

12-9-2018

Effecting Change in their Community: The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Teresa Fraga, 1970-1990

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Effecting Change in their Community:

The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Teresa Fraga,

1970-1990

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department Of

History

By

Ben Skipor

DeKalb, Illinois

Graduating December 2019

University Honors Program

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title (print or type):

Effecting Change in their Community: The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Teresa Fraga, 1970-1990

Student Name (print or type) Benjamin Skipor

Faculty Supervisor (print or type) Professor Kuby

Faculty Approval Signature

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Department of (print or type) History

Date of Approval (print or type) December 7, 2018

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HONORS CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

The purpose of my research was to find how the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council (PNCC) and Teresa Fraga were able to affect change within the Pilsen neighborhood located in the near Southwest Side of Chicago. This paper outlines the issues that the PNCC worked to correct and the methods that they used. This research is primary source driven. Most documents were accessed through the Community Archives located at University of DePaul Library. Additional materials were found from the Chicago Tribune. The research resulted in an outline of the groups most successful methods: making the community aware and invested in solving an issue, connecting key stakeholders in the community, and becoming a part of the solution.

Introduction

In 1948 at the age of five, Teresa Fraga immigrated into the United States from Mexico with her family. In her early life, Fraga followed the harvest across the country, working as a migrant farm worker. In 1966, she and her husband decided to settle down in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. As she raised a family, she became more concerned with conditions within the community and began to take a more active role. Fraga joined the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council in the late 1970s, becoming the president in 1977. Together, Fraga and the council began to implement change within their community, which had been neglected by the city of Chicago.¹ Wherever there was a need in the community, Fraga and the council sought to meet that need through community organizing.

When Teresa Fraga immigrated into the United States, she was joining an already growing population of Latinx immigrants in the United States. In Illinois, Fraga joined a growing community of Latinx immigrants that was made up of about 80,000.² In 1970, according to the census, the population had grown to 108,000.³ This number would be challenged by some scholars who estimated the number closer to 250,000. As of 2010, the Latinx community within Illinois, Chicago accounting for a very large amount of the population, is comprised of over two million people; 79% of this population is comprised of individuals with Mexican ancestry.⁴ Chicago stands out in the United States as having the second largest Mexican immigrant

¹ The Mexican-American Business & Professional Women's Club of Chicago Award Night pamphlet [YEAR], Box 1, Folder 2, Teresa Fraga Papers, DePaul University Archives, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter Teresa Fraga Papers).

² Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1.

³ Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago, 1920-1970* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983), 2.

⁴ Xóchitl Bada, *Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicagoacán: From Local to Transnational Civic Engagement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 3.

population.⁵ From the census data described previously, Mexican immigration to Chicago was not something new. Mexican immigrants arrived in Chicago in the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and remained until present day.

In the early 20th century, Chicago became a hub for Mexican immigration due to a number of industries: railroad, steel, and meatpacking.⁶ These industries had been fed by unskilled European labor for decades. The Poles, Irish, and Italians had established themselves for decades prior to the first large wave of Mexican immigrants arriving in the city.⁷ As the newest immigrant group, Mexicans were subject to challenges of finding stable work, affordable and quality housing, and prejudice for being the “alien newcomers.”⁸ Mexican immigrants were also distrusted and discriminated against by the other immigrant groups because the steel industry had used them to break the 1919 steel strike.⁹

Still, Chicago can trace its Mexican community’s lineage back over one hundred years. Mexican immigrants lived, and still live in, close knit communities that experience many of the challenges of other migrant communities. Dilapidated schools, systemic poverty, safety and crime, and the threat of gentrification posed challenges to the Mexican American community in Chicago. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council “originally serving a Bohemian population, eventually became a vehicle for Mexican civic action.”¹⁰

⁵ Xóchitl Bada, *Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicagoacán: From Local to Transnational Civic Engagement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 3.

⁶ Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago, 1920-1970* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983), 24.

⁷ Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago*, 21.

⁸ Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago*, 22.

⁹ Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁰ Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street*, 11.

Historiography & Methods

Scholars like Lilia Fernandez, Rita Arias Jirasek, Carlos Tortolero and Louise Año Nuevo Kerr have examined the experience of the Mexican American communities of Chicago. Each of these historians have researched the trials and tribulations experienced by Mexican immigrants in Chicago.¹¹ These historians primarily focus on the first wave of Mexican immigration into Chicago that took place in the early 20th Century. The texts predominantly focus on the time period prior to the 1970s, with a central focus on post-World War II Chicago.

