

Our Movement's First Home

By Larry Kleinman

Finding a home before thinking to look

On a Saturday morning in the fall of 1979, staff members of the Willamette Valley Immigration Project—Ramón Ramírez, Juan Mendoza, and I—let ourselves into the small house at 356 Young Street. The building's owner, Centro Chicano Cultural, had given us the key and offered the building for our use rent-free if we packed up its contents and looked after it.

We had previously visited there from time to time because the building had housed the Woodburn office of Oregon Rural Opportunities. ORO was a government-funded non-profit social service organization offering General Education Diploma (or "GED") classes and job training to farmworkers, services which resemble those offered today by Oregon Human Development Corporation.

That Saturday morning, we found cold cups of coffees, phone messages, files on desks, a sweater draped over a chair. It seemed as though the staff had left on a Friday, expecting to return on Monday, but never came back. As we soon learned, that's essentially what had happened. The federal government had frozen ORO's funding, fed up with chronic funding discrepancies and improprieties. The organization imploded.

It didn't take us long to pack up ORO's stuff. The house measured less than one thousand square feet and had only five rooms, including the bathroom. We collected the garbage and we boxed the files, save one file. Perhaps we retained it as a keepsake or a reminder of the bizarre conditions that gave rise to our arrival. Or perhaps we were tempted to actually make use of its contents. A few years later, we finally destroyed it: a file folder with about fifty blank GED certificates.

The Centro—and apparently, the federal government—had no use for the metal desks and worn office chairs. Since our first impulse was to use the place as some kind of graphic studio and meeting space, we didn't imagine that we'd need them either. Given our ingrained "scarcity" mind-set, we also couldn't visualize tossing them. The furniture stayed.

From caretaker to deal-maker

In May 1978, the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP) had opened its Woodburn office in a two-room storefront three blocks away on Garfield Street, facing the parking lot that served as a de-facto town square. A year later, we persuaded the just-established farmworker legal services program to pay half the

\$130 monthly rent to compensate for occasionally conducting their client interviews there. *Buying property* was the furthest thing from our minds.

At first, we used the house for our internal political study and discussion meetings on Saturdays. We were less likely to be interrupted and the house gave us a faint sense of “retreat.” Ramón soon joined the board of the Centro and we quickly got a better sense of why they had so readily turned the house over to our use. Once a prominent social service and cultural group, the Centro’s programs had folded and its paid staff had moved on. Ownership of property had become the organization’s sole purpose for existing. They owned the much larger, brick building next door, originally a Methodist church, and adjacent lots, more than half a square block in all. In 1973, the church building had been extensively remodeled to serve as the first permanent home for Salud de la Familia, the federally-funded migrant clinic. Salud only lasted about four years there and their departure for a downtown location started the Centro on its financial and organizational downward spiral.

At the Centro board meetings, Ramón discovered that the Centro’s lack of a tenant or caretaker for the house was the least of their problems. In late October 1979, the U.S. Bank of Oregon had filed a foreclosure action in Marion County court. The Centro hadn’t made its \$822 monthly mortgage payments since February and the bank demanded full payment of the \$60,948 balance, plus interest, costs and attorneys fees. The Centro faced losing the entire parcel!

Among us, only Juan gravitated toward superstition. In December 1979, one hundred mile-per-hour winds downed a huge old black walnut tree twenty feet behind the house. Juan contended that the fact that the tree fell to the south—*into the wind*—missing the house entirely, had to be a sign that some higher power protected us and meant us to stay there. At one of our Saturday morning meetings, we somehow persuaded ourselves that *we* could acquire the house.

Of course, we could end up owning the house only if we helped to engineer the Centro’s financial rescue. First, we had to convince the Centro board that rescue was possible. Initially, they reacted cautiously, but the Bank’s notice, “Demand for Trial” which arrived in early January, 1980 underscored the urgency. The deal we fashioned called for the Centro to accelerate their collection of about \$25,000 owed to them for sale of other property and to borrow \$25,000 (in effective, re-financing). We would buy the house for \$20,000. The Centro board agreed. When the judge entered the foreclosure order on March 28, 1980, the Centro had \$26,000 to deliver, a sufficiently good showing to extract a ninety day reprieve from the Bank.

