



# Establishing Individual and Social Identity: The Fulcrum for Immigrant Civic Engagement

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## Overview

A central challenge facing Mexican immigrants to California is to re-discover and re-assert who they are in the new world in which they find themselves. Individuals', families', and social groups' identities are not, in any sense, inherent or immutable; they are, instead, created, or at least shaped, in the course of negotiating one's relationship with others in one's social universe. This process which permeates immigrants' lives, is also, a key strand in their efforts to move from civic isolation to active engagement. This means that an analysis which reduces the challenge of developing immigrants' civic participation to the task of teaching them "how we do things in America", i.e. cross-cultural training about "the system", fails to capture some of the important dimensions of the process. Developing local, culturally competent civic skills is, indeed, part of what needs to be done, but this process is inextricably intertwined with the task of asserting who one is, where one is going, and how to move forward in navigating the complexities of civic life.

It is difficult to find the ideal term to refer to the complex process of establishing and asserting one's identity—as an individual or as part of a group. This process, referred to by some as "constructing" a social reality is, indeed, personal and self-initiated but, at the same time, it is dynamic, interactive, and in part, reactive. The mirror in which an immigrant sees his or her identity is, in part defined by the community in which he or she lives and, within that community, his or her social networks. Farmworker's ambivalence as to whether their identity can really be reduced to life as *braceros*, working machines, or, whether there is more to life than that is inevitable. Mexican immigrants' ambivalence expressed by as to whether they should be left out of the decennial census and remain statistically invisible because they "don't belong", is equally predictable. However, effective civic engagement implies an identity—a perspective, hopes, dreams, ideals, a personal style. One's personal identity, or one's social identity as a member of an informal or formal group is the fulcrum for social interaction and, thus, for civic participation.

The process of defining and asserting one's identity is a lifelong one and it is fairly obvious that for most of us it is something of a struggle, a never-ending work in progress, punctuated with fitful starts, experiments, adjustments, and modulations. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady point out, the process of developing civic skills is affected both by personal experience in informal settings and by learning experiences in formal educational settings. However, the Civic Voluntarism model tacitly assumes that the social context in which all of

these learning experiences take place are the same one. This is not the case when it comes to immigrants. Because immigrants find themselves transitioning from one civic environment to another, the basic assumptions which govern our overall model of civic skills development do not hold true. Past experience, knowledge of civic processes, styles of communication, and understanding of how “civic systems” work must be adjusted to a new reality and the inferences which govern this “translation” involve much more than just “acquiring a new skills set”; they involve creating a new personal identity, a new social identity (i.e. *persona*), and developing a new “voice”, that includes personal style and modes of communication.

At the level of community life, this dynamic process of re-invention is not simply a personal one but, also, one which may engage an entire family, an entire social network, or, an entire ethnic group (since ethnicity, by definition, refers to self-identification and network relationships). We focus on two particular cases, each of which exemplifies a more general challenge relating of immigrants’ adaptation to California society and development of civic activism.

My analysis highlights the experiences and reflections of two quite different immigrant civic activists. One is Jorge San Juan, a young Mixteco construction worker who is also the volunteer coordinator of a Mixteco cultural group *Se’e’Saavi*, and a member of the Board of Directors of a community-based organization, the *Centro Binacional para el Desarrollo Indigena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO)*. Jorge’s story is relevant not simply to his individual development but to the more general challenge of Mixteco immigrants’ re-assertion of their cultural, social, and political identity in a transnational civic space now referred to by some researchers as “Oaxacalifornia”. The second of these community activists is Raquel Velasco, a middle-aged mother of two teenager daughters and a grown son, who was, for several years, the informal but charismatic unpaid leader of a group of immigrant activists seeking to secure affordable housing in Winters. Her story, too, transcends her personal struggle, to reflect on the challenges faced by Mexican women in negotiating new gender roles in the course of their life in California. Through these two civic activists’ accounts of their experiences and perspectives, we explore both the process through which individual immigrants’ re-invent their identity in the brave new world of California civic life and the process through which groups of immigrants engage in the process of creating or strengthening bonding social capital and deploying it within the arena of local civic life.

Both of these activists have been involved in the organizational activities of one, or several, of the organizations which the James Irvine Foundation funded as part of the Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship (CVP). However, it would not be accurate in any of these cases to say that their civic activism stemmed from or was “caused” by the CVP program intervention. The theme running through their stories is that the CVP-funded project with which they were involved advanced their civic activism but did not “create” their civic activism; their activism arose out of their autonomous involvement in asserting their own personal vision/identity, and in working within affiliational networks to help groups of immigrants assert their collective identity and achieve a defined set of objectives. The primary functional role of the civic promotion organization was to provide a venue, a context for coming together, combined with coaching about how to effectively navigate an unfamiliar, sociopolitical, and organizational environment.

Neither of these activists became civically involved out of a sense of duty. Nor did they become involved entirely out of self-interest. As we will see, there were surely important personal benefits accruing to both from their civic involvement. But these were not economic benefits; neither holds a job as a “community organizers”. As they talked about their experiences, the theme we consistently heard was that self-actualization, seeking, pursuing, articulating, and implementing their “dreams” was a crucial element in what drove them to be involved. Their modes of civic engagement strongly suggest that traditional distinctions between “community leaders” and “civically-engaged citizens” have marginal utility in the context of Central Valley Mexican immigrant communities. Regular, active civic participation seems to become de facto leadership within the most important domain of civic life, informal social networks. Jorge and Raquel are as good listeners as they are speakers. In articulating their perspectives, they are reflective and careful to consistently return to examination of their relationship to the groups to which they belong. Their sense of their civic participation as community activists and “grassroots leaders” resonates more with contemporary thinking about leadership roles than traditional images of “leaders” as persons who are widely or universally recognized as “movers and shakers” as a result of their family connections, position, affluence, or membership in a multitude of civic organizations. Their modes of civic engagement at once give hope for a revitalized sense of rural populism and give pause in considering the challenges in strategic efforts to mobilize established mainstream non-profit organizations towards community leadership development.

### **Ethnic Identity, Community Identity, and the Deployment of Social Capital—The Context of Mixtec Civic Participation**

The efforts of Mixtec immigrants to California to affirm a sense of community and develop widespread civic engagement deserve special attention as part of efforts to understand the implications of immigrant diversity for building immigrant civic participation in California. The Mixtec experience is important—because they are the largest ethnic minority among Mexican immigrants to California, because they have been aggressive and creative in their efforts to explore ways to sustain community life within the context of a spatially fragmented “virtual communities”, and because they have extensive experiencing in translating social capital into tangible community development (via the institution of the *tequio* and reliance on traditional processes of volunteer-based governance to address and resolve a wide range of community problems).

The Mixtecos, known from the time of the Spanish conquest as the people of the Land of Clouds, Nuñuma, have more than a millenium of struggle to assert their cultural and political identity. Mixtec culture and written history precedes the Gutenberg Bible by more than 500 years, with Mixtec documents from the time of the Conquest going back to the dynasty of a ruler 9-Wind-Stone-Skull, born in AD 692.<sup>1</sup> Mixtec culture precedes the Aztec southward migration from the southwestern area of the U.S. to the Valley of Mexico by more than half a millenium and is, or shares much in common with, one of the three great cultures of Mexico, the culture of Teotihuacan and Tollan (Tula) already invoked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Benitez, “En el pais de las nubes”, Book 3, Vol. 3, **Los Indios de Mexico**, Siglo XXI, 1968. Benitez’s discussion of Mixtec culture in pre-Columbian times relies heavily on his interviews with a leading Mexican scholar, Alfonso Caso.

the apex of classical Mesoamerican society and knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Mixtecos are, obviously, a resilient society, given centuries of resistance to centralized economic and political authority.

One reason why ethnic/cultural identity is so important to Mixtecos is that Mexico is, by no means, an egalitarian society. Despite an abundance of progressive rhetoric, Mexico has been as fragmented by racial/ethnic and class divisions as the U.S. has ever been. Mixtecos' coherence as an ethnic group has been an important strategy for achieving the critical political mass to advocate for cultural, social, and economic equity. The racial/ethnic divisions separating Mixteco from *mestizo* migrants did not evaporate as Mixtec migrants came to work in California farmwork. The class-based divisions in the agricultural workplace described in our analysis of the Bracero myth are, for Mixtecos and other indigenous immigrants, exacerbated by ethnic tensions (within a population defined arbitrarily by outside analysts as “racially homogeneous”).

