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Research Center for Leadership in Action NYUWagner

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CULTURAL ROOTS AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH: EDUCATING AND ORGANIZING A FRAGMENTED IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY
REDISCOVERING PRIDE
OAXACAN INDIGENOUS BINATIONAL FRONT (OIBF)

"I hope we never forget who we are or where we came from."
Rufino Dominguez
Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front

"I had reached the point where I didn't want to say where I came from. I even thought that I'd forgotten my own language," says a woman of trying to shed her Oaxacan roots. "But then I saw a flyer about an Oaxacan organization - that these people were proud of their origins and I decided to call them."

In a world that is harsh enough for new immigrants, life in the United States has been particularly difficult for immigrants from the southeastern Mexican states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Guerrero. Made up of indigenous groups such as Mixtecos, Zapotecos, Triquis, Chatinos, Chinantecos and Mixes, and known widely as "Oaxacans," they represent cultures, customs and languages that are neither American nor Spanish—16 languages are spoken in Oaxaca alone. Because of their native origins, they find themselves victims of discrimination not only by Anglos, but also by other minority groups, including other Mexicans. "They refer to us with such derogatory expressions as 'oaxaquitas, oaxacos, indios,' all variations on 'ignorant,'" says Rufino Dominguez, an Oaxacan native and co-founder of the California-based, Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front; which is why Oaxaca natives feel compelled to distance themselves from their roots and their native culture for fear, says Dominguez, of the "double racism" from Anglos and Latino Mexicans that comes with being Oaxacan.

This leadership story was written in 2004 by Erica Gabrielle Foldy and Jonathan Walters. Erica Gabrielle Foldy is an Associate Professor at New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service and researcher for Leadership for a Changing World's Research and Documentation Component at NYU Wagner's Research Center for Leadership in Action. Jonathan Walters is a writer and journalist. Additional co-researchers for this leadership story were Leadership for a Changing World Award recipient Rufino Dominguez of Oaxaca Indigenous Binational Coalition and David Alvarez of Leadership for a Changing World's Research and Documentation Component at NYU Wagner's Research Center for Leadership in Action. The leadership story is intended solely as a vehicle for classroom discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

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Because of their low status and because of serious language barriers, Oaxacans have found themselves relegated to taking the dirtiest, lowest paying and most dangerous jobs open to immigrants, mostly doing farm labor in California's San Joaquin Valley. Their low status and separation from more mainstream immigrant groups means that Oaxacans have found themselves fragmented and powerless in the face of widespread prejudice, as well as cultural and linguistic isolation.

What many Oaxacans had not thought possible—that their Oaxaca roots could actually become a source of strength, cohesion and clout—only occurred to them when they saw the flier, made the phone call and discovered a community that was in the process of emerging from isolation and marginalization through a concerted effort to build on a deep sense of history and culture as indigenous Americans.

The Wages of Prejudice, the Price of Isolation

The stories about the consequences of prejudice, exploitation and isolation of Oaxacans are chilling. There are instances of Oaxacans being held as virtual slave laborers by unscrupulous farmers, working the fields for upwards of 12 hours a day at wages less than the minimum wage under unsanitary conditions, facing exposure to searing sun, brutal heat and a wide variety of potentially harmful pesticides. There are instances of children being removed from their households because family members, lacking interpreters, were unable to explain to Child Protective Services caseworkers legitimate day care and baby-sitting arrangements. There have even been instances of Oaxacans actually being committed to mental hospitals for what doctors determined to be incoherent ravings - ravings that were simply protests delivered in an Oaxacan tongue unfamiliar to medical staff.

Underpinning such horror stories is a broad sweep of serious issues facing indigenous Mexicans in the United States: the inability to access basic health and legal services because of fear of an unfamiliar system and the lack of access to adequate translation services; the inability to push or challenge an educational system that many Oaxacans see as failing their kids; a constant, nagging fear of persecution and deportation based on immigration status; and the deep sense of injustice that comes with contributing to the economy of a state that won't even allow them the privilege of official and necessary forms of identification, such as driver’s licenses.

Building a Movement

It was in the face of such injustice that the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front was born in 1991. The initial goal of the coalition was "to help indigenous migrants obtain better wages and working conditions," says Dominguez, "by educating them to their rights under United States laws and international conventions. We wanted to build a better world for our brothers and sisters."

