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Community Organizing: Leadership in Rural and Under Supported Latino Community

Juan Paulo Arangure

A Project Submitted to Graduate Faculty of
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Social Innovation

Integrative, Religious and Intercultural Studies Department

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The signatures of the individuals below indicate that they have read and approved the project of Juan Paulo Arangure in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Innovation.

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Abstract

Recent studies have shown that Latinos have both the highest labor force participation rate of any ethnic group in the state of Michigan, contributing significantly to the state's economic, cultural, and political strengths. Despite this, Latinos also face significant barriers with respect to education, entrepreneurship, and access to higher paying, "white collar" jobs.¹ There are also significant areas of Latino history and community-development work in Michigan that remain unexplored and undocumented, which detracts from the community's strengths and resilience. This project aims to address this need by exploring the creation and founding of El Centro Hispano de Oceana County, focusing on the importance of having a dedicated center in this Michigan community. This is the first study to be written about El Centro. Drawing upon oral history interviews, the goal of this study is to help to understand the purpose of the center and barriers encountered by its founders. By bringing together the story of four individuals who realized a need and purpose that only a Latino community center could fulfill for the people in Oceana County, this study also helps to shed light on the struggles and barriers faced by Latinos in Michigan over the 1980s-2000s. Through their work and determination, the founders of El Centro Hispano de Oceana County were able to create a central community resource at a key moment of demographic transition that provides opportunities for employment, access to legal aid, translation support, and one-on-one help to Latinos to this day.

¹ "Michigan's Latino population has growing pains, report shows," *MSU Today*, Aug. 13, 2015, <https://msutoday.msu.edu/news/2015/michigans-latino-population-has-growing-pains-report-shows>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Participation Rate – Hispanic or Latino [LNS113000009], FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS11300009>, July 25, 2021.

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My Personal Story

“What’s a migrant?” As my brother and I walked down the rows of beans with our hoes in hand, we had just spent a few hours cleaning the weeds away from the plants. A truck passed by and the driver yelled, “Get out of here migrants.” I was around 11 years old and my brother was 14. This was the first time I had heard this word used as an insult. I saw the frustration on my brother’s face as I asked him, “What’s a migrant?” He just ignored me and kept walking. As we continued to walk forward, I tried to make sense of the word. I had heard it before but could not understand why it would upset my brother. We were not migrants. Or at least I did not think that we were migrants. We both walked into the house and I went to speak to my mother.

When I brought it up to my mother, she was clearly upset but was not completely shocked either. She explained to me what “migrant” meant and tried to console my brother and me. Besides some microaggressions from classmates or parents, actions that I did not truly recognize as such at the time, this was the first time I truly experienced racism.

Growing up in Montague, Michigan, on the border of Muskegon and Oceana County, my family owned two acres of land. My father came from Mexico undocumented. My mother was a fourth generation Texan. Together, they decided to start their family in Northwest Michigan. At the time, I was the third of what would end up being four children. My siblings and I attended Montague High School. My father worked in a factory for over ten years and my mom worked for the state for over 30 years. After my dad left the factory, he started a restaurant out of a food truck for eight years before moving into a permanent building. He passed away two years after that move. Never once had we been migrants. Never once have I forgotten those words and the anger in my brother’s eyes.

“What’s a migrant?” This question, and the context in which it was first asked to me, is what has set me down this path - a path that sees the importance of helping others organize and assisting those who cannot do so on their own. I was blessed to have parents who understood the importance of education and where it could take me in life. For the undocumented as well as for migrant laborers, Hispanic Centers are sometimes the only way these individuals and their families can get the help they need. For Latinos who are first generation college students, Hispanic Centers help them gain more knowledge about opportunities that they may not find on their own. It is my passion for this work that has driven me to excel academically. I know there can be many more individuals like me if they can get the opportunity. So, I ask: “What is a migrant?” To me, “migrant” is a word that describes the hardest working people -- people who will go places, put in long hours, give more than they receive, and still find time to be with their families. I am the child of a migrant. This is why I know the center is important: it offers ways to let individuals excel in ways that they could not before.

El Centro Hispano de Oceana County/The Oceana County Hispanic Center

El Centro Hispano de Oceana County is where many Latinos in Oceana County go for assistance with legal documents, English classes, classes for citizenship, and even rides to Detroit for their citizenship tests. But El Centro is not just for Latinos. Farmers go to El Centro to look for workers. Other agencies call asking for assistance or resources that only El Centro provides. When El Centro assisted with food distribution, it was for the whole community, not just Latinos in need. El Centro hosts events that welcome everyone to become more culturally aware of everyone in the community. El Centro has done some good work over the years. But with COVID and dwindling funding to staff the organization, their foot traffic is going down.

