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NCLR - Forty Years Later: What Have We Learned?

Introduction

Forty two years ago, the late Dr. Paul Ylvisaker, then National Affairs Director for The Ford Foundation, engaged Dr. Julian Samora, Dr. Ernesto Galarza and I as Consultants to assess, and make the case for involving the Foundation in support of Hispanic causes. Lacking internal capacity, knowledge or experience in working with Latinos, Paul asked that we focus on Mexican Americans living in the Southwest.

This is my account of the journey the three Consultants undertook, the process we used, the people we met, the problems, opportunities and aspirations Mexican Americans from all walks of life shared with us along the way, what we recommended to Ford, and lessons learned that may have meaning for today and the years ahead.

In a real sense, this is a story about leadership that worked together to convince Ford that Mexican Americans and other Latinos were ready and able to work together and use philanthropic resources effectively on a meaningful scale so as to advance the well being of people and communities in distress. This story describes how the early Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR) survived the harsh political backlash foundations experienced from the Tax Reform Act of 1969, about the suspicion and hostility we encountered while laying the foundation for what became National Council of La Raza, and about the challenge we met to open philanthropic support for all Latinos.

To begin, I will say a few words about my two colleagues, Don Ernesto and Don Julian and also a little more about what I personally brought to the table. Then, I will say something about Dr. Paul Ylvisaker, and forces that may have

influenced the Ford Foundation to consider an unprecedented program initiative to help what was then the second-largest minority in the United States.

Long before Cesar Chavez became a household name, Ernesto Galarza was plowing new and hard ground trying to organize and call attention to the plight of farm workers in California. Unfortunately, at the time Ernesto was organizing in the late 1940's and 1950's, no national war against poverty or public sympathy for the poor and dispossessed existed as in the years that followed when Cesar picked up the challenge to organize his new union in the 1960's.

Unlike Cesar, who told me that "you can't change anything with research," Ernesto applied his incisive scholarly skills carefully: he studied and analyzed social systems, synthesizing facts that he then communicated on behalf of the neediest and most marginalized from society. Like Julian Samora, he was a master at placing scholarship in the service of social action. And, although rarely acknowledged, Cesar and many others benefited mightily from Ernesto's early organizing and research.

Ernesto was among the first to recognize that it was futile to try to organize domestic farm workers as long as Public Law 78, a law providing for the importation of an unlimited supply of cheap, foreign labor to work in agriculture and our railroads, was on the books. For the thirteen years that the *bracero* hiring system existed, Ernesto worked tirelessly to expose its evils through a nation wide publicity and organizing campaign. His efforts provided the understanding and rationale for repealing Public Law 78 in 1964, giving renewed confidence to the organizing efforts among farm workers that followed.

It is more than 45 years ago since I met Julian Samora, with his newly acquired tenure at the University of Notre Dame. He had already established himself as someone willing to speak his mind openly and frankly on the historical oppression of minorities. It was refreshing to meet someone, like Galarza, who knew that action and active involvement can follow intellectual efforts. Julian's ideas were practical and meant to achieve results. Like Ernesto, Julian was willing to confront authority and willing to sustain that commitment over a lifetime.

As for the other guy, that's me. About me, Ernesto once wrote: "He keeps trust without bonds, loans his talents without interest, lives perpetually serene in the midst of confrontations on many fronts, and in any coalition brings his own coal." I am honored to have been so described.

Ford Foundation's Paul Ylvisaker was an extraordinary person. He was a professor and a philanthropist, who inspired, energized and seemed to empower everyone he met. Paul was warm, compassionate and engaging.

In the early 1960's I met Paul Ylvisaker while working on a Ford Foundation supported program in San Francisco. Paul asked, "What was a Mexican American doing working in essentially a program for blacks?" I replied, "Ford does not fund programs to help Mexican Americans."

Paul shared several problems that concerned him. The first, was not knowing what group of leaders to work with, where to go and what issues to support. He said there was a strong perception going around that Mexican Americans were badly divided and could not get their act together. Paul made it clear he "didn't want to jump into a pool and find it empty, and wanted to avoid the problems made working with blacks."

I learned that in 1964, Ford granted \$630,000 for publication of a book about the Mexican American People, to be written by Dr. Leo Grebler, at UCLA. After analyzing Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 study, The American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Grebler saw some parallels relating to Mexican Americans, so approached and received support from Ford.

Chicanos in Los Angeles strongly protested funding of a non Mexican-American doing the book and further objected to Grebler's not hiring any Chicano scholars on his staff. Later, in response to pressure, Dr. Ralph Guzman subsequently joined the Grebler team.

