



*Photo by Kelsey Bell, 2006*

*Building Community and Awareness  
of Rights among the Latin American  
Immigrant Population in Massachusetts*

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

According to the United States Census in 2000, 31.1 million people living in the United States are immigrants (Marcelli and Granberry 2006: 25). Maria Elena Letona, Executive Director of Centro Presente, estimates that 11 million of these are undocumented. (Letona, 10.11.2006) Latinos, used in this report to mean individuals from Latin America now living in the United States, make up a substantial proportion of the immigrant population and have experienced immense growth in the last decade. Between 1990 and 2000, Latinos grew more in absolute numbers than any other ethnic group in New England and New York, reaching almost 770,000 in New England alone in the year 2000. (Marcelli and Granberry 2006: 29)

In the midst of these demographic changes is a stalemate between the United States House and Senate on comprehensive immigration reform. Federal bills such as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (1996), the USA Patriot Act (2001) and the Real ID Act (2005) have viewed immigrants as a threat to the United States. (Centro Presente newsletter 2006) The Sensenbrenner Bill, formally known as the “Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005” (H.R. 4437), which broadens the definition of smuggling, requires retroactive employer verification and complicates immigrants’ legalization process, has been approved by the House of Representatives and is currently working its way through the Senate. These laws, and bills currently on the table in Congress, do not embody the just treatment that the immigrant movement has been calling for. While provisions do exist for Salvador (American Baptist Church Agreement; Temporary Protective Status), Guatemalan (American Baptist Church Agreement), Honduran (Temporary Protective Status) and Nicaraguan (Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act) immigrants, many immigrants from these countries do not qualify for such provisions and many other nationalities are not included.

Nevertheless, the Latin American immigrant population in Somerville/Cambridge continues to grow. These Latinos come from various countries and various backgrounds, primarily “por el propósito de mejorar el sistema de vida de mi familia” [with the goal of improving the quality of life of my family], as Victor

described. (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006) Due to the diverse nature of Latin American immigrant, there are great differences in time of arrival among this population; some individuals are new arrivals, some persons settling, and others have been established since the 1980s. Many of those who came in the 1980s left behind wars which made physical and economic security extremely difficult to achieve. Most of the recent immigrants come from countries where both employment and salaries are too low to sufficiently support a family. This combination of diverse immigration experiences and immigration policies means that the majority of Latinos have encountered the checkerboard of US immigration policies previously discussed, which has made it difficult or impossible for many of them to regularize their status. In the midst of their undertaking in the United States, most Latino immigrants face discomfort caused by such ambiguity in immigration status, discrimination, language barriers, separation from family and loss of community.

The needs of this immigrant population reflect those expressed by other immigrant or low-income populations in the greater Boston area. Sociologist Miren Uriarte suggests that many of these individuals have been denied access to many standard services. As “the needs are broad... [t]he reality of exclusion in the face of urgent need has led the community, again and again, to develop its own service organizations” (Uriarte 1993: 20-21).

There are an ensuing number of immigrant organizations working to unite these individuals and facilitate their integration into the city. Founded to serve immigrant needs, and many of them originally immigrant-formed networks, these groups are today formal organizations and make up many of the area’s important community resources. Organizations like The Center of Refugees from El Salvador (CORES), Centro Presente, Concilio Hispano and The Welcome Project offer services to the immigrant population, ranging from support programs and community building, to advocacy and legal services. Additionally, there are other organizations whose work by nature entails a strong relationship with the Latino community. The Somerville Community Corporation, Somerville Immigrant Service Providers Group/Health and the Parent Resource Network are just three examples among Somerville non-profit organizations. These organizations will not be discussed here

however, because they are quite diverse and many of them only peripherally touch on the issues addressed in this report

CORES was founded in 1988 by husband and wife Marcos and Maria Elena Garcia in collaboration with a number of other Salvadorans. Today run principally by Marcos Garcia, CORES is a service-provider and grassroots organization which offers immigration and legal assistance, community development and English classes. Its mission, Garcia describes, is to further empower the Latino community, especially the Salvadoran refugee community. In the midst of the focus placed on the safety of the U.S. and on the dichotomy between law-abiding citizens and everyone else (all of whom inherently pose a threat to American security) since September 11, 2001, Garcia has felt the need to focus the work of CORES on issues of community and unity. (Lizeray 2002: 38)

Concilio Hispano is the oldest Latin American immigration organization in the area. It was created among the Latino, primarily Puerto Rican, community of Cambridge in 1969 as a socio-cultural based organization. However the changes in the Latino population and environment over the past decade have greatly transformed Concilio Hispano. The Latino community has become more diverse and decentralized, and so have their needs. The federal government, which now funds ninety percent of the organization's programming, requires high levels of professionalism in staffing and accounting. As a result, Concilio Hispano has transformed itself into a more formal, need-based service organization. (Keogh and Flahive 2002: 3-6) Its mission statement reads "Concilio Hispano is dedicated to social change, economic health and self-sufficiency, and the promotion of democratic participation. We are committed to fostering the culture, self-identify and advancement of Latinos and other minorities in the greater Boston area." Encompassing three offices, in Somerville, Cambridge and Chelsea, the organization's programs include education, information and referral, interpretation and translation, and a focus on health, family and youth. Concilio Hispano prides itself on being the sole organization in Somerville where Latinos are the primary providers of services for other Latinos, although it recognizes that similar organizations do exist in Cambridge (Concilio Hispano home page).

The Welcome Project serves the most diverse population of these organizations, owing much to its roots in the Mystic Public Housing Development of Somerville. In 1987, amidst inter-racial violence and conflict arising from the desegregation of public housing at the time, a group of tenants and community members founded the Welcome Project. (Nicholson and Van Nieuwenhuizen 2004: 9, 29) They aimed to truly welcome the newly arriving, non-white residents to the housing development and combat the discrimination and harassment many of them were experiencing. Primarily serving immigrants from Central America, Haiti and Vietnam, the organization has two staff members at the moment, and focuses on community organizing, tenant advocacy and education/self development.

It would be impossible in one semester to study all of these organizations in any substantial way. Therefore I have chosen to focus on Centro Presente, with which I was already familiar from teaching English there over the previous summer, to demonstrate the role of this sort of organization in the greater Somerville area.

In the midst of a large immigrant presence and the current political environment, Centro Presente holds tightly to its organizing vision of Latino empowerment. Through its membership structure, the various classes offered, and the legal services provided, Centro works with the Latin American immigrant population so that they may be significantly involved in their new society. Each of these programs and mechanisms serve to build community among the Latino population, which may not necessarily be considered a community in the sense of the word that entails unity.

Centro Presente is a member-driven “Latin American immigrant organization dedicated to the self-determination and self-sufficiency of the Latin American immigrant community of Massachusetts” which prides itself on giving voice to Massachusetts’ Latinos, or Latin American immigrants, within the organization itself, by being Latino run. “Through the integration of community organizing, leadership development and basic services, Centro Presente strives to give our members voice and build community power.” (Centro Presente brochure 2006) Based in Cambridge’s Central Square neighborhood, this organization which is

celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary provides services to 3,000 people each year and has 1,200 members. (Letona, 10.11.2006)

A study of Centro Presente and the expectations of the immigrants it serves can shed light onto the needs of this population and the roles which such organizations play. A look into the structure of Centro may elucidate a model for other Latin American immigrant organizations which stresses immigrant leadership and community building in the midst of service provision. Finally, discussions with Latinos may illuminate the gaps that remain to be filled by governmental and nongovernmental organization.



## ***METHODOLOGY***



*Photo by Valerie Schenkman, 2006*

As part of the Urban Borderlands class at Tufts University, this research was conducted over two and a half months. Having volunteered as an English teacher at Cento Presente the previous summer and having enjoyed conducting a month-long evaluation of a community based organization the previous year, I hoped to do something similar, and at the same time focus this research with Cento Presente in a way that would be most beneficial to them. As the organization is planning to move to Somerville in the coming year, the research would ideally focus on Latino immigrants in Somerville who were involved in Cento Presente. The final report would serve primarily to educate Somerville residents and officials about the organization, the Latinos in their midst, and their expressed needs, but also to educate Cento specifically about their role in the lives of this group of Latinos. Working through Cento Presente, the staff and I had difficulty obtaining interviews from Somerville-based individuals in this population, so the focus of the project was broadened to include all Latinos who use the organization's services, regardless of where they live.

