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by Sharryn Kasmir

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that I already had? What I knew was Central Americans, and I also had strong feelings about what had happened in Central America to make people immigrate to the United States. It was important to me to keep working with Central Americans in that sense. Once I knew that, Long Island was the obvious place. Long Island has more people from El Salvador than the five boroughs of New York City combined. That was all that I knew in advance. In retrospect, it was a great choice because nobody was doing this kind of work here. There is a huge underground service economy, and there are really interesting opportunities for organizing because you're not talking about garment factories that can pick up and go south or to another country. The jobs here are in people's home as domestic workers or landscapers, or they are service jobs cleaning offices or working in restaurants. So you really do have an opportunity to think about ways that you can raise people's wages without worrying that the jobs en mass are going to go.
These service jobs are fixed here in a way that industrial jobs are not.

Q: What was The Workplace Project like in its inception?

JG: For the first year and a half, two years really, we worked out of the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) in Hempstead. That was a tremendous help because their support, and the fact that they had the trust of the immigrants who came to them for immigrant services, gave a natural base to the organization. I sort of functioned as the head of a workers' rights project within CARECEN. For the first year, it was me doing wage cases and other employment related cases, figuring out how to do them as each new one came in. Also, I started teaching our worker's course, covering issues of workers' rights, minimum wage, over-time, and unemployment insurance, to educate the immigrant workers who came to CARECEN.

Q: Who were the people that you saw that first year, and what kinds of problems were they coming to you with?

JG: Really no different than what we see now, just fewer of them. People who were being paid less than minimum wage, or not being paid over-time, or not being paid at all. People with on-the-job injuries and unsafe working conditions. People who had problems with their unions, such as the contract wasn't available in Spanish and there was nobody who could speak Spanish to explain their rights to them. Things like that.

Q: In the second year, you struck out on your own as an independent organization.

JG: At the end of the second year. Before that, our first organizer Omar Henriquez came to The Workplace Project. He started after about fourteen months. It was really with his work in building a committee of workers, which grew out of the workers' course, that we started to move towards independence.

The more we started to think about organizing, the clearer it was that we couldn't just deal with Central Americans. People from different countries were all mixed up at workplaces. Because we wanted to be able to organize all these workers, and because CARECEN is limited by their mission statement to helping Central Americans only, and because we wanted an all-immigrant Board of Directors, it became important to us to become an independent organization. Really, in order to allow us to organize the way we had meant to.

Q: In particular you wanted to be able to organize beyond the Central American population?

JG: Yes, across the workplace.

Q: After you hired Omar Henriquez and you began the organizing project, how did The Workplace Project develop?

JG: Well, then we started to work with day laborers. Omar worked on what became a three-year campaign on three or four different street corners —day laborers' street corners—around Nassau County. It started as an effort to keep some workers in Inwood from being forcibly removed from the corner. It grew from there into a wage-organizing effort in Inwood, and the realization that if the workers in Inwood were asking for higher wages, the employers would just go to Franklin Square and get people for lower wages there. If we were in Inwood, we also had to be in Franklin Square. And then from there, if we were in Franklin Square, we had to be in Westbury, and we had to be in

Freeport. So Omar spent three years working on a campaign to set a higher minimum daily wage for those workers, and we continued that campaign through 1996.

Q: What was the outcome of the campaign?

JG: We were able to raise minimum wages over those three years by over thirty percent, from forty-five to sixty dollars per day. There is tremendous pressure and tremendous competition, and for that reason I consider it a great triumph that we were able to have workers stand there on the street corners and not accept a job when someone offered them fifty-five dollars an hour —five dollars less than our established minimum. Even though we're no longer actively doing that campaign, some of the workers' committees that were set up through the organizing process are still active, and the wage is up to seventy-five dollars on some street corners now.

Q: That's a great achievement. What were some of the hurdles you faced early on in the campaign?

JG: It's less early on than all along and why we eventually stopped. Day labor organizing has some built-in disadvantages. If your ideal is to form a committee of workers at each corner to set and require the other workers to adhere to a minimum wage, who is going to be chosen for the committee? The workers who speak most English, have most respect, are the most on the ball. But who's going to be chosen for day labor jobs? The worker who speaks most English, gets the most respect, and is the most on the ball. So your committee gets picked up by 7:30 in the morning for work because they are most attractive to employers. Then you don't have anyone around, and as the morning goes on, there is nobody to enforce the wage requirements. Likewise, those are the workers most likely to use the corner as a spring board for a full-season job and to go from day labor into full-time work. Therefore, as the season moves on you lose your committee.

We were in a position where every year -- never mind every year, practically every ***month*** -- we would have to start anew, with new workers and a new committee. In addition, when new legislation cutting benefits to immigrants and increasing the punishment for illegal entry into the U.S. was passed by Congress in 1996, people became much more afraid of being deported quickly. It became harder for people to turn down work, even when the wages were low. They had to pay back the people who helped them get here before they got deported. People were desperate to do that, on top of feeding their families. All this took place in a context in which only between one-fifth and one-quarter of the workers will get work on a good day.

The pressure of that, combined with the 1996 immigration law**,** eventually made us realize that if we were going to enforce our minimum wage, it would be us and not the workers enforcing it, and we would have to enforce it physically, by physically restraining workers who were going to take a job because they were so desperate. We

were not willing to do that. We had no interest in being the enforcers in an organizing campaign that workers didn't want. That's why we made the decision to stop. I hope there will be another moment when the workers on at least some of the different corners will want organizing support. If this happens, it means things have eased up a little bit.

Q: So, you redirected your work as the legal and labor environment changed, to make certain that you were not imposing a campaign that workers could not support. Was this decision reflective of the larger mission of the organization?

JG: Yes, because in a sense the central goal of organization is really reflected in its structure as a worker-led membership organization. What that means is that the organization is made up of and run by immigrant workers. You can only become a member of the organization by taking our nine-week Spanish-language night class on labor law, labor and immigration history, and organizing techniques. We've graduated over 400 workers from that class in the past five years. After graduation, workers participate actively in the organization by joining workers' committees, for example, our women's organizing committeee, our leadership training committee, or our "committee to fight for fair immigration status." These committees meet frequently. In that way, they plan and carry out our organizing and education campaigns. The whole membership meets monthly, and the entire Board of Directors is elected from among the membership. All of this means that the organization is in the hands of the community and provides oppportunities for a lot of immigrants to gain organizing skills and experience.

JG: I wish I knew. If you're talking about low-end jobs, things will remain the same unless someone begins to unionize. Long Island has a stable component of high income residents. They have continued to do well even when there have been recessions in the past. They will likely continue to employ low-income workers. Nassau County is a very wealthy county. There are always people looking for services.

The problem is that at minimum wage, a worker earns $10,700 a year. A two-bedroom apartment in Nassau costs $1,000 a month. That's $12,000 per year. That means that the worker starts out $1,300 behind. That's without taking the bus, buying any food for their children, buying a stitch of clothing. So, we can't even talk about minimum wage. We need to talk about a livable wage, enough to have a safe place to sleep for you and your kids and to feed your family a healthy diet.

Q: What would it take for this to happen?