



Stories of Resilience and Community

30 years of Casa Latina in Greater Seattle, WA

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Anniversary Edition

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This book is dedicated to the resilient
individuals who have defined the meaning
of Casa Latina.

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Founded in 1994, Casa Latina is a nonprofit organization that advances the power and well-being of Latinx immigrants through employment, education, and community organizing. Our vision is that the Latino community participates fully in the economy and democracy of this country.

Employment

We connect Latinx immigrants with job opportunities. Through our Day Workers' Center, our worker members are connected with employers and temporary jobs on a daily basis which often leads to full-time, permanent employment. All Casa Latina members receive training in job skills, strategies for health and safety, and worker rights - including the right to a safe and respectful workplace. Our members take the lead in determining program rules, procedures, and wages. This strong leadership development component creates a sense of ownership and pride.

Education

Our widely-recognized language and digital literacy classes employ a Popular Education model, honoring the skills and experiences of the students who participate and centering the practical needs of community members. Daily English classes in the Day Worker Center, weekly online tutoring sessions with volunteer teachers, bi-weekly computer classes, and our Somos Vecinos program of evening Spanish and English classes all contribute to a culture of learning, personal growth, and community connection.

Community Organizing

As part of the Washington Immigrant Solidarity Network (WAISN), the National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON), and the National Domestic Workers' Alliance (NDWA), Casa Latina members continue to participate actively in the ongoing struggle for immigrant justice and worker rights. Our *Mujeres Sin Fronteras* program promotes leadership and awareness through weekly meetings and workshops, with many participants advocating for worker rights through their own leadership and speaking skills. Seattle's Domestic Worker Bill of Rights, signed into law in 2019, was the first example in the US of specifically enumerated rights for domestic workers such as the right to a minimum wage, the right to a break, and the right to retain possession of one's documents.



Origins

Casa Latina was founded in 1994 with a dream of furthering the power and well-being of the Latinx immigrant community

From its earliest beginnings in a small trailer in the Belltown area of Seattle, Casa Latina has focused on Latinx immigrant agency. The programs developed by founder Hilary Stern (together with a core team of members and volunteers) had as their goal harnessing the wisdom, experience, and leadership of the community members themselves to build power for the Latinx community and to create new ways to initiate change. Many students found their way to that original trailer at Western Avenue and Battery Street as a safe space to learn English, find community, access connections to work, and get out of the rain. They were not only interested in learning English and finding work to survive within Seattle's precarious labor market and limited spaces of sanctuary; many were seeking the skills, voice, and awareness with which to become active agents in their own lives and full participants in the wider society.

In thirty years of ongoing growth and development, powered by dedicated volunteers and incredibly inspired staff, Casa Latina's Employment, Education, and Community Organizing programs have all taken shape within this participatory model. Casa Latina's ESL and digital literacy classes, job and safety trainings, Mujeres Sin Fronteras leadership programs, and

labor rights workshops all use a Popular Education framework rooted in the practical needs, life experiences, and actual realities of the participants. The Employment and Community Organizing teams are led by former worker center members, and the workers use a collective decision-making approach for setting employment conditions, rates of pay, and the protocol for running the job dispatch program. Along the way, our members have worked tirelessly to develop their own client lists and small businesses, earn credentials, and create stable pathways forward for themselves and their families. They have also built tremendous capacity to advocate for their communities and to win significant victories - most notably the City of Seattle's 2019 Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights/Carta de Derechos para Trabajadores del Hogar: a list of basic labor standards that continues to affirm the dignity of housecleaners, gardeners, nannies, and home care workers throughout the city. Through archival photos and individual member profiles, this book was created to document some of that history and to highlight the amazing resilience of all those who continue to make Casa Latina a participatory space of growth, learning, agency, and respect.







Domingo

“I am proud to be Latino, not just because I am from Mexico, but because I represent our entire community.”

My name is Domingo Salas, and I am from Mexico, from the state of Colima. I came to the United States in '81. I would go to Alaska to work and then return to Seattle.

