As the corporate “birth” certificate attests, the Willamette Valley Law Project officially came to life on March 31, 1977 in Salem, Oregon.

On that day, the Project’s four named incorporators signed and filed the “articles of incorporation” with Oregon’s Secretary of State. It’s doubtful that those four, Tom Steenson, Louis Savage, Lenore Glaser and Tim Plenk, or any of the less official collaborators who brought the Project into this world, realized that, on that very day, César Chávez turned 50.

In Oregon of the late seventies, César had achieved “household name” status by co-leading the heroic struggles of the United Farm Workers union. In 1969, he was the first U.S. Latino featured on the cover of Time magazine. César’s self-effacing style of leadership, though, ensured that only UFW insiders noted César’s arrival at the half-century mark.

You could count on your fingers the number of people who, on March 31, 1977, knew that a new Oregon non-profit corporation named “Willamette Valley Law Project” had been born. Today, on March 31, 2012, the Willamette Valley Law Project turns 35 but WVLP remains almost as obscure as César is famous—his birthday likely on its way to national holiday status.

Fittingly, today’s gathering at PCUN’s Risberg Hall, organized in part to recognize WVLP’s milestone, is part of an activities spotlighting—and tangibly advancing—the work of a growing family of organizations who can trace some branch of their ancestry to the Project. That family has come to be known as the “CAPACES” network. Before and after the celebration program at Noon, participants honor César’s memory with a day of labor in the seasonal launch of Voz Hispana Causa Chavista’s community gardens and in the construction of the permanent home of the CAPACES Leadership Institute.

Non-identical twins

From WVLP’s earliest days, other movement entities occupied the organizational limelight, starting with the Law Project’s corporate sibling—older by exactly ten days: the Willamette Valley Immigration Project. The Immigration Project conducted a dogged, decade-long, campaign in the streets, the media, and the halls of government, challenging the Immigration & Naturalization Service’s raids and defending immigrants who asserted their rights. Years later, in the late 1980s, the Immigration Project would, itself, recede into the background as a new sister organization, formed in 1985 and
incorporated in January 1987, took center stage. “Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste,” or simply “PCUN,” organized farmworkers and supporters for farmworker rights. Along the way, PCUN has achieved notoriety many times greater than the “Project” sisters’ combined fame.

The founders of both WVLP and WVIP correctly assumed that visible and militant resistance to the INS’s reign of terror would be branded as “political”—too controversial for some funders and allies who might otherwise support some of the practical, more conventional aspects of legal defense, such as research and training. The Projects’ founders foresaw the need to pursue a variety of strategies to achieve social change, some “in-your-face,” and others more like “stay-in-your-place.”

The WVLP-WVIP duo emerged from a collaboration of two communities—Chicano-mexicano activists centered at the Colegio César Chávez in Mt. Angel, Oregon, and the progressive legal community—lawyers, law students and paralegals—most connected to the Portland chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), but also including legal services workers from Salem and students in Eugene. Nationally, the NLG’s 40th anniversary in 1977 coincided with a resurgence of legal work to defend immigrants. Guild members, especially on the West Coast and in the Southwest, answered the calls from labor and community leaders to counter the rising tide of arrests and deportations. A series of “immigration projects” sprung up, many as “summer projects” operating for a season or two.

WVLP and WVIP began very much in that mode. But just as summer internships and modest donations ran out, funding for two-year, the prospect of full-time staff positions came into view. Cities and counties suddenly received millions of dollars thanks to the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act program, or “CETA,” as it was known in 1977. To fulfill CETA’s more pressing goals—economic stimulus and job training, local governments had to immediately create two-year “training” positions. In the Portland area, cities and counties met this imperative by making grants to non-profit organizations. In the Portland area, a host of non-profits either sprang up or” bulked up” thanks to CETA. By October, WVLP had four CETA positions and WVIP had three.

WVLP staff mostly “trained” themselves to develop and pursue litigation against the unlawful practices of the INS and local police, to research legal defense strategies challenging deportation, and to write a reasonably comprehensive, bilingual training manual on deportation defense and the immigrant visa process.