I began my research with a planning meeting with staff at Cento Presente and then a review of literature on or by Cento Presente. The remainder of my research was a combination of structured and unstructured interviews with individuals associated with Cento Presente. I conducted:

- 5 Interviews (structured) with Centro Presente students and clients
- 3 Interviews (structured and unstructured) with Centro Presente staff
- 1 observation of a working group at Centro Presente
- 1 observation of a Centro Presente celebration
- 2 visits to Centro Presente with Tufts University Exposure photographers

My narrators were a combination of my former English students, current classmates of these students, and others at Centro who the staff contacted on my behalf. The interviews took place in Centro Presente when possible or in a nearby cafe. Interviews were conducted in the primarily language of the narrators, which was Spanish for all but one person who spoke English fluently.

The relationships I have with the narrators do create a potential bias in my research. To some individuals, I was their former teacher, and for others I was working with the staff. This may have particularly hindered people's answers to questions regarding their perceptions of Centro Presente's weaknesses.

I am neither Latina nor an immigrant, so my understanding of these experiences comes from my relationships with Latinos and discussions with these individuals. I have attempted here to relate their stories and opinions to the best of my ability and I apologize for any mistakes I have made in this report or errors in my analysis. They are not intentional and I am solely responsible for them.

### *Notes on the Report*

In the spirit and example set by Centro Presente as it strives to build a community based on egalitarianism, I have referred to all narrators by their first name throughout my research and this report. Omission of last names of all students and clients at Centro Presente also serves to protect the identity of these individuals.

This report focuses primarily on first generation immigrants from Latin America to the United States. The term "Latino" embodies this population, but according to some definitions may include a wider population such as second generation immigrants. The phrase "Latin American immigrants" is cumbersome and not widely used to refer to the first generation, however. Therefore, I have elected to

use the term “Latino” in reference to these first generation immigrants from Latin America.

## ***NARRATORS***

**Carlos** – From San Vicente, El Salvador, Carlos has been a community organizer at Centro Presente for the past two years. He currently heads the Worker’s Rights team, striving to educate and mobilize workers as well as establish an effective intake system for workers’ rights grievances.

**Elsy** – Elsy held a managing position in a Salvadoran company until she came to the United States two years ago to live with her husband. Her two daughters, however, have remained in El Salvador because they are over eighteen and thus cannot come to the United States under their parents’ visas. Elsy recently developed arthritis, which is hindering her ability to continue the work she does cleaning. She now lives in Chelsea and is a member of Centro Presente, studying English in order to obtain a job that is less physically demanding. She is also part of the Adult Education Committee and a volunteer teacher for Centro Presente’s literacy classes.

**Maria de la Luz** – Hoping to put some distance between herself and a past romantic relationship, Luz left Vera Cruz, Mexico and came to the United States just under a year ago. She is in her late twenties, lives with her cousin and plans on staying for another few years. In Mexico, Luz received her bachelor’s degree in administration and worked in this field for a number of years. After arriving in Somerville, she was placed by an employment agency at Stacy’s factory, doing very physically demanding work. The agency just recently offered her a different position, this one an office position, which she is very happy to take. Luz goes to Centro Presente to improve her English, which is not only beneficial at work but also enjoyable for her to learn.

**Rafael\*** – Rafael grew up in a farming family in Chalatenango, El Salvador, attending school through fifth grade and helping his family in their farming until he came to the United States. He followed his four siblings here in 1993, searching for a better paying job and higher standard of living. In his early thirties, Rafael now holds

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\* Name changed at narrator’s request

various jobs, including gardening, construction and cooking, and works more than 10 hours a day. He began classes at Centro Presente over the summer because he finally had the time.

**Rosa** – Rosa came to the United States from El Salvador in 1990 with two of her three children, in search of work. Over these past sixteen years she has held the same job at a laundry company and has participated in organizing the company’s workers into a union to demand rights and an improvement in work conditions. Rosa first went to Centro Presente a few years ago for legal services. She has since had the opportunity to participate in a literacy class. Rosa lives in Somerville and is now a member of Centro Presente and involved in the Educación y Acción (Education and Action) workgroup, organizing the Latino community.

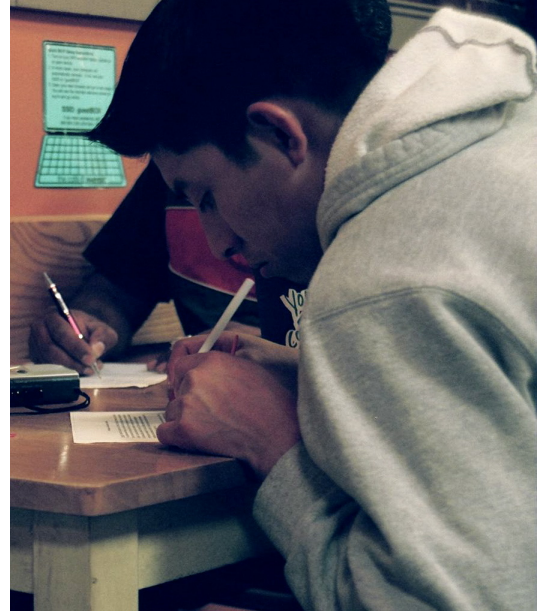
**Victor** – In San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Víctor was a supervisor in the inventory department of a clothing factory. In 2001, however, he decided to come to the United States, following his wife to improve his family’s standard of living. Now 38 and living in Jamaica Plain, Victor has two of his three children here and works in construction. He is currently in an English class at Centro Presente and plans to become a member.



*Photo by Valerie Schenkman, 2006*

*(Victor, top right, with interviewer, left, and Wilson, bottom right; during an interview)*

**Wilson** – In his early 20s and living in Dorchester, Wilson came to the United States after he received his degree almost two years ago. Though he has followed his one brother, three uncles and five cousins’ footsteps in coming to the United States, he plans on returning home to Jalapa, Guatemala within the next few years. This is what his parents very much want and also what he wants, as he hopes to continue his education and study either finance or teaching. Wilson works at a bakery and is currently in his second session of English classes.



*Photo by Valerie Schenkman, 2006*



*Photo by Kelsey Bell, 2006*

**Zuleika** – Moving from Puerto Rico to the United States as a baby, Zuleika grew up in New Hampshire and attended Emmanuel College. As part of her studies at Emmanuel she volunteered as a para-legal at Centro Presente. Zuleika has stayed on at the organization since graduating in 2005 and is now the Adult Education Program Coordinator, managing literacy, citizenship and English classes. She lives in Jamaica Plain.

## ***HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY***

Latin American immigration became highly visible in the Somerville/Cambridge area in the first half of the 1980s. This occurrence was primarily caused by the civil war in El Salvador, a conflict which was a culmination of long-standing dissatisfaction with economic inequalities, authoritative dictatorships and local unrest and which raged until 1992. The civil war itself led to greater unrest and insecurity in El Salvador, and coincided with similar conditions throughout much of Central America. The insecurity caused by this conflict was one of the central reasons detailed by Rosa for her bringing her family to the United States.

Que nosotros no teníamos, este ... una la libertad de nada, teníamos mucho miedo, que aparecían muertos por aquí, muertos por allá, durante las noches venían a tirar. La vida de nosotros no era fácil en mi país. Lo que nos abatía, pues, la pobreza también. Por eso yo he viajado pa- de mi país par' acá.