Despite the formation of a credible advisory group to act as a buffer between Grebler and the Chicano community, the Grebler issue remained volatile. In addition to the protests, the book was not due to come out until 1970—too late to help Paul decide what to do, if anything, to address possible support for Mexican Americans.

Acting separately, in 1964, the Rosenberg Foundation agreed to underwrite an anthology about Mexican Americans in honor of one of their Trustees and approached me about recommending someone to do the book. I recommended Julian.

In 1965, the Rosenberg Foundation hosted a utilization conference in San Francisco to review Julian's book, La Raza Forgotten Americans. At the invitation of Ruth Chance of the Rosenberg Foundation and Julian, Ylvisaker attended as did other contributors, including, Mexican American Political Association activists, Eduardo Quevedo, and Bert Corona, scholars, Dr. Ernesto Galarza, Dr. George I. Sanchez, Dr. Lyle Saunders, Rev. John A. Wagner, John R. Martinez, Rev. William E. Scholes, Lawrence B. Glick, Paul M. Sheldon, Donald N. Barrett, and community activist Leandro P. Soto and me.

The meeting lasted two days. Paul came away impressed with the high quality of discourse, civility, passion and commitment to problem solving demonstrated by everyone there. The myth that Chicanos could not work together quickly dissipated. Shortly afterward, Paul asked Ernesto, Julian and me to do the assessment. We were asked to complete this assignment in six months. My relationship with Ford continued until 1968, when I left to become SWCLR's first Executive Director.

Method of Operation and Procedure

To begin our journey, Ernesto, Julian, and I agreed to visit with key Latino individuals and Latino groups in communities throughout the Southwest, but especially targeted visits to the following areas: The San Francisco Bay Area; The Central Valley of California; Los Angeles Metropolitan; Salt River Valley of Arizona, The Denver/New Mexico Rio Grande area; San Antonio and the US/Mexico Border.

We had absolute freedom to go wherever and whenever we wanted—punctuated by frequent meetings among the three of us. We exchanged all correspondence and prepared memoranda on our respective community visits, and held feedback/progress meetings with community groups as we went along.

We also agreed no Ford staff would be present in these discussions except by mutual agreement.

Very important: we were not given any pre-conceived set of ideas or proposals to pursue. When asked if there were materials in Ford's files we should look at or persons we should contact, Paul Ylvisaker replied, "No," and said, "Go out and dream your dreams."

(Note: after we got started, Paul did suggest that since I had a particular interest and experience in voter registration and education programs, he suggested I visit Vernon Jordan, then with the Southern Leadership Conference in Atlanta. I did so. Later, we incorporated voter registration into SWCLR program activities. A dozen years later, Vernon and I served together as Trustees of the Rockefeller Foundation.)

We made it very clear that we did not aspire to permanent positions in the Foundation, and that our role went beyond that of consulting. We were, in effect, negotiating on behalf of the community.

Finally, we understood and made it clear to those we met that the Ford Foundation made no initial commitments as to money. The Consultants did not have any prior commitments as to funds to follow whatever the recommendations we presented.

In the Field

As we began our visits, we noted that by the 1960's anyone with a commitment to social activism seemed to be encouraged by the times to press for open dissent and change. This period was characterized by questioning traditional interpretations of such themes as democracy, loyalty, liberation, popular participation, patriotism and authority. For Mexican Americans, this was a time not only to assert self-determination, but it was a time of self-affirmation and of self definition as well.

We found growing militancy, threats, and a potential drift toward violence within our own community. In one report, I noted a meeting with Reis Lopez Tijerina in early 1966, calling attention to the possibility of his organization, the

Alianza Federal de Mercedes, turning to violence to challenge the loss of land grants without compensation.

As predicted, later in the year, Reis and four of his members were arrested and convicted for assault on Federal Officers and for attempting to hold a mock trial alleging the Park staff was trespassing in Echo Amphitheatre in the Carson National Forest, which The Alianza claimed was an ejido land grant.

Further determined to push the land grant issue, in 1967, The Alianza staged a raid on the County Courthouse in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico. Two lawmen were wounded when Reis and his group attempted to make a citizens arrest of District Attorney Alfonso Sanchez. Reis represented himself in Court. He was sentence to one to five years on one charge and two to ten years on another.

About the same time, my old friend Cesar Chavez, noting a lack of progress after two years of strikes, faced a potential drift towards violence by members of his fledging union, who were threatening to return the violence shown against them. This led to Cesar's fasting to turn his members against violence and toward the practice and witness of non-violence to achieve their goals.

