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Chapter 4

MEXICAN AMERICAN LEADERS DEFEND THEIR CULTURE AND PEOPLE

And I learned quickly that there is no real appreciation. Whatever you do, and no matter what reasons you may give to others, you do it because you want to see it done, or maybe because you want power. And there shouldn't be any appreciation, understandably. I know good organizers who were destroyed, washed out, because they expected people to appreciate what they'd done. Things don't work that way.

—César Chávez

Introduction

From the previous chapter we saw that the Mexican Americans of Middlewest have their own culture. Most Mexican Americans work for Anglo owners and managers of businesses, factories, and government departments. Mexican American children attend schools controlled by Anglo teachers and administrators. During their leisure time, Mexican Americans interact mostly with one another. My field research interviews and observations indicate that Mexican Americans generally face institutionalized racism when they leave their own culture to interact with the dominant Anglo society.

Most Mexican American leaders operate biculturally—they are comfortable interacting within both the Anglo and the Mexican American cultures. Their leadership positions derive from years of dedicated service maintaining their Mexican American
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culture, assisting Mexican Americans living in poverty, and attempting to defend Mexican Americans against racism. Most of the Mexican American leaders have experienced the migrant lifestyle and have worked in the fields.

Middlewest's Mexican American leaders generally have achieved more education, greater income, and higher-status employment than their fellow Mexican Americans. These leaders assist the community because they have experienced poverty and discrimination and, consequently, often feel compelled to pay back something to others. As one expressed it: “You get skills, you have to help others. I made it, now I have to help my people; I owe it; that is just the way it works.”

In many ways, all of the Mexican Americans in southwestern Idaho are part of one large ethnic community. The Mexican American community of Middlewest, especially its leadership, cannot be separated from a larger Mexican American community that is spread throughout seven towns in southwestern Idaho, all in close proximity to Middlewest.

Each community has its own grass roots leaders. Some local leaders participate in one of three important Mexican American organizations. Not only do the Mexican American leaders all know one another but also they have worked together on many projects. Many Mexican Americans of Middlewest have relatives and friends in the surrounding communities. Fiestas and conferences are attended by Mexican Americans from all seven communities. However, the migrants living in the three labor camps in the area do not participate as much as those living permanently in the area.

Poverty

Nearly all Mexican American migrant workers and their families live at or near the poverty level. Social services personnel and Mexican American leaders estimate that between 35 and 45 percent of the permanent Mexican American residents earn an income below the poverty level. Poverty has horrendous effects on Mexican American families. Many families do not have
access to health care. Jesús Fernández, a Mexican American elementary school principal in Middlewest, reported that some Mexican American children come to school unable to concentrate on their studies because of their health problems. Recently, an eleven-year-old girl came to school with a 3.5-inch cut on her foot that required six stitches. The accident had occurred four days earlier. In another case, a twelve-year-old boy needed dental care for severely abscessed teeth but his parents could not afford the necessary dental care.

Francisco Hernández and his family know the consequences of poverty. He works seasonally at the sugar factory and works in the fields during the summer. His income qualifies him for unemployment compensation and food stamps; still, he has no money to repair the family car, and the gas company sends threatening letters for non-payment of their heating bill. The stress caused by the family's precarious economic standing doubled after Francisco's wife, Maria, sustained multiple injuries in a serious automobile accident. The other driver's insurance will eventually pay all of Maria's health bills, but this takes time. When Francisco took Maria for her second visit to the doctor, she was refused treatment until payment could be made. Francisco did not have cash or credit cards for this payment and, although Maria needed a prescription drug, she was turned away. As Francisco neared the end of this story, his pain, anguish, and outrage intensified. His voice quivered and his facial expressions told a story that my narrative cannot capture. Three days later, Maria received treatment for her broken collarbone and broken ribs at a low-income medical center in a neighboring town.