When El Centro was first created in 2003, it was envisioned as being a first stop for new Latino families to get some basic information about housing, work, and supportive services. At the heart of this effort were four primary individuals: Frances Arangure, Penny Burillo, Irma Hinojosa, and Ken Fisher. When these four individuals joined together, it was to offer services and resources to all community members. They knew that the Anglo community needed a location that both Latinos and Anglos could go to work together for the advancement of the community. This paper explores El Centro's founding through the experiences of these four individuals. By describing how they arrived in Oceana County, what issues they encountered working or living in the area, and why they felt that creating El Centro would be the best answer to these pressing community needs, this paper will provide more insight to the beginning foundation of El Centro and possibly create more opportunities as it strengthens the commitment it has to the community.

Frances Arangure

Frances was born in Texas but moved to Michigan when she was six years old, in 1964. When her family initially came up to Michigan, it was not supposed to be more than just a two-week vacation so that she would see her grandparents. Frances recalled that trip:

We moved here from Texas. We actually came in a two-week vacation, and my dad liked it here. So, we ended up staying in Michigan, much to my mom's disappointment, but we stayed here, Michigan, went to school, my sisters and I, and we graduated from school here in Shelby, my two youngest graduated from Montague.²

Frances was the oldest of four sisters; the youngest two were born in Michigan. When she first came to Michigan, there were not many Latinos in the area and not all migrants were Hispanic.

² Frances Arangure, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Frances's Home Montague Michigan, July 9, 2021.

“Most of the families were migrant farm workers from Texas,” she recalled. “And we also had migrant farm workers from Missouri, who were Anglo, and they used to come and pick cherries and things like apples.”³ It was not until around the 1970s that a majority of seasonal agricultural workers in Oceana County became Latinos, coming primarily from Texas and Florida to work.

After Frances graduated high school and started working for the state, she noticed the demographics in Oceana County were shifting. Frances started working as a Migrant Outreach Worker for the State of Michigan in 1977. Her responsibilities were wide ranging. “I would go out to the camps and talk to people to see if they needed any employment. And some people did,” she recalled.

If they didn't have any place to go with housing, they would stop at the office, or they would stop at one of the other agencies that work with farm workers. And they would be referred to our office. But I also had to go out to the farms where their people were already living and see if they needed anything, anything like did they need to know about childcare? Did they need to know about the clinic?⁴

Frances soon became a primary contact person for many farmworkers and migrant families that made the trip back and forth to Oceana County every year. These ongoing connections also helped Frances develop her own career and build more relationships with migrant families. These relationships proved to be particularly important as it was also through her work for the State of Michigan that Frances first met Penny Burillo, who had moved back to Oceana County and was just beginning her own career as well.

Penny Burillo

³ Frances Arangure, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Frances's Home Montague Michigan, July 9, 2021.

⁴ Frances Arangure, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Frances's Home Montague Michigan, July 9, 2021.

Penny was born in Oceana County in 1947. She attended school in Hart, Michigan and lived in Oceana County most of life, with the exception of 12 years in early adulthood. Growing up in Hart, the area was primarily populated by Anglo people. Penny had never even had a taco until she moved to California in 1965. California is where she learned Spanish and found joy in Mexican and Mexican American culture. She taught herself Spanish. “I must have had an ear for it, because that is how I actually learn Spanish,” she recalled. “And then after, I’d been speaking it for about two years, I enrolled in Garden Grove, Community College because in California, college was free, and took Spanish language class. But it was just really kind of confusing, because I had already learned to speak Spanish without grammar without actually knowing anything about that real Spanish language and how to, you know, conjugate verbs and all that stuff.”⁵ As important as this experience was for Penny, at the time she could not have imagined that it would follow her back to Michigan. She married a Mexican man, had a child, and had every intention of staying in California.

Then things changed. Penny eventually separated from her husband. Following their separation, she decided to move back home to be around her family again. That is what brought her back to Oceana County. When she came back, she noticed a change in the area, including many more Spanish speaking families who lived in the area year-around. There was a need for bilingual people to help these new residents and workers. Penny returned to Michigan in August of 1976. In March 1977, she applied for a job with the migrant clinic and the Department of Health Services, now known as Department of Health and Human Services or DHHS. She was hired as a bilingual speaker to help Spanish families get the translation services they needed. With this position, she also worked with United Migrants for Opportunities Incorporated

⁵ Penny Burillo, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Penny’s Home Hart Michigan, June 19, 2021.