Today, \$20,000 for a house, *any house*, or even for a lot with no house, sounds shockingly cheap. Back then, we considered it a good deal, but not a steal. Arguably, we bought at or near the peak of a home-price run up that the Reagan

Recession would sharply reverse just two years later. The house's construction and condition were basically solid but primitive: no foundation, no insulation, no water heater, and no central heating. The only updating since the house was built in the late 1930s seemed to be the red weave carpet and the ugly, depressing, and fake walnut paneling.

Good deal or not, where in the hell did we think we would get \$20,000 *in cash*? The Immigration Project and our sister organization, Willamette Valley Law Project (WVLP) had been legally incorporated for almost three years, and had faithfully paid their modest financial obligations. In February 1980, we might have even qualified for a mortgage, but applying for one to fund the house purchase *didn't even occur to us*. Our "hustle" mentality focused us exclusively on soliciting donations from friends, families, supporters, and clients—immigrant families we assisted with immigration paperwork and/or represented in deportation hearings. "Plan B" was to *borrow*—from the same list of folks and organizations—whatever sum we couldn't get them to donate.

Suffice it to say that our organizing instincts drove us to create a compelling circumstance and opportunity (the "rescue" deal) and then hit off everyone we could think of to fulfill it. We compiled a list of about one hundred supporters, and a similar number of clients. By mid-March—in about thirty days—we had raised \$8,500 from 57 individuals and families, mostly donations under \$100. We borrowed \$11,000, short-term, at no interest. We put that \$19,500 in a money market account and earned the final \$500 in interest that accrued pending closing of the deal.

The Centro's \$25,000 loan went through in late May. We signed the purchase agreement on June 1st and tendered our \$100 earnest money. On July 14th, the sale closed, the U.S. Bank of Oregon got their money, and the deed conveying ownership to the Willamette Valley Law Project was recorded. We managed to pay back the loans within two years. The house at 356 Young Street became ours, free and clear.

Counting our chickens

Confident of success, we didn't wait for niceties like executing legal contracts before taking full possession. After all, there was the \$65 in monthly rent that we could be saving. So we moved out of the store front in mid-April *and* we organized a combination open house and Cinco de Mayo/International Workers' Day Celebration for May 2, 1980.

Fortunately, we did a better job of deal-structuring and fundraising than event planning. The sheer elation and relief of pulling off an improbable undertaking couldn't be extinguished by the arrival on that Sunday afternoon of the Woodburn

Police forty-five minutes into *Grupo Modelo*'s first set. The house couldn't begin to accommodate a band, so they set up in the carport on the adjacent lot. Oblivious to the existence of certain city ordinances, we had neglected to request a sound permit. The Police officer's threat to confiscate the sound equipment vaporized *Modelo*'s subsequent sets. Celebrating Primero & Cinco de Mayo became a custom we would continue for twelve consecutive years.

No Nos Moverán

Caught up as we were in the scramble to beat the foreclosure train bearing down on our acquisition scheme, as well as our self-imposed rush to move in and celebrate, we didn't immediately appreciate the mental shift that buying the house at 356 Young Street would cause. In retrospect, it's clear that acquiring the house occurred at the absolute low point financially in WVIP/WVLP's now long lives. The federally-funded training grants that sustained seven full-time staff during the Projects' first two years had all run out in August 1979. Ramón, Juan, and I (joined by Cipriano Ferrel in late 1979) stayed on as part-time volunteers, working other jobs. The 1980 operating budget (not counting the property purchase) totaled about \$6,000.

Though we busied ourselves with the struggles of daily survival, our sudden arrival into some state of permanence surely had at least a subconscious impact. Our funding, such as it was, might remain meager and precarious, but we could count on a base of operations. We also reduced our vulnerability related to openly and aggressively resisting the Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS) and local police cooperation in their raids. The militant stance we projected and tried to fulfill made enemies. By owning our offices, we eliminated one counter-tactic commonly used to de-stabilize "trouble makers": eviction and rental black-listing. In the worst-case scenario, we counted the house as the final resource we'd draw upon to financially sustain some last-stand battle with the powers-that-be.

On a more mundane level, owning the house reduced our operations costs and spurred us to activate one of our most enduring and valuable assets: volunteer labor devoted to maintaining and improving our facilities.