It is difficult to measure the percentage of Mexican Americans in Middlewest and in Farm County who face the myriad problems associated with poverty. The Idaho Department of Employment (1991a) recorded that 33 percent of the permanent resident Mexican Americans were in the poverty category. The department's 1988 data revealed a 14 percent unemployment rate for Mexican Americans. The seriousness of the problem is underscored when it is realized that governmental agencies
typically undercount minority problems. The average local Mexican American migrant family lives on only half the income set by the federal government as the poverty standard.

Marta Pérez experienced what happens to many Mexican Americans living in poverty. Her earliest memories are of her family being on the road and working the fields, and she recalls feeling like an outsider at school because she attended so many different schools. She quit school in the eighth grade and went to work in the fields. She married at the age of fourteen, and by the time she was twenty-two she had four children. When Marta’s husband left her, she moved in with her parents. The home had two bedrooms and Marta slept on the sofa. She claimed that one who has not experienced it cannot appreciate how poverty wears a person down. Marta felt as though she could never get ahead; she had more bills than money; she could not afford to buy her children clothes. Marta said, “Everywhere you go the Anglos sneer at you, they don’t want you around. You work hard and you still can’t make a living. I got angry, then I started drinking to ease the pain; before long I was drinking all the time.”

I asked Marta about Mexican American poverty. She said:

It’s the system. Mostly, Mexican Americans work in the local factories. They get laid off. They have not worked long enough to get benefits. Most Mexican Americans’ income only averages out to about $500 a month. You go to Health and Welfare and they don’t give you food stamps because you made too much money last month. Always poverty, always; I have to pay the bills for the months I have no work. The system is bad. Yes, I have a lot of anger at the way the system works. We have to tolerate this; we never get ahead.

Marta began associating with other Mexican Americans who had succumbed to poverty. She and her friends led chaotic lives that included intermittent work, petty crimes, and drug use. Her kids had to raise themselves as she became what she called “dysfunctional.” The more she drank, the worse it got. Her
oldest son and daughter turned to their peers for acceptance and support. The son now resides in a home for delinquent boys and the daughter became a teenage mother.

Marta feels enormous guilt for her failure as a parent. After years of this lifestyle, Marta hit rock bottom; then she turned to religion. The Mexican American Assembly of God church became an integral part of her life; she attends church four times a week, and she has not had a drink in a year and a half. Many Mexican Americans with alcohol and/or family problems turn to fundamentalist churches for assistance.

Marta believes the grinding poverty has a greater effect on Mexican American men than it does on women. She thinks that much of the macho image is a defense against a self-esteem under attack. The men work seasonally for minimum wage; wives then berate their husbands for not being good providers. Men in these circumstances turn to drinking and to other women. Fragile egos will fight for little reason, as men desperately attempt to shore up their self-esteem. Some Mexican American men have many driving violations including DUI (Driving Under the Influence) citations. Marta described her life during her dysfunctional period as one of hopelessness.

In a later interview I asked Marta why most Mexican Americans don't vote. She laughed, "You have to get serious; people have to find a job, get assistance, fix the car; voting is a luxury; the people are just too busy trying to survive." Some men on the down side of poverty feel anger and frustration. Their families become the victims of psychological and physical abuse. Marta said, "When you try to change, then the peer group works against you. They don't want you to make it, to get control of your life, because where does that leave them?... It only intensifies their failure."

A group of secondary Mexican American leaders consists of ministers of fundamentalist churches such as the Assembly of God and Pentecostal churches. These denominations hold services several times a week. They are commonly quite puritanical, and the congregations are admonished to refrain from deviant behavior. The ministers crusade against drinking, drugs, and adultery during each service. These frequent
admonishments and calls to self-examination provide a strong support system for those facing problems. Most of these churches are made up of small congregations that provide more intimacy and support than the larger and more impersonal Catholic church.

**Mexican American Organizations**

Four Mexican American organizations have their headquarters in southwestern Idaho. They include the Idaho Commission on Mexican American Affairs, the Idaho Migrant Council, the Mexican American Businessmen's Association, and Image de Idaho. Mexican American leaders from the Midwest participate in each of these organizations. Raul Rodríguez chairs the Commission on Mexican American Affairs and has worked on Mexican American issues for more than twenty years. Raul lives in Boise, the state capital; this has enabled him to develop contacts with leaders in both major political parties. He also has developed liaisons with the major corporations based in Boise.

Raul leads the lobbying efforts in the state legislature when proposals arise that will either assist or hurt the Mexican American community. He can quickly mobilize the Mexican American leadership when necessary. With other leaders, Raul engineered legislation to require farmers to provide portable toilets for field workers. For years, Raul and other Mexican American leaders have had to work hard to defeat attempts to pass a bill establishing English as the official language of Idaho. He and other Mexican American leaders are proud of their successful effort in lobbying the legislature to establish a $100,000 college scholarship fund for minority students. Mexican American leaders praise Raul for his lobbying ability, which requires incredible restraint and patience on his part. He spent an enormous amount of his time pressuring the state legislature to create the Mexican American Commission.

Raul made the following comments on the problems facing Mexican Americans:

I was fired by a local college and pushed out of state employment. The establishment does not like Mexican
Americans talking about prejudice and discrimination in Idaho. As chairperson of the Mexican American Commission, I regularly receive calls from across the state about Mexican Americans being treated unfairly. It is frustrating because we have no staff or authority to intervene. Nobody in state government is advocating for the Mexican American community. The state's affirmative action program is a joke... The two areas where Mexican Americans are having the most problems in Idaho are the schools and the criminal justice system. When three Mexican American male youths get together, they are seen as a gang. It is always the Mexican kids' fault. The schools, even if it is unintentional, destroy the self-esteem of most Mexican American kids. The parents are becoming very upset but they have a hard time articulating their views. When you listen closely, you understand the teachers and especially the counselors are prejudiced against Mexican American kids.... We cannot take issues straight on, the farmers, factory owners have too much power; not even the Democrats will assist us.

In a later interview Raul informed me, "You know, I have been working with the Mexican American caucus on our version of a reapportionment bill. Now, several people asked me if I have heard the rumor that I will not be reappointed to the Mexican American Commission."

I attended several board meetings of the Mexican American Commission on which Raul serves without compensation. He has made the commission a viable entity though it operates with minimal funding. Raul has written three grant proposals that will provide funding to record part of the oral history, art, and culture of Mexican Americans in Idaho. His commitment and dedication provide an outstanding example of what civic responsibilities entail.

The Mexican American Commission has eight members—four Mexican American leaders and four members of the state legislature. Two of the legislative members often do not attend the meetings; the other two showed little enthusiasm for their appointed task. They seldom participated in the discussions and
their demeanor projected an attitude of cool indifference. During one commission meeting in which a federal official reviewed national minority policy, one of the legislative members of the board fell asleep. Mexican American leaders said that one of the legislative members of the commission voted for a bill that the Mexican American Commission wanted to defeat. Members of the state legislature who are sympathetic to Mexican American issues said that the legislature resists any legislation that would assist Mexican Americans in Idaho.

During the winter of 1991 the commission did not have its own office space; meetings had to be held in an unused portion of another agency's office. The heating did not function and the commissioners had to wear heavy winter coats throughout the meeting. The office furniture was constructed from cardboard. This arrangement could be seen to symbolize society's treatment of Mexican Americans in Idaho.

The Commission on Mexican American Affairs serves as a sounding board for Mexican Americans facing racial conflicts throughout Idaho. The commission has no authority or staff to investigate or enforce settlements. The Mexican Americans on the Commission feel frustrated because they believe that the attorney general's office does not act vigorously to investigate complaints. The Mexican American commissioners informally telephone or travel to meet with the police, school administrators, state agencies, and political figures in an attempt to resolve racial conflicts.