The effort is not focused solely on Oaxacans in the United States. A hallmark of the coalition is that it is an organization with its feet in two countries. While it works on

improving the lives of Oaxacans in the U.S., the coalition is actively doing the same in Mexico. The coalition has an office and members in Mexico and holds conferences there. Action that the coalition pursues in Oaxaca can be as specific as helping to set up local bank accounts for families receiving money from relatives in the U.S. to developing and supporting programs aimed at broader economic and educational development. "Binational also means that some of us who are here will go back to our communities in Mexico," says a coalition activist who has participated in some of the workshops, "to work on economic development, schools, medical clinics, things that benefit state government, or even to run for office or work in government."

Building that better world has mostly involved a process of building on cultural identity while at the same time educating Oaxacans of their rights under U.S. immigration, labor, health, and education law. The coalition collaborates with California Rural Legal Assistance, an organization that provides legal assistance to rural immigrants. This organization has a 1-800-MIXTECO line that offers rapid entry into an increasingly visible and active community, and also offers a variety of direct help and referral services (the coalition also publishes a bi-monthly newsletter, distributed widely throughout the state of California and Mexico). While the coalition offers direct help—from health care counseling to translation services—the fundamental thrust of the effort is to get Oaxacans to a point where they can advocate for themselves, say activists. "We are trying to get people involved and teach them about general topics like schools and government, so these people can become their own advocates," says Dominguez.

To do that, the coalition has been offering a series of Civic Participation Workshops. Topics include how to deal with local schools, local government and how to build partnerships and coalitions to promote civic action. "Suppose trash services are inadequate in your neighborhood. We explain to people how local government is organized so they can go and make a claim," says one of the coalition’s activists. "One individual who came to a workshop said that their children's school tells parents that their kids are all doing fine. But if that's true, why are just a few of them attending college? And we want people to be able to go to their schools and ask those questions. It's about participation."

Connecting through Culture

But to be effective in such community affairs, it is important, say coalition activists, to build a solid foundation from which to leverage action, which is why tapping into the Oaxacan's sense of history and culture plays such a fundamental role. The coalition supports a wide variety of cultural and artistic events and activities to build such cohesion, including holding La Guelaguetz (native Oaxacan dances), along with concerts of Oaxacan music, and even sports events where participants wear traditional dress. "For example, we are working on a project that invites young people to participate in regional dance," says a coordinator for the coalition. "You teach them who they are as you give them alternatives to drugs and gangs. Instead of choosing a bad group, they can be part of our organization."

For a broader reach, the coalition also publishes El Tequio, a regular bulletin that includes a sweep of material, from poetry to listings of upcoming events.

A New Style of Leader, a New Source of Leadership

In teaching Oaxacans how to advocate for themselves, the coalition also hopes to deepen the reservoir of potential leaders who can then spread out into the community to continue building the indigenous Mexican rights movement. Indeed, the Civic Participation Workshops are aimed directly at identifying and grooming emerging leaders and activists.

One of the most promising sources of that new leadership among indigenous Mexicans, says Dominguez, are women, who as a group have traditionally been left out by all Mexican cultures—indigenous and Latino—when it comes to taking any sort of leadership role. "We are a conservative culture," says Dominguez. "When we created the coalition, there were no women working with us." While the culture might be conservative, Dominguez says it has always had a tradition of encouraging broad participation. Being inclusive of women may, in its way, be radical, but in fact it is consistent with participatory Oaxacan cultural tradition. "In 1997, we started a health program in order to talk to women about such issues as breast cancer and domestic violence. The idea was to get women involved in our meetings and in the coalition."

The idea worked and worked well. Women have become an active, vocal and valued source of power, ideas and expertise for the coalition, in areas from health counseling, to plotting coalition strategy, to offering translation services. "We need new leaders," says a volunteer in the coalition's health outreach program. "We need to get new people involved; they will be the ones who ultimately take responsibility for continuing the work of our organization."

Working the Streets and the Corridors of Power

While the coalition sustains a broad outreach program aimed at Oaxacans on a wide variety of issues from education to health care, it also gets directly involved in street-level issues even as it pursues broader policy goals.

For example, the coalition was a key player in an attempt to move 52 Oaxacan families living in a trailer park that had been built over a toxic waste site. "Corporations covered the mess and then built houses over it," says Dominguez. "It was difficult at first to get our people to participate, to exercise their civic rights." But gradually, working with the families, the coalition in concert with neighborhood activists won a $7 million relocation settlement. "It wasn't just important for the coalition," says Dominguez, "it was important for all people from Oaxaca, because they saw that when they are united and willing to fight for their rights, things change."