Historian Michael Innis-Jiménez argues that “cross community organizations” were created by Mexicans in Chicago to “improve their environment and defend against social, political, and economic harassment.”¹² Innis-Jiménez’s work primarily focuses on the Mexican communities in proximity to the Chicago South Side steel mills made up of the following neighborhoods: South Chicago, East Side, South Deering, and Hegewisch.¹³ The work done by Innis-Jiménez is very valuable in outline why Mexican communities in Chicago organized and draws similarities between the needs each of the separate communities needed.

Historian Xóchitl Bada takes a closer look into how the Mexican American communities, comprised of both recent migrants and long-term residents, worked to effect change within their community. Bada argues that hometown associations, transnational advocacy and organizing groups, serve to defend the rights of Mexican immigrants through “collectivist organizational

¹¹ Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Rita Arias Jirasek and Carlos Tortolero, *Mexican Chicago* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2001); Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago, 1920-1970* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983).

¹² Innis-Jiménez 4 Michael Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 4.

¹³ Innis-Jiménez, *Steel Barrio*, 15.

structure.”¹⁴ The idea of collectivist organization structure is very similar to the model in which the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council Operates yet, the community organizing group was mentioned very little in Bada’s work. Bada primarily focuses on groups that work to bridge the gap between Chicago and Michoacán, Mexico.

Together the work of Innis-Jiménez and Bada contribute to the discussion of how Mexican immigrants organized to defend their rights within the city of Chicago. Still, the Pilsen neighborhood has been neglected by the scholarly community. During the period of time in which Innis-Jiménez was examining Mexican communities, Pilsen was still a predominantly Czech neighborhood. It is not until two and a half decades after his period of study that the neighborhood experienced the population shift from Czech to Mexican. After that time, the Pilsen neighborhood has been an epicenter of the Latinx community in Chicago. From the 1970s forward, very little work has been published on the way the Pilsen community has overcome the challenges it faced. The work of members of the Pilsen community has been just as valuable and can contribute equally to the conversation taking place between scholars. In my research, I will be examining the role the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council played in improving their community as well as one of their most documented leaders, Teresa Fraga.

Grassroots community organizations can be challenging to examine. Whether it is their small size or limited organization, the ability find out the role of these groups play can be limited. Fortunately, the DePaul University Library holds extensive archives on the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Teresa Fraga. Through these community archives, I was able to examine how the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council effected change within the Pilsen

¹⁴ Xóchitl Bada, *Mexican Hometown Associations in Chicagoacán: From Local to Transnational Civic Engagement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 161.

neighborhood, the role that Teresa Fraga played within the council, and the legacy that Teresa Fraga left. In addition to the archival sources I utilized, the online collection of historical *Chicago Tribune* articles which has proven vital to my research. These articles were able to fill in where more information was needed from what the archives provided.

In order to successfully examine the way the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and Teresa Fraga effected change with their community, I examined the issues faced within the Pilsen neighborhood and how and why the community council was created. Then, I began investigating what the grassroots group has done for their neighborhood and Chicago as a whole. Only after examining the prior points, I was able to determine that the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council, with the leadership of Teresa Fraga, was able to effect meaningful change within the Pilsen community and set a positive legacy of activism within the ever-shifting Pilsen neighborhood. Moreover, I argue that the methods employed by the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council truly set their work apart from other community groups and allowed them to be most successful.

Section One: Creation of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council

Formed in 1955, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was designed to organize the Pilsen neighborhood rather than having a large number of smaller groups focusing on small issues. One of the group's goals was to have everyone in the “community to be able to help solve problems.”¹⁵ The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council is described as a “grassroots, direct

¹⁵ “Organizing is a Boost for Community Council” *Chicago Sun Times*, 24 July 1992, page 12, Box 20, Folder 2, Pilsen Neighbors Community Council Records, DePaul University Archives, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter Pilsen Neighbors Community Council Records).

action, democratically-controlled, non-partisan, institutionally based, community organization.”¹⁶ The group is “committed to bringing community institutions...together to develop... [to] improve the community.”¹⁷

As previously mentioned, the Pilsen neighborhood was ethnically Czech until the population began to shift in the early 1960s. Prior to this shift, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council worked to provide social services like 885 polio vaccines to the community, lead community improvement projects, and hold community celebrations.¹⁸ The shift demographic make-up of the Pilsen community is evident in a *Chicago Daily Tribune*, the name of the current *Chicago Tribune* before 1963, article titled “It’s Time to Dance in Pilsen.” The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was holding street dances in late July 1961. The food served during the dance, including “tostadas, pizza, and potato pancakes,” clearly reflects the Mexican, Italian, and Czech populations living within the Pilsen neighborhood. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council “aimed at maintaining and improving the Pilsen neighborhood as a residential area and to stimulate [the] civic interest of area residents.”¹⁹ As the neighborhood’s ethnic make-up shift, one constant was the driving principles and mission of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council.

Teresa Fraga’s experiences early in life set her up for success as she served the Pilsen community. Beginning in 1951, Fraga travelled and worked with her parents who made their livelihood through migrant farm work. In 1961, Fraga married and continued to follow the harvest throughout the United States. Looking for a more stable job for her husband, Fraga

¹⁶ Membership to the Board of Directors Document [1978], Box 2, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

¹⁷ Membership to the Board of Directors Document [1978], Box 2, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

¹⁸ Erwin Bach, “Neighborhood Help to Fight Polio Lauded” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Aug 16, 1956, N7.

¹⁹ Dorothea Nicholas, “Future is Up to You--Pilsen Group Told” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb 22, 1962, W1.

moved to Chicago in March of 1966. Fraga was like the approximate eighty percent of Mexican immigrants who lived elsewhere for more than two years before finally settling in Chicago.²⁰

The Pilsen neighborhood was where they chose to place their roots and would later be the site of many accomplishments. From Fraga's humble beginnings, one can begin to understand how she used her personal experiences to motivate those around her. Like many of her peers, Fraga had to work to be able to make ends meet and live comfortably. These experiences would guide Fraga to work to implement change within the Pilsen community.

Fraga's civic engagement began in 1973 when she became the chairperson of the Benito Juarez High School construction committee.²¹ She then continued to be the president of the Jungman Local School Council and the president of the Benito Juarez Steering Committee.²² In each of those roles, Fraga played an important part in developing and improving the education systems within the Pilsen neighborhood. Fraga became active in community organizing in after seeing the condition of Froebel High School, where he son had attendended, and his low attendance in class.²³ In both American and Mexican communities, women are expected to care for children and this expectation carries over to the political involvement of women. In a way, Fraga was working to improve the education system for her own children, but her interests as a mother expanded to benefit all of the children in the community. The role Fraga and the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council played in the construction of Benito Juarez High School is outlined in detail in “Section Two: Education.”

²⁰ Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, *The Chicano Experience in Chicago, 1920-1970* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1983), 21.

²¹ Teresa Fraga Resume [1990], Box 1, Folder 3, Teresa Fraga Papers.

²² Teresa Fraga Resume [1990], Box 1, Folder 3, Teresa Fraga Papers.

²³ Flores, Ayde. " Teresa Fraga." Chicago Women Rhetors. Accessed December 09, 2018. https://depaul.digication.com/chicago_women_rhetors/Teresa_Fraga.

Like many other women, Fraga transitioned from being an active voice of education development to serving in an even greater position, in her case, on the board of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council. In 1976, Fraga used her role on the steering committee as a platform and was elected to be the president of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council. She then served in that role for two years, which was the elected term. Fraga ran on a platform of change in the education system, jobs for Latinos, and after serving as the organization's president, Fraga has served on the board as the treasurer and an executive board member at large to present day.

The most outstanding part of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council history is what they accomplished within the Pilsen neighborhood in education, gentrification, and safety from the late 1970s to 1990. The community organization has fought to combat each of the issues that were outlined in this paper. Working with stakeholders within the community, aldermen, the mayor, and other key figures, the Pilsen neighbors Community Council was able to advocate for the Mexican-American neighborhood. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council created action plans, which it presented to the city of Chicago. These plans address concerns of education, safety, community development, gentrification, and a number of other key issues. In those aspects, the council was extremely successful as they were able to effect positive improvements, outline later in this essay, within their community.