The year I observed commission meetings, Mexican American citizens logged the following concerns: (1) The lack of Mexican Americans employed in state government; (2) The expulsion of Mexican American youth from schools; (3) a school district dropping a $500,000 grant for bilingual education; (4) a county establishing a separate court for Mexican American offenders; (5) inappropriate evictions of migrant workers from designated labor camps; (6) selective enforcement of laws against Mexican American offenders; (7) Mexican Americans being evicted from apartments and houses because of their race; (8) discrimination against Mexican Americans in job hirings, promotions, and terminations; and (9) the Idaho Department of
Agriculture certifying H2A workers from Mexico while local Mexican Americans were unemployed.

For the most part, the Mexican American community and leaders support the Democratic party; yet the Democratic party rarely supports Mexican American issues and candidates. In 1991 twenty-two Mexican American leaders, including those from Middlewest, invited Tim Robertson, the governor's assistant, to meet with them. The leaders wanted to express their concerns about lack of support for them from the Democratic party. One complaint focused on the small number of Mexican American employees in state government. Mexican American leaders expressed their concern that the Idaho Department of Education has no Mexican Americans on its staff and the department has failed to provide leadership in developing bilingual education. The leaders believe the Department of Education has little concern for the Mexican American school dropout rate. A third complaint involved the issue of racial conflict. Mexican Americans feel that Democrats avoid meaningful involvement with these issues.

**Image de Idaho**

Image de Idaho is a statewide organization of Mexican Americans, several members of which live in Middlewest. Image de Idaho has approximately 300 members and a fifteen-member board of directors. It operates without a paid staff. Its leaders devote long hours to insure the success of Image de Idaho programs. The board's primary activities include providing scholarships to Mexican American students; sponsoring conferences; and functioning, unofficially, as the public-relations committee for the Mexican American community.

The Image de Idaho board plays an essential role in organizing an annual Mexican American Issues Conference and a Mexican American Women's Conference. These conferences enable the Mexican American leaders to network and maintain Mexican American solidarity. The conference workshops create a forum for interaction between the Mexican American community and various government agencies. Exciting keynote
speakers stimulate the pride and unity of those Mexican Americans working for "la raza." The culminating event of the Mexican American Issues Conference in Boise is a celebration of the Septiembre 16 holiday.

The Mexican American leaders and their organizations work together on many projects. A review of minority literature reveals that serious fractions often occur among minority leaders. Mexican American leaders in Idaho have avoided this problem; they recognize the need to present a united front if they are to be successful.

**Mexican American Businessmen’s Association**

The Mexican American Businessmen’s Association is a recent creation. These businessmen live in communities throughout southwestern Idaho and most have not previously participated in community activities. Their primary mission is to promote the success of Mexican American youth. They believe it important to provide positive role models for youth. They supported a Mexican American individual’s campaign for election to the state legislature. This association has an energetic and expanding membership. It is creating a college scholarship fund and its members make a practice of hiring Mexican American college students for their part-time workers.

**Idaho Migrant Council**

The Idaho Migrant Council (IMC) remains the most important Mexican American organization in Idaho. It has existed for twenty years and has the largest membership. As a non-profit organization, IMC operates on a budget of approximately $4 million and provides services to Mexican American migrant workers. The IMC maintains its state headquarters in Middlewest and has approximately 100 full-time employees. Its funding comes from federal grants. Two hundred additional teachers and staff operate the Migrant Head Start programs during the six-month migrant season.
The IMC operates three major programs statewide, including the Head Start program, the employment and training program, and the housing program. The Migrant Head Start program enrolls more than 500 students each year. In 1991 the IMC received additional monies to operate Head Start programs in Wyoming and Montana. Teresa Medina has directed this program for over fifteen years and has become an important Mexican American leader.

Mexican American leaders also experience racism. Teresa Medina became agitated as she told me how the Middlewest schools treat her children. She said that both her son and daughter have been labeled as non-achievers by the local public schools. Teresa related how her children became increasingly alienated from school. She concluded, "I will never forgive the school for what they have done to my children."

