

Reclaiming Our Birthright

by *Ernesto Cortés, Jr.*

Conversations and negotiation around shared interests provide the space for a community to define what their birthright is and ultimately how to act upon these obligations.

Ernesto Cortés, Jr. Southwest IAF Network Issues Conference, September 1998, Houston, Texas.

When the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) began in the 1940s, it organized around balancing the asymmetric power relationships within the existing intermediary institutions such as schools, churches, unions and political parties. The goal of IAF then was to establish justice and accountability in these institutions through a thick network of relationships already embedded within and between them.

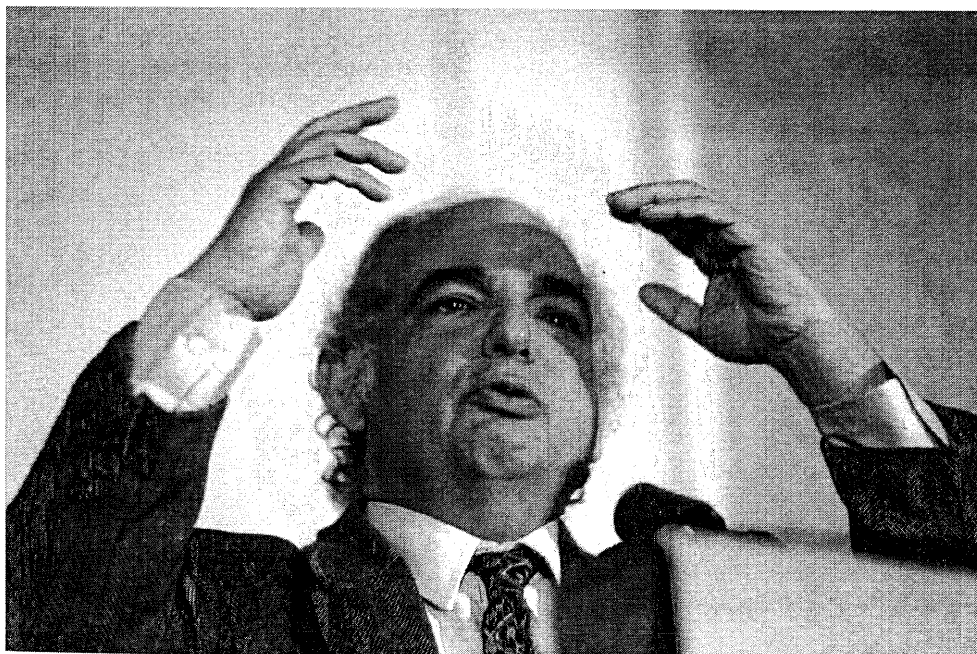
The assumptions around which communities organized thirty, forty and fifty years ago are no longer valid. Thick networks of relationships no longer exist in our institutions. Institutions lack the social capital and infrastructure necessary to serve as effective intermediaries. The seductive lure of “opinion-makers” in the form of television, media, and the internet provide us with the illusion of being

connected while in reality, we drift further and further apart. Children drift further from their parents; and our suburbs seemingly drift further from our center cities.

The Industrial Areas Foundation organizes in churches and schools to reconnect these critical institutions around a vibrant culture of relational one-on-one and small group conversations. These conversations occur across religious, geographic, racial and economic lines, and lead to the development of a diverse constituency of leaders able to take action that can reclaim the original vitality of our intermediary institutions.

This transformation is essential not only to the life of these institutions, but to the development of the vision and the values of a democratic society. Thus, the IAF organizations deliberately teach ordinary people to be conscious of both the powers of the market and the state and to be vigilant about organizing to protect the power of citizens to govern themselves. This entails developing the concept of active citizenship, and developing a culture of conversation that can preserve democracy by tempering the power and reach of the market and the state.

This culture of conversation develops relationships around shared interests. Jeane Bethke Elshain describes the capacity for citizens to interact and have conversations as an “environment of engagement” that encourages people to be citizens, not clients, and creators rather than consumers. For many of the IAF member congregations and schools, these conversations are initiated by organizers and leaders and begin in the form of one-on-one conversations that





Leaders Rev. Gerald Britt, Dallas Area Interfaith; Fr. Alfonso Guevara, Valley Interfaith; and Regina Rogoff, Austin Interfaith prepare to respond to keynote at Issues Conference.

lead to larger house meetings, research actions and eventually political action.

These conversations are not idle chit-chat, or even an exchange of information. Rather, these conversations provide the time, space and personal foundation for future public action. These are the types of conversations that I remember growing up, when institutions were able to mediate between families and the market.

I grew up in a very tight neighborhood — a *barrio* in 1950s San Antonio. In my *barrio*, there were over 250 adults organized “against” me, 250 adults who felt like they could intrude on my life, 250 adults who felt like they could give me advice and tell me what to do. Everyone from the school bus driver, to the school cafeteria people, to my neighbors, to my aunts and uncles to my *compadres*, and my *comadres* — all these people felt they had the right to tell me what to do, what to wear, what to study, and what to eat. All week in school and in church there was a network of adults who had an interest and a stake in protecting and defending me.

