

Political Tour of Sawtelle-Pico Neighborhood: Institute of Popular Education of Southern California

By Alejandro Lopez

Under the 405 Freeway on the corner of Sawtelle and Pico there is a place called the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA). I first heard of this place through a friend of mine named Cynthia Paredes who spearheads Conciencia Libre or “Free Conscience,” a UCLA student organization. Conciencia meetings are on Thursdays and deal with themes of globalization, social movements and in particular, have worked to improve the lives of the UCLA food service employees who did not have a union previously. Chicano activists and Latino immigrants founded IDEPSCA in 1991. The objective of this organization is to develop leadership and educational programs based on popular education methodology. Some of the programs offered here consist of ESL English as a Second Language courses, the Day Laborer Project, the Computer Literacy Project, and the Women’s Project. The ESL and Day Laborer Project are programs taught by volunteers. There are 1,500 volunteers that work at IDEPSCA on an annual basis. An interesting statistic I found on the internet site www.idepsca.org was that 60 percent of Latino immigrants in the US are illiterate in their native tongue hence this impedes them from being fluent in a second language.

One of the projects Conciencia has worked with extensively is the Day Laborer Project. This volunteer program allows UCLA students to teach English literacy courses to Spanish speaking immigrants. The classes take place at IDEPSCA on Saturdays from

9:00am to 12:00pm. Students meet at around 8:30am by the Ackerman turnaround and a van is provided by UCLA in order to commute to the Worker Center. We load up the van with bagged sandwiches, potato chips, fruit, soda, juice and iced tea.

I chose this site because I have been a volunteer at this center and have worked with the members of this community. I think it is important for people, especially UCLA students to be familiar with the demographics of this community is a part of West LA. I also believe that because there are immigrant workers in this community who work and seek work many times they are neglected, mistreated, and face hardships in our society on a daily basis. It is empowering to see them become empowered as we take an active role in education. The work I do at IDEPSCA is an example of how one can partake in creating social change to enhance our society.

Moreover, activism is relevant to our lives as UCLA students because we are sharing our education with those who many times are powerless. To “give back” to them is not a commodity it is an obligation. The immigrant community works the most arduous jobs that exist and are often not treated with respect by many privileged UCLA community members and other *West Siders*. An immigrant worker washes cars for a minimum wage salary and no benefits in the hot arid sun eight hours a day. The person on the cell and wearing shades who drives the BMW the worker is washing is complaining about their employer not giving them a holiday bonus. What’s wrong with this picture! The immigrant worker is still waiting for his/her (more than well deserved) bonus. While the owner of the BMW sits in the shade and calls her employee Rosa, a domestic worker and

tells her to pick up her children from school the immigrant worker worries about making ends meet in order to provide for his/her family. I am a firm believer in social justice and equality for everyone that is why I partake an active role in community organizing.

In previous courses I have taken in Chicana/o Studies I have learned about transnational communities and the services that are needed in their respective communities. For example, there is a large community of immigrants from Oaxaca in West Los Angeles that work in restaurants, and other jobs in the service sector. I have learned that many of these community members send remittances or money back to family members left behind in their native countries. Additionally, I have learned that many banks, and Check Cashing businesses charge expensive rates and have requirements (i.e. must have a social security card) that make it difficult for immigrants to open a bank account or to simply cash a check. Many of these hard workers are forced to pay outrageous prices sometimes to send money back home.

I have also learned through certain classes and through my involvement in La Gente that culture is very much alive in this community. For example, there are catering trucks or “taco trucks” that sell ethnic food in these communities. The food is authentic Mexican food from Oaxaca I know this because I frequently visit these trucks and the names on the menu are of specifically Oaxacan cuisine. I am also familiar with these names because I studied abroad this summer and I was fortunate to visit lovely Oaxaca. The same can be said of the produce trucks that sell ethnic produce at discount prices to the Oaxacan immigrant community. These produce trucks stop by apartment complexes

where Oaxacan immigrants reside. One of those areas is in an alley in between various apartment complexes close to where I live. At 6:30 pm every day a truck stops by and sells fruit, vegetables, and they often give credit to customers who are “regulars.” With five dollars I usually buy bananas, oranges, orange juice, tomatoes, onions, and chili peppers. The trucks also sell tortillas, frozen meat, water, candy, cactus and other ethnic foods. These sites also provide a place where people can network find out about employment, adult school, where to shop for necessities and so on.

In preparation for this tour I used a few sources namely local community members, the Internet and I also spoke to the Site/Marketing Manager Claudia Corrales. I speak to some of the local day laborers that seek work along Sawtelle. The largest pocket of day laborers can be found daily on the corner of Sawtelle and Santa Monica near a 7-11. The day laborers are predominantly immigrant men from various Latin American countries.

After touring this area I have learned that IDEPSCA provides important services to community members. IDEPSCA provides a public space for immigrant workers to do the following: find jobs, learn English, receive free health care at a clinic named Clinica Oscar Romero, receive free dental benefits and also to have intellectual conversations on political, cultural and social aspects of our lives. As long as they have an identification card provided by IDEPSCA the workers have access to these benefits. In addition, participants in such programs become politicized and pursue careers in activism.

What I have learned here I have shared in my courses, with my friends and acquaintances, and even with fellow co-workers and high school students. I think that by organizing forums such as the Assi Market forum we are able to reach many people. By making in class announcements on immigrant worker issues and talking about specific people that I have worked with ignite people to become interested. An effective way in which I have been able to attract UCLA students to become more aware is to share with them personal, specific and rewarding experiences that I have had in this community.

Recently, I attended The Vagina Monologues in Spanish and I was surprised to see such a good turnout of people. This play involved a lot of work on behalf of the actresses, artists, and other play participants. However, there were many important messages throughout the play. Many themes, phrases and images resonate in one's mind I was honestly impacted by this play. I feel the same can be done with immigrant worker stories.

Another way I could learn increase my knowledge of this community would be if I volunteered at other local community organizations. For example, if I attended St. Sebastian's Catholic Church I am sure I could find out more about the community. By talking to more immigrant workers that live near me such as the ones that buy from the produce and catering trucks I am sure I can find out more about the community. There are support groups such as ALANON and AA Alcoholics Anonymous that meet at Stoner Park, a local park. I know that I could be educated on community details by these community members who meet at the park.

I would be happy to conduct a tour of this location as soon as I have done more research on the history of the community. Since I have established networks here I would be helpful in talking about IDEPSCA and the surrounding community of undocumented workers.

I would really like to see UCLA students do field research in these areas. I think that aside from doing a political tour they should also do a survey of these many times ignored disadvantaged people. Then the students should also volunteer at a local community based organization. This way the student learns leadership skills but skills and knowledge that can be applied to our daily lives.