[We did not have, this... any freedom, we were very scared, dead individuals appeared here and there, during the nights then came to shoot. The life we had was not easy in my country. What pulled us down, well, poverty too. For this I have traveled from my country to here.] (Rosa, 11.04.06)

The poverty that Rosa expressed was both cause and result of the war, and has continued to be one of the main driving factors for migration from Central America to the United States. She described how “no tenia yo trabajo y lo mas diffeil para mi era cuando se llegaba la hora de comida y no tenia que darle de comer a mis hijos, y entonces, y la pobreza por cada día mas avanzada.” [I did not have a job and the most difficult for me was when mealtime came and I did not have anything to give to my children to eat, and the poverty each day became more advanced.] (Rosa, 11.04.06)

Such dire poverty was not apparent with each of the other narrators, all of whom have immigrated since the end of the wars. However, these individuals did describe the low income and limited employment opportunities that continue to pervade their countries as their reasons for immigrating. Elsy's husband came to the United States to earn the money needed to treat a family member's illness; Elsy then followed her husband here. Rafael came to earn a better salary than his family was able to earn by farming. For Victor, even the management position he held in the

industrial capital of Honduras was not sufficient to support his family in the way he hoped to.

For these individuals, whether their salary is used for family members back home, their family here, or themselves, they came because “de lo que estaba dando allá, no podría realizar todo lo que, osea, los planes que realmente me he propuesto hacer.” [From what I was doing there, I was not able to accomplish that that- the plans that I had planned to do.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.06)



## ***THE IMMIGRANT POPULATION and THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THEY LIVE***

### ***Immigrant Experiences***

Stories of immigrants in the United States working two low-wage jobs in order to earn a living wage are common. What remains hidden behind this reality, however, is a complex world of downward movement, discrimination and struggle, mixed with feelings of gratitude for the opportunity these immigrants have.

No matter how, when or why immigrants come to the United States, one of the first main hurdles they face is immigration status. For those who are eligible for federal provisions, such as American Baptist Church Agreement, Temporary Protective Status and Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, papers often need to be filed annually. For individuals aiming to be, or that are on the path to citizenship, separate forms must be filed and a long wait must be endured. Many of the Latino immigrants who are undocumented go through their daily activities in fear of being caught and deported. Among those immigrants with some sort of documentation, there is still much ambiguity over status and rights and thus a similar fear sometimes pervades.

Language is another vivid component of the immigration experience and serves as a major barrier to Latinos' integration into the cities of Somerville and Cambridge. Victor described the large Spanish speaking population in the greater Boston area as being both an advantage and a disadvantage to recent Spanish-speaking immigrants. It is an advantage in that Spanish speakers can be easily found in the instance that a quick translation is needed or an individual needs directions, for example. Yet because of this crutch, Latinos may not have a strong incentive to study English, and in fact many of them, such as Rafael, go years without doing so. However, to carry out fuller conversations and participate actively in the English-speaking community, a working knowledge of English is necessary. Unfortunately many Spanish speaking immigrants are hindered in the latter because they are enabled by the former. Wilson and Victor, both in the level two English class at Centro Presente, hope that by learning English they will be able to converse with more

people. For Wilson, this means meeting more women; for Victor, it means communicating well with his children, who speak English more fluently than Spanish, and with his children's school teachers. (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.06)

Many of the individuals I interviewed have immigrated to the United States in order to support their families. At the same time, much of the burden of immigration is borne by the family. For Rosa, being in the United States “es la única alternativa de luchar, trabajar, y salir adelante con nuestra familia y hijos” [is the only alternative to fight, work and move forward with our family and children]. (Rosa, 11.04.06) Two of her three sons are living here with her, but one is still in El Salvador. Rosa has seen neither him nor her mother since she immigrated sixteen years ago and greatly laments this loss, but she sees it as the price of providing for her family. Luckily, phone and internet technologies have facilitated continued communication among the family. Rafael's immigration away from his family has had a different sort of impact. In El Salvador Rafael was very involved in the church and attended services regularly. Now that he lives alone here in the United States, he does not have anyone to go to church with. For this among other reasons, he does not go at all.

Discrimination is also an important component to Latinos' lives, but since this is particularly a problem in the workplace, this will be further discussed in the section on work experiences.

Many immigrants do not come to the United States expecting and prepared for this pervasive fear, long-term distance from family and discrimination. Rosa recounted the illusions that many immigrants possess:

A veces los equivocamos cuando ... persona llegan a nuestros países que los cuentan llevando contando cosas que “que bonito”, que “aquí no se sufre”, aunque es verdad, nunca sufre, entre un trabajo no nos sufre, pero hay muchos compromisos que hay que cumplir, en este país. Y llevar todo esto proceso de .... de conoc-uno va conociendo un día mas en este país, porque diferentes leyes con diferentes culturas, diferentes cosas, uno va aprendiendo.

[Sometimes they misinform us when, when people arrive to our countries and carry on saying things such as “how beautiful”, that “here no one suffers”, although it is true, no one suffers, with a job no one suffers, but there are many promises that one has to keep, in this country. And continue with this entire process of ... of know- one comes to understand things with each day in this country, because

different laws with different cultures, different things, one learns.]  
(Rosa, 11.04.06)

Despite the shattered illusions and struggles these Latinos have experienced in the United States, they have both a need and a desire to be here. They have to adapt to the reality of the life they encounter in the United States, and they do. “Se va adaptando uno, poco a poco se va adaptando...tengo que seguir adelante.” [One adapts, little by little one adapts . . . I have to continue forward.] (Rafael, 10.30.06) Sometimes these individuals continue forward to the point that after a number of years they truly feel part of the country. Rafael explains that, while in El Salvador, he considers himself Salvadoran, in the United States “aquí es otra cosa. Porque estas aquí no sabemos si se va a ir o se va a quedar. Somos americanos.” [here is different. Because you are here we do not know if you are going to go or going to stay. We are Americans.] (Rafael, 10.30.06)

### ***Work Experiences***

In Mexico, Luz worked in administration. She spent her first year here working in a chip factory, carrying heavy boxes in the midst of intense heat for eight hours a day. She arrived home crying after the first day of work because she never believed that she would do work like this, enduring such physical pain. Wilson was a student. He works in a bakery. Victor was a business supervisor and now works in construction. Rafael was a farmer in El Salvador, and has spent many of his thirteen years in the United States leaving the house at 5 am for his first job and returning home at 1 am that night from his second job. While individuals such as Elsy have gained a stable job since coming to the United States, most others have exchanged a moderate job and schedule for a less-skilled, higher paying one.

These changes are due to a number of different factors which together formidably impact their job experience. Immigration status is often used by employers to deny rights ensured to other workers, such as overtime pay. For one narrator who wished to remain anonymous, her employer refused to provide the workers with a way to heat their food, and so they placed it under the machines from

which heat radiated or resigned to eat it cold. By exploiting individuals' immigration status and their uncertainty regarding their rights, employers can take advantage of immigrants. Staff members at Centro Presente describe this as a common occurrence.

Companies that do hire immigrants without proper work visas often do so through a contracting employment agency. Luz noted the disparate treatment given to the workers hired through the contracting agency as compared to those hired directly by the company. Because the company knows that the former individuals do not have the papers to work, "es muy diferente. O sea lo-lo-los hacen menos a las personas. Como si fuéramos animales. Y cosas que no son. O sea todos somos humanos y todos deseamos el mismo trato. Esto es lo que no me ha gustado, aquí." [it is very different. Better said, they degrade people. As if we were animals. And things that they aren't. I mean all of us are humans and we all deserve the same treatment. This is what I have not liked, here.] (Luz, 11.04.06)

For Victor, the key to Latinos' difficulty with advancing in the workplace is English. A poor level of English skills precludes many individuals from this advancement.

[E]sta es la clave, el inglés. Porque si uno se prepara, si uno-aparte de estudiar el inglés, aprenderlo- después si uno la aprende, uno entra a...como...con algo para seguir adelante, entonces allí uno puede...puede aspirar a trabajar en cualquier lugar, en un banco o trabajar como en una oficina ... y tener un horario normal entrar a las 8 por la mañana, salir a las 6 de la tarde, tener su carro, tener sus hijos, puede llevarlo al parque, y ... y visitar de una tarde soleada, y ver cuando el sol se oculta, pero ... pero relax, descansando.

