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The Story of the Puerto Rican-Chicano Committee

Abstract

The concept or idea for The Puerto Rican-Chicano Committee (PRCC) came from UB student Alberto O. Cappas, who also was the original founder of PODER, at the time known as the Puerto Rican Organization for Dignity, Elevation, and Responsibility.

Keywords

Buffalo, Equality, Civil Rights, Race, Demographics, PDF

(A Story in Progress)

The Story of the Puerto Rican-Chicano Committee (PRCC)

“Passing the Torch to our Young Generation”

By Alberto O. Cappas & Jose C. Pizarro, Co-Chairs
Puerto Rican Committee for Community Justice (PRCCJ)
12/13/2016

The concept or idea for The *Puerto Rican-Chicano Committee* (PRCC) came from UB student Alberto O. Cappas, who also was the original founder of **PODER**, at the time known as the *Puerto Rican Organization for Dignity, Elevation, and Responsibility*. Puerto Rican students, mostly from Buffalo, were instrumental in its development. A student by the name of Gloria Rodriguez, served as its first president. Shortly, the Puerto Rican students from New York City, added to the organization’s progressive and radical approach, influenced by the Black Student Union (BSU).

Some of the students involved in the early stages of **PODER**, were: Jose C. Pizarro, Marcelina Rodriguez, Gloria Rodriguez, Olga Perez, Jose Sosa, Naomi Velasquez, Mildred Rodriguez, Tony Perez, Maria Cruz, Luis Rodriguez, Evelyn Pizarro, Roberto Collado, Carmen Gonzalez, and Antonio Castro. There were others whose names we can’t recall at this moment.

PODER was responsible for forcing the UB administration to increase their efforts to recruit Puerto Rican students from the local area, as well as Puerto Rican professionals to work with their admission program. With this effort, Miguel Rivera, Else Pacheco, and Confessor Cruz were hired -- all from the local Buffalo & Lackawanna Community.

PODER was also responsible for the establishment of the Puerto Rican Studies Program, and for the Spanish programming at WBFO-FM, providing four hours weekly (Saturdays) of Salsa, Mexican, Latin American, and “**Comunidad Opina**” -- a program where the community had an opportunity to participate by calling in with their questions or shared their concern on the air.

With the cooperation and united with the Black Student Union (BSU), they were able to convince UB to establish an “Office of Minority Student Affairs,” to help address the educational concerns and cultural needs of the “minority” students on campus.

It was not too long for **PODER** to get involved in the local Buffalo Puerto Rican community. With the guidance and help of the few local Puerto Rican students, **PODER** extended their “activism” into the Buffalo Puerto Rican and Mexican community in Lackawanna., including North Collins, where Latino migrant workers faced racism from the farm owners and the local residents

PODER’s first community experience in working with a local Puerto Rican community group, known as the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, located on Swan Street on Buffalo’s east side. The founder and executive director was Ms. Stephanie Barrios, who worked with children and youth. **PODER** helped in painting and decorating the facility, as well as providing tutorial and counseling to the Center’s young people.

To have a community base of operation, **PODER** developed **PRCC**, with help from the well-known civil rights group at the time, the **BUILD** organization, which was very active and involved in the local African-American community. The first year, **PRCC** was known as “**PRCC of BUILD**”, since they helped with the funding the first few years, providing funds for rent and several paid staff. The **BUILD** organization hired

two Puerto Ricans and one Mexican-American to work directly in their headquarters, the three becoming liaisons between the two organizations.

The three African-Americans most helpful to PRCC, were **Roosevelt Rhodes**, UB's Director of Minority Student Affairs, **William "Bill" Gaiter**, Director of BUILD, and NYS Assemblyman, **Arthur O. Eve**.

Looking back, PRCC's mission and purpose was to serve the social, economic, and political needs of the Puerto Rican/Latino community.

Once established in the Puerto Rican community, PRCC accomplished this mission by confronting the local officials to provide better services, conducting voter registration drive, sponsoring candidates for office, working with the migrant workers, meeting with the private sector and government to secure jobs (employment), and organizing a series of educational and cultural programs to help instill a sense of pride in our youth. PRCC also worked with SUNYAB and EOP to recruit high school students.

PRCC also worked with the NYS Assemblyman, Arthur O. Eve, in securing jobs for many Puerto Ricans and Latinos to work at the Masten Park Correctional Facility. In addition, another political leader, Donald Turchiarelli, was very helpful to PRCC.

With the cooperation between PODER, PRCC, and UB's Office of Minority Affairs, a program to work with Attica Correctional Facility's Puerto Rican prisoners, was established, providing counseling, tutorial and worked in helping the inmates transition to the community upon their release. The program was inspired by Dr. Billy Fink, a social activist and psychologist.

PRCC was the original founders of the Puerto Rican Parade & Carnival, on Virginia Street, part of the lower west side.

Under the leadership of **Rosalie Roman and Rodolfo Santos**, PRCC established the first local Puerto Rican-Chicano Cultural Resource Institute, located at the Niagara Branch Library. PRCC also established the 7th Street Theatre Company (Calle Siete), performing throughout the city, as well as performing in other areas in Western NY, including Rochester, NY.