More than 20 years ago, Filemon Lopez, then a young farmworker and Mixtec community activist, shocked a gathering of progressive foundation staffers who asked about the relationship between a grassroots organization he had founded, the Asociacion Civica Benito Juarez, and the UFW, by noting that he and his fellow workers did not feel the UFW could or would represent their interests because they were *mestizos* and Norteños.<sup>3</sup> By the same token, Mixtecos still feel the need to assert their ethnic identity. And this need is by no means a purely subjective need. Two decades after Filemon Lopez articulated what was then a politically-incorrect view about the need for and cultural responsiveness to diversity among Mexican immigrant farmworkers, a variety of community organizations and service delivery systems continue to overlook the fact that hiring Spanish-speaking staff is not all that is needed to create responsive, culturally-competent community institutions. Now, as then, the de facto perception persists in some sectors of the social service delivery system that interactions which force Mixtecos into reliance on their second language are “good enough” to get by.<sup>4</sup>

Another important reason why Mixteco efforts to strengthen “bonding” social capital is so important to Mixtecos themselves and to all of us is that Mixtecos' recent history as migrants, the “Mixtec diaspora” as University of Southern California researcher, Gaspar Rivera-Salgado refers to it, is that Mixtec “social technology” has the potential of providing valuable insights for promoting and sustaining civic engagement in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century global society where geographic proximity means less and less and virtual affinity networks mean more and more. Cultural identity is an invaluable framework for maintaining group cohesiveness but, at the same time, Mixtec social processes exhibit a remarkable openness to pragmatic innovation. Researchers Michael Kearney and Federico Besserer have described in some detail, for example, how villages such as San Juan Mixtepec are re-inventing

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<sup>2</sup> Angel Maria Garibay K (Ed), **Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España**, Editorial Porrúa, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> This event, a special event convened by Sandy Close of the Pacific News Service in 1983, included a wide range of grassroots Mixtec community leaders and activists, several of whom continue to be involved in a wide range of activities

<sup>4</sup> However an excellent step forward has been made by development of national guidelines. See the Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health Care,” March, 2001.

community processes to cope with: a) transnational migration as an ongoing process which separates families as pioneer male migrants travel north leaving women behind and b) the parallel lives of the original sending community and a network of “daughter communities”—in Mexico and in the U.S. (Kearney 1995; Besserer 1998; Kearney and Besserer 2002).

Besserer, whose research has focused on the community of San Juan Mixtepec in the Mixteca Alta, presents two alternative perspectives on transnational citizenship as the consequence of community economic strategies based on migration— his own view that transnational civic space is proactively created by migrants and the alternative view that transnational civic consciousness is the result of nation-building and migrant-receiving countries’ exclusion of migrants.

Both perspectives have merit—in that each highlights important aspects of the overall sociopolitical reality. However, Mixtecos’ own sense of community as a series of “virtual neighborhoods” within a very large migrant circuit is that their creation of continent-spanning affiliational networks is, indeed, an important cultural/civic achievement, a community resource maintained by language and ties among *paisanos*. Here is how the phenomenon is described by Filemon Lopez, originally a migrant farmworker from San Juan Mixtepec, who, as well as being a long-time civic activist is the radio host of the popular Hora Mixteca on Satellite Radio Bilingue,

*I think that what’s going on here, the advantage we have as Mixtecos, is a tradition of being very much together, communicating a lot among people. The people who live here in Lamont, [CA], in Kerman, [CA], or in Washington are in touch with people in North Carolina....A Mixteco, after leaving his village, especially if he’s financially marginalized, is in touch wherever he goes. He knows what’s going on. We don’t tend to set ourselves apart. People who do are different, they become mayordomos or farm labor contractors, or take advantage of others and, then, they make money and once they have money they don’t care any more. In contrast, we think about the problems that affect us as migrants—housing, labor rights, pesticides—but we also think about our communities’ development. So there are two reasons, two linked concerns—how to better our lives here and how we can make use of our earnings—for electrification, potable water, schools, collaboration. There are things we have to do there and also here too....*

It deserves note that Filemon’s description of how Mixtecos’ proactive creation of what are essentially “network communities” (from which individuals can exile themselves if they make too much money and decide to abandon their community identity and membership) is quite consistent with a more theoretical formulation articulated by a fellow migrant from San Juan Mixtepec, Gregorio Santiago (a radio host like Filemon but based in the San Quintin area of Baja California). Besserer quotes Santiago as follows:

*Traveling is part of the particular ways of life [plural in the original] of us the people of the Ñuusavi world. We have become people who are in perpetual movement. Such is the case of those of us who have come to live permanently in the working camps in the Valley of San Quintin. It’s a matter of our everyday life to change from being a ã Nuusavi (“a person of the people of the rain”) to become a Tacu Ndavi (literally “poor person” or “migrant”).*

As Besserer, Rivera-Salgado, Kearney, Stephen, and others note, then, Mixtec strategies for establishing affiliational networks and sustaining community identity are recognized as a

valuable item in an ethnic inventory of social capital. At the same time, the value of this intangible store of “goods”, Mixtec language and traditions is seen as contrasting sharply with economic value. Having money breaks a migrant off from his or her fellow community members.

A key strategic concern then becomes whether this inventory of social capital can: a) be maintained in the hostile conditions of California life, b) whether it can be readily drawn down upon in collectively addressing the issues central to civic life in California, and c) how Mixteco’s creation of their own transnational civic space might play out in terms of relationships to the civic space of the established domains “owned” by the civil authorities of local communities, states, and nation-states.

### **Se’e’Savi--Recreating Mixtec Identity in California**

On a warm Saturday afternoon in May, 2003, in the balloon-festooned backyard of a suburban home in Madera, a small group of four young Mixteco men changed out of their street clothes, blue jeans, T-shirts, and sunglasses, into their dance clothes, spurs, chaps, cowboy jackets, cowboy hats, and masks. These young men are from Se’e’Savi, a group which had been formed slightly less than a year before to engage young adults and youth in affirming their cultural heritage. The dance they performed at this event is “Los Rubios”, a dance which is, in a sense, a form of historical narrative. As the young men put on the ceremonial dance masks (and accompanying bandannas which hide their black hair) they immediately become transformed into old men. Of the masks they put on, two had been made by traditional craftsmen in the Juxtlahuaca area but two have been made in Madera—by a farmworker who now lives in Madera.

After some logistic problems in setting up an audiocassette (solved by bringing a pickup truck with 50-watt amplifier up the driveway to play the music) the dancers begin to dance and dust rises up as “Los Rubios” is re-created in California in celebration of the first communion of Marcos, an 11 year-old boy who is himself one of the members of Se’e’Savi. As the dance progresses and kicked-up dust drifts up in the course of dance, reminding the celebrants of the cattle drives, two young boys join in enthusiastically. This is not a “performance” or a “presentation”. It is recreation of Mixtec culture, a reaffirmation of Mixtec identity in California.

The young dancers’ enthusiasm, the boy’s eager willingness to join in the dancing suggests that despite the incongruities (e.g. the fact that the traditional dance is being videotaped by three of the Mixtec families in the backyard, despite the blue-and-white helium-filled party balloons), what is going on is really an integral part of the life of a “virtual community”. There is further evidence of the robustness of the effort to re-create, preserve, affirm Mixtec culture in that a number of the people in the Madera backyard have driven 3 hours from Santa Maria to the event and are talking about local efforts in this sister community of Mixtec Oaxacalifornia to establish a dance group.

The Madera backyard cameo described above as illustrative of Mixtec cultural revival is put forward as a concrete image of the ways in which it is possible, in a material world permeated with SUV’s, hot dogs, and credit cards, to sustain a cultural tradition which is now in its 2<sup>nd</sup> millenium. The outcome of the contest is, indeed, very much in doubt. For

example, Marcos, the center of the celebration, who will enter middle school next year remains bilingual—in Spanish and English. Asked about whether he speaks Mixtec still, he says, “I understand of some of the things they [parents, sisters, relatives] say to me...and I’d like to learn it better”.

### ***The Genesis of Se’e’Savi***

A persistent issue in considering strategies for catalyzing immigrant civic participation is how the process gets started. One possibility is that an external “community organizing” group must, like some *deus ex machina*, appear on stage to get things going. To some extent, this may be true. But there are probably significant trade-offs—as community organizing groups, like all organizations, themselves have “corporate cultures”. To what extent will there be an inevitable culture clash? What happens when an organizational culture which has, perhaps 30-40 years of history comes up against a Mixteco social technology which has existed and evolved for 1,400 years?

In some respects, the primary thrust of our entire effort in the current inquiry has been to better understand this issue, how it is that efforts to build bonding social get started in the first place, how small social networks are formed and how they grow—more or less the microcosmic processes of civic life in immigrant communities. The general answer that, at least in the case of Mexican immigrants, individual’s linkages to family members, extended family networks, village networks, and *paisanos* are ready-made structures which, inevitably, bring individuals together in collective action, is a partial explanation of the genesis of bonding social capital. In a parallel way, the analysis in the previous section of this report, of the Bracero mythology and the agricultural workplace as the genesis of bridging social capital provides additional insight into the dynamics of civic life in immigrant communities. Jorge San Juan’s reflections about how he came to be involved as a civic activist provides another piece of the puzzle—an understanding of why.