(UMOI), which was led by Lorenzo Galvan. “So, we were kind of in cooperation with both the Northwest Michigan Health Services clinic, and the Department of Human Services,” she explained. “We were like, triad, those three organizations provided the services for the Hispanic speaking population. And at that time, they were still migrating back and forth.”⁶

This was how Frances and Penny met; Lorenzo Galvan was Frances’ father. As they started to work with the migrant population, Frances as an Outreach Worker and Penny as a translator for DHHS and the clinic, their paths started to cross frequently.

Migrant Community

Understanding the work that Frances and Penny were undertaking requires understanding more about the changes that were taking place within Oceana County through the mid-20th century. In the 1950s-1960s, federal initiatives such as the Bracero Program with Mexico and Operation Bootstrap with Puerto Rico, significantly increased the number of Latino agricultural workers in the state of Michigan. Although these programs had ended by the 1960s, many individuals who had first come to work as part of these programs decided to stay in the Midwest. At the same time, an increase in producing labor-intensive fruits and vegetables meant more and more jobs in places like Oceana County.⁷ By the 1970s, those workers were becoming increasingly well established in the area, including beginning to own homes, land, and farms. As commercial agricultural production diversified and expanded, many of the farmers could offer year-round employment and those who could stay would. Penny described noticing that there

⁶ Penny Burillo, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Penny’s Home Hart Michigan, June 19, 2021.

⁷ Rochin, R. I, et. al. (1989). Migrant and seasonal workers in Michigan’s agriculture: A study of their contributions, characteristics, needs, and services. Research Report 1, 3. <https://jsri.msu.edu/upload/research-reports/rr01.pdf>; Fernández, D. (2016). Rethinking the urban and rural divide in Latino labor, recreation, and activism in West Michigan, 1940s–1970s. *Labor History*, 57(4), 482–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2016.1239871>

were two main locations from which migrant workers increasingly hailed. “We had, you know, migrants that came from Florida, from especially like Homestead, Florida [near Miami] and we had migrants that came from the Valley and Texas,” she recalled. “Those were the main two groups of people that would come and leave, you know, because we were seasonal.”⁸

She was not the only one who observed this shift. Frances noticed it, too. Many families were looking for better opportunities, as Frances explained. “And then little by little things started changing,” she said.

The more the Hispanic families started either staying in Michigan, or in Texas, so that they could get a better education for their children and start working more full time. The Valley also changed. There were more businesses opening up down in Texas. So, people were able to stay there year-round and work year-round, to help pay for their bills and things so that way their kids could stay in school and go to college.⁹

More and more migrants also were choosing to settle in areas that would allow them to build a community. In many bigger cities across the Upper Midwest, like Grand Rapids, Detroit, or Chicago, this started happening in the 1950s and 1960s, as work by Delia Fernández has shown.¹⁰ In rural areas like Hart, Michigan, however, Latino settlement began peaking the 1970s.

It is difficult to overstate the tremendous impact that the shift to year-around agricultural employment had for Latino residents. Having opportunities for year-around work allowed families to stay in the area, moving across different crops or employers, while letting their children attend school in one location. Between May and June, workers would harvest asparagus.

⁸ Penny Burillo, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Penny’s Home Hart Michigan, June 19, 2021.

⁹ Frances Arangure, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Frances’s Home Montague Michigan, July 9, 2021.

¹⁰ Fernández, D. (2016). Rethinking the urban and rural divide in Latino labor, recreation, and activism in West Michigan, 1940s–1970s. *Labor History*, 57(4), 482–503.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2016.1239871>

Strawberries came into season from June to July. Cherries ripened and were picked during July and August. Assorted vegetables required picking, weeding, and maintaining all summer long, June to November. Apples were ready for harvest starting August through November. Christmas trees, another new and important crop to the area, required maintenance beginning in March, ultimately being harvested and sold in December. Food processing, including both canning and freezing, boomed year-around¹¹ More Latino families staying in Oceana County year-around increased the number of Latino students in the local public-school systems, growing the chance of college opportunities for these families. It was in this area of advocacy and education where Irma Hinojosa's work would prove essential.

