



Learning About Our Story: Organizing for Educational Justice in Chicano Communities

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Joel Santino Gamboa is a youth organizer with Puente in Phoenix, Arizona, and a member of the Youth Justice Corps program through the national Alliance for Educational Justice. Santino draws inspiration from his mother, his Chicano culture, and Puente staff organizers Michelle and Melina. Santino discusses his organizing work through protesting at his local immigration office and advocating for the removal of school resource officers and metal detectors in schools. Santino plans to study community organizing and political science in college so that he can continue to educate young people about Chicano history and make an impact through organizing for educational justice.

Inspirations and Beginnings

My mom has a lot to do with why I got into organizing. She has always focused on “school, school, school,” and she was always telling me to get involved in extracurriculars in middle school and throughout high school. To be honest, I would just blow it off because I always thought, maybe I won’t be good for this position. But once high school hit, I observed other people and realized, “I can do that.” My mom is my inspiration. She’s always on me about everything. Even though she can be a pain sometimes, I’m always thinking in the back of my head, “She’s helping you. Accept it.” She’s always pushed me forward. She’ll say, “You’re organizing with this; you should try that.” She always gives me solutions, which helps me.

My number two inspirations are Michelle and Melina at Puente. They’re the ones who put me in the Youth Justice Corps program because they saw something in me.

They saw what I’m capable of, and they wanted to put it to the test. I’m grateful that they did. I always tell them, once you guys leave, I want to do what you guys do. What you guys did for me, I want to continue doing for the upcoming kids that are going to be my age.

A lot of my participation in organizing also has to do with how I grew up. I grew up very Chicano-cultured, and I was around that a lot. I’ve always had this strong sense to always be proud of who you are, no matter what background you come from, no matter what religion, even be proud of your music. Always be proud of who you are no matter what.

My sister was in Puente when I was maybe 9 or 10. I remember dropping her off at Puente and I knew what it was, but I didn’t really know what it was until I actually joined. My mom was like, “Alright, your turn,” then she threw me in.

In my sophomore year, I joined the student council at school called STUGO. I got that sense of responsibility

and started organizing events for our school. During the summer while I was in STUGO, that's when I joined Puente. When I showed up, I was nervous. But I'm an extrovert, so I can talk to people easily, and it wasn't a big worry for me. I was nervous my first day, but I started talking to people and I enjoyed it a lot, so I just kept going. That's when we started having our trainings on organizing—how you can start a campaign, how to peacefully organize a protest—and I just learned from there.

Experiences in Organizing

I went to a protest here in Phoenix, where we marched to the immigration office. I was still in my school uniform; there's pictures of me and my cousin still in our uniforms. We were with Michelle, and then Melina had called us saying, "Hey, do you want to come?" And I said, "We're just out of school, but yeah, we'll go!" We were all hyped up.

That was the most effective protest I've ever seen. There was no yelling, no fighting—we were just walking, chanting, and nothing else. But, of course, the Phoenix Police Department took it too far and showed up with all of their riot gear. I thought, "We're just standing here. We're nowhere near you."

All young people should have the experience of organizing a protest. I think everyone should get that feeling. Sometimes protests go really well or really badly. Sometimes it's good if it does go really badly, because then you can say to yourself, "OK, now I need to fix this." And then you do another one, and it comes out better than the last one.

We also have what are called school resource officers (SROs) here in Phoenix. It's just a cop at school. At the last board meeting, we actually got rid of them, so the SROs are no longer going to be at school. But sadly, the board did agree on expanding the metal detectors in schools. Apparently, all schools in the Phoenix Union district are going to get them. So even though we got rid of SROs, everyone was still mad.

At my school, we've never had metal detectors. But I have friends in the West Side schools, like Maryville and Trevor, and they're saying, "Man, I hate going to school. They're always searching me." I heard about an incident where this kid was under suspicion of having a firearm in the car. The school cop went to his car without informing him, without asking him, and broke the back window and searched the car. There was no firearm. Things like that should not be happening at all.

We want to get metal detectors out of our schools, and half of everyone is saying, "Yeah, you guys are right. We're tired of being criminalized. I'm going to school feeling like I'm going to prison." Then you have the higher ups in administration, the people who say, "No, we need them. It makes us feel safe." It blows my mind because the last time we were at a board meeting, this kid said, "We need them," and he straight up said, "Even if some of them don't work, they're there." I thought, "You just proved your 'solution' wrong." It just doesn't make sense to me.

I care about these things because they affect not only my people, but everyone else. With SROs and metal detectors, all I hear is, "It takes long just to even get in school and makes me feel like I'm going to prison." Or, "I'm too scared to go to school because of how they are." There are kids who say, "I don't want to go to school because of how they treat me." They're missing out on their classes, and they're playing catch-up when they feel so unsafe in going to school.

At the end of the day, who are the kids who are going to get stopped automatically as soon as their backpack beeps? Black people, Brown people, people of ethnicity. It happens here in Phoenix, where even a binder sets off the metal detector. Then they make the person empty out their whole backpack, do the metal detector across their body, and they're doing all this over a binder. Students shouldn't be afraid to go to school at all. There should be zero fear.

Once organizing has an impact, and it starts making a change in schools, kids are going to want to go to school. They're going to have that motivation and feel like, "I'm not going to get searched anymore. I don't have to go through the metal detector anymore. I want to go to

school.” And then they’re actually putting effort into their school.