Jorge came north on his own, “out of necessity”, coming as a teenage migrant, right after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, to work in the California fields. He summarizes his time in the U.S. as follows,

*Now I’ve been here for 10 years. I came while I was till a minor. It was hard for me. When I tried to go to work, they’d say, “Go home, go to school!” But there wasn’t anyone to support me, to feed me, to put a roof over my head. Like they say, it was like using your fingernails to eat meat. I’d work for 2-3 days a week—because they realized they were breaking the law by hiring me. So I had to go to work in farmwork.*

Life was not just economically hard, it was personally hard. He says later,

*It was very tough at times. I think solitude was what made me fall down and what made it possible for me to get up again, recuperate. I think I’m lucky because I didn’t let myself fall too far. And when I got myself together again I remembered my parents’ words. If I hadn’t done that, I might have ended up as a drug addict, or as a drunk sleeping in the streets*

In one of his recent poems, “Se Quien Soy”<sup>5</sup> (“I Know Who I Am”) Jorge describes in even more depth, his experiences as a migrant teenager, and how they gave rise to his current involvement as a Mixtec community activist,

*.....The change was very drastic from one day walking in my homeland and, then another day in a place I hadn't known. It was like a dream or really more like a nightmare because I couldn't believe my eyes and my ears. For the first time I understood the word "RACISM" and saw how they humiliated my people, and I couldn't do anything because I had a knot in my throat and my heart was destroying me with those words which wounded me. That kept echoing in my ears and demeaned me but I wouldn't accept any of it and I said, "Why such insults if we're all humans one like another, if the same blood runs through everyone's veins?" I was still in my own country and I felt like a stranger. What happened to that phrase "SOVEREIGN AND FREE" and at that instant I thought a madman from an insane asylum had said those words. I never thought that some day all I had learned would get confused in my mind. Where had that white god who gave one love and peace, in whose eyes we were all equal, been left behind? Why wasn't he there to defend my people?*

*There were so many unanswerable questions that maybe it was because of that and to avoid any more humiliation that I denied my people, my origins, but time and distance change things. One day, lost in the streets some voices made me react, it was the echo of my parents and grandparents who through Mixtec words could give me, when finally I came to value my Oaxacan land. I looked at the sky and those stars which were there with me every night guarding me while I slept and I asked their forgiveness because I never valued them when I was little. I closed my eyes and cried out and asked my mother to forgive me for the times I'd denied my people, my land, my origins. I understood and began to value the richness that ran through my veins, the cultural worth of my language Mixteco. Today I proudly am a Mixtec Indian, lonely for my family and even though I'm not with my parents I carry them always in my heart and I'll pray to the God Sun and the God Moon for them.*

For Jorge San Juan, then, his volunteer work coordinating Se'e'Savi is a crucial part of life, shield against loneliness, connection family. In talking about how he feels about the work he is doing with the group he says,

*Needing to have a family is what got me started at working with the group...What gets me excited are my parents' words, and through them [the group] I find a family I can't have with me right now. Jokingly I'll sometimes say, "I have 40 children" and then, "No, I have 40 brothers and sisters". Every week I wait to see them. That's what motivates me. We're all a family. If someone leaves it's like breaking the ties which join us together.*

This account is, on the one hand, uniquely Jorge's story but it is, at the same time, an experience shared by many others. Cecilia Falicov, writing from the perspective of a family therapist, makes a valuable contribution to understanding the true dimensions of the experience of migration itself as part of immigrants' formative experiences and subsequent perspectives on social and civic life.<sup>6</sup> Falicov sees migration as being an experience of “ambiguous loss” because the separation is similar to the grief and mourning of irrevocable loss such as death but different in that reunion is possible. The idea of the U.S.-Mexico

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<sup>5</sup> *El Tequio: La Voz Binacional del FIOB*, November-December, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Cecilia Jaes Falicov, “Ambiguous Loss: Risk and Resilience in Latino Immigrant Families”, in Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Mariela Paez, **Latinos: Remaking America**, University of California Press, 2002.

border as a divide as extreme as the break between life/death is not an exaggeration. Family life is ripped apart as Jorge San Juan's poem states so forcefully. Talking with an undocumented Mixteca community activist in 2002 about her impending return to Putla, Oaxaca for her daughter's *quinceañera*, I was reminded that her decision to celebrate this important rite of passage in her daughter's life might mean permanent separation from her teenage son who lived with her in northern California. We should, then, see Jorge's experience as being as much an archtypical one as that of the Braceros. Falicov observes that, clinically, ambiguous loss can give rise to the construction of a binational identity, or alternatively, a sense of not belonging in either place. Jorge San Juan's experience of falling apart, dissolution, and recovery, remembering and relying on his parents' words, and finally affirming his cultural identity may be an extreme case but not an idiosyncratic one, much closer to a universal one. Both from his own perspective, and within the context of Falicov's theoretical framework, Jorge's proactive approach to finding personal fulfillment is one of constructing a binational identity, not just surviving but prevailing. Asked about his future plans/directions, Jorge said,

*First I need to learn English, and aside from English, bring my culture with me wherever I can. When I feel my culture is strong, and I see how strong it is here in the Valley, I'll move on to another county, maybe another state, to do the same as I have, so my culture will go on expanding—so they don't just say, Fresno, so they don't just say California—so, in other states, perhaps throughout the U.S., my culture will go on expanding there too. That's the future I want—for myself and for my community.*

Mixtec ingenuity and flexibility may, as Besserer suggests, make it possible for Mixtecos to construct a transnational community which rivals the nation-state in terms of civic space. But whether or not the nation-state is a dying type of social entity, it still has the power to inflict on migrants deep, personal pain. The emergence of groups such as Se'e'Savi, and the functional role it plays in the lives of the community activist who pushed so hard for it, in the lives of his fellow volunteer-activists, in the lives of Mixtec parents and their children, suggests that such efforts may be crucial tools in the "toolbox" of social technology to foster immigrant civic participation. The theme which runs through the experiences of all is "continuity"—for Jorge, connection/continuity with family and community, and for intact Mixtec families settled in Fresno and Madera counties, inter-generational continuity to keep 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generations of immigrants from losing touch with each other and their community. But assertion of cultural identity, transnational continuity, and strengthening of bonding social capital, can also impact civic life in general.

### ***Se'e'savi's First Public Appearance—from Cultural Identity to Civic Presence in Arvin***

Se'e'Savi is a new and fragile initiative. Informal talk about organizing this sort of group began in the early spring of 2002, continued for several months. The volunteer organizers scrambled for audiocassettes with the music for traditional dances, parents and community members began to try to remember hometown dance celebrations which some had not seen for years. The process was one of re-creation, not "maintenance" because, in truth, traditional community "funds of knowledge" about dance had been seriously eroded. During its first 6 months of development this effort, which took place under the aegis of the Centro Binacional de Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (which, however, had no budget or

available funds to support it) probably went forward with less than \$500 in small donations and in-kind contributions (e.g. for gas to take youth to the first few events), loaned costumes (from a Oaxacan dance group in Los Angeles). At that point, 10-15 parents and 10-20 youth were involved, although the group has grown in the past year to have 40 or so youth and about 20 parents.

I was fortunate to be able to observe how, even at its first public appearance, the Se'e'savi group made a subtle contribution to the development Mixtec civic life in the California sociopolitical arena. This first appearance was to celebrate the festival day of San Juan Mixtepec in Arvin (where many Mixtecos from this town and its surrounding *municipio* live) in late June, 2002.<sup>7</sup> This was itself something of a historic event because it was the first occasion in which San Juan Mixtepec's festival day had ever been celebrated in California. There had been, inevitably, much discussion about where this event should take place—a discussion eventually settled by general agreement that, in future years, the festival day should be celebrated in Santa Maria or Fresno where many in the village network also live.

The celebration took place in a newly refurbished Adobe Plaza in Arvin, the jewel in the crown of the town's new economic development plan—a combined community center/small-business incubator. It was an important community event—seen politically as an important opportunity to demonstrate that the several hundred thousand dollars spent on this public works project actually did have value “for the community”

The picture is very similar to that seen in summer events throughout rural America. There are perhaps 30-40 families, about 150 people in a semi-circle of folding chairs on a green lawn—some of them Mixteco families, some *mestizos*, Jaliscienses, Guanajuatenses, some Tejano/as from earlier waves of migrant farmworkers who came to Arvin. Children are playing. Announcements are made. Mixtec women are selling chicken *mole* and *clayudas*<sup>8</sup> under an awning to one side.