Section Two: Education

In the beginning of Teresa Fraga's civic activism in the Pilsen community, the community came together to challenge a number of issues that the public high school faced

including: “bilingual education, hiring of Mexican teachers, inadequate facilities, and the general poor quality of education.”²⁴ The council saw that there was a lack of tutoring available and recognized issues within the public-school system. Not only did they recognize issues that existed, the council actively sought ways to solve the issues that the community faced by rallying together and working with the leaders. In this case, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council worked with, and at many points against, the Chicago Board of Education.

Prior to 1977, high school students living in Pilsen were bussed to the Froebel Brando of Harrison High School. Residents of the Pilsen community felt their children were not being given the quality education they needed and deserved.²⁵ The methods employed by the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council started off small and grew to encompass the entire community as the Chicago Board of Education refused to meet the demand of the community. Through each step of the process, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was led by Teresa Fraga and other women. This core group of women worked for three years to get approval to build a high school.²⁶

The official process of requesting a new Pilsen high school began on November 20, 1972. Within a month of the first meeting, a petition for a new school with three thousand names was received to the Chicago Public School Superintendent’s office. On January 22, 1973, sixty people joined a sit in at the Chicago Public School Superintendent’s office to protest delays in the building of a high school for the Pilsen community. Months later in March, the community would hold a rally with eight hundred participants to demand a new high school. After almost a

²⁴ Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 11.

²⁵ George Emmett, "Pilsen Leader Wants Basics and Discipline in Education" *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 23, 1975, #.

²⁶ Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street*, xxiv.

year of organizing, the Chicago Board of education voted to build a new high school in Pilsen. Aligning with community values, the community demanded that a Latino architect is hired, and the Chicago Board of Education quickly selects Adrian Lozano.²⁷

During the struggle for the building of a Pilsen high school, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council relied on the perception by politicians and city officials that it was “more reasonable and less militant” than other activist groups.²⁸

In an article published in *El Tiempo*, a Mexican American newspaper based in Chicago, in September of 1974 residents of the Pilsen community express that their children are not being given a quality school within local proximity.²⁹ Residents are seen holding signs that say “We Need a New High School.”³⁰ Months prior to the vote to build a new high school, college students from University Iowa and a number of community leaders lead an uprising which resulted in twelve arrested.³¹ The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council primarily used more mainstream tactics that those in power felt comfortable with. That being said, the council did know how to push its weight around and organize the entire community when the machine politics posed a threat to their success.

As part of the protest, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council organized a school boycott of Jungman, Jirka, and seven other elementary schools within Pilsen in the fall of 1974. The Chicago Board of Education had not created a time table for the school completion and

²⁷ Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), xxiii-xxiv.

²⁸ Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street*, 187.

²⁹ “Insensible, Educación Ingnota a Manifestatantes Pro Secundaria”, *El Tiempo*, September 14, 1974, 2, Box 20, Folder 1, Pilsen Neighbors Community Council Records.

³⁰ “Insensible, Educación Ingnota a Manifestatantes Pro Secundaria” *El Tiempo*, September 14, 1974, 2, Box 20, Folder 1, Pilsen Neighbors Community Council Records.

³¹ Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street*, xxiv.

residents and leaders alike felt it was necessary to show the Chicago Board of Education they meant business. During these protests, 80-90% of students did not attend classes.³² The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was able to organize students and families within the Pilsen neighborhood under one message.

In September 1977, Benito Juarez High School opened its doors. At its dedication, a banner read “La escuela fue construída por el pueblo, no por los politico—que vayan much al diablo. (This school was created by the community, not by the politicians—who should to the devil.)”³³ The banner emphasized the primary role the community played in the building of a neighborhood high school. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council employed tactics of rallies, sit ins, and boycotts to bring the community together while also showing that solidarity to decisions makers in key positions in the education system.

With the creation of the Benito Juarez High School in Pilsen, the group looked to test the idea of effective instruction and integration of bilingual education into the community.³⁴ Prior to the construction of Benito Juarez High School, students from Pilsen were bussed to schools with lacking bilingual education programs. The bilingual education at those schools is described as “woefully inadequate” in one report.³⁵ In an area where a majority of students are Mexican American, and Spanish is a predominant language, bilingual education is key to the success of a school in educating youth. Students within Pilsen also read at a level two years behind the national average in the late 1970s.³⁶ While schools did exist in the Pilsen neighborhood, they

³² Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), xxiv.

³³ Ramirez, *Chicanas of 18th Street*, xxiv.

³⁴ “Pilsen Neighbors Platform on Education” [1978], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

³⁵ “Pilsen Neighbors Platform on Education” [1978], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

³⁶ “Pilsen Neighbors Platform on Education” [1978], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

were seen as being unable to provide for student needs in both instruction and the physical facilities themselves. Even after the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was successful with their construction of a community high school, the council continued to improve the school and community. Teachers setting expectations for students and monitoring their behavior, the school being open to adult education classes, and residents having a role in the hiring of principal and teachers were just a few of the community's requests.³⁷

A powerful solution at the table in 1978 focused on creating a Pilsen Board of Education made up of local representatives elected by the community. The goals of this board are as follows: "insuring quality bilingual/bi-cultural programs...developing an effective, comprehensive discipline code, requiring administrative accountability, and designing a response to desegregation."³⁸ The Pilsen Board of Education was drafted to serve as a tool of empowerment. In order to maintain some form of autonomy and agency with the community, Pilsen community members desired a way to be able to better confront the Chicago Board of Education when they saw issues within their community.

The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council used the energy of the victory of Benito Juarez High School's construction to continue improving the community by enlisting the community members, primarily parents, to monitor the education system in Pilsen. The Pilsen Board of Education acted as a "vehicle for uniting the energy and creating...change."³⁹ The key to the council's success was in the way it pointed out issues and failures in the system while also providing solutions.

³⁷ George Emmett, "Pilsen Leader Wants Basics and Discipline in Education" *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 23, 1975, N4.

³⁸ "Pilsen Neighbors Platform on Education" [1978], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

³⁹ "Pilsen Neighbors Platform on Education" [1978], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

Section Three: Gentrification & Affordable Housing

In the 1950s, gentrification and displacement of poor, minority communities spread under the guise of urban renewal in Chicago. Another growing concern within the Pilsen Community in the latter half of the 20th Century was gentrification and redevelopment. The “Chicago 21 Plan” also worried the Pilsen community.⁴⁰ The plan was designed to repurpose old railyards and “upgrading the 11-square-mile area bounded by North and Ashland Avenues, the Stevenson Expressway, and the lake. The Pilsen neighborhood, which was located within this area, would be the site of proposed “strengthening and revitalizing.”⁴¹ The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council recognized that the proposed plan by the city could greatly benefit or harm residents ultimately deciding to “form an alliance with the plan’s proponents—to be heard and to help.”⁴² The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council would then move to create a Chicago 21 Community Alternative Plan for Pilsen in May of 1975.⁴³ The council continued its theme of stating where the issues lay within a proposal or system, and follow that by forming a solution. In the case of urban renewal, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council worked with the city of Chicago to make sure their voice was heard and their community was part of the decision making process. If the Pilsen community had just voiced their dissent or had been violent in their approach, the city may not have been as open to having them participate. This method of representation was extremely successful.

⁴⁰ Leonard G. Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street: Narratives of a Movement from Latino Chicago* (Baltimore: University of Illinois Press, 2011), xxv.

⁴¹ Stanley Ziemba, "Neighborhoods Get Voice in City's Plan" *Chicago Tribune*, Jan 08, 1976, D1.

⁴² Ziemba, "Neighborhoods Get Voice in City's Plan," D1.

⁴³ Ramirez et al., *Chicanas of 18th Street*, xxv.

In 1970, Pilsen was home to over 1,500 vacant lots and scores of other vacant buildings.⁴⁴ With such a high number vacant lots, Pilsen became a target for gentrification. Gentrification had already begun to take place in other neighborhoods in Chicago as high-quality housing in close proximity to the business districts became scarce.⁴⁵ Gentrification threatened the community's ability to remain whole. Gentrification would displace residents unable to meet rising rent costs. Residents already cited moving out due to a lack of "decent schools, recreational facilities, or loans to upgrade their homes."⁴⁶

Elsewhere in the community, gentrification was fought with a community centered approach. The fight against gentrification had two parts. The first included working with the city and banks to limit loaning and permissions to the building of new developments within the Pilsen community. The second focused on the redevelopment of housing to meet the needs of Pilsen residents.⁴⁷

In order to halt the redevelopment of the Pilsen neighborhood into high rent apartments, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council contacted banks and alderman to gather support. From the alderman, the council wished to place freezes on the sale of city owned property within Pilsen.⁴⁸ Freezing the sales of those properties would allow those properties to be used to construct affordable housing. If high cost housing were to replace the city owned lots, residents would eventually be forced to leave the community because of the inability to pay the rising market rent. Fraga successfully worked with a Chicago Alderman to request that sale of city

⁴⁴ Proyecto Vivienda Memo [1990], Box 3, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁴⁵ Proyecto Vivienda Memo [1990], Box 3, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁴⁶ "Fears Told of Plan for Downtown" *Chicago Tribune*, Mar 22, 1974, B15.