Out of concern, and in solidarity with Cesar, Southwest Council of La Raza Board Member, Henry Santiestevan and I wrote and distributed widely in 1968, a "Call to La Raza for a Personal Pledge to Non Violence."

The times, it seemed, motivated and encouraged Mexican Americans and other Latinos to verbalize, organize and demonstrate against a dependent, subordinate status as well as against the inequality imposed by the majority community. It is my sense, that the social unrest in 1967 and 1968 may have raised great concerns within the Ford Foundation about what course Mexican Americans and other Latinos would take if no attention were given to address their situation. All in all, things were really looking bad for everyone.

According to Tim Weiner, in his book, The Legacy of Ashes, The History of the CIA (Doubleday, New York, 2007, page 286), "In 1967, America's ghettos had become war zones, seventy-five separate urban riots wracked the nation,

resulting in 88 deaths, 1,397 injuries, 16,389 arrests, 2157 convictions, and economic damage estimated at \$664.5 million. Forty-three people had been killed in Detroit, twenty-six in Newark.”

In the months ahead, we surveyed the effects of farm mechanization, urban redevelopment, population concentrations in urban barrios, and other root causes of upheaval in the communities we visited. Tracing immigration movement from its origins in rural Mexico, the Consultants assessed the economic, political, cultural and educational status of the Spanish speaking people of the Southwest and projected the form and direction of growth of this rapidly growing minority.

The Consultant’s report to the Ford Foundations concluded:

“Mexican Americans do not make up a homogeneous ethnic bloc. Unlike the case of Blacks, a powerful, cohesive force like the common struggle for civil rights was absent.”

“Another force -- the lack of economic opportunity and its manifestations in poverty - - was at work within the Mexican Americans; but it had not yet found forms of expression and action beyond grievance and protest.”

Second to poverty, the report called attention to a complex of other problems common to all the Mexican American communities: “The disruption of the barrios by urban renewal; ineffectualness of community cooperative action; fragmentation of ethnic organizations; a low degree of political effectiveness; loss of potential leadership to public agencies; deteriorated housing; insufficient educational opportunities; acute dependency on social assistance and high unemployment.”

In formulating our recommendations, the Consultant team, made every effort to reject programs and approaches which would foster the client system of social welfare, that is, recipients rather than participants: We rejected progress through redemptionist leaders and emphasized the need to promote the total competence, civic effectiveness, political experience and technical ability of the Mexican American community toward effectively influencing the distribution of public and private resources.

We argued firmly as our central goal for the need to organize and empower affected residents in the barrios; we rejected the notion of depending on ethnic brokers; isolated community organization; or competitiveness with poor Anglo whites or with economically poor Blacks for a given quantity of social resources.

In the discussions among ourselves that preceded the report to Ford, we agreed to put all this in the form of a question: Is it possible to formulate a design for action that will reach into every major area of Mexican American concentration, and stimulate progress toward common goals in the various fronts and level of our present community structure? In other words, what could support from Ford do to help speed the human and material progress in the Mexican American community in the immediate five to ten years ahead?

Our report, submitted in December 1966, included answers to these questions as well as elements of a proposal to the Foundation for the funding of five distinct, but related programs:

- I. To create a Council for the Southwest.
- II. To support local community cooperative action projects formulated and controlled by recipient neighborhood organizations (affiliated councils/organizations), including voter registration and region wide social action.
- III. Establish leadership training programs for developing and giving technical/organizing assistance to community workers in Mexican American neighborhoods.
- IV. To organize and maintain research and information related to securing public and private resources in support of local efforts.
- V. To enlarge community participation in support of educational opportunities for Mexican American youth.

The key to our plan was to leave uncommitted as much money as possible to sub grant to a new network of local affiliated projects that we did not wish to pre-package. It was clear that by leaving the funding open to local

proposals and thus sensitive to local needs, money would be better connected to whatever priorities the community itself wanted to establish.

We strongly believed that within five to ten years we would have generated enough power and skills to get at the public budgets for programs to help close the economic and social gap between the Mexican American Southwest and the promises of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and the war against poverty.

While we awaited consideration of our report, the Ford Foundation authorized the publication of our material into a book titled, Mexican Americans in the Southwest.

The time period we expected for discussion and action took longer than anticipated because both Ylvisaker and his successor Jack Coleman had left the foundation and the transition of McGeorge Bundy as the Foundation's new President in 1966 took time. In the meantime, Dr. S. M. Miller was assigned to work with us.

