

Blessed are those who continue to organize

Jorge Montiel

April 18, 2016

In his timeless book *Hope within History* Walter Brueggemann reflects on the dominant culture's approach to teaching history. The official version, he tells us, is written "from the top" following a linear timeline of rulers and their conquests. Brueggemann, a scripture scholar, suggests that the Bible is a notable exception. The Book of Kings, for example, is not really about the Kings. Sure, their names and succession are included, but only as a frame of reference for the action of the real history makers: the people of God and, especially, its prophets.

In my experience organizing with Industrial Areas Foundations (IAF) organizations, I have seen first hand the power of ordinary people to "make history." Valley Interfaith, an IAF affiliate in the Texas Rio Grande Valley has organized people for over 30 years and the evidence of history making is everywhere.

In early April, I visited the community of Las Milpas, now part of the city of Pharr, TX, where the Valley Interfaith leaders were celebrating the ground breaking of a library. The community had fought for years to get a library, but the struggle took a turn when Valley Interfaith leaders organized an Accountability Session with all candidates, followed by a non-partisan Get Out The Vote effort to gain support for their agenda of issues. Over 1,000 new voters from Las Milpas changed the conversation and elected a new mayor, who has kept the commitments he made at the accountability session, including breaking ground on the first public library in Las Milpas.



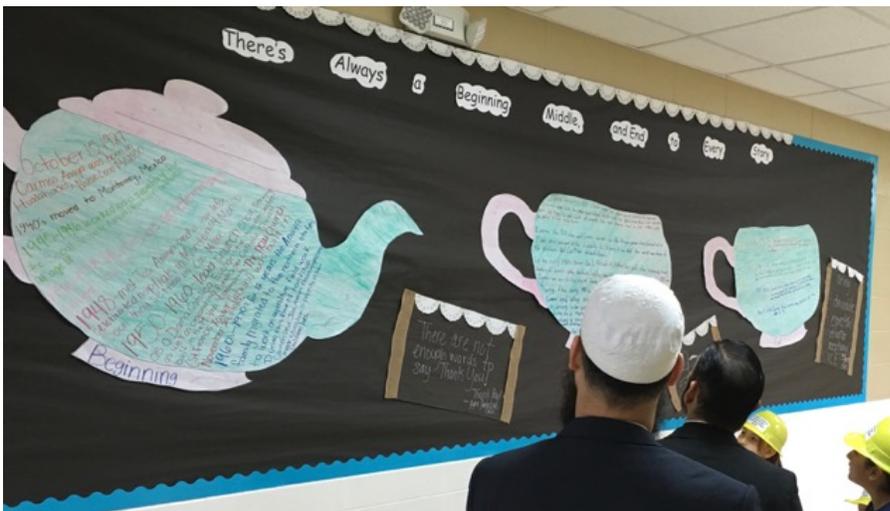
Predictably, a series of elected officials spoke at the groundbreaking and praised their new mayor as the one who finally made the difference. They also praised the people... for electing the right person. History was being re-written "from the top" before our eyes! Valley Interfaith leader Eddie Anaya, a member of St. Francis Cabrini Catholic Church, followed the officials and told a different story. He also credited the mayor for keeping his word, but reminded all those present that it was the people, organized with

Valley Interfaith, who changed the course of Las Milpas. It was through the organizing at his parish and other institutions that people got their standing and found their voice to demand change. Previous city administrations acted as "history blockers," to use Brueggemann's expression. Officials did not take people seriously, they denied their longings, and they attempted to silence their voices. Valley Interfaith leaders busted through all of that to change the history of Las Milpas. Again.



Valley Interfaith, it turns out, has been finding leaders and developing them into history makers for a long time. Eddie Anaya's own mother, Mrs. Carmen Anaya, is a prime example. Prior to the groundbreaking ceremony, we were given a tour of an elementary school that stands right next to the future library grounds: the Carmen Anaya Elementary School. Students led the tour and told guests how proud they were about Mrs. Anaya and what she had done; they showed us photo displays, newspaper clippings, recognitions and books written about Mrs. Anaya and Valley Interfaith. These young students were learning a history from below.

All the students, in fact, were part of a project titled "If you could have a cup of tea with Mrs. Anaya, what would you tell her?" Teachers encourage students to write thank you notes, messages, or questions to Mrs. Anaya and to display them in teacup or teapot-shaped decorated cutouts. From Kindergarten to fifth grade, every student participated. A third grade class wrote thank you notes and created a display that invited Mrs. Anaya to read the messages "while you sip your heavenly cup." One third-grader, Alfonso, expressed his gratitude by writing *"Hi Mrs. Carmen Anaya. Thank you for the streets and the school. My education is better because of you."*



Professor Brueggemann would particularly appreciate the display dedicated to Mrs. Anaya's timeline. Hand-written by the students, it includes when and where she was born, when she married and moved to Texas, the years she led the choir and other ministries at Francis Cabrini parish, the time Bishop Fitzpatrick asked her and other leaders to help launch Valley Interfaith, and other truly

seminal events for Las Milpas that continue to shape the lives of its residents two generations later.

History-making is an ongoing process, and not something done once. It requires an enduring organizing strategy to disclose stories of hurt and suffering, but also of hopes and dreams. When done in the context of a broad-based organization, such public disclosure leads to the release of social imagination and the power to make change possible. Valley Interfaith has kept this prophetic culture alive, and continues to organize people in the margins of the Texas Rio Grande Valley today.