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by Jerry Frank

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<http://riograndeguardian.com/frank-valley-interfaiths-living-wage-campaign-part-one/>



In his great encyclical on Human Labor, St. John Paul II wrote: "It is the government's business to support just work relationships as the foundation of a Christian society. A just

wage is the key to economic justice.”

Challenged by the Pope’s words and the plight of so many Rio Grande Valley parents having to work two to three jobs and seeing their families break under the financial pressure and its consequences, including addiction, domestic violence and gangs, Valley Interfaith began its living wage campaign in 1997.

Our research confirmed that the Valley’s economy was to a great extent a public sector economy in which school districts, counties and cities were the largest employers. Food service workers, grounds keepers and bus drivers were earning the \$5.15 per hour minimum wage or just above. Our goal then was to ensure that no worker in the Valley school districts, counties and cities earned less than \$7.50 per hour.

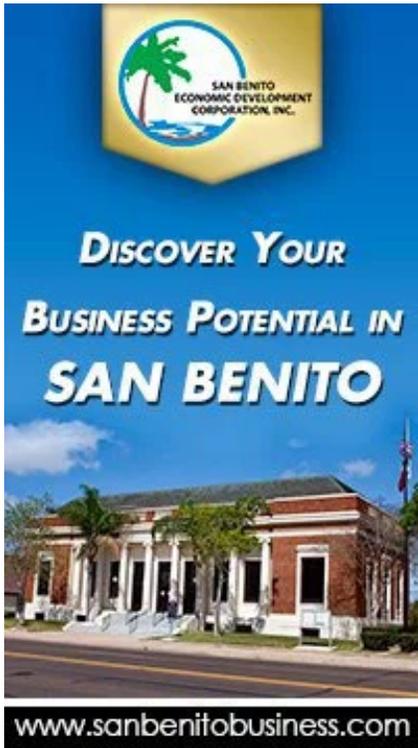
Sometimes we mobilized large numbers of people to attend school board and commissioners’ meetings and at other times small group negotiations worked. After a few wins, Valley Interfaith began to see a domino effect – school districts were forced to raise wages in order to compete for good workers. Our campaign quickly became the largest living wage campaign in the nation.

Some of the battles to raise base wages of workers were intense, but none more than the 1999 clash with Hidalgo County Commissioners Court. VIF’s proposal to raise the county’s minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour to \$ 7.50 passed by a single vote. Last year (2015), the court raised its minimum base to \$10.10 per hour.

In a March 3, 2002 story on the effects of the living wage campaign in the Valley, the *San Antonio Express-News* interviewed Yolanda Alvarado, a 42-year-old mother of two who was working in a McAllen school cafeteria. Her wages went from \$5.15 to \$8.06 an hour as a result of the VIF living wage campaign. She remarked “This has made a big difference in my family’s life. We can now afford some of the basics. Before, it was really hard to make ends meet. Capitalism works. What I’ve learned is there is a lot of dignity in not being paid poverty wages.”

An economics professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr. Paul Osterman, spent three months in the summer of 2000 surveying and researching the results of VIF’s living wage campaign. He reported that the campaign had increased the salaries of 7,200 workers by an average of \$.87 per hour or \$1,128 annually. He further concluded that the salary increases represented a small fraction of budget costs and did not cause a reduction in jobs. Administrators and supervisors told Osterman that the wage increases resulted in less absenteeism and turnover in jobs and greatly reduced retraining costs. They actually saved money.

Since Osterman’s study, the living wage campaign has considerably accelerated. Living wage policies have been adopted by school districts in McAllen, PSJA, La Joya, Mission, Edinburg, Weslaco, Hidalgo, Sharyland, Mercedes, Donna, Edcouch/Elsa, Brownsville and Port Isabel, by both of the county commissioners’ courts in Hidalgo and Cameron counties, by the cities of McAllen, Pharr, Edinburg, Mission, San Juan, Weslaco, Hidalgo, Mercedes



and Brownsville and by Region One, South Texas College, UT-Pan American, Texas Southmost College and UT-Brownsville.

Even the economic development corporations are now restricting incentives and tax and utility deferrals only to corporations which pay appropriate base wages to their employees.

In 2007, a new course of action in VIF's living wage campaign was launched in Brownsville and Cameron County, which will be the subject of Part Two of this editorial.

Editor's Note: Part Two of the Rev. Jerry Frank's editorial on Valley Interfaith Living Wage Campaign will be published on Tuesday, April 12, 2016. In the main image accompanying this guest column, MIT Professor Paul Osterman is pictured at a Valley Interfaith rally for the

group's Living Wage campaign in 2000.



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