[This is the key, English. Because if one prepares, if one- apart from studying English, learns it- after if one learn the language, one enters ... with something with which to move forward, then from there one can... can aspire to a job in any place, in a bank or work in an office... have a normal schedule entering at 8 in the morning, leaving at six in the evening, have his car, have his children, he can bring them to the park and ... and enjoy a sunny afternoon and see when the sun sets, but ... but relax, relaxing.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.06)

English is a skill set required in most upper-level positions, and those not proficient in it can be severely hindered in moving toward such positions.

Victor also expressed a struggle that many Latinos experience through the workplace. For him it is a struggle of will, to tolerate a lifestyle that does not permit

him time to take his children to the park. For others like the woman denied an oven by her employer, it is a struggle to fight for one's rights, possibly unity and "tener que andar luchando." [having to continue on fighting.] For Luz, this is a struggle to manage the work one has been given, learn the new skills required and move upward. Work allows an individual to take advantage of "el pais de las oportunidades" [the country of opportunities] and better support one's self and one's family (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.06). The struggle may even be so much a part of the experience as to be an inseparable part of it.

### ***US Political Climate***

All but one person told me that they did not know much about politics and that they did not understand politics, for which reasons they could not comment on politics. This was in response to a question I posed to each narrator on the political climate toward immigrants in the United States. Rosa explicitly said "yo siento que la política no se puede entender." [I feel that politics cannot be understood.] (Rosa, 11.04.06) Other individuals were slightly more country-specific, such as Victor and Wilson who explained that they don't understand the American political system and the role of the various local officials.

Much of this perception may be explained by these individuals' past experiences with politics. Those who during the wars in Central America were of the age to participate politically may have experienced a high degree of political repression in their home countries. These individuals most likely witnessed an incredible extent of abuse of power by politicians and a limitation on the voicing of one's own opinion and voting. Political repression was greatest in rural areas of El Salvador, where a number of narrators are from. (Molina 2004: 11) Nevertheless, this perceived lack of understanding of the political system and ability to effect is significant for organizations such as Centro Presente which organize to address the political environment and specific policies. Furthermore, immigrants' abilities to know and defend their rights will always be hindered as long as immigrants feel that politics cannot be influenced, no matter what the work of organizations on the issue.

Rafael took issue with current United States immigration policy and said that the present environment, which conflates the issue of illegal immigration with terrorism, is not acceptable because the majority of immigrants come to work rather than to do harm. Victor, however, expressed an understanding of the position in which the United States government and citizens find themselves. Government representatives need to be focused on the security of the country, he explained,

eso es algo que uno tiene que respetarlo porque el país es de ellos y ellos son los que deciden y son los que siempre han decidido. O sea, uno quisiera que todo fuera lo mejor para uno, y... en realidad tenemos que estar agradecidos porque hay muchas cosas, hay muchas cosas que realizan a favor de nosotros. ... Y tenemos que entender que este país, mientras que no tengamos unos documentos, no es de nosotros.

[that is something that one has to respect because the country is theirs and they are the ones who decide and they are the ones who have always decided. I mean, one would like for everything to be the best for oneself, and... in reality we have to be thankful because there are many things, many things that they do for us.] (Rafael, 10.30.2006)

In this midst of this appreciation for what the United States offers its workers and the resignation of voice and power because the United States is not their country, each individual spoke about the devaluation of immigrants, Wilson said that “a mi me gustaría que tuviéramos los mismos valores, los mismos derechos.” [I would like for us to have the same value, the same rights.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006) While individuals may not claim to understand American politics, they have clearly felt a negative political climate toward immigrants, particularly undocumented ones.

### ***Community***

The consensus among the Latino staff members at Centro Presente and those who visit Centro for classes or services is that very little community exists among the Latino population in the greater Boston area. Zuleika sees the population as very diverse and unfortunately often very segregated. She spoke of division by nationality within the Latino community. Victor however, sees this diversity within Latinos as positive. He defined community as “diversas costumbres, diversas religiones, diversas- no se- folklores” [diverse customs, diverse religious, diverse- I don't know-

folklores] coming together and pointed to the resulting opportunity to enjoy the many traditions and cultures of Latin America. (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006)

When Victor went on to define community as a group of united individuals, however, he no longer saw so much of this community.

Es así, hay una comunidad porque alguien dice “oh, en Chelsea esta la comunidad Hispana, la comunidad Hondureña.” Porque? Porque viven muchos Hondureños allí. O... la comunidad de Guatemala, porque allí vive muchos de Guatemala, pero se forma esa comunidad no porque son unidos... en realidad la comunidad se forma porque todo el mundo se da cuenta ‘hay alguien de Honduras’... Se forma la comunidad ya por el conocimiento de que allí vive gente del país.

[It is like this, there is a community because someone says “oh, in Chelsea there is the Hispanic community, the Honduran community.” Why? Because many Hondurans live there. Or... the Guatemalan community, because many people from Guatemala live there, but they form this community not because they are united... in reality the community forms because everyone realizes ‘there is someone from Honduras’.... The community is formed by the knowledge that people from a country live there.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006)

While the community is based more in cultural roots and geographical trends, this is not to say that a united community cannot grow out of such a basis. It is to say that up to this point not much of a united community *has* grown out of it. Additional hindrances are time and fear. Those immigrants who work two and three jobs experience both a lack of time and a lack of energy at the end of the day. Giving up what little time one has with one’s family is a precious trade-off for community unity. Undocumented immigrants are often hindered in organizing and participating in community events out of fear of being noticed by authorities and deported.

A recent strengthening of the Latino community has been noticed by a few individuals. This past spring, with the marches and rallying for immigrant rights, a strong community was visible. As Zuleika explained, this community was brought together because people were noticing similar struggles and realizing that they are much stronger together than separate. “I think something was really humanized, so that people realized that, you know, they were brothers and sisters in the struggle, and not opposites.” (Zuleika, 11.20.06) Though the community shows signs of growth

and a movement toward unity, there was little to be said about any unity existing today.

### ***Immigrant Population's Concerns & Needs***

In looking to match the expressed needs of the Latino population with the work of Centro Presente, I questioned each narrator on what he or she perceived as the concerns of the Latino community. Responses ranged from needs that must be met at the individual level to those at the society level. All reflected the stories and circumstances they had described to me throughout the interviews.

#### *English skills*

English skills are needed for mobility within the workplace and greater participation in United States society. Zuleika explains that “there’s a difference between ‘assimilate’ and ‘integrate’ and I think that [Latinos] really want to be a part of this society. . . politically, socially.” (Zuleika, 9.18.06) Yet when these individuals do not speak the official language, being a vocal part of this society can be difficult. Furthermore, until immigrants learn English, they need “a space where their voice can be heard.” (Zuleika 9.18.06)

#### *Rights*

Narrators expressed a need for protection of the rights they have and education on these rights. They hoped that employers and others would respect their rights to a greater degree. They also desired additional rights, which though never explicitly defined, would bring them closer to the rights that more established individuals, such as legal residents and citizens, have.

#### *Legal assistance*

Legal status serves as a foundation for addressing injustices and denial of rights, such as those endured by this population as a result of civil war, economic CRAP, etc. Legal assistance allows immigrants to obtain the legal permission necessary to engage with American society to a greater degree. It also provides the



documentation necessary for advancing in areas of education and the work force, among others.

*Support by the greater United States society*

For Wilson, “A mi me gustaría que, que la gente de aquí, que vive aquí, que apoyaría a la gente Hispana. Eso me gustaría mi, que tuviera, que tengamos los mismos derechos como ellos.” [I would like that, that the people from here, that live here, that they support the Hispanic population. I would like, that we could have, that we have the same rights as them.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006)

Victor also mentioned the need for health care. He focused on the importance of health care for children and the importance of children as the future of the community. This likely reflects his position as a father of two young children.

Each narrator expressed the need for Latinos, themselves included, to unite around these aforementioned issues of concern. For Rosa, there is a visible need “ser nosotros unidos. Y luchar.” [for us to be united. And fight.] (Rosa, 11.04.06) She explains that human beings have always struggled and always had to overcome issues facing them in order to move forward. The issues included in this list are threads apparent in each narrator’s experiences and may therefore serve to elucidate a program for Latin American immigrant organizations and Latinos in their struggle.