Head Start has enabled many local Mexican American women to obtain an education and employment. Mexican American women must enroll in a preschool training program and receive fifteen hours of training to gain employment in Head Start. The IMC programs demonstrate that, given an opportunity, Mexican Americans are eager to advance themselves. For example, Veronica Ortiz started out as a field worker with an elementary education. She became a member of the IMC and learned about their programs. She completed a Child Development Associate (CDA) program sponsored by the IMC and became a teacher's aide. After gaining experience, she became a teacher. Veronica has dramatically improved her self-confidence. She lost eighty pounds and now has a positive sense of self. Veronica has the distinction of being one of the few Mexican Americans elected to a school board in Idaho.

Sally Rivera also had an elementary school education and completed the CDA training to work in IMC's Head Start program. Because her husband did not approve of her working, Sally's success illustrates the determination of Mexican Americans to succeed. Despite his strong disapproval, she persevered to become the director of the Migrant Head Start program at the Middlewest Labor Camp. Sally went from being a field worker to becoming the supervisor of ten workers.
IMC manages a statewide employment and training program which provides training in the basic skills of applying for and maintaining a job. The program tests the academic and vocational interests of Mexican American migrants. The IMC staff assists Mexican Americans to enroll in high school equivalency programs and vocational programs. The major source of funding for these programs comes from the Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA). Over the years, many Mexican Americans who now live permanently in Middlewest have received vocational training from the IMC that has enhanced their standard of living.

The IMC also operates a housing program. For several years IMC has received grants for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) programs to restore low-income housing and to weatherize low-income houses. The housing program has several significant accomplishments to its credit, including the remodeling and management of a labor camp. Several years ago, HUD funded a grant that enabled the IMC to supervise the building of twenty low-income houses for Mexican American families in Middlewest.

Few Anglos in Middlewest have any knowledge of the services provided by the Idaho Migrant Council. The IMC has done more to train, educate, house, feed, and provide employment for Mexican Americans than any entity in the state of Idaho. However, many Anglos see the IMC as an unnecessary “welfare program.” The gulf between the Anglo and Mexican American communities of Middlewest is evidenced by the lack of information Anglos have about the IMC.

Many Mexican American leaders started their careers by working for the IMC. The keynote speaker at the 1991 Mexican American Issues Conference, Julio García, an administrator with the Southwest Private Industry Council, said: “Most of us Mexican Americans gathered here tonight to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the IMC know the importance of the Idaho Migrant Council. Because for us, it was the equivalent of college; we obtained our leadership skills through working for the IMC.”

Another contribution of the IMC to the Mexican American community is its sponsorship of an annual Mexican American Youth Conference. Approximately 400 Mexican American high
school students from across Idaho receive assistance to attend the conference. The adolescents listen to motivational speeches by successful Mexican Americans. They also attend two days of participatory workshops. In these workshops the young people learn how to apply for and receive financial assistance to attend colleges and vocational schools. Mexican American leaders and professionals serve as role models for the youth. A recent keynote speaker, Tony Gallegos, a commissioner of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, described his own impoverished background and how he overcame this to become successful. Gallegos told the assembled youth, “I am not here to advise you to go to college. No, I am telling you that you have to go to college.”

The Mexican American youth receive the message that they have a responsibility to become the leaders of tomorrow. Juan Celedón, the director of the IMC, told me: “There are not enough Mexican American leaders; that’s why we started the youth conference. We need more leaders. We [leaders] meet with school administrators, the police, we just met with university people. Last week we met with the newspaper because of their bias in reporting Mexican American crime. The community needs more leaders, there is much that needs to be done.”

Louis Iberra, an accomplished motivational speaker, captured his adolescent audience with a complex mix of serious motivation, jokes, and student participation. His manner and message allow the young people to relax, get to know one another, and talk seriously about their futures. The conference includes a queen’s contest, talent show, and speech contest, and it concludes with a dinner and dance.