The main thing is their educational experience. No matter where you go to school, you’re always happy to see your friends. But you should also want to go to school to learn, to expand your mind, because school is everything. That’s always been my thing. School is everything. My mom always says, “Oh, you want that? Go to school!” And that’s everyone’s mindset. Everyone wants to become a lawyer and make good money. Everyone wants to go get their MD. Or at my school, since we focus on firefighting, everyone wants to get their EMT and become a paramedic. That’s our motivation.

Reflections and Community Impacts

To me, organizing gives everyone a sense of responsibility. A lot of people don’t have the guidance to know what responsibility is or the feeling of it. I think anyone can be an organizer. Whether it’s organizing school events, a party at your house, or a family party, you can tell yourself, “Hey, yeah, I set that up. I feel good about what I did.”

I want to make sure that everyone knows what we are doing and what we stand for. A lot of people are not informed. They’re clouded over. Teachers at school are even telling them, “There’s a certain group of people who do it like this, don’t end up like them.” But they don’t know anything about what we do. When we get kids to come over here to Puente, we enlighten them about who we are. Then those kids start coming back and have this new mindset that we need to start making change, because now I know my people are being affected by it, and I want to get in the fight.

An important moment for me was when we started our campaign Students Over Surveillance. I made up a slogan that’s on our shirts. It’s “Watch Us Grow, Not Our Every Move.” Everyone liked it and said, “Oh, that’s good!” It made me feel really good about myself. When Michelle let me know about the Youth Justice Corps program, I thought to myself, “Dang, it’s getting real. I’m ready to show my capability and what I can do.”

Learning at Puente is a new experience because you’re not used to someone teaching you something outside of school. You know what to expect when you go to school: you know a teacher’s mood, you know how they’re going to act, and you know how to handle that teacher in certain ways. But when it comes to Puente and Michelle, it’s an eye opener. I’m learning something new, and I’m ready to take it in. You never know what you’re going to expect when you come to Puente because we’re constantly moving through situations that are happening in the community.

Everyone should experience what Puente is. I took advantage of being vice president for student council at my school to let STUGO members know what Puente is. I had Michelle send me a PowerPoint with a breakdown of what we are and what we do. I had my teacher put it on the whiteboard with the projector and then I handed out flyers with information about our next meeting.

Through organizing, I’ve learned a lot, including how to handle people. Here at Puente, we have our extroverts and our introverts. I learned how to work with both of them in different ways, even my tone of voice or the way I talk to them. With the extroverts, I’m going say things like, “Hey, we gotta do this!” and I’m all upbeat. But then when I get to my introvert friends, like my homie Angel, I’ll lower my tone and speak in more of a calm voice.

In general, I’m an easy person to talk to. People have never seen it hard to come talk to me or ask me a question because everyone knows me as the goofy kid. You don’t want to be scared to ask the person in charge. I like that feeling that people can just walk up to me and ask me a question because they see me as the chill leader, not the strict leader.

During my freshman and sophomore year, I was not organized at all in school. I was the kid who’d always lose their paper. When I started coming to Puente, I realized I had to be more organized to pursue my education. Puente gave me a new mindset about how to do things. For example, in my senior year, we have a lot of projects, and I’m always put in a group together with my two friends because we’re close. With past projects, I’ve always been the one doing everything. Now I have a new sense of

leadership, working with others. We can all put this together and get a good outcome.

Puente has also helped me grow when it comes to reaching out. I often hear people say, “I’m too scared to talk to people about Puente.” There’s that fear of, what if they don’t like you, what if they think it’s dumb? But you’re always going to have people who are not going to agree with what you’re organizing or standing for, no matter what. It’s better just to speak to everyone whether they agree or not.

In the future, I want to see where organizing takes me, but there are certain topics I really care about. My principal recently said something that blew my mind. We were talking about how Chicano studies isn’t that well-known, and you have to find it when you’re looking for your degrees in college. He said, “We’ve spent years learning history, but not our story,” and it blew my mind. I’ve never thought of it that way. I would like to have an impact on kids who grew up Chicano but didn’t learn as much as they should have about what it means. You always see the movies, and you see the quotes, like from Cesar Chavez or Dolores Huerta, but people don’t learn the educational part of it. They don’t know what we had to do to even get an education. I think the rate for a Chicano man or woman to go to college was around 2% in the 1960s. We’ve grown so much as a community and as people, and that statistic went up.

Since it’s my senior year, I’m just going to chill this summer. In August, I’m going to get some college in. I’m going to community college, and I want to study community organizing and political science, because those go hand in hand when it comes to making change. And I want to continue here at Puente, because obviously, I like being here. I really do. ♦

About this Project

This essay was produced as part of a project with the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) and the Community Based and Participatory Research Course taught by Professor Mark R. Warren at the McCormack Graduate School at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

The mission of the Youth Justice Corps (YJC) of the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) is to support young people to develop as organizers and leaders of their peers in their local schools, communities and youth organizing groups. The program provides political education and organizing skills training and connects these emerging youth leaders across the country. The young people are typically youth of color from low-income communities attending secondary schools.

Doctoral students collected the stories of young people leading education justice organizing efforts in their local communities.

These stories are posted on peoplethinktank.us, the website of the People's Think Tank. PTT is a network of thought leaders from over forty community, parent and youth organizing groups, national alliances, and allied organizations committed to building knowledge to support movements for racial equity, educational and social justice, and community liberation, fiscally sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education. For more information on other projects, check out [@peoplethinktank](#) (Instagram), and [@4edjustice](#) (Instagram).



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