## ***CENTRO PRESENTE***

### ***Centro Presente Overview***

Centro Presente is located two blocks off Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square. Sharing a tall brick building with other organizations, the building's front entrance has a painting of flowers posted on a fence, a countryside landscape mural on the adjacent wall, and the words "Wake Up" crudely scratched into the glass on the front door. Up a flight of stairs one sees a colorful, hand painted "Centro Presente" sign and a smaller "United Way" sign directly below it, both straight ahead and left of the double doors leading into Centro. Upon turning the corner, one enters a single hallway, with white walls and a barrage of colorful paintings, posters and flyers. One painting, created by Centro's youth art program, takes up almost half of one wall. Opposite this is a table covered in stacks of newspapers, Centro Presente newsletters and pertinent magazines, almost all in both Spanish and English versions. The rest of the wall is spotted with posters such as two that read "Grito de los excluidos: movilización continental 2004" ["Yell of the Excluded: Continental Mobilization 2004"] and "Razones para ser miembro" ["Reasons to be a Member"]. The hallway is lined with chairs, often filled with visitors and those waiting for classes and meetings to begin. Among all of this are posters filled with photographs of Centro's recent activities, including the "Keep Our Families Together" rally in Cambridge, as part of the "Keep Our Families Together" national campaign, and the graduation of the summer English classes. Off to the left and right are classrooms, semi-partitioned offices and the reception, all filled with Latin American artwork and posters advocating activism. The staff is primarily Latina women, both Spanish and English are heard through the halls and phone messages and posted announcements are mostly bilingual.

Centro Presente was founded in its current location in Cambridge, MA twenty-five years ago by Sister Rose Marie Cummins, with the assistance of Dan Kesselbrenner, a US lawyer working in the social justice movement. Having participated in a mission to Puerto Rico, Cummins returned to work at St. Mary's Parish in Cambridge, MA. During this time, Cummins became aware of the Latino

community's need for a centralized assistance organization, particularly as related to the ongoing wars in Central America. She decided to found exactly that. She brought to this new organization her belief in Liberation Theology and her experience on a mission to Puerto Rico. Liberation Theology stresses the relationship between Roman Catholic theology and political activism, interpreting the Christian faith through poor individuals' suffering, struggle and hope, and critiquing society through the eyes of the poor. Puerto Rico had given her a greater appreciation for the hardships endured by Latin Americans. (Haas 2004: 2-9) She says,

I had been working as an outreach worker in the Latino community in [the St. Mary's Parish in Boston] and one of the things that was happening was that a number of Guatemalans and mostly, at that time it was Salvadorans began to come into the country and I just found that there was no place – no centralized place – where people could get help, the kind of help that they needed. Nobody was legal at that point, everybody was undocumented and that made lots of problems by way of getting services. (Cited in Haas 2004: 11)

During this time, Kesselbrenner worked to give Centro Presente an official existence with the government and “was instrumental in developing the structure and mission of the organization in the early years.” (Haas 2004: 2). The name “Centro Presente” was chosen for the organization in memory of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a Salvador priest killed for speaking out against the human rights violations during the country's civil war, and of others who died during this time. “Centro Presente” comes from the Catholic tradition in Latin America of saying a deceased person's name and the crowd responding with “Presente.” “Centro Presente” is a reminder that the people who came before us are always present. (Haas 2004: 15)

Centro's ties with the Catholic Church are now limited to affiliation with a number of churches – in Framingham and East Boston particularly – at which Centro Presente is able to hold community forums and activities.

Centro does a lot of community forums in churches, just through different contacts that we have with churches, because there is a large community of immigrants that attend different masses, and so we just feel like the church is like a... powerful entity for us to use to educate people around different things, for example different immigration law proposals, or just different issues affecting the community, we have different community forums with the churches. (Zuleika, 11.20.2006)

It appears that the progression toward this secularization has been a natural progression since executive directors have succeeded Cummins.

Executive directors since Cummins have maintained the core work and vision of the organization, but have each adapted Centro Presente's work to the needs of the immigrant population at the time. Frank Sharry, who followed Cummins as Executive Director, led Centro Presente in its participation in the movement advocating for Temporary Protective Status for Salvadorans and Hondurans as wars in Central America pervaded. Oscar Chacón, who became director after the United States government approved Temporary Protective Status classification, led the push for individuals to qualify for it. Maria Elena Letona followed Chacón and her influence on the organization can be seen in their current work, which follows. (Cummins, Sherry, Chacón and Letona 2006)

The basis for much of Centro Presente's work today is staff members' understanding of underlying factors in the current federal and state legislation. Centro notes the fear and hatred apparent in the legislation and posits that these currents exist for two reasons. First, the changing economic landscape has allowed the Far Right to blame immigrants for unemployment and a perceived decrease in quality of life. Second, the demographic reality is alarming to many, as the Latino "minority" grows steadily and many major cities are on the edge of becoming minority-majority cities (meaning that the total minority population exceeds the size of the majority population.) This threatens more established residents' self-identity and understanding of what it means to be an American. And so Centro Presente sees, as the answer to these questions and fears, the need for a movement that will celebrate diversity and generosity. (Centro Presente newsletter 2006)

*{Photo collage of Centro Presente}*

### *Current Organizational Structure*

There are twelve full time staff members at Centro, which counts an Executive Director, an Associate Director, an Adult Education Program Coordinator, two full-time paralegals, a development coordinator, accountant and receptionist and four community organizers, whose focus is to lead working groups and do the organizing in the community. Additionally, there are numerous volunteer teachers and legal interns.

Zuleika describes the structure of Centro as “bottom up”. “The base of the organization, the real foundation, are the members. So the members make up the staff, and the members also make up the board of directors, for example. So it really is a place where the members have a voice.” (Zuleika, 11.20.06) Centro Presente members take part in the organization’s workgroups. These groups are “vehicles for our community and leadership development work” (Zuleika, 11.20.06) and advance Centro’s mission by building community power and developing leadership and democracy within the organization itself. The number of members participating in these groups varies significantly, but there are generally ten to fifteen people on each working group, including 2-3 staff members who participate. Furthermore, Zuleika explains that there is no “type” of person who tends to participate more in working groups (be it demographics, economic status, etc.) These workgroups are what Centro staff members feel is most unique and ideal about the organization. They turn the question which many Latinos ask of Centro Presente, “what will you do for me”, and ask back to these individuals what they will do for themselves (Carlos, 11.06.2006). The following are Centro Presente’s initiatives:

#### 1. Community Organizing (workgroups)

(I) *Immigrant Rights* -- This workgroup is Centro Presente’s “vehicle to contribute to a broader movement that seeks to reform U.S. immigration policy in a humane and effective way.” (Centro Presente Home page) Their current initiative is the national-level Keep Our Families Together campaign “that highlights the human component of the immigration journey and depicts the heartbreaking separation of hundreds of families” (website) in an effort to achieve substantive changes in United States’

immigration politics (*¿Que es la Campaña?* brochure) Another initiative is the “City Council Resolution Campaign” -- an “advocacy campaign that aims to promote city resolutions that positively affect immigrants.” (Centro Presente Home page)

(II) *Workers’ Rights* – The team was launched in 2005 and aims to “establish a workers center that will integrate individual advocacy, education and collective action... [the Center] will address workplace exploitation and abuses faced by Latino immigrants.” (Centro Presente pamphlet) To date, the team has focused on building its own capacity and contacting sister organizations to get training on workers’ rights and organizing workers. (Carlos 11.06.2006)

(III) *Educación y Acción* (Education and Action) – Formed from a recent merge between the Immigrant Rights and the Community Education for Change workgroups, this is the largest and most developed workgroup. *Educación y Acción* “disseminates information about immigration policy, workers’ rights and the global economy through a weekly half-hour radio program, monthly member meetings, a quarterly newsletter made by and for members, educational guides in the form of ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, occasional community forums in local churches and schools” and *Encuentros Con Centro*, a monthly meetings at Centro Presente for the community to discuss issues. These public education strategies are also tools mobilize members and nonmembers. (Centro Presente Home page)