After the five couples--some of them teenagers or young adults, some parents in their 40's--who make up the core group of Se'e'savi danced, there was a public dance competition of *chilenas*, a popular Oaxacan music/dance style. As one would hope and expect in any such event, the dance contest winners include an older Mixtec couple who dance beautifully but sedately, the young couple who are really the most spectacular dancers, and an 8-year old Mixtec boy who had enthusiastically danced the *chilenas* on his own. The MC, of course, decides to wind up the prize-giving with a “special” award--\$10 dollars—and a few questions for the boy. The boy's answer to the final question (in Spanish), “*Vives aqui en Arvin?*” is emphatically “Yes!” (in English) much to the amusement of the entire crowd.<sup>9</sup>

After Se'e'Savi's presentation, and the dance contest, the Arvin's mayor, Juan Jose Olivares makes a speech to the crowd, in which he congratulates the festival organizers for the great

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<sup>7</sup> More correctly, Nuu'savi, as San Juan is a Hispanic overlay, the name of the town's patron saint, St. John the Baptist, and an earlier Aztec overlay—Mixtepec, i.e. “the place where Mixtecs live”.

<sup>8</sup> A traditional type of Oaxacan tortilla.

<sup>9</sup> The Master of Ceremonies who is now living in California is well-known as he was formerly a bilingual (Mixtec-Spanish) radio announcer in Ensenada, Baja California. Not surprisingly, his Mixtec is excellent.

job they have done in putting the event together. He goes on to commend Se'e'savi for their beautiful dancing and reiterate his excitement at having the opportunity to join with immigrants from San Juan Mixtepec in celebrating this very important event. And, of course, the mayor takes the opportunity to note that it was he who had pushed for the new Adobe Plaza complex where the event is being held and that events such as the San Juan Mixtepec festival make all the work worthwhile. The mayor's speech is absolutely within the mainstream of small-town civic life in America—except for the fact that the mayor is seeking to survive a recall (popularly seen as being motivated by anti-Mexican sentiment) and the fact that a substantial portion of the virtual community of San Juan Mixtepec in Arvin, California are ineligible to vote.

The celebration of San Juan Mixtepec's patron saint day and Se'e'savi's role in creating a "critical mass" for the celebration are, arguably, small "blips on the radar screen" in the immense panorama of transformations of civic life in California. However, these sorts of "micro-initiatives" may well be the sort of "small things which make a big difference" as social analyst Malcolm Gladwell puts it.

On August 15, 2002, six weeks after the San Juan Mixtepec celebration, a special election to recall Mayor Olivares was held. The election generated great regional interest, in part, due to the stark conflict between the demographics of the community (88% of Arvin's population is of Hispanic origin, 10% White Non-Hispanic) and of the electorate (with a disproportionate representation of Anglo-American voters). The other element is that the mayor's main opponent, Joet Stoner, had based her campaign, in part, on allegations that Mayor Olivares was trying to drive Whites out of town. Ultimately, Olivares survived the recall with a margin of 81 votes and the mayor remained in power.

What is interesting in this case is that, ultimately, about 70% of the votes in this racially-divisive election were cast by Latinos, and about 28% were cast by Anglos, the remaining 2% by African-American or Asian voters.<sup>10</sup> In actuality, the balance of political power in the community was held by Hispanic-origin voters (despite the disproportionate representation of Anglo voters), and it is quite conceivable that support for Olivares from the few Mixtec residents who were citizens and eligible to vote might have resulted in the crucial handful of votes the mayor needed to remain in office.

The outcome of this election, in turn, shifted the City Council from a raucous, squabbling, dysfunctional entity which had been addicted to 3-2 votes accompanied with personal invective into a collaborative body which has now at least found common ground in efforts (which may or may not be successful) to improve community life in Arvin.<sup>11</sup> Whether or

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<sup>10</sup> Two ethnographers from Ed Kissam's "New Pluralism" project, Anna Garcia and Aline Doignon, observed the voting at 2 of the 4 polling places and tabulated the ethnicity of 735 voters—slightly more than half of the Arvin electorate.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in a political conflict described by newspapers, Kern County political observers, and, sometimes, by local politicians themselves, as a struggle of ethnic politics, one of the new City Council members working closely with the council's Latino majority is African-American. Arvin has significant stores of "bridging" social capital as evidenced by cross-ethnic political allegiances in which sub-groups of Latinos and Whites are closely allied in opposition to the current Latino majority on the council.

not, Se'e'savi's Arvin presentation might have been an instance of the phenomenon whimsically referred to in writing on chaos theory as "the butterfly stamping its foot and turning the universe upside-down" is unknowable. What is knowable, in terms of civic life, and political responsiveness is that the mayor of Arvin and the Arvin City Council consider Mixtecos to be an important constituency—even though most cannot vote. Disenfranchised or not, they are visible in community civic life due to Se'e'Savi's efforts, along with those of local Mixteco community workers, Fausto Sanchez and Hector Hernandez from the CRLA Arvin office.<sup>12</sup>

### **Outward-moving Ripples—The Maskmaker and Onward to Civic Participation**

Efforts such as Se'e'Savi have the potential of generating ripples which move outward from the group of parents and children throughout loosely-organized networks of Mixtecos--perhaps even igniting a "social epidemic". A clear-cut direct objective of the Se'e'savi dance group is cultural continuity, engaging Mixtec children growing up in the cultural world of their parents and the virtual, transnational "network community" of Mixtecos.

A more tangential and, perhaps, equally valuable impact is to strengthen parents' and other Mixtec adults' participation in, engagement in their virtual community. Jorge San Juan considers this an important part of the effort and is excited by what he sees as immediate results. Here is how he describes what happens at the weekly rehearsals/gatherings of the group of parents and youth and why it is important,

*Many farmworkers get done in from fieldwork...there's no chance to even talk to their children....Even though they're here with their wives and children, not all their family is here...When we get together it's like a big family—yelling, smiling, joking, everything. So they get excited also about showing up—even if there's not been time to take a bath or eat, they go straight to the rehearsals. It's fun, there's an atmosphere of tranquility and I think their exhaustion evaporates...<sup>13</sup>*

The process leading up to Se'e'savi's re-creation of the "Los Rubios" dance in California presents another example of how "small things can make a big difference". In order to perform "Los Rubios" Se'e'Savi needed to have four masks. These are fairly small, hand-carved masks, painted with lacquer paint. They are a crucial part of the stagecraft of transforming young men into the dance's image of mature men celebrating their return from the month-long trek driving cattle from the highlands of the Mixteca Alta to the Pacific Coast. Jorge San Juan tells of his interaction with the maskmaker as follows:

*He was distant—from his neighbors, even from his own family. When he got involved with the group everything changed...Now he's laughing all the time...We needed the masks for the dance, and he said, "I can make them, but the problem is I don't have any tools". So I told him, "That's not a problem" so he explained "I've been looking around here for the kind of trees you use to make the masks and finally I found*

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<sup>12</sup> Fausto Sanchez, a former farmworker, has been extensively engaged in building "bridging" capital via events such as a local library presentation co-sponsored by FIOB/CBDIO on Mixtec culture. However, Fausto and his family are also maintaining their cross-border ties to the extended Mixtec community. On the most recent occasion when I talked with Fausto, he and his wife had just returned from a round trip, 12 hours or so of driving, to take donations of clothing to a Mixtec labor camp in the San Quintin area.

<sup>13</sup> This term (*tranquilidad*) in Spanish also conveys a sense of calmness, freedom from anxiety, worry. Thus exuberance and tranquility are not contradictory emotions.

*them, but they're by the river. So I can't use an electric saw with a cord". So we bought him a little chain saw with a gas motor. So he cut some tree limbs and took them home. He's told us he now has finished 3 masks and that he's willing to make more".*

So Se'e'Savi has been, in that regard at the very least, an example of the "Cultura Cura" sort of program design. But Jorge goes on to share his thinking about the next steps in building outward and upward from the mask maker's involvement in the group, saying,

*I'd like to find an opportunity to help him more—to have an exhibition of his masks. He's a farmworker who works in the fields and I want people to know that he's [also] an artisan, that he makes art. And more of the youth have gotten excited about this...I'm going to talk with him and, if he has the time, say to the youth, here we have an in-house artist, this is how he works, and hopefully he can teach the youth how to do this sort of artisanry.*

Jorge is clear that the cultural affirmation is not an end in itself but a first step in building the bonding social capital which will provide the foundation for building a sense of community. While the Mixteco community may be a virtual one emerging from the framework of extended family and village networks, there must be an actual locus for community life—the Friday nights which bring tired, hard-working parents together with others and their children. He sees the next step toward full-fledged civic participation as a necessary one and he sees it as being based on self-expression and oriented toward "making a mark" on community life. He contrasts Se'e'Savi's efforts to build civic participation with more frankly political ones as follows,

*Civic participation is a duty. It's when we start to work together, to talk, and to listen. Before, I wasn't involved in anything and I'd say this law they're passing doesn't matter to me, I don't have time, I'm tired from work...But there are good opportunities which get lost...If there's a law that's negatively affecting me, of course I'll oppose it..[But]...many people think that civic participation is to complain, to file suits, about laws, about bad things, but civic participation is also about positive things. I say to the youth, "Going out to clean the streets [a community service project suggested to the group by a girl who is a high school student] isn't having a demonstration, it's something positive. But I see all kinds of participation as positive, it makes changes...*