It all began in '94 when we were found waiting for work under a bridge and on some street in Belltown. They approached us and asked, “Why are you here?” We told them, “We are here waiting for work.” Then, the founder of what is now Casa Latina said to us, “I want to set up a trailer here so you have a proper and safe place to be, so you’re not out here. I want everyone to have a stable place instead of being out here.” And we said, “Of course, we’ll help you.” That’s how Casa Latina started, and we began organizing workers and the community to find jobs. I was one of the original founding members and have been with Casa Latina for 30 years.

Over the years, Casa Latina has grown. It has not only offered us jobs but also education, labor rights workshops, and training to help us develop our skills. Casa Latina has supported all Latinos.

For me, Casa Latina is a very respected and cherished place where I feel like I am with family. I have had many positive experiences like the time I went to California to represent Casa Latina along with 10 other people from here at a meeting with other worker centers

from across the United States. People commented that Casa Latina in Seattle was the best center, highlighting the quality of our work. People from other places have come here to learn how we organize at Casa Latina.

I have had many employers through Casa Latina. Even though I lost several due to the pandemic, I have always found work here because I want people to see that Latinos are hardworking. And I don’t just mean the men, but also the women. All the women are hardworking, and I’m talking about Latinos from all over: Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Colombia, from everywhere. Casa Latina has helped thousands of us.

I am proud to be Latino, not just because I am from Mexico, but because I represent our entire community. I am proud to be Mexican and to be a worker at Casa Latina, because this is a place that I truly appreciate.





Original Casa Latina building in Belltown, Seattle, circa 2000



Casa Latina Seattle office located in the Central District



Irene

“I am grateful because I was able to support my daughters. That fills me with pride. Many of my fellow workers have also improved their lives thanks to this organization and the people who give us employment.”

My name is Irene López Velázquez, and I am from Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico. When I arrived at Casa Latina in 2008, I didn't have a job. People told me that here they helped people and there was work. I was so happy because I was finally going to work. On my first day, I went with two fellow day laborers to do gardening, and they taught me how to do it. I remember how happy I felt to find a job and arrive at Casa Latina, especially because moving to a new city is difficult, and it was for me.

When I found Casa Latina and had my first days of work, I thought, “Even if it's in the garden or wherever, this is the best job I've ever had.” I felt like I had found a family, and that motivated me to stay. They also helped me a lot; we shared the same language and culture, which made me feel more supported.

During those years, while I was working in Seattle, my daughters finished school in Mexico. Two became teachers and one a psychologist. I worked very hard for my daughters and never rested, coming to Casa Latina every day to look for work. Thanks to that, I found employers who gave me work every week and taught me how to get organized. I am grateful because I was able to support my daughters. That fills me with pride. Many of my fellow workers

have also improved their lives thanks to this organization and the people who give us employment.

I enjoy participating in the afternoon meetings in the group “Women Without Borders.” There are always workshops, retreats, orientations, and talks where we learn and support each other. We receive information that helps us understand our rights. Although I did not have the opportunity to study much, I have learned a lot at Casa Latina and feel more confident. It makes me happy to see how much I have grown.

Coming here, being able to talk, and feeling listened to did me a lot of good. I was going through a difficult situation, leaving my daughters behind and not knowing if I could stay or would have to return. That's why I say Casa Latina is my second home; here I find support, companionship, and a space to feel better.

Since I arrived at Casa Latina in 2008, I have been part of this community. I remember when we were all together in a small trailer on First Avenue, sharing the space with my colleagues, no matter if it was raining or snowing; we were there, together. Those moments have left a mark on me, and that is why Casa Latina will always be special to me.







Juan

“Here, I learned that sharing and collaborating is essential. When everyone contributes something, a lot can be achieved.”

My name is Juan Us, and I’m from Guatemala. I arrived in the United States on December 1, 2007. I first settled in Florida, but there wasn’t much work, so I looked for opportunities in other states. I moved to Virginia, but I didn’t like it there because of the heat. A friend, in Fresno, California, told me there was work in the fields. Since I grew up in the countryside, I knew how to do that kind of work, so I went to Mendota, California. I worked during the season, but when the harvest ended and winter came, we were left without jobs. Another friend in Vancouver, Canada, told me there was work year-round and encouraged me to go. I took a Greyhound bus and headed toward the border.