We worked diligently to craft a name for our Movement and our house, settling on "Frente Trabajador Autónomo" (Autonomous Worker Front). We envisioned an entity roughly equivalent to a "party," overarching our organizations, including the "Taller Gráfico de la Raza," a simple silk screen studio we installed in the backroom. Within a few years, the "Frente" would shrink from its modest beginnings to become an unexplained line at the bottom of Project stationery and the name on an eight-foot wooden plank hanging above the house's front porch. Every one we knew simply called our place "El Proyecto," referring to WVIP.

Though owning the house might not have rivaled the strength of that “tree by the water” celebrated in the chorus of “We Shall Not Be Moved,” anchoring ourselves at 356 Young Street proved to be powerful: symbolically, strategically and practically.

Busting at the seams

Other than the fact that we couldn’t host meetings of more than twenty people, the house adequately met our needs for six and a half years...until November 6, 1986, to be exact. On that day, President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, creating two programs which offered “amnesty” or legal status to millions of undocumented immigrants nationally, and thousands in the Willamette Valley.

Anticipating Reagan’s action, we had scheduled community forums in Independence, Woodburn and Salem for November 7th, 8th, and 9th. Each forum attracted a standing-room only crowd. On Monday, November 10th, immigrants besieged the office, clamoring for information and anxious to start the process even though the INS wouldn’t begin accepting applications for another six months.

Over the succeeding nineteen months, the house would give its fullest measure. We utilized virtually every inch of space.

By the time the amnesty application “window” opened in May 1987, the staff at 356 Young Street had doubled. The kitchen became a fingerprinting station; a narrow passage way became a studio for taking application photos. We’d partitioned the front room into offices, leaving a waiting area which sat at most a dozen people. A side-entrance hallway, bounded by a sliding glass double door, became my workspace. It measured about five feet by seven and I met daily with families there to prepare them for their INS interviews.

When the weather permitted, thirty or more people would sit on the front porch, the lawn and the steps awaiting their turn to attend an orientation, enroll as a member or pay dues, have a screening interview or deliver documents. PCUN, Oregon’s farmworker union birthed by WVIP in April 1985, signed up nearly two thousand members during those nineteen months. Four days a week, at 5:00 PM, two dozen or so immigrants would pack into the back room, an area well under two hundred square feet, for an orientation on the union and the new immigration law. It was the same back room we had regularly filled with cigarette smoke and with the ideas and plans about starting a farmworkers union.

Our spatial challenges spawned creative adaptations. Ramón took advantage of the property’s wrap-around driveway to offer what can only be described as “drive-up”

service. In the moment, it just seemed practical to open his window for a brief check-in and document hand-off with a client who had pulled up before the office opened. If the cliché “do you want fries with that?” had existed in 1987, Ramón would never have heard the end of that one.

Buying out the Centro's holdings

Though we expected our activity level to diminish temporarily as we transitioned out of mass immigration application mode, nineteen months of overcrowding, the ballooning of our membership, and the dues and services revenue we had generated all militated in one direction: expansion. We checked out the few buildings in Woodburn that seemed suitable and available, mostly former churches. Finding little worth pursuing, our gaze settled on the facility right under our noses: the building next door. It seemed advantageous in every way but one: it wasn't for sale.

In May, 1988, as we neared winding down our part in the amnesty applications marathon, we had become increasingly aware that the Centro Chicano Cultural was struggling to even minimally manage the properties on both sides of our house. Ramón's board involvement had long-since ended and, as near as we could tell, their core of active board members had dwindled to three. A food bank and an after-school tutoring program shared the former church building, generating just enough rent to cover payments on the \$25,000 loan Centro had secured in 1980. Sadly, but predictably, the Centro had never sought to re-finance that loan and therefore continued to pay 21% interest, the going mortgage rate at inflation's apex in 1980. As a result, they still owed more than \$23,000 after eight years of payments.

Sensing that the Centro's diehards felt overworked and unfulfilled, we approached them that May with two offers. At least one of them, we predicted to ourselves, they wouldn't refuse. On May 18th, we proposed paying the Centro \$40,000 down and \$35,000 in seven annual installments of \$5,000 at eight percent interest, a total purchase price of \$75,000. Alternatively, we'd buy them out for \$70,000. In either case, they would deed us the former-church building, its contiguous parking lot and the vacant lot on the other side of our house. *We* would take over their remaining stake and own the five-eighths of the block which the Centro had acquired in the early 1970s.