So, in actuality, Jorge's vision of civic participation is not one which is opposed to civic activism, self-assertion, but, rather, one which strives, also, toward meaningful civic engagement, not just ceremonial participation. We go on to talk schools' role in civic education and the possibility that teachers may be worried about whether they are sanctioned to teach about active civic involvement. San Juan's impression of the situation is the following:

*The reason they [teachers] are scared, like politicians is that they are afraid that these people who have gone along blindly will open their eyes. So if one started to organize, to build organizations and everyone in the community were to participate in them, they would think that it would lead to their downfall [su derrota]. What they're scared of—both teachers and politicians—is that we'll all take initiative, that we'll all talk, that we'll not just show up to sign a paper [to register] to vote and leave it at that, that we'll come to the point of expressing ourselves, and start yelling, saying "No, not that!" What would become of a teacher if a student shows up in their class and says, "Teacher, I don't like your class. You don't know how to teach!" If a youth becomes an activist and is given the chance to say how they feel, the teacher's not going to like it.*

Jorge San Juan's recognition of the inevitable conflict between popular self-expression, the ideal vision of participatory democracy and hierarchical institutions of social control echoes, at a concrete and practical level, the more abstract efforts by researchers and academics to understand the dynamics which give rise to the development of transnational ethnic communities such as those of Mixteco migrants. Within this context, the strategy of starting by strengthening bonding social capital as the basis for self-expression and moving on, using that accomplishment as the fulcrum to gain power to begin to act to advance one's goals makes total sense. At the same time, Jorge's recognition of the forces arrayed against this sort of exercise by immigrants (or other disadvantaged groups) of their collective "voice" is judicious.

### **A Resonant View—*Danza*/Cultural Revival as Workshop for Building Civic Skills**

A discussion on a Mixtec-oriented public radio program "La Hora Mixteca" on March 30, 2003 provides yet additional insight into current Mixtec community leaders' thinking on the issue of how transnational migrant networks can give birth to "local" place-based institutions and how we should visualize civic responsibilities in a transnational community. Santiago Ventura, a well-known Mixtec community activist, originally from San Miguel Cuevas, who, after several years in Fresno, now lives and works in Oregon, explained to the radio host, Filemon Lopez, that he considered his return from Woodburn, Oregon to Fresno to dance in a traditional dance, "El Acharreo" to be an essential civic commitment—because the dance event was part of San Miguel Cuevas' first village celebration in California.<sup>14</sup> This was interesting in its own right, because the celebration was a huge gathering, cars lined up along the road for almost half a mile. Also, if there is, indeed, a trend toward home villages' traditional celebrations in California and other parts of the U.S. this must also be seen as a shift in Mixtecos' thinking about the extent to which "community" is really a network phenomenon—whether "home" may indeed be where one has settled.

Ventura went on in his on-air remarks to argue an even more interesting proposition, that the teamwork required to organize such community celebrations has value not only as a contribution to maintaining and asserting Oaxacan village identity but, also, as a locus for dispersed migrants to learn how to work effectively in the context of long-distance collaboration. Not surprisingly, Filemon agreed enthusiastically, as did a range of listeners who called in to the show. At the same time, it was illuminating to find La Hora Mixteca, itself a vehicle for networking among Mixtecos (and other indigenous Mexican migrants), serving as the "virtual agora" for a range of Mixtecos from many village networks to voice their approval of the San Miguel Cuevas' decision for a California celebration.

### **A Woman's Story—From Mother to Civic Activist**

Raquel Velasco, a fruit-processing plant employee in Winters, California, is, from a sociological perspective, a typical Mexican immigrant. From a personal perspective she is an extraordinary woman whose perspectives and civic involvement routinely transcend everyone's expectations. I met Raquel when I was introduced to her in 1998 by Sacramento Valley Organizing Community (SVOC) staff who told us she was a good example of the

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<sup>14</sup> This celebration is on the feast day of the community's patron saint, St. Michael Archangel.

“community leaders” with whom they were working on housing issues. In this regard also, Raquel represents a paradigm, yes, but she is not “typical”

Raquel is a petite middle-aged mother of three. At the point we first met, her two daughters were still living at home, Raquel was working at the fruit-processing plant (sometimes on a split-shift schedule), and she was juggling the roles of full-time mother, full-time worker, and full-time community activist—advocating for low-income housing for Mexican immigrants to Winters (most of them, also, working at the fruit-processing plant) and serving as the driving force, inspiration, coordinator/whip, and reflective voice of the SVOC Winters immigrant activist group.

Raquel’s story also reminds us of that community organizing projects and other programs designed to promote civic participation do not “create” activists or “community leaders” but, do provide support and mentoring as a civically engaged citizen such as Raquel forges their own path forward. This sort of dynamic interaction is one which the Civic Voluntarism model predicts in that SVOC’s role as a “recruitment network” was crucial to Raquel’s emergence as a civic activist. The model also demonstrates that, ideally, the same organizational network which recruits a potential civic activist, can serve, also, as a training ground for building civic skills—in analytic thinking, persuasive communication, and collaboration. Raquel Velasco’s emergence as a civic activist is a success story for SVOC and a success story for her personally.

### ***Character As an Element in Civic Competency***

Raquel’s story underscores a fundamental difficulty which policymakers and program planners find challenging. As it turns out “civic skills”, when we consider them as the functional competencies required to be effectively engaged in civic life require not just cognitive abilities but, also, a variety of less easily defined competencies which we think of as relating to character—integrity, personal style, personal values, modes of social interaction. Raquel’s story is as important one about who she is and how she came to be that person as it is in terms of what she does or how she does it. These very real aspects of one’s personal identity are difficult to address as an aspect of social policy because they are, on the one hand, intensely personal and, to some extent, “private”. On the other hand, they are clearly publicly visible. And they are clearly an important facet of any individual’s functioning as a civic activist in a variety of roles: as role-model, as counselor/supporter, as source of encouragement, as strategist, as communicator.

Analysts, researchers, and theorists in the field of leadership development are quite willing to consider these personal dimensions of social interaction and teamwork as a legitimate subject of inquiry, so there is not much debate that these aspects of character can legitimately be considered of as part of the “bundle” of skills addressed in personal development. But in the context of “educational policy” there is, correctly, much more apprehension as to whether “character” is something to be addressed legitimately as part of public social policy efforts or political process.

### ***Social Roles and Opportunities for Civic Activism***

The process of juggling the difficult task of raising children with work and participation in community life is, in no sense, incidental to the overall challenges of becoming, and remaining, civically engaged. The paradigm of the civic activist as “little old lady in tennis shoes” has fairly obvious messages about gender and civic participation: no child care responsibilities, not deeply preoccupied with image, experienced and, by implication, financially independent to make the burden of long hours of civic work feasible and the likelihood that the middle-aged men who are also engaged in civic affairs are much more likely to be well-paid staff—political appointees or technical/managerial specialists.

At the same that Raquel must be seen as an individual and her personal story considered as part of public learning about how to promote civic engagement, it is necessary to see her story as providing insights into a multitude of untold, unrecognized stories of Mexican women who have come as immigrants to California. Her story is one which has important implications for thinking about how gender roles enter into the development of civic activists.

### ***Formative Experiences in the Life of a Civic Activist***

Like most Mexican immigrants to farmwork, Raquel Velasco was born in a small hamlet, Rancho La Barranca, outside the community of Ojo Caliente, Aguascalientes. This region of Mexico, like the Jaripo area of Michoacan, is a very well-established migrant-sending region. The nearby community of Nochixtlan is a major migrant-sending village and Teocaltiche, Jalisco, the community of origin of many Winters immigrants has, also, sent migrants north for many years.

Raquel’s father, like many men in the area, began migrating to the U.S. as a teenager, as a Bracero. After the program was over, he continued migrating north as an undocumented farmworker. While Raquel was growing up, her father would spend 6 months of the year working in California farmwork and 6 months working his lands at home. Although he was caught from time to time by the Border Patrol, this was a stable way of life—even though the family remained in poverty. Raquel remembers her dad bringing her shoes on his return home. She, like other children in Mexican villages, saw these gifts as something from the mysterious northern lands of California but, laughingly, she told me that they actually were from Leon, Guanajuato, a famous leatherworking center in the Bajio.