Irma Hinojosa

Today, Irma works as an Administrative Assistant in Student Records at West Shore Community College. She was one of six children in her family. For many years, her family – including her grandparents, aunts and uncles -- would travel together from Texas up to Michigan annually. Along the way, they made a stop in Hope, Arkansas at a big migrant center to rest during their trip. Remembering that center, Irma recalled:

Every year we would stop there, and they had small, little miniature mobile homes that were situated with beds in them. But it was just a facility to sleep. There were no bathroom inside the home. So, they had a huge like...center in the center of the entire park, where they had showers, bathrooms, ...e a patio for people to cook out because there were no stoves or anything like that.¹²

Her whole family did their own part by either getting food or preparing the fire to cook. They would eat, sleep, and get up the next morning to continue their trip to Michigan.

¹¹ Karmiesool, E. (2015, September 24). A season of change for farms and workers: a look at the migrant life. *Ludington Daily News*. Retrieved from https://www.shorelinemedia.net/ludington_daily_news/news/local/a-season-of-change-for-farms-and-workers-a-look-at-the-migrant-life/article_bf3c2254-6186-11e5-93c7-4f7a102b7447.html

¹² Irma Hinojosa, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, El Centro Hispano Hart Michigan, June 20, 2021.

Irma recalled that when her father decided to stop making this annual trip, it was because he wanted Irma and her siblings to focus on education. Their family decided not to make the trip for two years and her father sought year-around work in Texas during that time. As Irma was about to enter her sophomore year, her father began having problems with his back. They made one final trip to Michigan. She recalled: “So my dad got a job working for Chase Farms. And he would drive truck in the summer and then in the winter, he would work at the factory. And so yeah, been here since 1980.”¹³ In 1980, Irma and her family made Michigan their permanent home.

As Penny and Frances were starting their careers working with migrant families in different organizations within Oceana County, Irma was still in high school. Being one of very few Latinos in Walkerville, Michigan, she encountered some tough experiences. Penny was Anglo and through her early years, she had not had much experience with Latinos in the area. During Frances’ high school years, most Latino families were still migrating back and forth. Demographically, the most significant changes were not yet being broadly seen across Oceana County even if those working within Hispanic serving agencies were starting to see the shift. Irma and her siblings experienced some rough times while attending school and did not feel like they had support from school staff. This felt very different, as she described, and very unlike Texas where Latinos made up a substantial percentage of the public school and a majority of most communities’ populations.

Irma’s father always told his children not to react to this hostile behavior. At the time, Irma recalled being upset that she could not react or say anything. But ultimately it was that

¹³ Irma Hinojosa, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, El Centro Hispano Hart Michigan, June 20, 2021.

tension that helped shape her into being the person she is today. It was also what led her to be part of El Centro. “So, I think that's why I have, as I have gotten older...joined committees and been part of a community because I know what it feels like to be that person,” she reflected.

And so, not allowing that to happen to any kid or family that we can prevent that from happening. So, I feel that's probably one of the biggest things that I see. Even being on the school board I see things like that happening. And it's like, you got to put a stop to it now. And being more of a voice instead of just an outsider.¹⁴

This perspective would play a big part in her commitment to El Centro and to her continued work.

After high school, Irma continued on to college at Ferris State University. Penny and Frances also continued in their professions, Penny as a Bilingual translator and Frances as an Outreach Worker. Occasionally in professional or private conversations, someone would suggest the need for a separate organization, located in Oceana County and run by local residents, that could specifically serve the needs of the area's Latino residents. But it was not until the early 2000s that there became more of a spark for action. By 2000, Latinos made up nearly 12 percent of Oceana's overall population, a number that had nearly doubled by 2010.¹⁵ Agriculture remained a primary draw, with most farms hiring laborers directly rather than working through contractors. This, too, encouraged more families to settle year-around in Oceana County as workers developed ongoing relationships with individual farms and farm owners.¹⁶ There needed

¹⁴ Irma Hinojosa, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, El Centro Hispano Hart Michigan, June 20, 2021.

¹⁵ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Population of Oceana County, Michigan: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Graphs, Quick Facts,” <http://censusviewer.com/county/MI/Oceana>.

¹⁶ R. Rosenbaum (2002). Migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Michigan: From dialogue to action. Michigan State University, Working Paper No. 39, <https://jsri.msu.edu/upload/working-papers/wp39.pdf>.

to be a space that could be a welcoming location for migrant families and services for Spanish speaking community members. Ken Fisher had just moved back into the area and was looking to take part in the community. One of the organizations he joined was the West Michigan Migrant Resource Council.

Ken Fisher

Ken was born in Michigan and had family in Oceana and Muskegon County. Through the first part of his adult life, he spent time on both the East and West Coasts of the United States as well as in Ann Arbor and Detroit, Michigan, primarily working. He primarily lived in big cities. But in 1998, he moved to Oceana County along with his second wife, who was a nurse midwife and infant mental health specialist. Being in the country was a culture shock. Ken was doing some work with homelessness in the area and the clinic since his background was in healthcare. He found himself involved with the West Michigan Migrant Resource Council.