Two important Mexican American leaders work for the Idaho Migrant Council. The director, Juan Celedón, founded the IMC some twenty years ago and it survived the Reagan years. Celedón began by organizing students in the 1960s. He admits that as a young activist he had some rough edges and used unsophisticated tactics; he has matured with the IMC.

The IMC has had two major crises during its twenty-year existence. A major conflict developed between the IMC and a medical group. The two agencies jointly created a low-income
community health clinic but they differed on how its services should be administered. The two organizations went their separate ways, but not without some scars. The second problem involved the accountability of the budget to federal funding guidelines. This dispute involved both financial accountability and the types of programs the federal government would fund. The problem of meeting federal guidelines hampers most nonprofit organizations. The end result of this dispute was the elimination of some personnel and programs. Also, the government has restricted the IMC from becoming involved in advocacy programs for the Mexican American community.

Some in the Mexican American community complain that the IMC has become a bureaucracy and that the agency “plays favorites.” During my field research, I spent many days observing the managers of the IMC. They work in a dedicated and professional manner. The IMC leaders do receive many requests for assistance that do not fit within the guidelines of the programs they administer. Their inability to grant those requests naturally lead to disappointments and “sour grapes” complaints from some.

Most Mexican American migrants have positive views of the IMC. The managers of the IMC have gained community leadership because they assist Mexican Americans after their regular working days are finished. The Mexican American migrant workers appreciate the emergency rent, food, and gas money supplied by the IMC. The IMC also provides migrants with assistance to gain access to social services. The director and deputy director have reputations for assisting low-income Mexican Americans. Celedón reviewed some of the success of the IMC: “We have made progress in the last twenty years. The community has more Mexican American professionals now. The leadership of Image de Idaho and the Mexican American Commission work with us. We stick together. The people in our community had no success, they felt defeated. Now every success builds and prepares for more success for our community. We operate four farm labor camps; we also remodeled these facilities. We built and own an office building here in Middlewest. We have had some victories in the legislature.”
Juan Celedón is a member of three of the principal Mexican American organizations in Idaho. Through years of experience he has become accomplished in delivering speeches, in working with agencies to increase their support for Mexican Americans, and in organizing his fellow Mexican Americans to accomplish special projects. For example, Juan created the Mexican American Caucus, a group of Mexican American leaders, to develop and lobby for a Mexican American reapportionment plan. One key feature of the Mexican American Caucus’s reapportionment plan establishes a voting district in Middlewest and Farm County that enhances the influence of the Mexican American vote. Federal law dictates that minority areas should not be gerrymandered, but the Mexican American Caucus plan may not withstand a court judgment. However, the Mexican American demand that they be players along with the state legislature has had positive effects. The Republican party recently hired a Mexican American to work toward increasing the number of Mexican American Republicans. The governor recently appointed a Mexican American to fill a vacant seat as county commissioner of Farm County.

Mexican American leaders organize fiestas, assist the poor, support other Mexican Americans in court hearings, and meet with governmental leaders to prod them into providing services to the Mexican American community. A prime example is Armando Acquirre, the deputy director of the IMC. His career began with the IMC nineteen years ago. He serves on the governing boards of several organizations such as the community mental health association. He knows many of the personnel and administrators of social service programs on both the local and state levels. He actively explores possibilities to create or extend programs to serve the Mexican American community. For example, while attending the Chamber of Commerce Leadership Program, he heard the chief administrator for the city of Middlewest mention that the city had a $200,000 grant for housing development that had not been spent. Within days, Armando had begun exploring the possibilities of using these monies for low-income housing for Mexican Americans.
Acquirre has energy and persistence; he ardently explores any possible avenue to gain grants, programs, and assistance for the Mexican American community. He wants to establish a government lending program to foster small business development. Armando seems to know all of the people, both Anglo and Mexican American, as he attempts to establish a drug and alcohol prevention program for Mexican Americans in Farm County. He also hopes to develop a paraprofessional program for young Mexican Americans. He said the following about race relations in Middlewest: “In ways, the Anglos are afraid of us; I suppose because we speak another language and our skin color is different. But we want the same things they do. Our people want a good job, a house, and a good place to raise their kids. We want our kids to get an education, to have a better life than we have. Isn’t that the American way? . . . We will have to help ourselves. The Anglos sure are not going to give us much help.”