In a recent conversation with Dr. Miller, I asked what factors were the most important in convincing Ford to support Mexican Americans? Dr. Miller told me that because poverty programs appeared to be aimed primarily in favor of African Americans, he was able to make the case for broadening and expanding assistance to include Spanish Speaking, Native Americans and others.

A New Beginning

On September 29, 1967, the Consultants were informed that a grant in the range of \$600,000 would be available for the first year to undertake and launch the first four programs mentioned. Ford approved an interim, small planning grant to support the work of an organizing committee to form a tax exempt regional council to handle the Ford grant. The organizing committee requested and Ford agreed to let me help organize the group.

Following many meetings, and with the able assistance of attorney Armando de Leon from Arizona, the new group, incorporated, secured a 501-c -3 tax exemption and organized into the Southwest Council of La Raza (SWCLR).

Maclovio Barraza was elected the first Chair, and I was asked to serve as the Council's founding Executive Director. I agreed to serve for one year and two at the most. Julian Samora was elected to serve on the Board of Directors and Ernesto became a consultant to the Council.

On June 22, 1968, the Council officially received a first grant in the amount of \$630,000 from the Ford Foundation to begin its work. Overall, the Consultants had completed the assignment with few problems of the kind faced by the Grebler project. Only two minor incidents occurred. Once in 1966, during a meeting in Fresno sharing an update about our work, a young man angrily stood up, shook a fist and shouted at Dr. Galarza and me: "If you old bastards don't move faster, you are going to find footsteps on your back!"

Another was a letter that was sent in 1967 to McGeorge Bundy, Ford's new President, from Al Pinion, then President of the Community Service Organization demanding that any grants by Ford to Mexican Americans should be awarded to the CSO on the basis that this organization was the strongest and oldest community based civil rights and organizations in California. The irony is, I had once served as President of CSO.

On more of a historical coincidence: Soon after the SWCLR grant was approved in 1968, I was discussing a pending proposal from MALDEF with Bill Pincus, a Ford Program Officer, who showed me a letter he had received from Raul Yzaguirre requesting support for his organization, NOMAS. Bill asked me if I knew Raul. I told him I did not and that to my recollection neither of the other Consultants, Galarza and Samora, nor Paul Ylvisaker had ever mentioned Raul's name. Bill did not ask me to respond to the letter nor did he indicate how he planned to respond. However, several years after leaving the Council, I met Raul in Washington D.C. around 1973, just before he was recruited to become NCLR's third Executive Director. What a small world! Little did I know he would go on to build NCLR beyond my wildest dreams!

The Chaos of 1969

While events of 1967 and 1968, such as the War in Vietnam, riots in urban areas and the assassinations of King and Kennedy weighed heavily on our

minds, work in getting the Council underway was going smoothly; this changed in 1969 with the passage of the Tax Reform Act (TRA),

Believing that wealthy East coast families and their foundations were exploiting legal loopholes to protect their fortunes and were engaging in widespread self dealing activities, Congressional hearings, led by Wright Patman (D-Texas), Chair of the House Committee on Banking and Currency, resulted in passage of the TRA, a statute which hit us with a vengeance and threatened the very existence of our work.

Basically, the TRA restructured the tax code, set limits on the deductibility of gifts, placed an excise tax on private foundations, established minimum pay out provisions, imposed penalties on self-dealing, and promulgated regulatory policies limiting the way foundations use funds. The law spread a chill over voter registration and education projects and gave many foundations another excuse not to allocate grants for innovative, social change, oriented projects.

The biggest constraint was the “expenditure responsibility” section which required that foundations be accountable for all actions taken by their grantees. Mini-grants were eliminated because the new stringent expenditure responsibilities made it impossible to monitor mini grants, or sub grants effectively.

The impact on all of this was devastating to the emerging Council and to the Ford Foundation. During the hearings, it became evident that there was a substantial bloc in Congress whose major objective was to prevent foundations, principally the Ford Foundation whose goals were assisting minority groups and community organizations seeking to bring about a greater and more varied participation of their constituents in the civic process of our democracy.

Some specific activities that distressed Congressional representatives based on questions asked during these hearings were:

- I. Voter education and/or voter registration efforts, principally among Blacks and Mexican Americans, mainly because they were perceived as a direct threat to incumbent office holders. Dr. S. M. Miller, then at Ford, had made the non partisan voter registration grant to CORE (Congress of Racial Equality),

which was perceived as the reason Carl Stokes was elected Mayor of Cleveland.