It was here that he first met Frances and Penny. During these meetings, there kept being talk about getting a place started that could be a central gathering spot for Latinos to come for information. Ken, Frances, and Penny decided to start a focus group to better identify and call forward to express the needs of the community. Elevating this need seemed particularly important as they each thought they saw a clear need for a center in the community. Ken took the lead on the paperwork “And that was really the main thing that we did to decide, okay, let's, let's try to put this together,” he recalled “And so, then we went through a process at the Migrant Council of coming up with a name and I wrote some bylaws and that kind of thing.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ken Fisher, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Zoom interview, private residence Ann Arbor Michigan, J.P.'s Home Grand Rapids Michigan, July 24, 2021.

While Ken was creating bylaws, the others were thinking of programs that would help the organization to grow. As momentum increased, they realized that they needed board members. This was when Irma got involved. A colleague recommended to Irma that she apply for the board when they saw the call. With a board in the process of being assembled, their next goal was to get more funding and to locate a building from which they could operate. Frances, Penny, and Ken knew there needed to be funding because without resources, their work would be limited. This was their next major challenge. Even though they had the enthusiasm from the community and confirmation that the proposed center was meeting a real need, there were not many jumping up to help fund the organization and its programs.

The three went ahead and started El Centro anyway. Their first location was a small office that they could rent. The office was located in an old barbershop and was not being used at the time.¹⁸ There they remained for a few years as they tried to look for more funding and a larger location. Luckily for them, St. Gregory's Catholic Church in Hart had a location that they were not using, so they offered it to El Centro. Another community organization was disbanding in the area, so they donated their office chairs and desk to El Centro.¹⁹ Little by little, El Centro was starting to look more and more like a fully functioning center. Yet they still needed enough funding to have programs or even offer more regular services to the community.

The group tried everything they could to generate dollars. Many of the larger farming processing plants did not want to contribute much to the center in the way of money. While they appreciated the services El Centro provided, they did not want to get too involved. St. Gregory's

¹⁸ Irma Hinojosa, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, El Centro Hispano Hart Michigan, June 20, 2021.

¹⁹ Ken Fisher, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Zoom interview, private residence Ann Arbor Michigan, J.P.'s Home Grand Rapids Michigan, July 24, 2021.

did give them \$5,000 to host a program about healing racism.²⁰ Getting grants or other competitive funding was hard for El Centro to come by. Still, little by little, they were able to find small donations or small grants to keep things afloat. They had no funding to be able hire full-time staff. But they were slowly able to provide a regular range of services such as translation support, legal guidance, and cultural events. A great deal of their efforts relied on volunteers, which was bolstered as more people learned about El Centro. Together, these four individuals set out to create positive change and were able to not achieve that goal but have continued to keep El Centro going over the years. El Centro is in a position to grow with new opportunities and making new partnerships that can give more funding to operate with a staff. Today, El Centro is still open even though time has been hard, they are still providing services to families and the community.

Conclusion

El Centro was established to provide services that would allow Latinos more opportunities in the community such as translation support, legal guidance, and cultural events. Thanks to the path breaking work of Frances Arangure, Penny Burillo, Irma Hinojosa, and Ken Fisher, this dream became a reality. As Irma reflected: I feel that the community or the Oceana Hispanic center is now instead of us going out and trying to Approach events that we want to be part of now I think there's more of an invite where people are calling us and saying there's a Hispanics that are want to be part of this event, where before it was always us initiating that bond with the event. And now it's them coming to us and saying, you know, we think it's important that the Oceana Hispanics that are be represented.²¹

²⁰ Ken Fisher, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, Zoom interview, private residence Ann Arbor Michigan, J.P.'s Home Grand Rapids Michigan, July 24, 2021.

²¹ Irma Hinojosa, interviewed by J.P. Arangure, El Centro Hispano, Hart, Michigan, June 20, 2021.

Irma makes a great point on how having El Centro has changed over the years to be the bridge for the community. This is what has helped the work move forward in the community, they are being asked to come to the table instead of begging for a seat.

El Centro will continue to serve the community, look for new opportunities for programming and be a voice for the Latino community on issues that matter in Oceana County. When asked about the future of El Centro, each of the individuals interviewed, spoke on the subject of how funding was their biggest issue because the people and programs were there, it was how can we find ways to provide opportunities to everyone. This work also provides an excellent example of cross-section social innovation and collaboration.

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