

Aquí Estoy The Origin of “El Centro”

Written by: Robert Johnson

In June 1966, the Division Street Riots, caused by and characterized by excessive violence and repression from the Chicago Police against Puerto Ricans in West Town, resulted in a reckoning by city and state officials, who finally underwent a process of self-reflection, which resulted in some well-meaning outreach efforts, including Northeastern Illinois State College's agreement to support an education center in the West Town community. In March 1969, Aquí Estoy (“Here I am” in Spanish) was founded by Rose Brandzel, a faculty member at the college and long-time English tutor, and student Rosa Hernández, who served as its first director. At first, Aquí Estoy focused on ESL and GED efforts, primarily serving factory workers in the Puerto Rican community seeking better professional and financial opportunity.

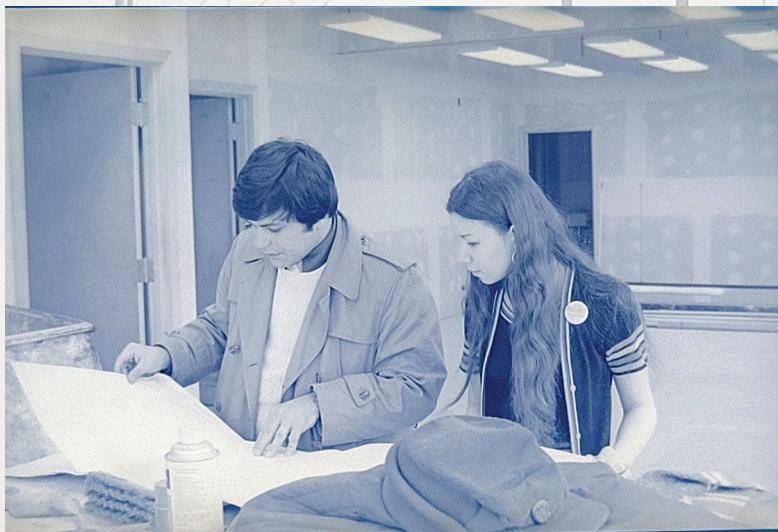
Sadly, in the early 1970s, Aquí Estoy had all but shut down, without the concerted efforts of its founders and in the face of an apathetic university administration. Students Silvia Rodríguez and Elba Rivera helped organize an effort by the Union for Puerto Rican Students (UPRS) and Northeastern alumni, which resulted in the hiring of Miguel Velázquez, who, even though only 25 years old at the time, already had experience as a bilingual high school teacher, university advisor, and as a director of an adult education program that served the Spanish-speaking community.

Mr. Velázquez was tasked with an ambitious expansion of the program, which would now serve as Northeastern's satellite campus in the West Town community. Its mission would not only be these ESL and GED efforts, but also to provide opportunities for college courses to be taken locally within the community. Now renamed C.L.A.S.E.S. (Centro Latino Adelantando Sus Estudios Superiores, or Latin Center for Advancing Your Higher Studies) to illustrate its expanded mission, the University leased a building at North and Artesian Avenues, on the opposite corner from the famous Puerto Rican mural, la Crucifixión de Don Pedro Albizu Campos. In a scheme that would likely have been the greatest real estate investment Northeastern has made in its history, the owner was to donate the land and the building for the large tax credit he would receive.



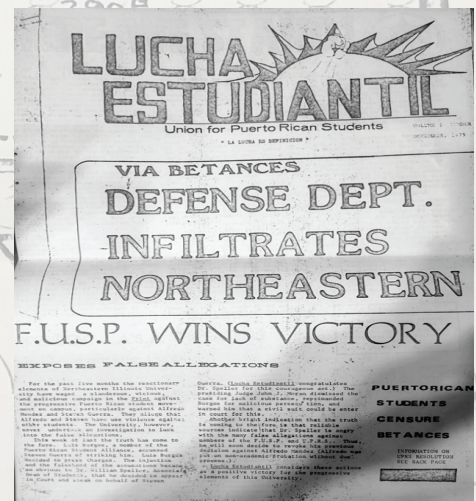
Rosa Hernández circa 1971

Source: American Education, Vol. 7, No. 2, March 1971, published by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare



Miguel Velázquez and his student assistant Aida Ileana Laboy at the construction site, January

1975. Source: NEIU University Archives



Lucha Estudiantil, Vol. 1 No. 3, December 1975.

