

Que Paso? What Happened?

By Leo Martinez-1996

What happened to that dream—a dream to provide the Latino, Chicano, Mexicano community with a center that they could be proud? A Center where all people in the community could learn about Latino culture. A Center that would provide childcare, health services, legal assistance, small business assistance, and a restaurant. That was indeed an ambitious goal back in 1970.

With the support of community businesses and individuals, the original founders were able to convince Bank of America to finance a warehouse building that could be renovated into a community center. The City and County of Santa Barbara helped us immeasurably with revenue sharing monies and flexible timeframes in which to bring the building up to acceptable building code standards. There was a building committee made up of local contractors, headed by Ben Cheverez, who were willing to donate their time to renovate La Casa. Shame on you Board of Directors and past Executive Director (not Grace Florez), for you failed over the past 29 years to use funds for building code compliance wisely.

What happened to our old supporters- City government (the Police Department, Fire Department, Parks and Recreation Department), County government, the Greater Eastside Merchants, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Fiesta Board? Private individuals and business—Pete Jordano, Kallman Nursery, Oxnard Building Materials, Newton Building Materials, Channel Lumber, Mission Industries—all lent their support to make the La Casa dream become a reality. Shame on you Board members and Executive Director for these were your friends. You systematically destroyed these friendships in order to conceal the fact that you were not doing your job.

What happened to those unselfish volunteers, who, in the beginning, gave countless hours to make the dream a reality? Those volunteers who made possible the fundraisers, rummage sales, food booths, and door-to-door pledges from the neighborhood? Were they also intimidated or forced out?

Remember La Fiesta de la Comunidad? These were festivities La Casa organized to coincide with Old Spanish Days. In those days we had enough volunteers to staff a memorable as well as profitable function at La Casa. Latin, Anglo, and Black

artisans put up their booths around the building to sell their wares. There were always volunteers to work a booth at the Mercado in De La Guerra Plaza

La Casa members would eagerly await the financial outcome of the Fiesta activities. A committee counted the monies and reported to the entire membership at the next monthly meeting. Over 50 members always attended these general membership meetings. What has happened to those monthly membership meetings? You don't even have regular membership meetings or a membership list.

The primary function of the Executive Director of La Casa is to prepare grant proposals to private and public foundations so that an annual budget can be created. This is an elementary function of any head of an organization. Obviously this was not done. Moreover, important funding deadlines have been missed.

To the old Board:

You have gotten yourselves into this fix. Don't blame the City, the City attorney or the Fire Department or whomever. Just blame yourselves and the Executive Director in office for over 20 years.

In any organization, whether it be private or non-profit, you would have been fired or voted out of office. However, you can't be fired because regular meetings are not held whereby you could be voted out. You should search your hearts and if you feel that you really want to help La Casa and the dream, then stay. If your goal is to embrace your resume, then quit and let someone else who is willing to work take your place.

Mr. President of the Board, you should definitely quit. You have been at the helm for more than 10 years and have defended your Executive Director to the community and me. By doing so, you and your Board have let the Latino community down—big time.

To the New Board and Executive Director:

1. Focus on the building. Look around you. Where in the United States will you find a Latino organization that owns its own building? You should be proud of the fact that 30 years ago, people worked hard for this dream. Don't let those people down.
2. You have an able woman manager in Grace Florez. She has been handed a can of worms. You must operate as a working board—all members working together as a team.

3. Set aside political differences, color, creed and religions. Liberals and conservatives—you must recognize that everyone has something to contribute in their own way
4. Rebuild old bridges. Renew old ties. Believe it or not, there are organizations that are willing to donate to La Casa if they are convinced that you mean business. Adopt a policy of inclusion instead of exclusion.
5. Set an example by your good work. New people will join and help. You need to generate new blood for a prosperous future.
6. Reinstate monthly meetings and actually have members vote for the board. It is a healthier way to conduct business.
7. Stay out of politics. Avoid taking political stands unless it involves the physical structure of La Casa.
8. Establish an advisory board of business people, county and city department heads, and philanthropists so as to foster communication and obtain advice.
9. Contract an independent audit of La Casa funds prior to any donations being accepted.

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