(IV) *Cultural Events/Grassroots Fundraising* – This group organizes annual events around significant holidays and historical events, such as a boat dance cruise on the Boston Harbor and annual holiday fiesta, both with Latin American food and music. The purpose is “not only to nurture and celebrate our shared history as Latinos, but also to raise awareness about our political advocacy work, recruit and mobilize members, and raise funds from our community.” (Centro Presente Home page) These cultural events are also significant strategies for community building, as they allow clients and friends to come together socially, not in the context of classes, work or organizing. The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration took place during the writing of this

report. In a Revere club filled with a couple hundred people, it was an evening of mariachis, Latino food, music, and dancing. During dinner the ex-Executive Directors were invited on stage for a question and answer session on the history of Centro Presente and of the immigrant rights struggle, as well as a look at today's work. The event brought together a diverse community of people, both Latinos and non-Latinos, young and old, many families, making each feel more connected to the organization throughout the events of the evening. This workgroup also hosts the Monseñor Romero Truth Award, where they present the award to someone in the community who continues Romero's legacy of work for social justice. (Zuleika, 11.19.06)

### 2. Youth Leadership: Pintamos Nuestro Mundo/We Paint Our World (PNM)

Pintamos Nuestro Mundo is an after school program in Somerville which engages immigrant Latino youth, ages eleven to fourteen, in arts-oriented curriculum, homework assistance, outdoor activities and leadership development. In this initiative youth choose an art project which they would like to work on, the only limitations being that the art will be put on display for the community and that it be rooted in youth's collective experiences. Centro Presente's mission for activism and community building is vividly entwined in this work which provides a means for youth to make their voices heard. (Keogh and Flahive: 2002: 22-23)

### 3. Adult Education: Education for Empowerment (EFE)

One of the most formally established programs, Adult Education is staffed by volunteers and consists of classes in: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Spanish Basic Literacy, Spanish as a Second Language, US History and Civics Citizenship and Computer Literacy classes. The program serves between 350 and 400 students a year. Charges for participation in the nine week courses are between 125 and 150 dollars, depending on the course. There is simply a 25 dollars suggested donation for the literacy class. (Zuleika 11.19.2006)



#### 4. Legal Immigration Services (LIS)

The legal department is another formal initiative at Centro Presente and serves upwards of 5,000 clients per year. (Zuleika, 11.19. 2006) Staffed by 2 full-time paralegals and numerous volunteers, services provided by Centro Presente's legal department include:

- Renewal of work permits for members of the ABC program of political asylum
- TPS for Salvadorans and Hondurans.
- NACARA (Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act) applications.
- Support services: change of address, FOIA requests, copies, photos, etc.
- Consultations with our legal staff.
- Family petitions, residence renewals, and citizenship petitions
- Individual advocacy to immigrant workers

There is also a fee for these services. (Centre Presente Home page)

#### *Funding*

Funding for this multitude of projects and staff comes from both individuals and foundations. Individual contributions are in the form of donations, membership fees and class and legal fees. These make up fifty percent of Centro Presente's budget. Support by foundations covers the remaining fifty percent. Of supporting foundations, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay is the foremost and longest-standing donor.<sup>1</sup> (Centro Presente Program 2006)

#### ***Changes in Centro Presente over time***

Much of Centro Presente's mission relates to empowering the Latin American immigrant community. This focus was embodied in the transition which occurred in leadership from North American leadership to Latin American leadership. The change was most vivid with the arrival of Chacón, the first Latino Executive Director, further establishing a focus on Latino leadership. This period of change occurred during Cummins' time at Centro Presente, and reflected a larger-scale tension centered around whether the leadership should be comprised of non-Latinos or members of the Latino community. It reflected an underlying difference in the philosophical approaches of the two groups. One group felt the most appropriate

service model was to “provide” and that there was something wrong with saying “Do it yourself.” These were primarily religious volunteers. Others in the organization wanted to foster self-reliance among the community members. (Haas 2004: 15-17) The then-head of Centro Presente’s social service division described this transition to one researcher and concluded by explaining that “over time, people grew and learned and changed and revisited things” and thus the transition was able to occur smoothly (Cited in Haas 2004: 16).

Some aspects of the organization have remained stable. Throughout this period and continuing today, Centro Presente’s work has been a combination of various basic services to the immigrant community, primarily legal services and English classes. (Letona, 10.11.2006). Executive directors since Cummins have geared Centro Presente’s initiatives toward the political environment and community needs at the moment. This has historically entailed primarily adapting political initiatives to the current issues.

The last ten years in particular have seen a number of profound changes in Centro Presente. In response to a changing political environment, Centro has placed focus on immigrant rights and immigration reform in the workgroups. The United States’ move toward stronger immigration laws is inextricably linked to changing labor issues in the country. For example, when the Sensenbrenner Bill passed in the United States House in December of 2005 immediately there were visible effects. Employers, with a great fear of being punished under this bill for hiring undocumented immigrants, altered their interactions with immigrants so as to be in line with the bill’s stipulations. In many cases, workers’ rights were ignored. All this despite the fact that the bill was not yet passed and still faced the hurdles of the Senate and conference committee before become law. In response to these and other detrimental changes in employer attitude and treatment toward immigrants, Centro Presente has created its Worker’s Rights workgroup to conduct advocacy and support on the issue. Furthermore, Centro Presente is working to incorporate rights issues into all aspects of the organization, including the English class curriculums. (Carlos, 11.06.2006)

Centro Presente has always seen itself as primarily non-political, in the sense that its focus is on preservation of human rights. However, many staff acknowledged that today it is impossible to avoid becoming politicized to some degree. Cummins explained that “I don’t know if I would have, myself, identified [Centro Presente] as a political organization, but I definitely felt that we had taken a political stance. . . we tried to stand with the people and the stories that they were telling, you know, that had caused them to leave the country.” (Cited in Haas 2004: 17-18) Interaction with the government was taken to a further level when Centro Presente became involved with lawsuits challenging the government’s immigration policy in the late 1980s. The organization’s City Council Resolution Campaign, culminated in Cambridge this year, 2006, with the city formally reaffirming its commitment to being a Sanctuary City (meaning that the city’s employees are prohibited from participating in the investigation, arrest, or deportation of individuals accused of violating immigration laws.) This represents not a political action per se, but a community process and action.

Since 2001 in particular, Centro has begun to focus heavily on organizing the community, and the staff has developed two long-term goals: democratization of Centro Presente itself and construction of community power. Letona explained that going beyond service delivery is extremely important to “stop the bleeding”, or deal with the problems which are occurring in the community. (Letona, 10.11.2006) Although the organization is run by Latinos, these staff members themselves have a position of power over the rest of the community, just because they hold the information. A lack of access to information can disable a person from speaking up for his or her rights, as the individual may not know what they are, or knowing what resources are available to draw from to strengthen any initiative within Centro Presente. Democratization of Centro Presente spreads the power throughout the community, and has been done through a system of membership with voting rights within the organization. This system is proving successful in both quantity – there are 1,200 members – and quality – there are on average a dozen members at each team’s meetings who work regularly in the workgroups to exact change in specific areas. (Letona, 10.11.2006) The results of their efforts have been seen in the “Gran Crucero

Bailable” [Great Dancing Cruise] this past summer, in the Latinos now educated on their rights in the event that an employer requests to see their social security card, in the drastic increase in membership over the past six months and in the previously mentioned recent declaration of Cambridge as a Sanctuary City for immigrants.

Finally, Centro Presente has responded to the changing demographic of the Latino population and the resulting change in needs of this group. There is currently a growing population of older and more established immigrants, as the early immigrants are aging. This means that a significant portion of Latinos are no longer in need of services for recently arrived immigrants such as legal services and English services, but are now looking at issues such as voter registration. (Carlos, 11.06.2006) This is exactly where Centro Presente is now looking as well. Simultaneously the organization cannot leave behind the basic services they have historically provided, because the rate of new migration has not dropped significantly; and indeed they are not. Instead they are expanding to incorporate these new needs of the community, even attempting to bring those individuals who have passed through Centro Presente over the years back to the organization. (Carlos, 11.06.2006)

### ***Impact of Centro Presente on the Latin American Immigrant Population***

It is unclear how aware the Latino community in Somerville and Cambridge is of Centro Presente. For those individuals who are aware of Centro Presente and involved in its activities, they came to learn about the organization in a variety of ways. According to Zuleika, the Adult Education Program Coordinator, most people learn about Centro through word-of-mouth. Friends affiliated with Centro will recommend it to their friends and often these new individuals find themselves identifying with Centro. This element of social networking explains why there are individuals from as far away as Nantucket, Westborough and Worcester at Centro. Yet a significant number of individuals recounted learning about the organization from Centro’s weekly radio program on immigration policy and labor rights as well as from flyers. Either way, be it through networking or Centro Presente’s media and

flyering, the sheer number of individuals involved in the organization demonstrates their effectiveness in raising awareness about their work.

Possibly the most significant impact of Centro Presente on these involved individuals was described by Elsy. In her two years in the United States before becoming involved with Centro Presente, Elsy

no encontraba yo un apoyo para mí, yo no me sentía bien. Porque en mi país yo tenía mi negocio, mi negocito, y tenía mi vehículo. Y entonces yo, y a venir acá, sin carro, enferma, todo contra mi, sin mi mamá y mis hijas, sola, también una señorita.

[but I didn't encounter a support for myself, I didn't feel well. Because in my country I had my business, my little business, and I had my vehicle. And then I, and to come here, without a car, sick, everything against me, without my mom or my daughters, alone, also a single woman.] (Elsy, 9.25.2006)

So when someone gave her a flyer for English classes at Centro Presente and she heard that the classes were more substantial in the amount of material they taught than many others in the area, she decided to give the class a try. She ended up continuing with the class “y el apoyo que me dio Centro Presente fue muy bueno para mí. Y entonces así empecé.” [and the support that Centro Presente gave me was very good for me. And then like that I began.] (Elsy, 9.25.2006) This “así empecé” [like that I began] was recounted so emphatically that it left no doubt as to the importance of Centro in supporting Elsy in truly beginning in the United States. Elsy is now in the level two English class, a member of Centro Presente, a participant in the Adult Education Committee and a volunteer in the literacy class. She says she is feeling better.

Centro Presente has had a similarly strong impact on Rosa. While she initially approached Centro Presente for legal support in applying for permanent residency, she has since become quite involved in a literacy class and Centro's organizing. Rosa is thankful that Centro gave her the opportunity to learn to read and write, which she was never able to do in El Salvador because her family was so large and preference went to her brothers. The support system which Centro has created by way of its

community organizing has been valuable for her. She is also thankful for being given the opportunity to assist in furthering the organizing. The importance of Centro Presente's caring about people was echoed in many interviews.

For some individuals, Centro is like family in the supportive role it plays. One of the most vivid examples of this was seen by Zuleika. One of the women at Centro Presente does not have her family members with her in the United States and has attended English classes. After having gone through the three levels, however, she started with level one again and continued through the classes, multiple times. Zuleika describes the role that Centro Presente is playing in this woman's life in the absence of her family, "so-this is kind of like her family, and her place where she can come and be with people, and socialize". (Zuleika, 11.20.2006)

For new immigrants, the working groups are the most valuable aspect of Centro Presente, Zuleika believes, as they have just arrived and need that working group and space to share their experiences. "That's kind of the most important thing, kind of the only thing that Centro has to offer those people that have just recently arrived. There's not much we can do for them in terms of legal department. They can also participate in the classes; a lot of them don't have time, in some cases, for that." (Zuleika, 11.20.2006)

In the midst of these individuals who benefit so much from their relationship with Centro Presente, there is another large group, this one of people who do not seem to take much more out of Centro than purely the service they are paying for. Rafael attends English classes and is aware that Centro Presente is a quite active and supportive community. He is neither a member nor an active participant in this community. He mentioned that with more free time he might get more involved. However, he did not seem very interested. There was also a striking absence of individuals at Centro who have been affiliated with the organization for more than three years. The role of Centro Presente in these older immigrants' lives remains unclear to me.

The diversity of relationships within Centro Presente appears to reflect the diversity of experiences among the Latinos themselves. Each individual immigrates to the United States in a different context and in search of something different, albeit

with the many commonalities described so far. The need to be part of a community and strengthen it may be greatest among individuals for whom this is their only community, and among those who plan to raise families here. Those who are younger and planning to return in the foreseeable future often see no reason to invest time in such activities. One's extent of free time will undoubtedly influence one's involvement. Finally, some element of participation undoubtedly comes down to personality and interest in such initiatives. It is evident that Centro Presente's recent push for community outreach and the membership program have significantly affected the extent of community participation in the workings of the organization. Further study of determinants of participation could provide Centro Presente with insight into the level of community participation they should reasonably strive for and how this can be achieved.

Separate from the impact of Centro Presente on individuals is the impact which it has on the Latino community as a whole and on the sense of community among the Latinos. For some individuals, Centro Presente is a community in and of itself. Offices are based around a central hallway, doors are rarely closed and everyone goes by their first name. Zuleika explained that for some students, they "just always come to class, and that's the community they identify with." Similarly people who "go to the legal department to renew their work permit for example [...] that's- they find community there." (Zuleika, 11.20.2006) Rosa finds exactly this community at Centro, and "doy gracias a Dios por tener una comunidad tan bonita como está organizada Centro Presente" [I thank God for having a community as beautiful as is organized Centro Presente]. (Rosa, 11.04.2006)

Simultaneously, Centro Presente is creating community outside of the organization itself. Victor explained the creation of unity within community as a role that Centro clearly takes on, "hay lugares donde [trabajan para formar comunidad], como Centro Presente, que se hace como, como ayuda para los Hispanos" [there are places where [people work to form a community], like Centro Presente, that does it to, to help Hispanics] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006). Victor believed this work to be a service to the community. When I questioned Zuleika about where the desire for such unity comes from, she described multiple sources. "[I]t's a little bit of both, it's

some people realizing that- the importance of organizing and uniting and working towards unity, and I think also the other half is Centro actually raising awareness [in the community] around these issues” and conveying that much more can be accomplished when people work together than alone. (Zuleika 11.20.2006) Others see community in the sense of unity and struggle, rather than daily support and interactions. For these individuals as well, Centro Presente was perceived as working toward this, though not having yet had any remarkable effect. For Carlos, though this “es un proyecto bastante ambicioso” [is a quite ambitious project] neither he nor the rest of the staff at Centro will give it up until they see the fruits of their labor. (Carlos, 11.06.2006)



## *Narrator's Ideal Focus Areas for Latin American Immigrant*

### *Organization*

Narrators expressed three roles they would like Latin American immigrant organizations to fulfill: orientation, support and unity. Looking at the idea of orientation, narrators focused on a number of elements, one being “dándole a cogido” or making immigrants feel welcome in Somerville. (Elsy, 10.25.2006) Another aspect is providing some sort of orientation to these individuals. Luz in particular pointed to the need for organizations to explain the rights of immigrants to them. Lastly, Victor pointed to the need for something akin to an information booth or help desk which would explain to individuals where and how to do such things as open a bank account and enroll one's children into school.

[D]ebería ... como tener gente que ayude, como digamos, abogados de inmigración, para informarle a la comunidad inmigrante [...] por ejemplo, como pagar sus taxes [...] por lo menos como buscar educación . . . porque tiene que ir a colegio, y uno no sabe que lo puede- que lo puede ingresar [...] Como ayudar también a las personas como que le prestamos de dinero, como abrir una cuenta de ahorro, como también enseñar a las personas como economizar el dinero.

[It should ... have people who help, lets say, immigration lawyers, to inform the immigrant community [...] for example how to pay their taxes [...] at the least how to seek out education... because one needs to go to high school, and one doesn't know that he or she can – that he or she can enter [...] Also with help in borrowing money, how to open a savings account, and also teach people how to economize their money.] (Victor and Wilson, 11.15.2006)

This sort of orientation would allow immigrants to better navigate the new city and society in which they are living. It will also allow them to be more productive and capable members of the society.