I arrived in Seattle by accident; I didn’t know anyone, and I didn’t speak English. A man at the bus terminal suggested I visit Casa Latina, gave me directions, and I went the next day. I got up at four in the morning, went out to find the place, and when I saw the people there, I knew it was the right spot.

At that time, Casa Latina was very small. They held English classes in a small space, and there was a little room where they served coffee, but only a few people could fit. Everything else was outdoors, where we endured the cold or the sun.

I decided to stay in Seattle, even though

I didn’t know anyone. One day, a man from Mexico approached me while we were waiting for work, and we started talking. He showed me how to get around the city and take the bus, which helped me learn how things worked here.

Over time, Casa Latina grew. We moved to a new building because the old one had become too small. We organized to request the construction of a larger building. We went to Olympia, spoke with legislators to gain their support, and finally, they approved the project and began construction. Although there were things missing at first, like the elevator and kitchen, we kept asking for support. With the help of many people, we managed to build this building.

Casa Latina is a place where people help each other, something I hadn’t experienced in other states. Here, I learned that sharing and collaborating is essential. When everyone contributes something, a lot can be achieved. What’s needed in life is unity, understanding, and doing good for oneself and those who come after, because we never know who will need help in the future.







José

“That’s the beautiful thing about Casa Latina and the day laborer community. It remains a place of support and growth for all of us.”

My name is José Antonio Lara Olivares. I was born and raised in Mexico City. I first came to Casa Latina in 2008, thanks to a friend. I had been working in construction since 2006, but when the project I was on ended, the 2008 recession hit, and many of us were left without work. That’s when my friend told me, “Go to Casa Latina.” I didn’t know what it was, so I asked him, and he said it was a place where they provided work. He gave me directions, and I went; it was when Casa Latina was still under the bridge on Western Avenue.

Since then, I’ve learned a lot. In Mexico, I worked in an office, so when I arrived in the United States, I didn’t know how to do anything related to what a day laborer does. But at Casa Latina, I learned to do everything: painting, gardening, carpentry, and construction. Besides learning trades, I also got to know what nonprofit organizations are, attended leadership trainings, and participated in activities like advocacy and going to Congress. All of this has enriched me greatly.

Adapting to a new country isn’t easy. Everything changes: the weather, the language, the people, the food—everything. It’s a process of transformation where you have to change the lifestyle you once had. Fortunately, I was able to find that balance,

partly thanks to English classes, but mostly thanks to work. Casa Latina provided me with work from the beginning, and that helped me adapt. When there was no work in construction, I went to Casa Latina. That’s how I became integrated and discovered that there are opportunities for progress in this community.

I miss a lot about Mexico—everything, really. I’ve always felt that, although I’m physically here, my mind is in Mexico. I hold on to the firm hope of returning one day. I’m grateful for everything I’ve received. First, the opportunity to live, to have sustenance, a home, and a job. I’m grateful at this moment that I still have the strength to keep moving forward, to live and work. A day laborer works hard, dedicates himself, and faces many difficulties. It’s a job full of sacrifices and needs. Everything I’ve learned and observed drives me to give my best in whatever I can.

I’ve known Casa Latina since 2008. Everything changes, and Casa Latina has also gone through changes, but fortunately, it remains the home for day laborers who come looking for work. That’s the beautiful thing about Casa Latina and the day laborer community. It remains a place of support and growth for all of us.







Ana

“Sometimes, there are many struggles, but those struggles shape us and make us reflect on the kind of people we want to be. If everything were easy, I don’t think we would be who we are today.”

My name is Ana Bello. I am from Michoacán, Mexico. I came here thanks to a person who recommended Casa Latina to me while I was looking for English classes. They told me to contact the manager of Casa Latina’s educational program. When I called, they told me I could come the next day, and that’s how I started with the English classes. Later, I was invited to the HH women’s group, and then to *Mujeres Sin Fronteras*. I started attending the meetings and also got involved in the community kitchen project.