### Childhood experiences as the foundation for civic activism

Raquel’s father did not know how to read or write but he played an important role in her development of civic skills, her civic education. The family’s house was far from neighbors and Raquel’s father would take her with him to the hillside plot he farmed; she remembers beginning to help with planting when she was only three or four years old. She fondly remembers, also, riding horseback to the hills. Her father played an important role in making Raquel the courageous and proactive woman she is today. In talking about her personal development Raquel remembers vividly one example of how her father helped her become brave,

*When we got to the hillside plot, my dad went to look for the team of oxen, and he’d lift me up onto a large boulder so that an animal wouldn’t eat me—because it was an isolated area in the mountains. I would keep*

*calling out to him so he'd know I was still there....Sometimes it would rain and there would be lightning. I was very scared of the lightning bolts and would try to get under the cart, but my dad would tell me that wasn't a good idea either.*

At the same time, Raquel reflects that she wasn't an unusually brave child. She recalls, laughingly, that she would whine a lot and have nightmares. She says, "I would even scream when my uncle would tease me by sneaking up and dropping a cigarette pack on my neck (like an insect alighting)". But she was (at least in her memories) an assertive child. She remembers that while she was sowing with her father, she would sometimes stop halfway down the furrow and make a stand telling him she wouldn't work any more. He would hit her when he got annoyed but Raquel mentions this as only a small part of a flow of fond memories. She remembers, also, that halfway through the workday, her father would stop and build her a little shelter out of branches and cornstalks and that she would drink fresh milk from the cows they had.

Eventually, Raquel's family sent her to school and her life went on like other children's as she grew up. But her father's migration, the family's poverty, in combination with her parents' encouragement provided a sound foundation for the roles Raquel now handles with ease. She remembers that the family was so poor it was hard to buy pencils and paper and that she didn't want to go to school because of that. But, once again, she emphasizes the, almost inevitable, combination of apprehension and perseverance:

*I always knew unconsciously that even though you never can be completely sure, you have the illusion that that things will turn out. I'm not scared of that. I never think that things will turn out badly. My daughters keep on asking me (about her community involvement), "Aren't you embarrassed?". I tell them, "Sure I'm embarrassed, but I have to do it and I'm not scared. I'm going to do it!"*

So, Raquel's story is one where early childhood experiences make a difference but so do adult experiences. Pursuing our conversations about courage at one point I asked Raquel, "When did you stop being scared of things" and her answer was, "When I crossed the border...although I still would do things even though I was crying inside (before I crossed the border)." So, for Raquel, and many women like her "crossing the border" is not simply a move through space and time but, also, a tremendous change in social geography. What is not easily captured in tabular data or regression equations is that the process of "crossing the border" a journey which also requires her to navigate from traditional to new gender roles.

### Living in Changing Times

Raquel remembers thinking as a girl that she would never marry a migrant farmworker — because of the loneliness and emotional ups and down of wives and children being left alone for months on end before a migrant came home again. But, like most girls in her village, she did marry a migrant.<sup>15</sup> Raquel's migration story begins as her husband disappears into the north. She remembers, "My husband came to the US but then I didn't hear anything from him for a year". To make ends meet Raquel began borrowing money to support herself and

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<sup>15</sup> See **Table 10.1** (Massey et al 1987) Massey and his colleagues estimate that in the established migrant-sending villages at the point when Raquel got married, about 70% of the men would migrate at some point in their lives.

her children. So finally she said to herself, “Am I married or not”. So, being the proactive sort of person she is, Raquel came north as a female solo migrant, an almost unthinkable phenomenon years before.

In making her decision to come north or stay at home in Ojo Caliente, Raquel reflected long and hard about her life and the life she wanted for her children. She asked advice from a Mexican official, asking what she needed to do to get a visa to go to the U.S. and he gently and obliquely told her that would not be possible (U.S. consulates are reluctant to issue visas to persons who are very likely to become visa overstayers), that she should find “another way”. She went to a friend, an older woman and asked her advice about what to do given that she’d have to cross the border illegally. The woman suggested she borrow the money for the border-crossing from her father. She remembers she thought of the famous folk song, “Cuatro Caminos”—about the decisions one makes in life, which road one should take, and made her decision to go forward.

### ***Crossing the Border***

Raquel went to her father, who continued to migrate to California and asked him to let her accompany him to the U.S. and lend her the money to pay a *coyote* to cross the border. Raquel’s mother didn’t want her to go to the US but, also, she thought she should find her husband. Raquel was a mother with three children already, the eldest a son, and two very young daughters. Her mother didn’t want Raquel to leave her daughters behind and she didn’t want to leave them either, but she decided this was a step she had to take. It was a difficult and traumatic decision. As their mother left to go north, Raquel’s daughters started crying. For a moment, Raquel thought she couldn’t do it, that she wasn’t going to go. At the brink of taking off, her mother told Raquel, she shouldn’t leave her daughter behind, that she should take her too. But that was impossible. Finally, her father said to her mother, “Well you encouraged her too!” So they went forward with the plan. Her mother took her sobbing daughters into the house and Raquel set off with her father and her son.

After arriving in Tijuana Raquel stayed for 2 months with an uncle while she was waiting to find a safe way to cross. Her father could not wait for her as he had to return to work at the ranch in San Diego County where he worked so he went on alone and crossed. An American friend of her father’s sent for Raquel’s son and crossed him easily but she was still left waiting in Tijuana. Raquel and her uncle talked about crossing the border with family friends who worked as coyotes—but they finally decided that the wisest course would be to pay an experienced, reliable *coyote*.

She remembers that her uncle took her to see a classic movie ‘La India Maria’ —kidding her about how she would have to dress like a man to go with the party of migrants. She dressed like a man in pants and went through the mountains near Tecate even though it was already winter. She was, indeed, the only woman in the border-crossing group. The *coyote* told her, “No matter what happens, even if we have to run, stay close to me”. Raquel laughs as she tells of running into another group in the dark and guys saying, “At least we can go fast since there’s no friggin’ women with us” not knowing she was, in fact a women. She says, “I always was a good walker”.

After they had successfully crossed the border, the guide left Raquel alone in San Isidro at the trolley station right after dawn while he went off to make contact with people in a safe house who would pick them up. It was a traumatic experience. ( Raquel started to cry as she recounted the experience for us). The guide had left her there without any money at all though he gave her the address of the safe house (but she knew nothing about the layout of the town and, thus, had no idea where the house was) just in case. She was wet and cold from walking all night. She waited there a long, long time. Winos would come by begging and she would say, “Well, I have less money than you do”. Finally the guide found a man who ran a restaurant but also worked transporting migrants who would take her to the ranch where her dad worked. The guide charged the intermediary to take good care of her. When Raquel was delivered to her father, he paid the restaurant worker with a crate of avocados from the ranch where he worked.

Subsequently, she sent for her daughters to join her. After the girls had arrived in Tijuana, it was necessary to figure out how to get them across the border. A family friend, who had papers said she'd not charge much to cross the girls as though they were her own daughters. But then, after hearing of Raquel's situation as a mother on her own, she said she wouldn't think of charging her, and finally brought the girl across at no charge. Raquel says that, from time to time, talking with her daughters they tell her, “You should have left us back there [in Ojo Caliente]” but then they agree that, no, she did the right thing. Her daughters know there was no work, no way to make a living back there.

### ***Traditional Values and Network Flexibility***

Raquel's journey north provides a good idea of how the changing dynamics of migration are forging a new cultural mix of mutualism and independence. Raquel embarked on her journey driven, in part, by social values which stress the importance of lifelong marriage and child-rearing, but her journey, initiated by the breakdown of the values which allowed her husband to cut off contact with her and his children, took place within a new framework of values. Within this new framework a woman's right to be independent, take risks on her own, and make key life decisions on her own was respected—by her father, her mother, her uncle (and eventually her children). While her fellow migrants still clung to gender stereotypes (e.g. “Women are fragile, they can't take the hardship of walking across the mountains and running from the *migra*”) her migration took place within the traditional mutualist context of support from male relatives.

Throughout the ordeal of her journey from being the married wife of a migrant and stay-at-home mother to settling in Winters, California, Raquel was helped by the people in her social networks. The help she got was not simply to walk all night across a formidable mountain range to come to California but, also, the help she need to move out of a dead-end life as a woman waiting passively year after year for the husband who would never return. For Raquel and others like her, even the most self-reliant and courageous of immigrants, reliance on social networks, the social capital of affiliational networks, in this case, traditional extended family and village networks, is also a key resource in “crossing the border” from social and political isolation into active civic participation.

### ***Getting Involved in Community Activism—Women's Networks***

Raquel's involvement with SVOC began because her next door neighbor, Mrs. Ramirez, told her she should get involved, that it was something she should do even if she didn't have any free time. Another friend, Lydia Montiel, also was part of the group. Yet another, friend, co-worker, and member of the SVOC group of activists, Aurora Borges, also, urged her to get involved. Raquel says, admiringly, of Ms. Borges, "She was always pulling people in and getting them enthusiastic about being involved [in organizing for a low-income housing development] even though it turned out she didn't, herself, manage to qualify [for one of the homes which were eventually built]".

