

Economic Justice in San Antonio, Texas: Project QUEST

WILL WAUTERS*

As Vicar of Santa Fe Episcopal Church on the south side of San Antonio, Texas in the early 1990s, my pastoral experience in this poor barrio saw an increase in incidents of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancies, and gang violence. After breaking up a gang initiation of a young girl in the parking lot of our church, I had the opportunity to talk with some of the young girls. I mentioned to them that life could be bigger and better than sex, drugs, rock and roll, and the violence of *la vida loca*. They all disagreed, and said what chance did they have to make a better life? There were no jobs in San Antonio. Needless to say, I was pretty depressed that afternoon.

There was truth in their perception. Several south and west side companies that paid decent wages—including the Roegelien meat packing plant, Miller Curtain, and San Antonio Shoes—had all closed their doors. Two of the largest employers, Levi Strauss and Kelly Air Force Base, the main source of middle class income for south and west side families, were closing. The perception of San Antonio's economic downturn was pervasive. Even Red McCombs, a leading businessman, barked at a meeting of business leaders, "What are we doing here? There are no jobs in San Antonio!" San Antonio was an economy in transition. We had lost some fourteen thousand jobs in manufacturing, textiles, transportation, and other low-skill, modest-wage occupations.

Santa Fe Episcopal Church was a dues-paying member of a broad-based community organization named Metro Alliance. Together with our sister organization, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), we were affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). COPS/Metro represented over fifty congregations and ninety thousand people. In talking with other clergy, we found

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that a crisis was already surfacing in the same pastoral tragedies experienced at Santa Fe. Instead of merely looking to resolve the immediate concerns, we examined instead this economic downturn as a causal factor in the violence, abuse, and tragedy in our parishioners' lives.

COPS/Metro embarked on a two-pronged research strategy. One looked internally at our communities, and the other looked externally to see what the job situation really was. The tried-and-true methodology of IAF community organizations is to begin with house meetings to elicit the *metis* or intuitive knowledge embedded in the real-life experience of our folks. What we found after hundreds of house meetings was a hard-working, loyal workforce that had a dismal experience with formal education and an even more dismal experience with educational providers that promised increased skills for higher paying jobs. Indeed, a common experience was one of incurring debt through the student loans necessary to complete their training and a nearly nonexistent track record of finding a better job. This experience of exposing their lack of education and feeling swindled by the job training proprietary schools left many with a sense of shame. It was only in trustworthy house meetings that many opened up with their stories. When they realized that they were not alone, there was a surge of anger and the passion that led to a struggle to change the labor market in San Antonio.

On the other side, COPS/Metro leaders conducted nearly forty meetings with various business leaders in San Antonio to discover what their needs were as employers. What we discovered was that while San Antonio had lost fourteen thousand low-skilled jobs, it had also gained nineteen thousand jobs in higher skilled areas that also paid better. At a meeting with Callie Smith, the CEO of the Baptist Hospital system, he disclosed that he had three hundred jobs that he needed filled that very day. Indeed, virtually all the business leaders in the allied health field were desperate for nurses, radiology techs, respiratory techs—all the allied health positions. The airplane industry was looking for skilled sheet metal workers, and there were also hundreds of jobs available in electronics and technology. These leaders wanted to employ workers from San Antonio, as their loyalty and industriousness were value-added assets. They saw the need to change the way workers were being trained from the short-term, low-skill education currently being offered to a system that built a skilled capacity, which they realized required more time.

Lay and clergy leaders from COPS/Metro worked with friends like Roy Marshall, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, and Bob McPherson, both at the University of Texas's Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs in Austin, to design a system that provided the long-term, high-skills training necessary for the new San Antonio economy. Despite the support of the business leaders and the expertise of leading thinkers such as Marshall and McPherson, it was the political acumen of the COPS/Metro leaders that took this plan from a nice idea to a real operation that produced living wage jobs for the community.

Despite our leaders' blistering criticism of the existing job training system, COPS/Metro leaders were able after many actions to convince the board overseeing San Antonio's funds under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) to set aside 10 percent of those funds designated for innovative projects for our new project. This represented a little over two million dollars for various tuition and administrative costs. We were also able to secure an additional two million dollars from Governor Ann Richards from Wagner-Peyser federal funds that came through the governor's office. That left us nearly two million dollars short for a program that would train people for the 650 jobs identified by the business community.

Following our house meetings in our communities, two issues emerged that were critical for their participation in a long-term training program. First, there needed to be clearly identifiable and attainable jobs at the end of such training. Trainees had been burned too often by other job training schemes that left them jobless or stuck in two or three low-paying jobs to make ends meet. While our business partners could not guarantee specific jobs two years in the future, they promised to give first priority to our participants. Moreover, their participation in the design of this program and in the feedback loops into the progress and nature of skills development provided the business partners with ample exposure to trainees, giving our folks confidence that they could indeed see a job waiting for them.

The second concern raised was how trainees were going to support themselves and their families over this long period of intense training. Federal job training monies, both from the JTPA and the governor's funds, were restricted to tuition and direct training costs, based on bad experiences from previous job training experiences. The final 1.6 million dollars that we needed to raise would go in part to fund practical support, uniforms, daycare, transportation, and all that

was needed to take our undereducated, low-wage workers up to this new level. COPS/Metro embarked on a strategy to secure the remaining funds from the city's General Fund, although no city in Texas had ever used General Fund monies to support job training before.