When I began to organize in Los Angeles in the 1970s, I found the opposite situation. Instead of 250 adults organized against one kid, it was 70 kids organized against one adult. The adults were under

house arrest: afraid to go to church, afraid to attend festivals, some — intimidated by their own children. Adults were fearful of participating in the activities that are requisite for a civil society. That was 25 years ago. Today I find this situation almost everywhere I go. Whether it be New Orleans, Houston or Albuquerque, the intermediate institutions of family, unions, political party, schools, settlement homes and congregations have imploded and are no longer effective in protecting and defending families.

The erosion of the social capital that once enabled institutions to share in the obligations of community life has left families, churches and schools disconnected. The ramifications of this fissure are far reaching. Many schools no longer provide a place for parents to engage around the issues that affect their community. Cuts in welfare and other safety nets have reduced churches to mere service centers.

Addressing the fears and the ensuing disengagement and isolation of whole communities requires organizing. Organizing creates a structure and a culture within institutions that can rebuild community and reintroduce accountability, obligation, and collaboration.

Aristotle said that we are social

beings whose humanity and personhood is defined in public relationships, and that our humanity emerges only to the extent that we engage in serious and deliberative conversations with other human beings about the needs of our families, the education of our children, and what happens to our property. IAF believes this holds true today, which is why organizers and leaders constantly have conversations with pastors, with parents and with each other to develop their own social and spiritual dimension, and to clarify their self interest as a basis for mutual action.

With the fragmentation of institutions and communities, much of society has retreated, deferring these conversations and deliberations to the realm of “experts.” Sheldon Wolin, in his book *Presence of the Past*, warns against this deferral of our obligations by reinterpreting the spiritual and social dimensions of life as a person’s birthright. Wolin further defines this birthright as a person’s “politicalness.” The story of Esau and Jacob from the book of Genesis is useful to interpret the culture of obligation and birthright in organizing.

Esau and Jacob were always in tension with each other; it is said that they struggled even in the womb. They



were twins. Esau, the eldest of the two brothers, was a hunter, a solitary man — his father’s favorite. Esau was what I call a 50s kind of guy. Jacob, on the other hand, knew his way around the tent. He was younger, smooth of skin, and knew how to cook. Jacob was his mother’s favorite. Jacob was a 90s kind of guy.

After an unsuccessful hunting trip Esau arrived starving and came upon Jacob who was making lentil soup. When Esau asked Jacob to feed him, Jacob wanted to know what he could expect in return. When Esau asked his brother what he had that Jacob could possibly want, Jacob replied, “Sell me your birthright.”

So Esau sold his brother his birthright. And the Bible says, that from that day forward Esau despised his birthright. Esau’s birthright neither fed him, nor kept him warm at night; it was his father’s obligation that he had to keep. For Esau, his birthright had become a burden, which he was glad to get rid of.

Now Wolin suggests that we are all Esau; because we are willing to sell, to give up, to contract our birthright for a

bowl of soup. Society is willing to give up its inheritance for the culture of materialism. We are willing to give up a Birthright Culture for what IAF calls a Contract Culture.

In a Contract Culture a person is defined by his or her individuality. Each person is treated the same, no matter the situation. A person is not responsible for what happened before them, nor for what comes after them in a Contract Culture. These responsibilities and relationships are contracted away for narcissistic material desires. The Contract Culture depends on the rhetoric of *traditionalism* — the dead ideas of the living.

Fortunately, there is this alternative culture that the IAF organizes around. It is a *Birthright Culture*, rooted in the stories and history of *tradition* — the living ideas of the dead. In the Birthright Culture, a person’s humanity and personhood is defined by his or her relationships with others and their ability to deliberate and negotiate these relationships. A person is encumbered by the responsibilities inherited from these

Leaders respond to their statewide issues agenda during conference

relationships and enriched as they come to know themselves and the other through conversation and action.

It is the obligation and responsibility of each community to forge the necessary public space to allow the creation of institutions that can teach the Birthright Culture. To do this IAF organizers and leaders develop relationships and skills in and among community institutions through meetings that lead to research actions and ultimately to political action. There is no interest on the part of institutions to connect to one another unless a connection can lead to the ability to act — unless the relationship can lead to power. IAF teaches organizers and leaders how to have conversations that lift up shared

interests and provide the space to build relationships in and across multi-ethnic and multi-faith institutions. Conversations and negotiation around shared interests provide the space for a community to define what their birthright is and ultimately how to act upon these obligations.

For organizers with IAF this means holding 40 individual meetings each week and teaching leaders to hold these same kinds of meetings. Leaders and organizers are constantly seeking out new leaders that have some energy, the ability to reflect, a sense of humor, some anger and the ability to develop a following. It is only through these types of conversations that a community can develop a collective leadership that is able claim their birthright through collective action.