⁴⁷ Proyecto Vivienda Memo [1990], Box 3, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁴⁸ Teresa Fraga to Alderman Soliz [1989], Box 3, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

properties be frozen pending the “development of a plan which would utilize city property to develop affordable housing.”⁴⁹ The development of a plan regarding the development of affordable housing would be a task given to the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council.

On behalf of the council, Fraga contacted the Assistant Vice President of the National Republic Bank of Chicago in March 1990. In a letter, she outlines a number of requests:

“-Opening relationships with your financial institutions

-Learning about opportunities available to our community for rehab loans or mortgages for existing homes and new construction through your institution,

-Exploring what interests your institution may have in working with us in the area of housing”⁵⁰

Through that request, a goal of setting a meeting date as well as an overarching project goal was developed: building affordable homes that were safe for residents to live in. Focus was placed on the homes being affordable in order to meet the financial constraints of Pilsen community members in need of quality, low-cost housing.⁵¹ Fraga, on behalf of the council, partnered with local stakeholders to best meet the needs of the Pilsen community. The partnership allowed the council to coordinate community development. Again, the pattern of finding an area of concern, bringing it to the attention of the community at large, and working with local stakeholders and the city government to craft a solution.

Section Four: Safety

⁴⁹ Juan M. Soliz to Commissioner Reyes [1989], Box 3, Folder 5, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁰ Teresa Fraga to Mr. BJ Mehta [1990], Box 3, Folder 5, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵¹ Proyecto Vivienda Memo [1990], Box 3, Folder 4, Teresa Fraga Papers.

Public safety became a main concern after the loss of many lives in a fire on December 25, 1976. Less than a week later, another fire killed 8 and hurt an additional 11 people.⁵² The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council sought answers while also working to find a solution. Within a week of the fires, the group was able to hold a meeting with the Fire Commissioner of the Chicago Fire department.⁵³ Within that meeting, the group planned to discuss what happened, the community response, what conditions in the community contributed to the tragedy, and to review and vote on demands to hold before the Chicago Fire Department.⁵⁴ The demands listed were all oriented around having Latinx fire fighters within the Spanish Speaking communities. The ability for emergency services to be able to communicate with residents was a central argument. At that time, only 11 of 4500 Chicago fireman were Latino.⁵⁵ The community wanted to assure that a tragedy like this never happened again and they began working with the Chicago Mayor's Office and Chicago Fire Department to find a solution. With the support of these two stakeholders, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council would be able to accomplish their goals.

By partnering with the Chicago Fire Department, Fraga and the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council were able to gain report with the leaders within the department. Fraga, serving as the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council, was one of many volunteers in Pilsen who worked to educate the community on fire prevention. The volunteers worked with a fire-prevention officer from the Chicago Fire Department. The method of fostering a positive relationship with this stakeholder lead to the hiring of 34 unemployed, Latinx community members to aid in fire prevention after the one million dollars in federal funds were received.

⁵² "Apartment Fire Kills 8; 11 Hurt" *Chicago Sun Times*, 2 Jan 1977, page 12, Box 8, Folder 11, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵³ Meeting Agenda/Notes [1979], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁴ Meeting Agenda/Notes [1979], Box 5, Folder 9, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁵ President's Address [1978], Box 2, Folder 7, Teresa Fraga Papers; "Firemen Learn from Tragedies of Christmas, 1976," *Chicago Sun Times*, 25 Dec 1977, 10, Box 8, Folder 11, Teresa Fraga Papers.