2. Ford funding of a school de-segregation experiment in New York City, which allegedly created tensions between Black and Jewish communities and also between Blacks and the powerful United Federation of Teachers.

3. Experimental programs in slum areas that appeared to mobilize the electoral strength of minority communities.

Unfortunately, the heated rhetoric of young Chicano militants not affiliated with the Council was less than helpful, including the words of one activist, from La Raza Unida, who was quoted as wanting to “eliminate the gringo.” Although probably taken out of context, the rhetoric was intended to shock, and shock it did!

Alarmed, Congressman Henry B. Gonzales (D-Texas), from San Antonio, responded vigorously to the threatening rhetoric from La Raza Unida, an organization many confused with SWCLR. A series of meetings were held to calm and defuse the situation. At a meeting with Ford staff in New York attended by SWCLR Board Member, Albert Pena, representatives from SWCLR, San Antonio affiliate, the Mexican American Unity Council (MAUC) and I, Ford said they were sending out a press release announcing the termination of funds to a MAUC sub grantee, the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). (Note: the funds to MAYO had already been given to them by the SWCLR).

In addition to my meetings with Congressman Gonzales, our gifted Program Officer at Ford, Dr. S M Miller, also met separately and generated a sense of excitement from the Congressman about the Council’s work. But, the worst was yet to come.

Reacting to the TRA, Ford changed its grant making policies and practices. Ford gave SWCLR a choice: “spin off” some programs, change over to “hard programs,” or risk the loss of continued support. (Note: “hard programs” are those programs designed to be measurable and achievable, for example,

creating the specific number of new businesses, development of specific housing units, job slots, etc.).

For the Council, this meant spinning off our voter registration and education program, changing our relationship to our affiliates, ending our mini grant program, and ending the organizing, training and development of low income residents to empower and define their own agenda and needs to go out and work for positive change.

On July 19, 1969, the day astronaut Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, the SWCLR Board of Directors met at beautiful Asilomar, California to decide a new programmatic direction or face the end of support from Ford.

After a long, vigorous, and sometimes painful debate, the Board voted to accept a shift to “hard programs.” SWCLR would act as an umbrella group and make designated sub grants to specific local affiliate councils which would now work toward becoming functional community development corporations. The affiliates supported this change. Ford would later fund mature affiliates directly.

With the shift firmly in place, on February 15, 1970, Ford announced a supplemental two year grant to SWCLR for \$1.3 million for operations, including expansion of technical and financial assistance to affiliates.

Recognizing that the Council was now heading in a different direction, and requiring new leadership, I resigned to pursue other interests. I felt that after four years I had fulfilled my commitment to help secure funding from Ford and to stay around long enough to get the Council started. As any wise poker player would do, I moved on.

In March 1970, Board Member and former United Auto Workers Union Representative, Henry Santiestevan was elected the Council’s second Executive Director. In December 1972, the Board adopted a new name, the National Council of La Raza and moved to the nation’s capitol in Washington, D.C. The new Council was clearly on its way to becoming a national organization.

Lessons Learned

There are many lessons one can glean from this narrative. First, Foundation money made it possible for a regional council to get started and continue despite concerns over TRA. While the road was not always easy, and sometimes bumpy, a new learning curve took place within the Foundation and for us. Along the way, it introduced Latinos to the field of philanthropy and to the fact that even such mighty institutions as foundations are subject to the whims of powerful legislators.

Opening the door to such a preeminent philanthropic institution as the Ford Foundation was itself a remarkable achievement. This gave us enormous credibility, and helped gain access to other funders, not only for Mexican Americans, but for other Latino groups as well.

The emergence of Latino empowerment did not go unnoticed by the forces of darkness that sought to thwart and silence our movements by trying to control and misinterpret what we were doing. Because these forces continue, we must work to stop the crippling virus of racism and bigotry that seeks to frustrate our civic participation in the democratic process.

This we cannot do alone. We must continue to expand cooperation within our own community and with others who value the promise of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation based on mutual respect and understanding aimed at unleashing new possibilities for all persons seeking a better life for themselves, their families and their community.

On a personal note, I would like to extend recognition and appreciation for the privilege of working with Don Julian and Don Ernesto, our founding board members, the staff of SWCLR, and our colleagues at The Ford Foundation. In retrospect, it's easy to suggest that things could have been done differently or better, but the fact is, in the end, it was the good judgment, strong, and visionary leadership of all concerned that laid the foundation for what is now NCLR.

Thank you.