While the social networks of extended family members, *paisano/as*, helped hold the group together, what SVOC's deliberate community organizing efforts did was to build a pre-existing informal social network—which appeared to have developed around a core of women working at the processing plant—into a group of civic activists who had the skills to be noticed by mainstream civic leaders and institutions. As for male farmworkers for whom the agricultural provides an opportunity to develop social capital, for the SVOC women working on affordable housing in Winters relationships with packing plant co-workers were the basis for building *confianza*, mutual trust. These ties, based on gender and workplace friendships, bridged migration networks—bringing immigrant women from Yucatan (Ms. Borges), Michoacan (Ms. Montiel), and neighbors (Ms. Ramirez) together in leading a common cause. Interestingly, the stereotypical view that Mexican women's civic engagement is constrained by male reluctance to accept women's participation in active roles is eroded by the Winters situation where the majority of the civic action group leadership consisted of women. In talking with at least two male participants in the community action group and querying them about their thoughts on Raquel's leadership of the group, neither expressed any reservations. From their perspective, it was natural for her to assume a leadership role because they considered her to have leadership qualities.

### ***Organizational Strategies for Building Immigrants' Civic Skills***

The community organizing model used by SVOC to guide its work to actively engage Winters immigrants in a wide range of civic initiatives worked well for Raquel because it was experientially oriented, because it was structured to provide immigrants like Raquel with opportunities for civic interaction which they would not, otherwise, have and helping them to prepare to take advantage of those opportunities, and followup on them. Essentially, the SVOC organizing approach envisions the organization's role as a "recruitment network" for civic action as one in which the organization offers local immigrants a "menu" of possible areas for collective community action. The model draws on Mexican immigrants' "cultural capital", i.e. the social technology of mutualism, to set in motion a process whereby the bonding social capital inherent in Mexican immigrants' networks and the bridging capital developed in the workplace are combined to provide the fulcrum for developing "civic capital", that is, the ability of immigrants to draw on the resources they already have to engage in effective civic action in the new context of California communities and the U.S. political system.

In Winters, the particular campaigns which Raquel and others finally became involved in addressed two major areas of community concern: availability/affordability of housing and children's education. In terms of civic activities these campaigns included: voter registration, efforts to pass a school bond (in part to give immigrant parents political leverage in

discussing, “negotiating”, with school officials about ways to improve their children’s school experience), advocacy for local ESL/Citizenship classes, and advocacy for low-income housing. For Raquel, part of the motivation was the enjoyment of “getting things done”, having a real impact on the community. Enthusiastically she said, “People themselves are doing it! I like doing things, not just talking!” When asked what she thought about how to best involve people in civic action she said, “Have a big agenda!”

Talking about her civic skills development, Raquel told me, “I like what I’ve learned....and I’ve learned well”. She points to several factors which make a difference. One factor, she notes, is that she didn’t, at first, know the technical information about how systems work but that once she was provided the information she needed to understand the environment she was working in, then she enjoyed the process of strategizing on her own, of analytic thinking. In this regard, Raquel’s very Mexican sense that “things are usually not what they seem to be” served her well. She told us that she likes the process in which one question, leads to another, and finally, to the point at which one can really know everything about what’s going on “inside the system”.

### ***Building Self-Confidence***

Raquel often returns to consideration of the ongoing tensions in her life between lack of confidence and a proactive outlook and between traditional and contemporary roles. She explained that at first, she was shy. Laughingly, she noted that, at first, she was even scared to talk to the local priest. And certainly she was afraid of talking to strangers (in English, at least). In Raquel’s development, part of the impact of SVOC’s intervention stemmed from structured training—which helped her learn how to speak in a well-organized way in public, and to speak without notes. The value of involvement in SVOC’s “civic recruitment network” included the opportunity to test and master those skills.

Raquel identifies a key point in her personal skills development as being an opportunity to have dialogue with the local Catholic priest on a one-to-one basis (not as a parishioner per se). Raquel told us (and others subsequently confirmed it) that the local priest had many reservations about “mixing politics and religion” but she goes on to say, “...but finally we brought him along”. For Raquel, and we believe many others, the critical issue is, in large part, dynamics, a “mastery-oriented” experiential curriculum in which successes serve to build self-confidence, and self-confidence contributes to success. The SVOC model is particularly thoughtful (and well attuned to people like Raquel who struggle to achieve the ideal balance of self-confidence and apprehension) in that a highly formalized process of group review and reflection on each “action”, each civic event, is used as a tool to build individual and group self-confidence. If one understands the syntax of success and failure, it is obvious that one can experience a greater “locus of control”, ability to working perseveringly to achieve difficult, ambitious objectives.

### ***Transcending the Boundaries of Class and Position***

Based on Raquel’s account of her development as an activist, another aspect of personal growth and growing civic engagement, is the fairly straightforward process of bringing engaged civic activists, especially those who are potential community leaders, in contact with established political players. In talking about her personal development Raquel enumerated

the people who she had had an opportunity to talk with personally, in her role as Co-Chair of the SVOC Winters Committee, about one of the several issues of concern to her and her group: the Mayor of Winters, Antonio Villaraigosa (then Speaker of the California Assembly), Congresswoman Helen Thomas, Henry Cisneros (then Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development), the Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento, and the President of the Bank of America. Her generally interactions with these well-known local, state, and national figures, reasonably enough, contributed to her self-confidence about her ability to be effective in her civic involvement.

SVOC's community organizing model further levels the playing field for immigrant civic activists by engaging new immigrant activists in organizing events where they control the social/political environment. Essentially, this sort of event skillfully decreases the power asymmetries between low-income immigrants and other interest groups in the sociopolitical environment by initiating and/or hosting events of their own—individual meetings, group meetings, and public assemblies. This provides another sort of learning opportunity for the development of civic skills. During the year before we first met her, Raquel, for example, had chaired and spoke at a SVOC-sponsored celebration of the successful conclusion of a voter registration campaign, spoke at a celebration of the conclusion of a campaign to pass the local school bond measure, and introduced the priest who had initially seemed to her such a formidable figure at an SVOC assembly. The key to this strategy seems to be a careful balancing of guidance/support from experienced community organizers combined with an insistence that developing immigrant activists have genuine “ownership” of the organization, that the environment for civic skills development be an “authentic” one.

### ***Popular Ownership—The Value of Bottom-Up Civic Action***

From Raquel's perspective, the value of the SVOC approach to building leadership skills can most clearly be seen by contrasting her experience within its “civic recruitment network” with her experience as a member of the local Migrant Education Parents' Advisory Council, a program design feature which is also intended to provide farmworker parents with an experiential base for civic engagement. Raquel's critique of the Migrant Education Council was simply that the role of parents was to be a “rubber stamp” for courses of action proposed by staff. In this sort of situation where the ritual of deliberation and civic process predominates, the skills-building impact is minimal. Experience only serves as a sound foundation for civic action if participants' experience provides opportunities for activists to “own”, to design, actually pursue, and achieve their objectives.

### ***Communication Skills—Individual and Social Identity in Gathering Information and Sharing Perspectives***

It is useful to consider the competencies which immigrants need for effective civic participation as consisting of two related but distinct skills sets—general communication competencies and English-language ability. The challenge of learning to be an effective communication—to be a good listener and a good persuasive speaker—are skills which native-born activists and immigrants must both develop. But for Mexican immigrants there is the additional challenge of developing the specific 2<sup>nd</sup> language skills needed in California civic life.

Raquel's experience with civic activism suggests that a two-phase strategy for building communication skills is underway as immigrants move toward civic activism and that it makes sense to design programs to contribute to these pre-existing natural processes. That involves, first, focusing on building the strategic skills related to analyzing the context of persuasive communication and effective verbal or written presentation of one's perspective or arguments, and secondly, focusing on building the actual practical skills of actually speaking or writing lucidly. The first set of skills is closely linked to articulating and expressing one's identity, what analysts such as Vygotsky refer to as "voice" in language. The second relates more to practice and language-learning proper. It is likely that investment in building the first set of skills, the analytic/strategic competencies result in ongoing civic engagement in a variety of roles while the second set are part of the skills which contribute more to specific roles (e.g. as public representative of a group, as an effective debater).

Raquel sees her limited English as an impediment to getting more involved and moving upward to take on still more demanding roles in community affairs. But at the same time she considered the public SVOC-sponsored events as having been a good way to practice English. Within the traditional realm of education, she had done well also—having successfully prepared for her GED and passed the exam (during a period of personal crisis) and having successfully studied for and passed her naturalization test to achieve citizenship. Even when we first talked to her, she thought it conceivable that one day she might run for City Council (and she knew it was, like the rest of her work, unpaid).

The final area of civic skills development we talked about with Raquel related to analytic thinking and teamwork. She stresses her sense that a good community leader has to listen as well as speak persuasively—a view closely paralleling current leadership "experts" who see effective leadership more in terms of catalyzing teamwork than as top-down management. Raquel observes,

*Lots of times we listen but we don't understand, right? My daughters say, "Mom, you always keep wanting to find out what's really going on, underneath everything". At times I don't ask a question; I just observe. I do listen but I'm always anxious to know if I understood things right. I keep wanting to interrupt..."*

So, finally, Raquel is a leader who does not behave "like a politician", i.e. a leader engaged in teamwork and helping others. She says, "When people aren't at the exact point you are, the thing you have to do is keep on telling them what's going on—step by step".

