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Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago: 50 years as a model of resistance

The historic organization continues creating institutions in response to systemic discrimination against minorities



José López Rivera, executive director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago. (Daniel Delgado)

Washington - Fifty years after its founding, the leadership of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center of Chicago remains committed to the community's determination to create parallel institutions as a way to survive and respond to systemic discrimination.

Its history has been a model of resistance to promote “self-determination, self-actualization, and self-sufficiency.”

“It emerged as a phenomenon that already existed in Latin America: organizations created by the community to meet its needs,” said Professor José López Rivera, Executive Director of the Center and one of its founders.

The Center, whose name honors the memory of Nationalist leader and poet Juan Antonio Corretjer, was officially created in 1973. The movement that led to its founding took off on June 12, 1966, when a police officer shot Puerto Rican Aracelis Cruz on the same historic Division Street during Chicago’s first Puerto Rican Parade.

The police said that Cruz, 20, had pulled a gun. Back then, others questioned that version. Cruz was left bleeding in the street.

The incident sparked a series of protests - and police repression - in Humboldt Park, which marked the Chicago Puerto Rican community forever, a city now home to nearly 100,000 Puerto Ricans.

“It was the most significant uprising of Puerto Rican communities in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s,” said López Rivera, who witnessed the events when he was 16 years old.

López Rivera recalls that the same day, his brother, now former political prisoner Oscar López Rivera, called the family from Vietnam, where he had been sent as part of the U.S. Army. Six months later, upon his return to Chicago, Oscar dedicated himself to community organizing.

Although he is most recently remembered as the longest-serving Puerto

Rican political prisoner in U.S. prisons - nearly 36 years, 12 of which he spent in solitary confinement for his ties to the clandestine organization Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional (FALN) - in Chicago, Oscar López Rivera was a key figure in the movement for greater access to education, housing, and jobs.

What was happening in Humboldt Park was not different from the reality of Lincoln Park, where the Young Lords group - born in Chicago - led the fight against gentrification, discrimination, and Puerto Rican independence.

There was a collective awakening.

López Rivera - for decades a university professor of Latin American history - argued that under the influence of the movements taking place in Latin America and the work of Paulo Freire on the “theology of liberation,” the focus was on education.

First, the high school, now named after the nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos, was created to serve young people outside the traditional system.

Research by university professor Isidro Lucas, with whom José López Rivera worked he was a student, reflected that 72.9 percent of Puerto Rican public school students in Chicago ended up as dropouts.

“They were pushed out of the schools because they did not understand the dynamics of our youth, nor were the resources directed to our reality,” he said.

Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos school is integrated into the city’s education system.

“At the same time, we realized that we had to develop awareness-raising work,” said López Rivera, highlighting the calls in favor of the liberation of nationalist prisoners and the close relationship that was forged with Rafael Cancel Miranda, who was in an Illinois prison near Chicago, in Marion. Until his release from prison in September 1979, the neighborhood school was named after Cancel Miranda.

The demands for access to education were taken to the campuses.

Thirty-eight students and activists, including Oscar López Rivera and Carlos Alberto Torres - who served 30 years in prison after being linked to the FALN - took over the chancellor’s office at Eastern Illinois University.

In 1973, the first Center for Latin American Studies was established at the University of Illinois. Later, a program - known as LARES - was created to recruit Latin American students.

Currently, the center has 20 initiatives, including programs in health, housing, LGBTQ+ support, nutrition assistance, urban agriculture, fitness training areas, and a market.

The Museum of Puerto Rican Art and Culture, as well as the bilingual publication “La voz del Paseo Boricua” have been at the core.

López Rivera said that “nowhere else in the United States can you find a federally recognized Puerto Rican museum that receives federal funding that guarantees its survival.”

“In the heart of the community”

“The Puerto Rican Cultural Center has always been at the heart of the Puerto Rican community. It is probably one of the few organizations that

not only provides services to the community, but also thinks about the services that Puerto Ricans living in Chicago need,” said Woods Fund Chicago President Michelle Morales, who was a teacher at Pedro Albizu Campos High School, a member of the Center’s Board of Directors, and active in the movement to free political prisoners.

Since 1988, under the name of VIDA-SIDA, they have been running a program of assistance to patients with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), one of the oldest in a Latino community in the United States, with the goal, as López Rivera explained, “to help them live with dignity and honor.”

The health agenda includes a program to educate and vaccinate the community against COVID-19 and to provide outpatient services. Mental health services are also provided.

A recent initiative is the purchase of a building on Division Street that will provide housing and a workshop for artists. In the lower part of the building, the Urban Theater Company (UTC) will have a space for 100 people with a bar and dining room.

The building incorporates elements of Old San Juan and Chicago architecture. “We want to help artists survive and grow,” López Rivera said.

Morales said that “minority communities that could deal with gentrification have done so because they have solid organizations anchored in the community,” and part of that is the acquisition of real estate.

In addition to the political causes that the Puerto Rican Cultural Center has championed - including H.R. 2070, introduced last congressional session by Democratic Puerto Rican Congresswomen Nydia Velázquez and

Alexandria Ocasio Cortez in favor of a status convention and referendum on non-territorial alternatives - its leadership has been close to efforts to give the community political influence in the city and state.

The district has been represented on the City Council by Puerto Ricans since Luis Gutiérrez won a seat in 1986.

Gutiérrez was followed by Billy Ocasio, Roberto Maldonado, and, as of May 14, newly elected Councilmember Jessica Fuentes, will become the first Latina to hold the seat and the first Latina lesbian on the City Council. Fuentes was the director of public policy and youth affairs at the Cultural Center.

Gutiérrez, in turn, represented the district in Congress from January 1993 until December 2018, when he was replaced by another ally of the Puerto Rican community, Jesus “Chuy” García, who was born in Mexico and whose wife is Puerto Rican.

Since January, after the re-districting process, the congressional district has been held by Delia Ramírez, of Guatemalan origin and also close to the Cultural Center leaders.

Among the community’s recent victories is the designation -by state law- of the “Puerto Rican People’s District,” which should become official later this year and seeks to create tools to prevent the displacement of its residents, promote economic development, and, as State Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas, of Puerto Rican origin, has said, “proudly reflect the identity, contributions, and history of the people who helped build it.”