Patiently and persistently over a nearly two-year span, we met with city council members, the mayor, and former city leaders such as Henry Cisneros to move our agenda forward. Some council members would not hear of it, some suggested a pilot project for twenty or thirty trainees, and the mayor was supportive but could not see how he could give up 1.6 million dollars from a very tight municipal budget. Finally, on a critical night at City Hall, hundreds of COPS/Metro leaders rallied outside, chanting, "Invest in us, invest in us," while inside, the mayor was reluctant to sign on, even after an intense meeting in his office with priests, pastors, and lay leaders from COPS/Metro. Still uncertain, he joined other leaders in the press room, where he encountered twenty or so prominent business leaders and a majority of the city council. Pat Ozuna, a COPS leader, asked, "Mr. Mayor, will you sign on for 1.6 million dollars for a new job training program for San Antonio?" The mayor looked around and said, "I can count and see that you have a majority of the council and you have business leaders willing to commit to offering 650 jobs—so, yes, I will sign on to this." Jubilant leaders went outside before the crowd, where the mayor, the council members, business leaders, and leaders from COPS/Metro signed the symbolic letter of agreement. Through what would become Project QUEST, an investment had been made to transform the labor market/workforce development of San Antonio from a low-skill, low-wage history to a skilled workforce that earned a decent wage and the possibility of a better life.

Project QUEST (Quality Employment Through Skills Training; www.questsa.org) began to build the infrastructure of innovative and effective partnerships with business leaders, the community college system, and the community itself. At nineteen churches around San Antonio, prospective trainees were screened by leaders of COPS/Metro. We were not screening for aptitude to enter Project QUEST; we were looking for *ganas*, desire. Each applicant was told how hard their church leaders had fought to bring Project QUEST into being. Most trainees had been out of school for five or more years, so this training would be a challenge for them. We told them they could expect that their community leaders would support them in any way that they could. They were told also to expect that we wanted nothing

but their best effort to complete this training and secure a decent job at a decent wage. Insincerity or half-efforts would be a waste of precious hard-earned monies. What the applicants saw were mothers, fathers, grandparents who believed in them to be the better future they had worked and hoped for in their communities. Many self-selected out after these initial screenings, stating that they could not give up two years of their lives or were afraid of the educational demands. Other, less rigorous job training opportunities were suggested to them.

Briefly, since it began in 1992, Project QUEST has served over four thousand people, providing access to the training they needed for jobs that offer family-level wages, benefits, and opportunities for a career. Wages have increased for participants from \$7.80 per hour to a current wage at placement of \$16.40 per hour. According to a Public/Private Ventures' evaluation, 96 percent of graduates remain working full-time in the sector that they trained for after two years of employment. An evaluation by the Aspen Institute found that the average annual earnings in the years 1997 to 2001 went from \$5,367 to \$24,907.¹ Project QUEST was cited as a reason that the Toyota Motor Company chose San Antonio to develop a new truck assembly plant. The Enterprise Foundation and J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation have given Project QUEST awards for excellence in workforce development. The Ford Foundation and the Kennedy School at Harvard University gave Project QUEST one of its prestigious Innovations in American Government awards.

Prior to his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in Memphis to support janitors who were demanding just wages. The workers picketed with placards that read, "I am a man." Living wages and workforce development strategies that lift people out of poverty are ultimately never about dollars and cents. They are about human dignity. They are about the shame of poverty, whose devastating manifestations can be seen in every church's pastoral work with substance abusers, gang members, victims of domestic violence, and the perpetrators of crime. The theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez noted that the poor are not born inherently poor; poverty is a condition imposed upon them. As my friend, Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who runs Homeboy Industries in

¹ Statistical data on Project QUEST may be found at <http://www.questsa.org/QuestData.html>.

Los Angeles, has written, “The call is to allow the painful shame of others to have a purchase on our lives.”²

Churches must play an integral part that does not just fix an unjust economy through protest, sermons, and institutional leverage. We must first walk with those who suffer from unemployment and underemployment. We must listen to their anger. Our future must be seen in their future if we are to fulfill our baptismal call to respect the dignity of every human being. Dignity is respected not by a handout but by the opportunity to create one’s own future with a good job. Too often we do things “for” the poor and thus further disempower people. Project QUEST was born in small house meetings where people struggled to identify conditions that caused them shame and the dispirited sense that “there are no jobs, there is no hope.” That hope comes from within. Project QUEST was not the invention of academics or government leaders; rather, it emerged from the desire of COPS/Metro church leaders to listen and act together to discern a way to deliver a pragmatic job training program for a better future. It was an act of faith in God’s relentless desire to see justice in claiming dignity for every human being. The theologian Beldon Lane writes, “Divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty and all embarrassment into laughter.”³ Santa Fe Episcopal Church, COPS/Metro, and Project QUEST are instruments of that incessantly restless love of God. The road of economic justice begins with a walk with the poor. “Blessed are those who know the spirit of the poor, for the kingdom of heaven will be theirs.”

² Gregory Boyle, S.J., *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 43.

³ Quoted in Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 43.