




# DE LOS SANTOS: MY LIFE-CHANGING WORK WITH VALLEY INTERFAITH

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April 18 07:04 2016

by Ofelia de los Santos

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"How would you like to be a part of the most powerful organization for change in the Rio Grande Valley?" With these words, Ernie Cortes, Jr. had me hooked.

We had been chatting for almost an hour, or so I thought. Later I would find out that this was one of the infamous one-on-one meetings that the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) cultivated and refined for selecting leaders for the purpose of community organizing.

Over the course of six years that I spent with Valley Interfaith (VIF), the IAF affiliate in the Rio Grande Valley, as a leader from my member church, Our Lady Queen of Angels in La Joya, Texas, I worked hand in hand with some of the finest and most talented organizers that I have ever met.

The IAF was invited into our area around 1982 by then Bishop of Brownsville, the Most Reverend John J. Fitzpatrick who was concerned with the economic inequalities he witnessed firsthand in the Rio Grande Valley. He understood that charitable giving was only a band aid approach to a bigger problem. Political decisions were being made by politicians that affected the lives of all residents, not just citizens, on both sides of the American-Mexican border.

The majority of his flock had no real influence in decisions being made that affected their families, their lives and their dreams for a better tomorrow. With the help of Father Armand Matthew, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate priest who actually interviewed organizers from several organizations for Bishop Fitzpatrick, the IAF was invited into our Diocese to study and examine the area for community organizing. The organizers, Ernie Cortes and Jim Drake spent an entire year doing one-on-one meetings with hundreds of parish and community members. They came to the conclusion that the area encompassing four counties and several cities could be organized and the new organization

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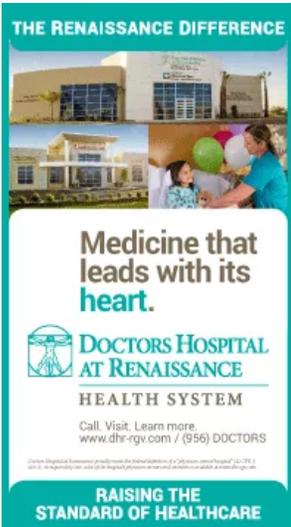


## LATEST TWEETS

was launched in 1983.

I remember our first action at the McAllen Civic Center – a gathering of 5,000 Catholics from approximately 60 parishes within the Diocese of Brownsville. Many priests came leading their flocks with much enthusiasm and excitement. It was unprecedented, it turned heads and it startled many of the powers-that-be who adopted a cautious approach unsure of what this might mean for them as elected officials. Texas Governor, Mark White attended, lending his influence and authority to this new actor in the polis.

Who was the leader of this auspicious group? How big were their numbers? What was their motivation? What did this mean for the status quo? VIF quickly drew concerns within their rank and file members as well. Not all clergy or lay people were comfortable with this whole notion of social justice and later the much touted “preferential option for the poor” explained in the Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching on the U.S. Economy promulgated by the United States Catholic Bishops. VIF was tasked by Bishop Fitzpatrick to teach this letter across the Diocese thereby educating the masses and assisting in the continued recruitment of leaders for VIF’s work. Shortly after our public appearance in McAllen, several of us were hand-picked to attend a ten-day training by IAF at their headquarters in Staten Island, New York. The training was so intense, it turned my notion of political movements on its head.



“There is no Chicano movement! There is no farmworker movement! There is no Raza Unida Party! Ernie Cortes shouted out during one of our first classes. We argued, we disagreed, we became angry and we challenged him at every point. But, his logic overwhelmed us and we eventually understood his point – if you organize around a single issue, a single leader, your cause dies the minute the single issue is resolved and/or the charismatic leader dies or falls from grace.

The IAF wisdom was that it was much better to organize in community with many leaders, to have several issues and to always focus on strengthening the organization by continuously building the leadership. Consensus decision-making was the best model for selecting the issues in any particular action. And we learned about picking “winnable issues” not issues that polarized or for which there was no agreement. We were “disorganized” in order to be “reorganized” into a new way of thinking and acting. It worked for me.

I returned home to my small community filled with an inner turmoil that no amount of prayer could quell. What did this all mean? What would I be expected to do for this organization? Some of the people I was mixing it up with were much better educated and prepared than I was. In my heart, I yearned for change. I had been fighting inequality since I was in elementary

school and had not achieved it. I yearned for respect and did not know how to earn it. I yearned for power and felt guilty for saying this out loud.

VIF became a sort of “university” for many of us. It taught us that power was not a dirty word. We learned that POWER in its truest sense – PODER in Spanish – simply meant TO BE ABLE. We learned about “politics” with a little “p”. The ability to speak for ourselves, to do for ourselves and if necessary for those who could not. We learned about the “iron rule,” which was: “Never do for others what they can do for themselves”. At the time I had recently graduated from Pan American University where had majored in political science and minored in communications. This University taught me many things which inspired my love for the political process and for public speaking. But my love for these processes was either as an actor – running for office, giving speeches or as a spectator – voting for my candidate, speaking and working for my candidate. It did not teach me about true empowerment which results from an educated populace which is organized and which acts as one voice on any given topic. It did not teach me that I could do for myself what I expected my political representatives to do for me.

On the other hand, VIF taught me some things that build on this academic foundation and fed my very soul. It inspired me to live my Christianity, beyond Sunday worship, beyond teaching catechism, beyond charity. It taught me that by living my Christianity, I became the living breathing Body of Christ here on earth, building His Kingdom, sharing the Good News, taking the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to a new level. We walked in the footsteps of the Apostles. We helped heal the sick (Indigent Health Plan passed through state legislature in 1985) and gave water to the thirsty (Basic Infrastructure in the Colonias in the 1980s and 90s) and we helped clothe the poor (Living Wage Initiative 2009) to name a few.

It was work that was taxing, all consuming and exhilarating all at the same time. The training continued “on the job”. Oftentimes, I found myself floundering in an important meeting and looking for direction to Jim Drake our organizer, only to find him staring right back at me as if to say, “What are you looking at me for? You’ve got this. Use your common sense.” It was brilliant, and the evaluation after the meeting was even more important than the action itself. For you see, it never was primarily about the issue at hand, it was about teaching us, the leaders in formation, how to think and act for ourselves in the heat of battle. It was about letting us find our voices. Never do for others what they can do for themselves! A violation of the iron rule was the only “unforgivable sin” in the IAF.

*Editor’s Note: The Rio Grande Guardian is running a series of guest columns and stories about Valley Interfaith to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas. Ofelia de los Santos’ next installment in this series will be titled: “How Tom Pauken helped build Valley Interfaith.”*

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Caryn Schenewerk, senior counsel for @SpaceX, discusses a rocket-launching facility being built at Boca Chica beach. @RGVPublicRadio 7:41.

5h

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Caryn Schenewerk of SpaceX praises @utrgv's STARGATE project at Texas House hearing in Brownsville.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ofelia de los Santos** is a retired attorney from Edinburg, Texas, working for the Catholic Diocese of Brownsville as Director of Jail/Prison Ministry and Immigration Services. Email: delossantosofelia36@yahoo.com

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