### ***Sustainability of Civic Engagement***

After three years of intense effort, the SVOC community group's efforts to force the City of Winters to build a low-income housing development which would provide the very high level of subsidies required to make home ownership feasible for very low income immigrant workers like Raquel failed. The City of Winters' Housing Advisory Council came to believe that heavily-subsidized housing was not "good" for immigrant workers—in part because the alternative strategy for meeting the municipality's obligations under the housing element of its General Plan cost less. There was, privately, a good deal of rhetoric about the positive moral impacts of "sweat equity", of immigrants' pride in helping to build their own homes—although Raquel and other women who worked at the nut and fruit-processing plant had

explained that the challenges of juggling work and family life, especially with split-shift schedules, made it difficult to reliably engage in yet another role as house-builder.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of the heavily-subsidized housing development which Raquel and others had worked towards, the City of Winters moved forward with a self-help model of housing development and the houses were built and occupied by immigrant families. Although Raquel had opposed the “sweat equity” model of housing development, she and her daughters eventually became one family among the new homeowners. They had approached the daunting challenge of combining work, family life, and school and home-building with as much energy as they had others. One of our last discussions with Raquel was cut short because she and her daughters had to leave to go pick up hardware for installation of the air-conditioning unit in the house which was under construction.

One of the parts of Raquel’s full life which was truncated by the difficult undertaking of home-building was her community activism. When we last talked, Raquel was encouraging her neighbors in proactive efforts to get the Winters Unified School District to add a school bus stop near the new low-income housing development so that their children would not have to walk along the side of the main highway into Winters to catch the school bus. But she was not as directly involved in the group as in the past. Raquel reflected on her diminished involvement emphasizing how good she thought it was for others to be taking on leadership roles, that she was happy to see others, including her friend, Lydia Montiel, who had first involved her in SVOC’s work, taking the lead.

Whether the story of the 4 years of Raquel’s life as a civic activist is a story line to be summarized as one in which the civic activist or “the system” won, is not entirely clear. The thought that any community might be deprived of the communication, analytic thinking, and teamwork skills of a civic activist such as Raquel Velasco is a sad one. On the other hand, this individual story reflects the reality captured by the Civic Voluntarism model that resources of time and money enter into the equation of civic participation.

My conclusion is that it should be expected that immigrants’ civic participation will be sporadic—as life crises such as Raquel’s needing to devote her time to working to support her daughters and sweat equity to acquire a home, cut short a “career” of civic activism. At the same time, the related recognition must be that the personal strengths, skills, and perspectives of a woman like Raquel, the personal transformations she underwent taking on a new role as mother on her own, female head of household as part of her move to California, and the intense experience of being recruited into a civic action network such as SVOC’s and using that venue as an opportunity to develop her civic skills, have forged in Raquel a “civic character” which she will never lose. We do not know if she will become visibly active in community affairs again, what her priorities will be if she does (as her youngest daughter is now out of high school), or what roles she will explore. What is fairly clear is that Raquel is likely, even in “invisible roles” as a responsible citizen and community activist, to make significant contributions to improving community life in Winters. Despite the uncertainties associated with the James Irvine Foundation’s investment in the Central

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<sup>16</sup> This emerged in an interview with an advisory council member Ed Kissm interviewed as part of the Aguirre evaluation of SVOC’s community organizing work in Winters and the overall effectiveness of the housing campaign.

Valley Partnership for Citizenship, the uncertainties about SVOC's ability to consistently implement its plan of action, and the uncertainties about outcomes for even the "best and the brightest" among popular activists, this sort of long-term investment in sustainable civic engagement is well-justified.

### **Final Reflections on Social Identity as the Foundation for Building Civic Skills**

The stories of activists such as Jorge San Juan and Raquel Velasco should serve to remind us of the need for strategies to foster civic participation which transcend crude sociological analysis. Sound theoretical models of the underlying social processes which give rise to civic and political participation in community life, tabular data confirming and refining the initial model, and regression models providing an understanding of the dynamics of civic participation have utility. But the "micro-level" analysis of how things play out in the lives of individuals and in the genesis, development, and ongoing efforts to nurture and "grow" fragile organizational networks to involve low-income immigrants in California community life is also needed.

How efforts to catalyze social change, including increased levels of immigrant civic participation will play out always involves probability functions. Like analyses of children's development and family life, technically adequate analyses will require complex and expensive longitudinal research efforts to generate pathway analyses of individual and group changes over time.

Immigrants' own stories, while "scientifically" inconclusive, provide valuable signposts—guidance in both program design and policy analysis. Jorge's assertion that his work as a community volunteer and activist is a means to assert a personal and social identity is an important point of guidance. Raquel's affirmation of her ability to transcend the sociological constraints on her "position in life" – as a low-income woman raised in a traditional culture is equally instructive. Both Jorge and Raquel were, in many significant ways, engaged in their own individual journey of personal skills development and efforts to "make meaning" and "make change".

Jorge's and Raquel's individual stories are, in a sense, didactic tales in that they provide examples of the ways in which individual immigrants have worked to convert human capital (their own skills and energy) and social capital (their relationships with others) into "civic capital", the collective resources needed to work collaboratively to improve community life. Both Jorge and Raquel are sociologically "outliers". They have overcome substantial odds—lack of disposable income, lack of free time, limitations in English, incomplete knowledge of how U.S. civic and political systems work—to make things happen, to contribute to group efforts toward making positive changes in community social and civic life. It is not likely these stories will become miracle plays in which Jorge and Raquel go on to become nationally-recognized figures—but the value of their efforts is that they suggest that, to some extent, popular democracy is feasible and that, in some respects, civic life in very poor rural communities with high concentrations of immigrants can have oases of healthy interaction.

The James Irvine Foundation's support of two community-based non-profit organizations' efforts to catalyze immigrant civic participation made significant contributions to both Jorge

San Juan's and Raquel Velasco's development as civic activists. In a very real sense, this sort of work is a collaboration between individual immigrants with very limited resources and very personal aspirations and large organizations with ample resources and aspirations to effective positive macro-level social change. It would be a mistake to attempt to exclude non-cognitive traits from the inventory of civic skills needed to improve community life or to focus too narrowly on a "technical" model of civic participation which purposefully or inadvertently serves to de-value individual vision, individual initiative, and a wide range of efforts to create new personal, group, and civic identities. Jorge's and Raquel's stories, because they are personal also have dimensions of excitement, enjoyment, at the what might be considered to be the aesthetic dimensions of learning and effective action—the marvel that one can actually do something that makes a difference.

An important consequence of such a recognition should be the idea that there is no "magic wand" which can be used to transform the civic life of communities—anywhere in America, but particularly in the economically and educationally disadvantaged communities of the Central Valley. High-school civics classes, voter registration campaigns, get-out-the-vote campaigns, leadership workshops, educational television and radio, are all useful tools for working towards solutions. There must be a broad range of educational opportunities for civic skills-building because there is a broad spectrum of individual interests and competencies.

The critical recognition, as often forgotten by "community-based" organizations, even "grassroots" organizations, as well as by municipal government, schools, universities, is that participatory democracy is driven by a wide range of efforts to create and assert meaning—as individuals and as groups of like-minded individuals. The most effective contributions to the shared objective of micro-level individual efforts toward "making meaning, making change" will be ones which respect individual analytic insights, aspirations, and creativity while building on a sound analytic foundation and powerful models of the processes of civic participation to highlight the particular sorts of contributions large and somewhat impersonal institutions can make to a process which is inherently personal.

The model of interventions to build "civic skills" will necessarily be more akin to tutoring, mentoring, and programs structured to provide a diverse range of learning opportunities more than toward rapid and efficient communication of a core set of "teaching points" about civic principles. To be sure, the ideal skills development program is one which is structured, which takes a systems-oriented perspective toward capacity-building and leadership. Community organizing models such as the one used by SVOC have the advantage of building on a well-defined set of principles about how to "organize" individual experiences to best build civic effectiveness but it appears that even the endeavors such as Se'e'Savi which are closest to the "popular education" model of collective inquiry, self-directed learning also have great promise.

The current inquiry suggests that in the face of uncertainty about the ideal balance of structured learning and learner-driven experiential learning, the strong linkage between development of a personal and social identity and sustainable civic engagement, the most effective interventions will be those which lean toward "authenticity" and learner engagement and less toward teaching about "how the system works". In either case, the experience in a range of educational contexts emphasizes the need to articulate expectations

of excellence, that immigrants' involvement in even the first stages of civic involvement will yield tangible and valuable outcomes, not just "provide practice" for responsible citizenship.