Source: Author's personal archive



Photo of the mural *La crucifixión de Don Pedro Albizu Campos* taken from the C.L.A.S.E.S. building, January 1975. This mural was painted by the Puerto Rican Art Association, painted by UPRS founder Héctor Luis Rosario, José Bermúdez, and Mario Galán. The text in the lower right that gave credit for this work has recently been covered up by the latest restoration.

Source: NEIU University Archives

With construction efforts stymied, and local community pressure that led Velázquez to run against indicted Alderman Thomas Kean's wife, who was running in his place, many students on the main campus of Northeastern felt that it was due to distracted leadership that further development of C.L.A.S.E.S. was running behind schedule. It was at this time that the UPRS intervened, while Velázquez was out of town on paid vacation. The Union's vice-president even questioned Velázquez's Puerto Ricanness in the school newspaper: "Miguel Velazquez is no longer nor can be considered a Puerto Rican."

Miguel Velázquez was born in Moca, Puerto Rico, then grew up in slum apartments and housing projects on the West and South Sides of Chicago, one of ten children who would never have a permanent residence in their youth. If anyone lived some of the worst that Chicago had to offer Puerto Rican migrants, it was Velázquez.



Photo from *Que Ondee Sola*, taken September 23, 1972, the day after the 150th anniversary of the Grito de Lares. The participants are standing up for Puerto Rican independence, facing the mural, "*La crucifixión de Don Pedro Albizu Campos*." The building in the background would become the C.L.A.S.E.S. building, but there is now a Walgreens there. Maximino Torres, the director of *Proyecto Pa'lante*, with dark hair and glasses towards the right

Source: QOS Archives

The ripple effect of Velázquez's dismissal in February 1975 was monumental in influence. John Major, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, publicly opposed University President Mullen's decision to bow to student pressure without an examination of the facts involved. Major would soon be forced to resign, and the unpopular Mullen would likewise resign within a year. The inability of student activists and administration officials to agree on a replacement to lead C.L.A.S.E.S., an impasse that would last several months, led to the almost complete destruction of this academic outreach program. It would be moved to the Far West Side, far from the community it was meant to serve. Now it is known simply as El Centro, this previous effort at community outreach reduced to simply a name put on a building next to the expressway. The building that was to be C.L.A.S.E.S. has been replaced by a Walgreens.

The president of the UPRS, who had put his signature to the accusations against Velázquez, would be ousted, and the Puerto Rican student community would split into two, and then three organizations. Even *Que Ondee Sola* itself was subject to something of a "tug-of-war" match, so contentious that the lock to the dark room was changed. A new UPRS newspaper, *Lucha Estudiantil*, would briefly be published, and its December issue would be the centerpiece to litigation among faculty that included eighty hours of testimony, massive legal costs, and, in the end, a great waste of time that entangled the faculty of the Sociology Department, delaying the implementation of the Justice Studies program.

To Miguel Velázquez's credit, he would go on to a long career as a Chicago Public School administrator, last serving until his retirement as the Principal of Eli Whitney Elementary School, where, among other things, he invested the school's discretionary funding to employ a full-time social worker, unheard of in a public school climate where these funds are often used to reward and enrich faculty and staff. It is hard to say what may have been if the events of early 1975 had occurred just a little differently. Well-meaning idealists on all sides of the dispute found themselves distracted by conflicts over Puerto Rican identity, playing into the hands of ongoing efforts to divide the Puerto Rican community, which remains strongest when united, as does all of humanity.

¹ No longer the appropriate term, but English as a Second Language was the nomenclature at the time

² Created in 1971 by UPRS founder Héctor Luis Rosario, José Bermúdez, and Mario Galán. It remains in this spot over fifty years later after two restorations.

³ Some may recall recent expansion into the surrounding neighborhood, property that has neither appreciated in value nor is currently utilized by NEIU, or entrusting The Nest to a for-profit corporation that has resulted in obvious to forsee but ostensibly unforeseen debt.

⁴ The UPRS had already opposed Velázquez due to his unwillingness to center curriculum on Puerto Rican liberation, rather than focusing on the practical goals of the program

⁵ Print Vol. 6 No. 6: Friday, 21 February 1975, attributed to Luis Gutiérrez. See *Boricua en la luna* in this issue to clarify why this was and remains problematic.

⁶ Retained in the author's personal archive

AQUISICION | NORTHWESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY | PROYECTO PA'LANTE | PLAN/FURNITURE | 434 W. NORTH AVE. | CAMPUS PLANNING OFFICE | DATE: 2-28-74 | SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0" | GROUND FLOOR