The importance of support by Latin American immigrant organizations entails providing a space where Latinos feel supported in their endeavors in the United States. Such support is necessary to counterbalance the discrimination and denial of rights which many Latinos experience daily in the workplace. Wilson described the need to have a space where immigrants do not feel exploited. Much of this is provision of the moral support necessary to face sometimes daunting challenges that inevitably arise in a foreign country.

Thirdly, narrators pointed to the need for an organization to help create unity among the Latino population, in other words, create true community. Rafael pointed out the need as, “Ser unidos. Porque siendo unidos, uno tiene de todo.” [Be united. Because being united a person has everything.] (Rafael 10.30.2006) In a community that is united, individuals are able to share resources, both materials and knowledge, and have the widest range of such resources available.

Staff members at Centro Presente discussed this question in terms of their goals. Carlos focused on the centrality of organizing, by which an organization has the potential to change something fundamental in the community. In many ways community organizing is encouraging the population to create unity among themselves. For Carlos, no matter what the immediate goal of a project is, community organizing must be both the overarching theme and long-term goal. Each of these three elements aims to create a community that is strong and capable, able to access the resources available to them and able to support each other in doing so. This must be the standard for assessing the work and success of a Latin American immigrant organization.

## ***CONCLUSION***

Latinos encounter challenges of language and family separation. They often face discrimination, primarily in the workplace, and find themselves doing less-skilled labor, which while good for the income may not be great for the morale. With an uncertain legal status these Latinos have less of a foundation to address such denials of human rights. The sense of community among Latinos is limited and based more on physical proximity than unity. Despite these challenges, each narrator expressed gratitude for being able to work in a country of extensive opportunity and accomplish their goals much more than they could in their home countries. Each one also expressed a desire to see a change in many of these aforementioned elements.

Considering the role Latin American immigrant organizations may play in their struggle, Latinos point to areas of orientation, support and unity. Centro Presente focuses on elements of each of these, but most explicitly on the latter two. Centro Presente is a highly supportive environment which seeks to build community not only with community-building initiatives such as working groups and social events but also through every other Centro Presente initiative. A number of Latinos affiliated with Centro Presente highlight the difference this community has made in their lives.

The educational and legal services offered address some elements of orientation, as do the new membership structure and English class curriculum which focus on empowering Latinos so they may be significantly engaged with American society and the greater Somerville community. The Worker's Rights committee aims to educate Latinos on their rights in the United States. The element of orientation which is not as apparent at Centro Presente is the provision of information on issues unrelated to organizing and rights. Examples of this detailed by narrators were information on how to open savings accounts and how to enroll one's children in school. Centro Presente does currently offer one workshop every class cycle, or three months, with the upcoming one being "How to start your own business", sponsored by the City of Cambridge. However basic themes could be addressed in more regular, informational seminars that are publicized to the entire community or alternative formats such as an information desk. These initiatives may not be where

Centro Presente wants to focus its energies, or is best at focusing its resources, but the perceived lack of these services is an issue that deserves to be addressed.

In contrast to the narrators who are members and very involved in Centro's workgroups and other initiatives, non-members could describe only a small amount of what Centro does. Various informational handouts, including Centro's newsletter, are accessible from a table at Centro Presente's entrance; nevertheless "tiene que estar conectado, como dice Wilson, en saber como se esta moviendo en cuanto a los inmigrantes." [you have to be connected, like Wilson says, to know how everything is moving in regard to immigrants.] (Victor and Wilson, 1.15.2006) Bringing these non-members more into "the loop" and making them feel like a greater part of the Centro Presente community may benefit the individuals. It may also support Centro's initiatives by involving more people.

### ***TO THE FUTURE...***

Now Centro is raising funds to open an office on Broadway Avenue in East Somerville. Finding a larger immigrant population in Somerville and a lack of Latino-led immigrant organizations, Centro hopes to fill that gap, support the community and make Somerville a more immigrant-friendly city. Centro Presente plans to begin their Somerville-specific work with the next stage of their current City Council Resolution Campaign. The campaign was designed to focus on at least four cities (Cambridge, Somerville, Chelsea and Boston) through the fall of 2008. Based in Centro Presente staff members' understanding of the political environment, the primary goal is to get the City Councils in each city to declare themselves a sanctuary city for immigrants. This is "an ambitious advocacy campaign that aims to promote city resolutions that positively affect immigrants. . . and it has have three highly inter-related goals: (1) To raise awareness around a re-framed way of understanding immigrants and immigration policy; (2) to deepen our organizing and leadership development model; and (3) to strengthen and broaden alliances both locally and nationally" (Centro Presente Home page). In Cambridge the campaign process entailed talking to local Centro Presente members, community organizations, churches and other community leaders and basing the details of the resolution on these conversations.

While the Somerville Board of Aldermen did declare Somerville a sanctuary city in 1987 and Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone recently restated the position in a May 1 speech in Foss Park, Somerville, this does not necessarily reflect the current environment on the ground or in city offices. Through the upcoming process Centro hopes to hear the stories of Latin American immigrants living in Somerville, find out what the situation on the ground is, and make this campaign a visible movement which builds local community tolerance for diversity and Centro's base. (Letona, 10.11.2006)

One hopes that as Centro Presente enters this new community they themselves form a community with similar and complementary organization already in the city. Despite the similarity in mission statements and populations as well as geographic proximity of the immigrant organizations in the greater Somerville area, there appears to be little collaboration between them. At this point staff members at Centro Presente are not aware of all the organizations in Somerville nor the roles filled by the organizations already present there. It may be the case that what is most valuable is collaboration with organizations which meet separate needs of the community, such as churches or law firms, which *is* presently occurring. Might it be that the immigrant population is too large and diverse to be served by a closely collaborating group of organization alone? These issues merit consideration.

It appears that immigrant organizations are not the only ones lacking awareness of each other. Individuals who study and receive services at Centro Presente do not know about these other organizations either. Not one of the individuals I interviewed knew of another Latin American immigrant organization. One woman knew of a church in Somerville and an organization in Jamaica Plain which offer English classes and one man knew of other English classes, but that was the extent of this knowledge. It may be that these organizations do not work on outreach so much, but instead focus on working with the community immediately surrounding them geographically and through social networks. Yet for an organization such as Centro Presente which is aiming to involve more community members in its classes and committees, a study of the outreach techniques of these organizations and awareness of their presence among the Latino community would

provide more insight into this issue. For organizations aimed at creating unity, it is crucial that they be aware of the individual communities which may be in the process of formation around each organization itself.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

One semester was enough time to focus on Centro Presente as a whole, but it left many directions of research still untouched. A focus on a specific program or workgroup at Centro Presente and the way it fits into the larger organization could be valuable in understanding the real difference the new membership system is having. Furthermore, this research project was one of the first of the Urban Borderlands class to look specifically at one Latin American immigrant organization. As such it opens the possibility to study a similar organization in the area and compare their work and impact with that of Centro Presente. An examination of what services are provided by the city and how the Latin American immigrant organizations fit into the gaps remaining could be valuable by elucidating remaining gaps in current service provision.

In looking more specifically at the make-up of Centro Presente, one may want to investigate why the organization is gendered to the extent that it is. The staff is primarily female, those enrolled in English classes are primarily male, workgroups appear to be relatively gender balanced, and females appear to be the ones most effected by the support and organizing work that Centro Presente does.

Finally, Centro Presente focuses on community building and organizing. Do what extent has this been felt in the greater Somerville community? To what extent have member been affected? What obstacles exist to Centro Presente's further effectiveness? Questions such as these which look at a specific goal or element of Centro Presente would certainly be instructive.

## ***List of Individuals Interviewed***

### **Carlos Chacón**

Centro Presente Staff Member, Worker's Rights team head

### **Elsy**

Centro Presente member, Adult Education Committee member, Volunteer Literacy teacher, English student at Centro Presente

### **Maria de la Luz**

English student at Centro Presente

### **Rafael** (pseudonym)

English student at Centro Presente

### **Rosa**

Centro Presente member, Educación y Acción (Education and Action) workgroup, Literacy student at Cento Presente

### **Victor**

English student at Centro Presente

### **Wilson**

English student at Centro Presente

### **Zuleika Andrade**

Centro Presente Staff Member, Adult Education Program Coordinator



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