

CHAPTER 1

Valley Interfaith

"The Most Dangerous Thing We Do Is Talk to Our Neighbors."

In the early 1990s, teachers and administrators at the Palmer Elementary school in Pharr, Texas, began working with Valley Interfaith, a coalition church and school groups, to organize parents and other area residents improve the school. Pharr is in the Rio Grande Valley, not far from the Mexican border. Many of Palmer's students came from "colonias" in the surrounding area—unincorporated communities of mainly Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, among the poorest localities in the rest region in the United States at that time. Many colonias lacked even such basic residential services as electricity, sewers, and paved roads. The lack of adequate sewers forced the closing of the elementary school several days each year. Eighty-six percent of the students at Palmer were classified as economically disadvantaged; 58 percent had limited proficiency in English.

Significantly, the teachers did not ask parents to come in to the school but made visits to students' homes, asking parents about their hopes and worries regarding the school and their children. For many parents, it was their first real connection with the school, the first time anyone had bothered to ask their opinions. For the teachers, it was a first glimpse of their students' lives outside school. In *Valley Interfaith and School Reform*, author Dennis Shirley quotes school principal Salvador Flores: "When we first started doing our home visits, some of the teachers would come back to the school crying when they saw the conditions that the children were living in. These home visits, the face-to-face conversations between a teacher and a child's parent or parents, gradually built up a group of parents who believed enough in the possibility of improving the schools (and believed enough in the goodwill of the teachers) to meet together to take the next step in organizing and planning. These were the parents who came to the small and medium-sized gatherings known as house meetings organized by Valley Interfaith with and for the school.

The heart of a house meeting is when participants break into small groups of six to ten so they will all have a chance to express their concerns and listen to stories about what has brought them there, why they care enough to act. Later, the groups will describe the issues they discussed to the meeting as a whole and all will vote for what they consider the most important ones — part of the process of developing an action agenda to address the problems that matter most to the people affected by them.

In a small group at one of the Palmer Elementary house meetings, an older man who seemed restless and distracted while others talked interrupted a parent and launched into a tirade against the school district: how the people who worked for the district cared only about their next promotion, how they didn't care if streets around the school were safe or if drug dealers prowled the neighborhood.' It wasn't the first time the man, Mr. Ortiz, had spoken out; he was raising his grandson and regularly launched into similar tirades at these meetings. The group leader tried to get him to talk more directly out of his and his grandson's experience, but he went on in the same loud, angry style and then crossed his arms and turned away from the group, mumbling angrily to himself while others talked.

After a while, the leader addressed him: "It's obvious that you're angry about things at this school. I'm angry, too, because I want my daughter in special education to get the services she needs but the district is cutting back. That's why I'm here—to organize so we can make sure our kids succeed. Can you tell me a story about something that happened to make you so angry?"

For a moment, Mr. Ortiz stayed as he was, arms across his chest, body twisted in his chair. Then he dropped his arms and turned to face the group, his face softening. His voice, when he spoke, was different, too. This was a man speaking about the pain in his life. He told about his other grandson, the one who had been hit and killed by a car outside his elementary school five years earlier.

The group's frustration and impatience with Mr. Ortiz melted away. They could see him as a man who had suffered a terrible loss and had had no way to express that pain except through his rage. Another member of the group who had not yet spoken said, "I've never lost a kid, but I know what that kind of being powerless feels like." Then she told the story of her daughter, who had joined a gang. Mr. Ortiz looked at her and listened. He nodded when she said, "It's too late for my daughter, but damned if I'm not going to do something so that other parents don't have to go through that pain."

Father Alfonso Guevara, pastor of Christ the King Church in Brownsville, Texas, and a longtime leader in Valley Interfaith, says, "We make private pain public." The house meeting was part of the process, a step toward making the pain public in a local group to build the energy and commitment needed to bring that pain—and the actions needed to relieve it—to a wider public stage where officials would have to recognize it and respond.

Relational Organizing

It's called relational organizing. The Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation network, of which Valley Interfaith is a part, builds its membership through one-on-one conversations and at house meetings like the one Mr. Ortiz attended. Catalina Mendoza, a local organizer, says, "The heart of our work is one-on-one meetings with people. Organizing is all about building relationships. It's not about meetings. These are not counseling sessions. They are not an interview. It's a conversation. You're building a relationship here. Not extracting information. Not pushing an agenda. And the only way to do this is to leave yourself open to be...

The above excerpt is from a book called *Better Together - Restoring the American Community*, written by Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein