

## A Call from Tom Ruhl

By Larry Kleinman  
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“I was fascinated by the discussion at the Food and Immigration panel at the Unitarian church on June 28. I would love to talk with you about a project I am putting together.”

Those were the first words I heard from Tom Ruhl.

Tom didn't actually speak those words. He emailed them. I welcomed his interest and we arranged a visit at PCUN headquarters in Woodburn for July 27, 2010.

We only had a couple of hours so I took Tom on the “express” tour of what some facetiously call the “PCUN empire.” The “PCUN” part of the “empire” fits in less than a square block in a low-income Latino neighborhood adjacent to a half-vacant light industrial zone. It's a stone's throw from Woodburn's Latino-dominated historic downtown district across the tracks. PCUN—Oregon's farmworker union—first gained a foothold on the block decades ago, moved into the former church building in 1988, and, years later, took over the 97-year-old farm house just behind it. The “church” became a union hall—“Risberg Hall”—and the house, a radio station, home to *Radio Movimiento*, PCUN's low-power noncommercial FM radio station, KPCN-LP.

“There's more close by,” I informed Tom after walking through those buildings. “Housing,” I added. That's the part that seems to conjure “*empire*.” “OK,” he replied. “As long as we have time to talk.”

In about twenty minutes, we'd driven to, around, and back from the Nuevo Amanecer farmworker housing project. I narrated a brief history of *Nuevo*'s 90 units, built, owned and managed by PCUN's sister organization, Farmworker Housing Development Corporation. *Nuevo* is arrestingly beautiful—not what most visitors associate with “farmworker housing.” I stopped the car in front of a handsome community multi-purpose facility within the *Nuevo* campus. “We named it the ‘Cipriano Ferrel Education Center’,” I began. “An *education center*,” Tom interjected. I proceeded to impart my well-worn rap about how FHDC had acquired the site in the early 1990's despite fierce resistance to siting farmworker housing there. By the time FHDC built the Center in 2002, they had completely reversed that opposition.

“I came to the right place,” Tom declared as we rolled back into the Risberg Hall parking lot.

### What brought Tom to Woodburn

Three weeks earlier, I had accepted Tom's emailed invitation to be a panelist—more like a conversant—in a seminar entitled “Food: Local Challenges, Global Issues” which Tom was organizing at Marylhurst University's campus in West Linn. Tom served as the founding chairperson of Marylhurst's Education Department, president of its faculty association, and, as I came to learn, a dynamic and respected force for social justice at Marylhurst. In his email, Tom had offered this description of Marylhurst's identity and its nexus with the planned seminar:

“The Sisters of the Holy Names who founded Marylhurst were committed to serving the underserved. In Portland in 1860 this meant starting the first high school for young women and eventually a college for women. ... The university community is rethinking what it means to act on a mission statement that includes concepts of social justice. The Graduate School is really a collection of five autonomous programs without a common mandate or mission. I proposed doing a Fred Friendly Seminar as a way to help our students and faculty see the complexity and interconnected nature of the causes, challenges and factors surrounding a topic. The faculty chose the issue of food.”

His email went on to sketch out his vision for bringing a dozen participants from diverse realms of the world of food—a couple of growers, a religious leader spearheading anti-hunger organizing, a former restaurateur and food-policy activist, a food importer, a food service manager, a K-12 teacher leading an interactive community garden project, and me, voicing the workers' perspectives. Rounding out the cohort were a few Marylhurst students and administrators.

The combination of the seminar's purpose, composition, and method intrigued me. I recalled seeing Fred Friendly in action on public television in the 1970's. I admired his energetic style for facilitating a dozen opinionated and articulate speakers in freewheeling—but intelligible—debate. A Fred Friendly approach would certainly stir the pot of food politics. Tom had concluded that PCUN—and I—qualified as one of the cooks.

Tom and I spent an hour or so on in my office on that July afternoon. We talked mostly about the seminar, but also about Marylhurst and its mission of service to those excluded from society's privileges. As the conversation ambled to a conclusion, Tom paused as if captivated by a powerful notion.

“What can *we* do?” he asked.

I took the “we” to mean Marylhurst University. “Create a path for undocumented immigrants to attend the University,” I replied. Tom said nothing but his expression transmitted an unmistakable determination.

### The politics of food for thought

The seminar at Marylhurst on October 14<sup>th</sup> clearly fulfilled Tom's expectations and it made good on the time and creativity he invested in casting and convening the group. Fred, himself, would have been pleased. We had that on good authority, from Ron Paul, the former restaurateur on the seminar panel, who had roomed with Fred's son while in college student, and spent time with the Friendly's.

Tom had wisely recruited Emily Harris, host of Oregon Public Radio's popular call-in show "Think Out Loud", as moderator. A devotee of the power of story, Emily threw me the opening volley: "Tell us about the 21-year-old migrant worker who's deciding today to leave his village in Oaxaca, Mexico to come to work in the fields in Oregon." "If he's 21," I began, "he probably left for the U.S. five years ago." I caught a glimpse of Tom standing in the back of the auditorium. He flashed a smile that seemed to say "we're off!"

The conversation ranged all over the world, the industry, the Metro area, the Marylhurst community, and, of course, the issues. Each speaker recounted powerful experiences and ideas at the intersections of food and justice. No one left holding "the answer" but we all walked off the stage feeling nourished and invigorated.

As the crowd thinned, animated conversations continued to swirl around Tom. He *had* "set it off"—gotten a couple hundred people thinking, talking and imagining in new ways about a topic they all knew and shared. As I headed out, he reminded me: "I'll see you next week, then."

### Joining our *clica*

That next Thursday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Tom returned to Risberg Hall for a pair of gatherings we called "Setting the Foundation." The main event that evening highlighted our progress toward establishing the "CAPACES Leadership Institute," a place for current and future leaders to engage our movement's values and big ideas and to gain the skills to put them into action. "Establishing" the Institute meant expanding the networking and cross-training begun in 2003 as the "CAPACES" process by nine sister organizations, co-led by PCUN. It meant constructing a permanent home for the Institute right next to Risberg Hall. And it meant raising money—\$750,000—and mobilizing hundreds of volunteers to erect the building and launch the programs *with no debt*. "Setting the Foundation" celebrated milestones on all of those crisscrossing paths.

Right before that celebration, we held the inaugural gathering of the "CLICA": the "CAPACES Leadership Institute Council of Advisors." True to our traditions of "popular education," we planned to ground our exploration and practice of leadership development in our own experiences and collective wisdom, but we recognized that we

would need to enlist the minds, the methods and the mentorship of capacity builders and educators who share our values. We call them “advisors” but we consider them our “*clica*”—a Spanglish version of “clique” connoting a bond of trust and back-up in daily struggle.

By mid-October 2010, CLICA members numbered about forty, drawn from across the country. About half attended the October 22<sup>nd</sup> gathering, including Tom. He had accepted our invitation to join on September 7<sup>th</sup>. Tom listened intently as two PCUN leaders and two academics who’ve researched and written about PCUN’s evolution carried on a moderated “fish-bowl” discussion. The topic: “what are the most significant things that PCUN has changed and *not* changed in its first quarter century?” The “*not*” part injected a dose of Fred Friendly-style “keep it real.”

### A DREAM denied

I next saw Tom exactly two months later on December 22<sup>nd</sup>. I had called a few days earlier just to check in. He proposed that we meet. Soon.

As I took a seat in his office, I described a recent trip to Washington DC. “I was on Capitol Hill on the 8<sup>th</sup>,” I began. “That was the very day that the House of Representatives passed the “DREAM” Act, 216 to 198, but the critical House vote was actually much closer—a margin of only three.” I told him about roaming the halls of the House office buildings with farmworkers and the children of farmworkers lobbying in favor of DREAM. “We even ran into our Congressman from the Fifth District, Kurt Schrader,” I continued. “He said he would vote ‘no’ and we asked him—we challenged him—to change his mind.”

Tom didn’t ask me to explain the DREAM Act. He knew that it offered legal immigration status for undocumented youth brought to the U.S. by their parents. The DREAM Act required that the young person have been in the country at least five years and graduated from high school. They’d have to enroll in college or join the military to get permanent resident status, the stepping stone to U.S. citizenship.

Tom had apparently closely followed the DREAM Act’s dramatic surge in the 2010 “Lame-Duck” session. “Five votes,” he broke in: “It failed in the Senate *by just five votes*.” He had an indignant tone that I hadn’t heard him use before. I shared his anger—as did millions of others—knowing that on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 55 senators voted to enact DREAM, but cutting off the opponents’ filibuster required 60.

Tom’s next words—and the way he enunciated them—startled me. “I’m *ready*,” he declared. I sensed almost immediately what he was ready to do. “How soon can you write me a ‘one-pager’?” he asked. “Well, I could have my version by tomorrow,” I replied, “but I don’t think I should.”

### The “one-pager” that revived the DREAM spirit

The DREAM Act had come closer to enactment than any pro-immigrant legislation on immigration in at least a dozen years. Its defeat left many in despair, but, for Tom, it crystalized his resolve to embark on the quest I had suggested when we had met at PCUN in July: remove the financial barriers that shut undocumented immigrants out of the University.” The one-pager would lay out that plan.

Tom’s earnest tone amply signaled his resolve. “We—in Woodburn—need to take the measure of *ours*,” I thought to myself. “Tom, this needs to be *our* one-pager, not just *mine*,” I told him.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, I gathered a dozen leaders of our movement at PCUN headquarters. All were immigrants and under 35 years old. Some had already graduated from college. Others had graduated from a high school in Salem or Woodburn but couldn’t go to college or university. Their undocumented status meant no financial aid, no low-interest loans or even in-state tuition, despite many years of residence in Oregon.

As the meeting began, an air of dejection pervaded. “*University*,” I said, opening the meeting, “might seem impossibly far off.” Heads nodded. “Well, there’s a professor—a leader—at a university 25 miles from here who wants to change that,” I continued. “His name is Tom Ruhl and he teaches at Marylhurst University. It’s private school and can offer scholarships without regard to immigration status. Professor Ruhl tells me that social justice lies at the heart of Marylhurst’s mission. He’s learned of our community, our movement, and the struggle to pass DREAM. He asked me to write a proposal for creating a path—including full financial support—to a Marylhurst degree. I told him that *you* needed to decide what it would say.”

The mood brightened. Questions began to fly. What would such an opportunity mean? Who should have it and how they should earn it? What commitment to the movement should they make or have demonstrated? What support would they need and how might they need to prepare? By meeting’s end, the answers flowed down two sheets of easel paper. We had the proposal’s essential elements. “What should we call it?” someone asked. “How about ‘CLI-MUn’?” I offered in jest. “‘CAPACES Leadership Institute-Marylhurst University’,” I decoded. CAPACES Coordinator Abel Valladares went with the joke, trying on the label: “I guess that would make us ‘*climunistas*’,” pronouncing that newly-coined adjective more like ‘*kleinman-istas*.’

“Are we serious?”

Since I was the only *climunista* who had ever set foot on the Marylhurst campus or met Tom, a visit to the Marylhurst campus emerged as our obvious next step. Tom enlisted Patricia Martínez, a fellow faculty member in the Education Department, to work on the collaboration generally and on the campus visit, in particular. Patricia was also a friend and PCUN supporter who knew our community, having dedicated a year as community outreach director for the Woodburn School District.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, our contingent, a dozen-strong, drove up old Highway 99E, past hop and grass-seed fields and nursery greenhouses, through small towns and Oregon City’s mill-town city center, onto Highway 43 and into the southern suburbia of Metro Portland. At a pastoral expanse of lawn, we entered Marylhurst and headed down the gradually sloping hillside that meets the Willamette River.

We filed into a classroom in BP John Administration Building, the center of campus. The students who frequent such rooms, we learned, are mostly adults from the Metro area who put off higher education after high school graduation or who started but detoured for family or economic reasons. Our delegation members included six who had taken some community college courses, one who had a GED, one who could easily earn a GED, and three who had completed a B.A. and were mulling graduate school. I considered myself simply a facilitator and cheerleader, since I had completed all the formal education I expected to have in life when I received a B.A. from Oberlin College in 1975.

After welcomes and introductions, Tom briefly summarized Marylhurst’s origins, core values and defining characteristics: “The faculty here isn’t pressured to conduct research or publish. We’re here to teach. It’s a ‘student-centered’ institution.” He went on: “The class schedule includes many evening and weekend sessions, tailored to students who enroll part-time because they’re working.”

Tom and Patricia led us on a walk through the campus, describing its history and functions. Stepping into Flavia Hall triggered a Marylhurst memory of my own: a reception there in May 1991 for César Chávez. It stood out as an unusual gathering: nuns, labor leaders, faculty and students, farmworkers and PCUN leaders. It turned out to be César’s last visit to Oregon—and the last time I saw him—before his death in 1993.

Before heading to lunch in the cafeteria—the very same assembly space in Clark Commons employed for the food politics seminar—we stopped at the library for a few minutes of unstructured exploration. Some in our group gravitated to the exhibits. Others headed for the stacks or the periodicals. Brenda Mendoza and I hung out near the check-out desk. “Can you picture yourself here?” I asked her. As she gave the lobby a once-over glance, I recognized the skeptical look I’d seen often since we began working together in 1997, just as she turned twenty-one. “I’m not a good student,” she responded

dismissively. “You may see yourself as simply a high school drop-out,” I countered, “but you’re also practically the only person—among the many, including the college-educated—that I’ve worked with who dove right in when handed the three-inch thick, thin-sheeted, tiny-print volume of federal immigration statutes and regulations.” Her expression morphed into a “can’t argue with that” smile. “It might be a long journey...” I started to say, but stopped when I saw her looking around more intently.

After lunch, we met again in the Administration building. Patricia laid out some challenging questions we’d need to compellingly answer to attract full-scholarship support, such as:

“Why are you special?

“What evidence can you offer about the impacts of your work and your leaders?

“How will this collaborative shape and support the next generation of Latinos whose numbers represent a huge demographic shift in Oregon?”

“What’s *your* story?

“*Are you serious?*”

Pati’s spot-on bluntness couldn’t eclipse her passion for this collaborative; in fact, they were inseparable. We felt at once daunted and motivated. We had our work cut out for us—individually and collectively.

As we prepared to depart, Tom made an announcement. “I will be having heart surgery in a few days. It is something that I have known would be coming, it is just coming sooner than expected. It’s a heart valve, so nothing to worry about. I will be out for four to six weeks. Patricia will carry on with you all while I’m gone.” We wished Tom the best.

“I am home!”

On Feb. 22<sup>nd</sup>, I opened an email from Tom bearing those words in the subject line. I anxiously read its content: “My progress has been positive. I am home after a more invasive surgical procedure than planned. In addition to the planned aortic valve replacement, I had an aneurysm resulting in 3 additional hours of surgery.”

About four weeks later, on March 19<sup>th</sup>, I received another email from Tom. The subject line contained one word: “News.” It was *good* news, as Tom assured in the opening lines of the text. “I received clearance to return to work on March 28 on a limited basis while I’m having physical therapy.” As he had before, Tom concluded the message by thanking his caregivers, colleagues and Marylhurst University for provide the benefit of “access to the high quality care I received.”

That spring, the *climunistas* worked on the “homework” Patricia had assigned. Several sketched their “stories.” Some researched scholarships that don’t consider immigration status. Some brainstormed the community fundraising opportunities that CAPACES

organizations could undertake to help support the leaders they might nominate as candidates for Marylhurst enrollment.