I have liked everything: the information they provide, the support from the community, and the opportunity to learn a little more about their lives. You learn about labor rights, the Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights, and so many other things that Casa Latina offers. I have learned a lot, especially how to be completely independent. Between cleaning houses, traveling to different places, organizing my schedule, attending English classes, and participating in *Mujeres Sin Fronteras*, my life has been filled with activities that I really enjoy. To me, Casa Latina is like a second home.

Not having family here is sometimes difficult because you don’t always have someone to turn to. However, Casa Latina is a place full of people who support you. If you

ever need something, just talking to someone who is going through the same things as you is a great comfort.

Continuing to learn is essential. At first, I had a very different idea of what the United States was before I came to know Casa Latina. I thought this country was just for working, a place where you come to be alone, where you come to suffer. But now, with the new experiences from Casa Latina, I have learned that you can learn a lot here. It gives you the knowledge and a sense of empowerment that not only women but everyone needs.

I miss my family, my roots, my origin, the people, the food, and the smell of my hometown. Despite the difficulties, I am grateful for life itself. Sometimes there are many struggles, but those struggles shape us and make us reflect on the kind of people we want to be. If everything were easy, I don’t think we would be who we are today.







José Luis

“I believe it is important to help others move forward, just as others did for me. If someone taught me, I have to teach someone else so that they can also progress.”



My name is José Luis Ramírez, and I am originally from Michoacán, Mexico. I have known Casa Latina since before they built the new work buildings. Many years ago, they offered English classes at the Millionaire’s Club and in a church. I had friends who found work here and invited me, so I started coming in February 2018.

I used to look for work at Home Depot or other places, but it is very different here. It’s safer, and you have the assurance that you will get paid, which wasn’t always the case in other places. I prefer going to Casa Latina because out there, with the crowd waiting in the rain at Home Depot, the situation is very different. Here, you simply come to work without worrying if someone will show up to offer a job.

I come from a rural area in Mexico, where I worked in agriculture, but after many years living in the city and working in restaurants, returning to fieldwork was a challenge for me. I didn’t know how to care for a tree, prune it, or have any experience in gardening. I have learned all of that here at Casa Latina, thanks to the jobs we do and the support from my colleagues.

Being part of Casa Latina motivates me to keep moving forward. There are many programs and opportunities here to gain new

knowledge and improve in different types of work. Over time, I have learned to prune, plant, and even work in construction—areas where I had no experience before. Little by little, I have been acquiring more ideas and knowledge that have helped me advance.

Now, I try to share what I have learned with those who work with me. I tell them, “Look, this is how it’s done.” I believe it is important to help others move forward, just as others did for me. If someone taught me, I have to teach someone else so that they can also progress.







María

“I never miss the Mujeres Sin Fronteras meetings; I love being involved, meeting good people, and spending time with the group.”

I'm from Acapulco, Guerrero, Mexico. I arrived at Casa Latina three years ago. At that time, I was cleaning houses with someone else, but due to the pandemic, the work decreased. That's when I decided to start coming to Casa Latina, and soon I began getting my own clients. Although I've been offered work elsewhere, I wouldn't trade Casa Latina for anything because you can earn well here. You're your own boss, you communicate directly with clients, and you don't have to answer to anyone. If you work well and with dedication, you can maintain and grow your work opportunities.

Casa Latina has been a great support for me. They don't take a single cent from you and they help you find work without asking for anything in return. Additionally, they have weekly meetings with the women's leadership group where they offer very valuable information. I never miss the *Mujeres Sin Fronteras* meetings; I love being involved, meeting good people, and spending time with the group.

Casa Latina is more than just a workplace; it has been a great support in my life. I feel empowered and backed by the organization. They value me and take me into account, and honestly, it's the best thing that's happened to me in the 23 years I've been in

this country. I've never encountered a place like Casa Latina in all my years here. Both professionally and personally, it's been one of the best experiences of my life.

Life here in the United States is very different from Mexico. Here, you can work and also enjoy what you earn, something that, unfortunately, isn't always possible in Mexico. Although I have my mother and three brothers there, and I'd like to return, the insecurity and high cost of living make me decide to stay here. Seattle, in particular, is wonderful. There are more opportunities, and it's a place where people can progress and improve themselves. After 10 years, I don't plan on moving from here.



