand, and the Fiesta is now only one of many projects of its sponsoring organization, El Pueblo, incorporated in 1995. Statewide in its reach and led by Executive Director and former founding board member Andrea Bazan-Manson, El Pueblo has programs in leadership development, civic participation, youth leadership, health and safety, capacity building, and advocacy. Its first-ever Latino Day at the state legislature in May 2003 drew one thousand grassroots participants.

Other organizations have played a distinctive role in this growing institutional and leadership network.

The North Carolina Center for International Understanding (CIU) at the University of North Carolina, under the direction of Millie Ravenel, had been sponsoring international citizen exchange programs since 1979. Working with Herrera, Parra, and other Latino leaders, CIU created the Latino Initiative for Public Policy and Civic Leaders in response to the growth of the Latino population in the state.

Since 1998, the initiative has been bringing foundation, non-profit, school, and policy leaders on educational visits to the communities of origin of the state's Mexican immigrants. A predeparture workshop prepares participants for the weeklong tour, while a follow-up gathering creates an opportunity to reflect, share, and evaluate. The initiative creates multidisciplinary, diverse study teams of participants, including local Latino leaders, to build relationships. A total of 145 leaders participated in the program through 2003.

Although CIU does not claim sole credit for such innovations in North Carolina as the Governor's Liaison

and Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs, the educational visits have been a life-changing experience for participants.

Perhaps the stories of most dramatic impact have come from neighboring Chatham County, where poultry processing plants have attracted a large number of immigrant families, particularly to the Siler City area, whose elementary school population is now over 60 percent Latino. Overwhelmed by the rapid change, county commissioners sent a highly publicized letter inviting what was then the Immigration and Naturalization Service to deport undocumented immigrants.

The CIU organized a Mexico trip for Chatham County officials, following which the chair of the county commissioners publicly apologized for the letter. Shortly thereafter, when white supremacist David Duke held an anti-immigrant rally in Siler City, officials who had participated with CIU successfully helped to defuse the situation. Chatham County educators on a separate tour subsequently developed a statewide award-winning migrant education program.

Each of the leaders mentioned here—only a few among the hundreds who have helped to build North Carolina's infrastructure to

promote immigrant civic involvement and inclusion—would be the first to downplay his or her personal contribution. All emphasize collective responsibility for positive change. All cite the critical support of North Carolina's foundations and the hard work ahead to extend efforts throughout North Carolina.

But the promising beginnings of similar institutions exist in other areas of the state and throughout the new gateways of the South, and the collective experience of leadership and institution building in North Carolina's Triangle Area offers much for other communities to learn.

ENDNOTE

1. Perez, E. "North Carolina Credit Union Banks on Latino Immigrants." *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2003, p. B1.

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