The coalition is also working on immigration rights issues at a higher level, including an effort to allow immigrants to get drivers licenses and automobile insurance. "Thousands

of Oaxacans are driving with no licenses," says a community activist with the coalition. "If we need identification to cash a check, we don't have any. We are here paying taxes, paying doctors, contributing to this economy, but we can't obtain a driver's license."

"We Offer Solutions"

In explaining the coalition's effectiveness, members emphasize that winning change requires more than just pointing out injustices, like the lack of opportunity to get driver's licenses. "We don't only complain and yell stubbornly," says another coalition activist and an interpreter who speaks English, Spanish and Mixteco, an Oaxacan language. "What we do is offer solutions, propose changes. For example, the Mexican government has promised they would send us interpreters. They haven't sent any so we started our own program. The Mexican government won an agreement from California to develop a health program targeted at Mexican immigrants. We had already initiated such a program."

While the focus of the coalition's activities is on Oaxacans here and in Mexico, it is not only Oaxacans to whom the coalition is reaching out, say coalition members. "The coalition is not just focused on indigenous Mexicans," says a community activist, "We are reaching out to a number of groups." The coalition's efforts to include immigrants under the state's Medicaid program, for example, have included Hmongs, Latin Americans and African Americans. The coalition also has a program specifically aimed at bringing Hmong and Oaxacan women together to identify common problems and ways to address them. "We strongly believe that organizations shouldn't be competing with each other," says Dominguez, "but cooperating with each other."

Signs of Progress in a Long Process

Dominguez and his colleagues say they have no illusions about how difficult the task ahead remains. Efforts to keep young Oaxacans out of gangs, to educate field workers to their rights under labor laws, and to educate US citizens to the differences in Oaxacans and their culture mean committing to a long-term, long-range campaign for change and improvement. "It's going to be a long process," says one of the coalition's interpreters and activists. "US citizens don't really know who we are or what our language is. Just in the medical area, for example, we're trying to educate health care providers about our culture, so we have workshops directly in the community with doctors and nurses. They learn about us and who we are." It is likewise in the areas of education and law. "In all these areas, we're trying to teach officials that if they need translators they can come to us."

Dominguez explains that their efforts do seem to be paying off in some broader areas. Conditions for laborers seem to be improving, he says, along with access to health care, education and legal services. Indeed, the coalition has proved so effective in helping Oaxacans with problems large and small; it is now regarded by many as a much more effective avenue of action than going to the Mexican consulate for assistance.

But progress is slow, say coalition activists, and will continue to depend on Oaxacans' ability to merge into a single, cohesive voice for change. And that, says Dominguez, continues to depend on the ability of Oaxacans to build on their potentially powerful and deep sense of culture and history. "I hope we never forget who we are or where we came from. I say this because I have relatives who are confused. They came here as teenagers and they are now United States citizens. But when they see the color of their own skin, they wonder who they are. They are confused. But to be strong we need to have pride in our Mixteco or Zapotecos origins. And we need to teach our children about our origins."

It is on that foundation, says Dominguez, which Oaxacans will move forward. "This is the land of opportunity for those who have the knowledge, and we want to be part of it." It is a goal that is well within the grasp of indigenous Mexicans. One of the coalition's activists affirms, "Now I hear people say, 'Oh, I didn't know about those school programs or what the school board does or that I could be a member of the school board!' But when they find out they have such rights and that they are members of the community, that's when they find their power."

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

As the leadership research and development hub for the field of public service, the Research Center for Leadership in Action fosters leadership that transforms society.

Founded in 2003 at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a top-ranked school for public service, the Center's unique approach integrates research with practice, bridges individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connects local efforts with global trends. RCLA scholars use innovative social science methodologies to address ambitious questions that advance big ideas in leadership.

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About the Leadership for a Changing World Program

Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a signature program of the Ford Foundation designed to recognize, strengthen and support social change leaders and to highlight the importance of community leadership in improving people's lives.

The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

Learn more about Leadership for a Changing World at http://www.leadershipforchange.org, and learn more about the RCLA Social Change Leadership Network at http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/our_work/social_change_network.php.

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