The Centro board welcomed our initiative and promptly signaled that they'd favor the buy-out. We had about \$30,000 on hand, so we had to fundraise or borrow the rest. Though no external pressure, like foreclosure, required it, we thought it best to cement the deal without delay, lest they change their minds. If \$70,000 for four lots and a two-story, six-thousand-square foot building *wasn't* a steal, it came awfully close.

Even as we geared up to raise the remaining \$40,000, it pained us to hand \$70,000 of our members' and supporters' hard-earned money to an organization as feeble as Centro Chicano Cultural. We calculated that they'd clear about \$45,000 on the deal after paying off their loan. Though we considered them honest, we had no confidence that they'd devote the money to particularly useful purposes. We struggled to extinguish from our minds the images of what *we* could do with \$45,000. Over the subsequent few years, those pangs resurfaced intermittently as we watched them bleed away what had been *our* money on half-baked annual celebrations of Mexican Independence Day.

We kept our eyes on the prize, this time, a *compound* including a building with ample office space *and* a meeting hall we could restore which would seat 125 people. As in 1980, we turned to our immigrant and supporter bases, both of which had grown substantially. We, again, reached our goal quickly, this time without having to borrow a dime, thanks primarily to donations considerably larger than those we had received in 1980.

One donation in particular stood out because of its amount—\$15,000—but also its source: my mother, Annette. Though the check bore her name, the money, in her mind, still belonged to her mother who had died four years earlier. My mother had pledged to herself to dedicate that inheritance to a purpose worthy of her parents. They were Russian Jewish immigrants who had settled in Chicago and joined community and union organizations. My grandmother didn't speak Spanish and had only passing acquaintance with Mexican immigrants in the modest retirement housing where she ultimately resided. In the 1930s and 1940s, she and my grandfather belonged to the International Workers' Order, an organization strikingly similar to WVIP and PCUN. Recognizing—and forging—a bond across generational and ethnic lines, my mother donated her part of my grandmother's estate in her memory. In a handwritten note dated May 31, 1988, my mother explained her intentions:

“they believed—and lived—the hopes and dreams of the displaced. They found a better life here than they ever could have had in Russia, largely through their own efforts and the efforts of their organized co-workers. Their children and grandchildren benefited directly from their spirit and their teachings—and now, perhaps, people who never knew them may benefit also.”

Six years later, after finally completing restoration, PCUN dedicated the Sonia & Edward Risberg Hall in a ceremony on April 28, 1994, the birthday that PCUN and my grandmother happened to share. Governor Barbara Roberts, Richard Chávez (César's older brother), and folksinger/activist Pete Seeger headlined the event

which attracting hundreds, including my mother and a couple dozen members of my family.

Reverting to residence

On Labor Day weekend 1988, we moved our offices out of the house and into our “new” building thirty feet to the west. Even as we focused mostly on demolishing the wall partitions installed by the Salud clinic to convert the former church sanctuary into patient rooms, we set our sights on turning the house into a residence for volunteers and interns.

In the summer of 1988, PCUN began what would become a decades-long, multi-front struggle for farmworker collective bargaining rights and agreements. Organizing workers in the fields and consumers in neighborhoods, churches, campuses and union halls required staff resources we simply didn’t have and couldn’t afford. Awareness of the farmworker cause and PCUN’s increasing visibility brought supporters to our door. Some of them were college students willing to put in long hours in exchange for room and board. The empty house could provide the room for at least a few at a time. Between 1991 and 2002, nearly fifty volunteers and interns, plus a few PCUN staff, took up temporary residence at 356 Young.

For the eight years that the house was our office, we had done without hot water just like the ORO employees, the WIC program employees before them, the Methodist Church rectory staff before them, and the families who presumably lived there once upon a time. Obviously, cold water would no longer suffice for a residence: Oregon’s landlord-tenant law even said so. In the spring of 1991, volunteer brigades installed a water heater, a shower stall, and used kitchen appliances. Ramón’s former office, six feet by nine, became a bedroom; drive-up service became a casualty of progress.

Though some who lived there might pronounce a harsher judgment, the house ranked on the Spartan end of the habitability scale. Given its major structural limitations and the demands of refurbishing and maintaining the Risberg Hall headquarters building, we invested only the minimum effort required to keep the volunteer house functional.