When City Hall introduced a federal funding project (CETA) for citywide participation, PRCC came up with the idea of all Puerto Rican groups to unite and work together to force the city to fund a program for job training and employment, thus, preventing "divide and conquer." What came out of this was the "Consortium of Spanish-Speaking Community Organizations (**COSSCO**), funded by the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA). This effort was also made possible by **Gilbert Hernandez**, who at the time was the assistant director of the City of Buffalo's Manpower Program. Gilbert was also one of the founders of the Hispanic Business Association where many of their members were former PRCC members.

PRCC saved the Puerto Rican community from being destroyed, by putting a stop to the government's proposal and plan to build an expressway on Virginal Street, from Main to Niagara Street, led by a committee of Frankie Perez, Jose Pizarro, and John Moffitt.

And with the help and support of PRCC, the first Puerto Rican newspaper was established, The Latin Journal, as well as the Latin Gallery, both located in the lower west side (founded by Juan Gonzalez, Pablo Martinez, and Alberto O. Cappas), providing community news, art exhibitions, poetry readings, and art and cultural workshops.

As a member of PRCC, and the publisher of the Latin Journal, Alberto O. Cappas, was asked to be part of the **Attica Observers Committee**, which tried to negotiate a peaceful settlement for the prisoners demanding their rights as human beings during the "Attica Prisoners Uprising" on September 13, 1977.

Domingo Rodriguez and Pucho (forgot last name) were also part of the committee, at the invitation of Cappas.

PRCC was instrumental in ensuring Puerto Rican inclusion in the NFTA's Arts project, contracting three Latino (3) poets to create a poetic art collage at the Allen Street Station (Juan Gonzalez, Alberto O. Cappas, and Olga Mendel).

PRCC tried to work with the community leaders and organizations, like PRACA, Hispanic Task Force, ALIANZA, and others, but found that these organizations were too ingrained with the local political status quo, and instead of supporting PRCC's efforts, they sabotaged and worked against PRCC's interest in the community.

PODER and PRCC were always labeled as communist and socialist by the older leaders, and they kept a distance as to not tarnish their relationship with the local elected officials.

Years later, before PRCC merged with several community organizations, it secured government contracts to provide on-going services in the community, which is still provided by the **Hispanic United of Buffalo (HUB)**, the new organization created with the merger.

The three (3) individuals that served as executive directors of the Puerto Rican Chicano Committee during the early stages of the organization, were **Francisco Perez, Jose C. Pizarro, and Miguel Medina**, three outstanding community organizers and grassroots individuals. Pizarro was the executive director when the merger took place.

Other people that played key roles in the early stages and leadership of PRCC, were Miguel Rivera, Juventino Mejia, Domingo Rodriguez, Rosalie Roman, Rodolfo Santos, Roberto Collado, Olga Perez, Alberto S. Cappas, Rev. Antonio Rodriguez, Susie Escabi, Alberto Sosa, Raul Gonzalez, Frank W. Berger, Elsa Cruz, David Baez, Maria Cruz, Miguel Mendez, Luis Rodriguez, and others.

In the end, both PRCC and PODER were taken over by the local Buffalo students and community leaders, thus erasing the progressive history and mission of both organizations.

The merger destroyed the fire, energy, mission, sense of purpose, and the progressive spirit in the local Puerto Rican community.

Today, there is no real advocacy, no real activism. You can see this by the fact that no one challenged the government when it divided the community into 3 or 4 Council districts, eliminating a strong and political Puerto Rican/Latino voice. That spirit has long been gone.

Note: Alberto O. Cappas and Jose C. Pizarro have united and come together, forming the Puerto Rican Committee for Community Justice (PRCCJ), with the plans to address many of the social, business, economic, and political issues that are neglected by the current leadership in the Puerto Rican/Latino community. For information, contact Jose C. Pizarro at 716-207-1883, or email us at charlemjournal@aol.com, a online publication of PRCCJ.

TODAY:
“A Reflection on the Merger”
Giving birth to the Hispanic United of Buffalo (HUB)

Comments by Jose C. Pizarro
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The merger was between **Puerto Rican-Chicano Committee (PRCC)**, **La Alternativa**, and the **Puerto Rican American Community Association (PRACA)**, although PRACA decided not to be part of the merger, leaving PRCC and La Alternativa to compose the leadership and governing board of the new agency, “**Hispanic United of Buffalo.**”

1. If we had to do it again, I would never agree or support the merger, for the following reasons.
2. PRCC had the most to lose, had focus and more services, while the other two organizations had a single focus, one was drug services/counseling, and the other a place to dance and socialize, which was their only major or main contribution.
3. PRCC agreed to the merger because we were concern about the needs of the community.
4. In hindsight, I believe that with the merger of PRCC, the community lost the only real-pro-community and progressive organization in the Puerto Rican/Latino community, as well as an organization with a rich history of activism and grass-roots community involvement.
5. Today, we are too-social service oriented, with no programs in place for business and economic development, and none with a pro-community profile when it comes to our political voice and needs.

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