In late April, Tom and I conducted an email conversation centered on the “tuition equity” legislation then gaining traction in the 2011 Oregon Legislature. The bill would grant in-state tuition to virtually all Oregon high school graduates, regardless of immigration status. Without this change, students who were undocumented would continue to be charged “foreign student” tuition, several times higher than the rate paid by Oregon residents and an impossible financial burden. Tom asked me for advice on framing this issue for discussion with Marylhurst leaders and colleagues. I found one statement he made in our exchange particularly striking:

“The time off gave me time to think about life, career and important tasks ahead. ... For too long I had a comfortable and unexamined professional life. My work with Cultural Competence in the past few years opened my eyes to what I should/could have done in the past. That can't be changed but I can focus on today and the future. I want to help.”

Tom explained that, for the time being, his help wouldn't be on the front lines—at the Legislature on a major lobby day May 2<sup>nd</sup>—but he assured me that I had given him what he needed.

### The prayers of 600 Sisters

The message I received on June 29<sup>th</sup> from Patricia was a forward, but the comment she added was as troubling as it was brief: “Tom is very ill.”

Infection had set in during Tom's recovery from surgery and a second surgery was scheduled for July 5<sup>th</sup> at St. Vincent's Hospital, west of Portland. Margie Abbott, one of Tom's closest colleagues at Marylhurst's Education Department, was the author of the email that Patricia had forwarded. The message provided guidance about how best to offer support. She reported that Sister Cecelia, a Marylhurst trustee, had enlisted the help and prayers of 600 Sisters to support Tom and his family.

In the early afternoon of July 5<sup>th</sup>, I made my way to a second floor waiting area adjacent to St. Vincent's Intensive Care Unit. Coming off the elevator, I spotted a couple dozen people engrossed in conversations. The re-arranged chairs and side table with snacks and refreshments suggested an encampment of some duration.

Margie greeted me with a brief update. “Tom went into surgery very early this morning and he's in recovery. The doctors are hopeful.” She introduced me to Tom's wife, Mary and their daughter, Amanda. “Your work and your friendship is very important to Tom,” she told me and proceeded to share something which left me speechless. “Last week, as

he was preparing for this surgery, Tom insisted that I find out and take the steps necessary to change his will so that it would include support for the scholarship program you've been working on with him." She described the steps she had taken and assured me that Tom was gratified when he signed the change. I was overwhelmed by the power of Tom's decision, intensified by Mary's determination and the grace with which she imparted it to me.

Tom died on two days after the surgery from complications.

*We are "Ruhlistas"*

On July 13<sup>th</sup>, a new nonprofit organization was born in Woodburn. That day, nine leaders—one from each of the CAPACES organizations, gathered with co-workers at Risberg Hall and signed the articles of incorporation for the "CAPACES Leadership Institute." We filed the papers at the Corporation Division in Salem and we held a celebration in the Hall that evening.

During the celebration's program, I addressed the crowd, accompanied by a half dozen of my fellow *climunistas*. I related the story told here—an abbreviated version—and concluded by declaring: "from this day forward, we will call ourselves *Ruhlistas*."

The *Ruhlistas* and Tom's colleagues at Marylhurst have carried on the initiative, preparing the way for the first beneficiary to enroll, hopefully as soon as the fall of 2012.

For Tom, I believe, the bequest was a simple but deeply purposeful fulfillment of a personal commitment, rooted in the conversation he and I had had fifty weeks before his death. His bequest, one of his final acts on this planet, became the inaugural contribution to the "Tom Ruhl Scholarship at Marylhurst University."

That's the call from Tom.

Many have already heard that call and responded. If we model Tom's determination, many more will and, with their support and participation, we will have inspiringly answered his question: "what can we do?"

*Dedicated to the enduring memory of  
Dr. Thomas Everett Ruhl  
December 19, 1949 – July 7, 2011*

***Tom Ruhl, ¡Presente!***