# Empowering Community:The Young Lords in Lincoln Park

The Young Lords Organization serves as an important example of grassroots activism inciting change in local communities. Inspired by the Black Panthers, founder José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, a Grand Valley State University alumnus, transformed the Young Lords from a Puerto Rican street gang into a political human rights organization fighting to enact social reform for minority groups living in the neighborhoods of Chicago, Illinois.

Jiménez donated the Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection to Special Collections and University Archives in 2014. His donation included newspaper clippings, articles, promotional materials, memorabilia, and over one hundred oral histories related to the Young Lords’ history. “My purpose was to display many perspectives so that others can imagine for themselves what took place,” said Jiménez.

The collection tells a compelling story about social justice and change agents in American history. During the early 1950s, Puerto Rican immigrants settled in Chicago looking for greater employment opportunities. The city’s urban renewal plan, however, eliminated affordable housing options and forced minorities out of neighborhoods at an alarming rate. “The movement opened eyes to housing discrimination,” explained Jiménez. “It was a sophisticated form of segregation that is both economic and racial.”

Activist groups like the Young Lords pushed back against the gentrification, as well as other issues plaguing their communities such as police brutality and the lack of affordable healthcare. To that end, the Young Lords joined forces with similar groups to form the Rainbow Coalition in the late 1960s. Together with the Black Panthers, a primarily African-American group, and the Young Patriots, composed of white Appalachian migrants, the Rainbow Coalition sought to empower communities to stand up for themselves politically through grassroots organizing. The Rainbow Coalition believed that each group was fighting for the same goals and could fight most effectively by joining together. The Young Lords’ participation in the Coalition illustrated a commitment to multi-cultural and multi-ethnic empowerment.

The Young Lords also led numerous protests and projects to combat inequality in the local community. For example, they seized land marked by urban renewal for a tennis club—complete with a $1,200 membership fee—to instead create a People’s Park with playground equipment donated by local merchants.  In November of 1968, the Young Lords staged a takeover of the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church and renamed it the “People’s Church”. They established a health clinic, free breakfast program, and daycare within the church basement to better serve the needs of the community.

Fueled by the desire to bring minority voices to the forefront of issues that affected them, Jiménez ran for political office in Chicago’s 46th ward in 1974 on a “people first” platform. Although his campaign was unsuccessful, he did help orchestrate an increase in voter registration among minority residents in the district.

Empowering community was at the heart of every action. The Young Lords wanted to improve their neighborhoods, but not at the expense of neighborhood diversity. For them, it was all about the people whose lives were being affected by unfair social and political practices.

The Young Lords collection provided the inspiration for a recent exhibition in the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons celebrating the organization’s 50th anniversary. Ultimately, Jiménez hopes the collection and exhibition will inspire Grand Valley students to “become leaders in creating a better world.” The collection is open to the public, and can be viewed at Special Collections and University Archives in Seidman House on the Allendale Campus. Oral histories are available in our digital collections.

To explore oral histories in the Young Lords Collection:

<https://digitalcollections.library.gvsu.edu/collections/show/24>