As CETA money ran out, I and two other staffers kept the Projects going. We closed the Portland office and consolidated operations in Woodburn, where we had opened an office in May 1978. We worked other jobs and took turns anchoring four-hour office shifts. INS arrests and raids escalated. So did our rapid response and routine follow-up.
A place to stay

In early 1980, maneuvering by the WVIP volunteer staff positioned WVLP to acquire a piece of property—a small, rather run-down house two blocks east of Woodburn’s downtown, to be exact. The price was $20,000. We conducted a swift and successful campaign to raise and borrow that sum from supporters (mostly in the legal community). The campaign and its success infused the Projects with an energy and sense of stability that carried us through what would be five more very lean years. “We may not have salaries, but at least we have a place,” we often reminded ourselves.

Property owner became one of WVLP’s signature roles. In 1988, with help from PCUN and WVIP, WVLP purchased adjacent lots which included a very church-like structure built by the Methodists in 1949. In 2003, when yet another adjacent lot and structure suddenly became available. WVLP snagged it and expanded the campus to three-quarters of the block. In 2006, PCUN led the transformation of that new acquisition—a simple but solid, two-story farmhouse built in 1913—into the studios of Radio Movimiento, PCUN’s low-power noncommercial FM station.

Today, the house WVLP bought in 1980 is gone, dismantled in the summer of 2008. (Days before the de-construction began, I wrote a short narrative titled Our Movement’s First Home, describing the little house’s place in our history.) Where the house once stood, a new building is taking shape—the future home of the CAPACES Leadership Institute. Hundreds of donors, dozens of businesses and foundations and a thousand volunteers have contributed or participated in the construction. Despite donated or discounted labor, services, and materials, worth many tens of thousands of dollars, the Institute building will probably end up costing more than twice the combined amount that WVLP originally shelled out to buy all its property. Granted, that’s not adjusted for inflation, but even so, the construction has already proved its worth. The movement-building power generated by bringing together the unlikely to do the improbable and achieve the amazing is priceless. For years to come, folks from around the country and around the block will be drawn to the Institute by what I call its tres maravillas or “three marvels”: the building, the way we built it, and what happens inside it.

A word about our “sponsor”

Over the past quarter century, WVLP has served as “fiscal sponsor” for PCUN, for Voz Hispana, and a few other organizations that, although they are non-profit, tax-exempt corporations, do not qualify to receive most foundation grants and cannot offer “tax deductions” to donors. These sponsored organizations do work that meets the IRS’s definition of “educational” and “charitable” and WVLP facilitates financial support for that work. Since 1989, that support has totaled nearly $4,700,000, supporting mass education and capacity building impacting issues from pesticide exposure, labor rights,
immigrant civic engagement and youth leadership, to mass communications and recognition of Latino community heroes.

Given that WVLP does not undertake its own programmatic work, it needs little or no paid staff. I serve as WVLP’s “director”, supported by the corporation’s five board members. Those five—Marina Espinoza, Glenn Harris, Eli Jiménez, Monica Smith and Terry Wright, have a combined 82 years of service on the organization’s board. They bring a rich array of skills and experiences in local government, as attorneys (with roots in the NLG), educators, foundation staff and board members, and community servants.

Though WVLP has remained vital and has facilitated impressive change in the community, the corporation’s name is down-right anachronistic. WVLP long ago aged out of “project” status and its engagement with “law” was indirect at best. The Immigration Project also outgrew its name but changed it to Centro de Servicios para Campesinos (Farmworker Service Center) just before its tenth birthday. Arguably, WVLP has retained it name due more to inertia than pride or adherence to tradition. But there is also the “carved in stone” theory or, in this case, cast in bronze. On April 28, 1994—the halfway point in WVLP’s life so far—a joyous crowd of 400 gathered in the parking lot for the ceremony which formally dedicated the former church as “Sonia and Edward Risberg Hall.” The plaque, unveiled that day and affixed soon thereafter to the building’s front corner, prominently displays WVLP’s name.

**Living La Vida Chavista**

César never “met” the Law Project, its incorporators or its board members. If he had, or if he were here today--with us not just in spirit, he would instantly identify with the Project. Despite his immense fame, he would resonate with WVLP’s humility as a steady and unheralded servant for La Causa—the farmworker cause—year after year. He would embrace the birthday bond WVLP shares with him. He would join with all of us to celebrate WVLP’s fulfillment of one of our movement’s “big ideas”: “Amid the instability of the immigrant world, build stability.”

*Dedicated to the memory of Monica Smith, March 16, 1951 to October 9, 2013, and to her WVLP board service, 1989 to 2013.*