The organizations of the Industrial Areas Foundation have come far in claiming their birthright. In San Antonio, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance, are now challenging tax abatements to hotels that employ people (primarily Latinos and African Americans) at poverty wages. In a captive market, San Antonio has chosen to subsidize vast hotel chains. Now, COPS and Metro leaders are telling the city — “If you are going to give companies subsidies, you are going to have to pay people living wages.” And it is because their strategy includes leaders connected through house meetings and actions from all parts of San Antonio that leaders are

able to negotiate with the city with energy and power.

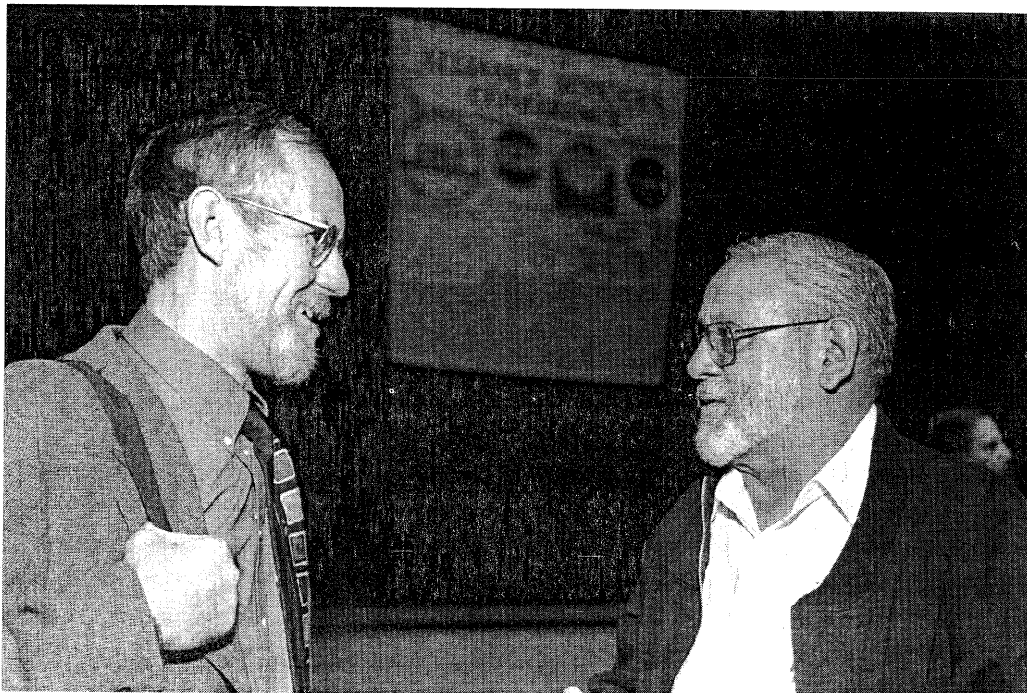
In addition to successes on the local level, there have been several significant regional victories in the Southwest. Leaders leveraged \$14 million for the 1999-2001 supplemental state funding program for the IAF’s Alliance Schools; created a \$24 million fund for long-term training for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) recipients; and designed a bond package for \$250 million to bring water and sewer services to the *colonias* along the Texas - Mexico border. In addition, six local organizations have followed COPS lead and developed local job training programs that are connected to jobs with career path; and both Valley Interfaith in the Texas Rio Grande Valley and Pima County Interfaith Council in Tucson, Arizona have organized to develop living wage ordinances in their local county or city.

A broad based approach, based on relationships developed through a Birthright Culture is effective with all kinds of organizing strategies to improve education, to develop career ladders, and more importantly to create possibilities of effective civic engagement. This will be done much more successfully to the extent that we recognize that what people need most, is some kind of connection or intermediary institution.

What the Southwest IAF Network has learned from its past twenty-five years of

organizing, is that to begin to address issues of poverty and race, we must organize beyond a recognition of grave inequalities. In the midst of the surrounding poverty, racism and inequality, institutions that have some thickness, some stability, and some power, need to be continuously re-organized through conversations and the development of a civic culture.

To effectively organize communities, we need to connect the shared interests of leaders from cities and suburbs. We must continue to develop leaders in the context of broad based organizing not only because it provides power and justice for ordinary people, but because having conversations and relationships that encumber us to one another is healthy for adults, healthy for our children and healthy for our institutions and for our communities. This entails a challenge for broad based organizing that can sustain across religious, racial and economic lines, one that can connect people across institutions so that they can begin to be relational and can agitate one another and struggle with one another. Once the fragments of institutions can be woven back together, congregations, unions, civic organizations and schools can begin to use this network and structure to enable people to negotiate with those who have power, and thereby transform their communities.



COPS leader, Andres Sarabia and Harvard education professor, Richard Murnane share ideas about Alliance Schools.