At least once each summer, the volunteer house’s season of highest occupancy, some sort of meltdown would occur—usually as much interpersonal as infrastructural. Weekly house meetings—when they happened—and basic house rules—when residents followed them—relieved some of the pressure of stressful work and living in close quarters. At least one pair of interns who met at 356 Young got married.

The wear and tear took its toll. Finally, during an especially cold spell in January 2005, the plastic water pipes froze and split. We faced a choice: invest significant time and money or close the place down.

The fact that we had acquired *another* adjacent property eased our decision to shut it down. In October 2003, the 89-year-old resident of the house behind PCUN headquarters decided to move to an assisted living facility. We negotiated to buy her sturdy two-story home, built in 1913. Since it was next to our main parking lot and across from a metal fabrication business, we agreed that the house would attract few residential buyers. Of course for us, the location was ideal. We settled on \$96,000 as the purchase price. Six of PCUN's major donors put up the \$20,000 down payment and we borrowed the balance from a sister organization, an eight-year loan at 3.5% interest.

By summer 2005, we'd completed the painting and minor plumbing work necessary to utilize the house as the successor to 356 Young. As events would have it, the "new" volunteer house lasted only about a year in that role. In June, 2006, we threw ourselves into the daunting but ultimately successful project of installing two sound studios into the former living and dining room. Volunteers no longer came to live at the house, but rather to broadcast their programs on PCUN's low-power FM radio station, KPCN-LP. The new volunteer house became the *Radio Movimiento* house.

The last hurrah

When we boarded up the windows and screwed the doors shut to prevent vandalism, we assumed that 356 Young had hosted its last human occupants. The back room slanted southward, sagging further into the ground. A fifth generation of birds had ensconced itself amid the rafters. Moss was growing on the roof moss.

Ordinarily, holding to the no-more-humans regimen would have been a safe bet. There was nothing ordinary about the "Radio Barnraising" weekend in August 2006, nor about the hearty souls from the Prometheus Radio Project who rolled in from Philadelphia to co-lead the "raising"—the installation—of *Radio Movimiento*. That weekend, every corner of our now-three-quarters-of-a-square-block compound buzzed with activity. 356 Young was no exception.

The Prometheans included veterans of house squats, re-claiming dilapidated structures which lacked most basic services. In the range of their squatting experiences, 356 Young probably seemed higher end. The vacant lot would soon fill with tents, lodging for barnraisers arriving from around the West Coast and beyond, so the Prometheans took over 356. As they concluded their week's stay, they re-installed the window boards.

La “casita”: ¡Presente!

Though it’s sad to see the house at 356 Young Street in its state of disrepair and decay, there’s been no compelling reason to take definitive action... until now. In March 2008, the PCUN board unanimously approved a new initiative, the CAPACES Leadership Institute, intended to take Movement consciousness and leadership skills to the next level. The Institute builds on the CAPACES process, a collaboration knitting together the sixty combined staff of PCUN and our eight sister organizations.

Every “institute” needs and deserves its own home and our Movement’s many buildings (including those on Young Street) are full. The CAPACES Leadership Institute calls for putting 356 Young and the adjoining lot, vacant for decades, to a higher use: a new building. We’re visualizing, reconnoitering, designing, planning, raising money, and identifying the crews who will build the Institute’s home, starting, we expect, in spring 2010.

First, though, the old house must go. It had given all that it had and we mostly just took. I suppose we owe it more than a bulldozing or a Woodburn Firefighters’ practice session. Since 1980, our deepening sense of environmentalism has meshed with our somewhat more relaxed mentality of scarcity and thrift, inducing us to deconstruction as the removal method of choice. We hope to incorporate some of old house’s still-valuable roof joists and wall studs into the new building. We’ll deconstruct the house in the same way that we’ll erect its replacement: with volunteer labor.

We began dismantling the house at 356 Young Street on Summer Solstice Day 2008. By mid-July, we’d dispatched three thirty-yard dumpsters filled with roofing, wallboard and carpet; salvage lumber lay in piles awaiting de-nailing. By the last day of summer, the concrete front steps and walk lead to a big patch of bare ground on which daylight hadn’t fallen in seventy or eighty years.

Now we look forward to gathering our communities from near and far on May 2, 2010. It’s the day we’ll ceremonially break ground for the Institute’s future home. That day, we’ll strive to remember what happened on May 2nd, thirty years earlier at our first celebration there. This time, we’ll be sure to get a sound permit.

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