The efforts began in the Latinx communities and branched out. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council's strategy of serving as a partner organization and gateway into the Latinx communities in Chicago, allowed them to have a voice in the change in the community and assure that the change took place.⁵⁶

Firemen in Latino neighborhoods also received training in 72 key Spanish phrases that would help them communicate with residents in the case of emergencies. Even though Chicago Fire Fighters Union president called these claims "foolish and un-American" the mayor of Chicago stood behind proposals to transfer Spanish speaking firefighters to communities that needed them.⁵⁷ The Spanish speaking community was challenged with comments such as "this is America; let them speak English" made by the president of the Chicago Firefighters Union.⁵⁸ These ethnocentric notions were not enough to deter the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council from their work. Some opponents demanded that Pilsen residents learn English, placing the responsibility on residents. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council embraced its Mexican American identity and fought the notion of assimilation.

Less than a month after the string of fires that killed 26 in the Pilsen and other Spanish speaking neighborhoods in Chicago, the city "agreed...to hire 40 Latinos and 168 Blacks" in a new hiring waive of 274 firefighters total.⁵⁹ The hiring of these firefighters was important for the aspect of shared language in the Latinx communities in Chicago, but also to make sure the make-up of city government and services reflected the ethnic and racial communities within Chicago.

⁵⁶ "Firemen Learn from Tragedies of Christmas, 1976," *Chicago Sun Times*, 25 Dec 1977, 10, Box 8, Folder 11, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁷ "'Foolish' says Fire-Union Chief of Bilandic Language Plans," *Chicago Sun Times*, 5 Jan. 1977, page 22, Box 8, Folder 11, Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁸ "'Foolish' says Fire-Union Chief of Bilandic Language Plans," Teresa Fraga Papers.

⁵⁹ "'Foolish' says Fire-Union Chief of Bilandic Language Plans," Teresa Fraga Papers.

The activism of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council not only helped the Latinx community, it also helped enfranchise the black community of Chicago.

The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was not just looking out for its own neighborhood. On the bottom of the meeting agenda, Teresa Fraga wrote “teams should be added to all the fire stations where all other Latino families reside.” Out of tragedy, Fraga lead efforts to make change within the greater Mexican-American community of Chicago. Recognizing that one issue within the Pilsen community could also arise within other predominantly Latinx communities, Fraga and the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council sought to make sure their demands extended outside of the walls of their community. The proposed changes did not just exist within the Spanish speaking community. Fire fighters with fluency in Polish and Italian were also on the list of in-demand languages because of their high populations in Chicago.⁶⁰

Conclusion

As a grassroots organization, the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council was and continues to effect change within the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. Changing demographics and the development of the University of Illinois at Chicago challenged the community. Residents frustrated with the education system, organized to fight a system they saw as broken. After tragedy struck and lives were lost in a number of fires within the community, community members, organized by the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council, brought demands to the Chicago Fire Department and mayor’s office looking for change to take place. Even when they faced

⁶⁰ “‘Foolish’ says Fire-Union Chief of Bilandic Language Plans,” *Chicago Sun Times*, 5 Jan. 1977, page 22, Box 8, Folder 11, Teresa Fraga Papers.

pushback from some groups, the council continued to move forward with its mission of create a safe and prosperous Pilsen community.

Lead by Pilsen community members, the heart and emotion of those leaders is seen through the organization's work. In order to make a better future for their children and to ensure the longevity of the neighborhood for senior community members, those with the ability to represent their neighbors lead the charge to effect change within their community. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council organized those looking to make a difference.

In each of these areas where the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council intervened, state problem and actively be part of solution. Rather than making just making noise, the council proposed solution after solution. In one instance, they created a seventy-seven-page proposal to be submitted to the city of Chicago. Another key aspect of the council's work is the fact that their activism did only exist within the borders of Pilsen. Other disenfranchised groups in the city saw empowerment through the efforts of the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council. Ultimately, the council held and holds an integral role in the development and empowerment of Pilsen and other communities in Chicago.

In Teresa Fraga's presidential address at the 1978 convention, she left the Pilsen Neighbors Community Council and audience with a challenge for the future. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council is "an organizing vehicle, through which people in this community, affect by a certain problem & wanted to do something about it, can come together & get results."⁶¹ In her words, the council gave residents a "sense of power," "dignity," and "pride that they are members of the Pilsen Neighbors [Community Council.]"⁶² Using methods of

⁶¹ President's Address [1978], Box 2, Folder 7, Teresa Fraga Papers

⁶² President's Address [1978], Box 2, Folder 7, Teresa Fraga Papers

finding key issues in the community, engaging in conversations with the city government, and connecting community stakeholders, Fraga and the council were able to create a legacy of action and change.

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