Armando Acquirre organized the Farm County Mexican American Political Awareness Committee, which encourages Mexican Americans to become involved in the political process. The group conducts drives to register Mexican American voters and it also assists Mexican Americans who run for office. In the past few years more Mexican Americans have run for political office, but with limited success. Still, they have gained some political influence.

Other Leaders

Many local Mexican Americans consider Ricco Gómez to be their most important leader. He has received several awards for his community service work. He lives in a town close to Middlewest and has a statewide reputation among the Mexican Americans of Idaho. He has served on many prestigious boards of directors. Ricco began assisting Mexican American migrant workers in the 1950s. He has worked to reduce police abuse and to develop better educational opportunities for Mexican Americans. Gómez has been on state boards that enhance the access of Mexican Americans to jobs and social services.
a Mexican American cultural event is scheduled, he works to make it a success.

The state and federal governments have honored Ricco Gómez for his community service. He played a key role in the successful efforts to create the Mexican American Commission and the Human Rights Commission as state agencies. He also assisted in the drive to establish Image de Idaho. Ricco has not lost his roots; he knows many working-class Mexican Americans. No one I interviewed maligned the character of Gomez, because they recognize that he has spent his life in service to the Mexican American community.

Estella Medina is the quintessential grass roots Mexican American leader of Middlewest. She arrived in Middlewest as a girl via the migrant trail. Her husband works in farm labor as a truck contractor. Estella actively participates on the Catholic church’s Mexican American Council and is a tireless worker on behalf of the Mexican American community. For example, in 1990 she acted as the mistress of ceremonies at the fiesta honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe. In 1991 she organized the church council to hold a special dinner honoring the migrant workers. She ran unsuccessfully for the school board in 1992 and has encouraged other Mexican Americans to run for office. Whenever an issue of concern to Mexican Americans arises in Middlewest, it is certain that Estella Medina will be present.

Estella works for the Farm County court system as a juvenile officer and as a court interpreter for Mexican American offenders. She believes that some judges assign Mexican Americans harsher sentences. During the period of my field research, Estella attended more community meetings than did any other person; she attended more city council meetings and school board meetings than any other person in Middlewest. The chief of police requested her services on the interracial committee to solve the Mexican American gang problem. She is an active member of all the local Mexican American organizations. When the RUDAT study recommended the establishment of a committee to implement its recommendations, Estella went to the committee, requesting to be a member. Like many other Mexican American leaders, she does not have a college education. I
asked her why she participates in all the community activities. She responded: "I care what happens to people. They need a push in the right direction, so they can make it, so they don't have to stay in the same position forever. I care what happens to my community. Things won't get better if you don't get involved. It's the love of the people." By her voluntary service, Estella represents the essence of good citizenship.

**Mexican American Leaders/Professionals**

The leadership of the Mexican American community in Middlewest consists of teachers, lawyers, criminal justice personnel, a few businesspeople, social services professionals, and two Catholic priests. Most of these people started as migrant workers and overcame their limited opportunities, limited education, and their backgrounds of poverty. They have traveled a long and arduous trail, in part because they are self-taught, and have gained their skills by trying to solve the problems of their fellow Mexican Americans.

Most Mexican American professionals in Middlewest become community leaders. One way these leaders assist other Mexican Americans is through their jobs. Most Mexican American teachers participate in the migrant and bilingual education programs in the public schools and alternative schools. In their capacity as teachers they serve both as role models and motivators to encourage Mexican American youth to pursue their education.

Alberto and Maria Garza typify the Mexican American teacher. They started as migrant workers. They became teacher aides but soon realized the need for a college degree. They became teachers to assist Mexican Americans, but they recognized the need to serve in Mexican American organizations, because so few leaders exist. Alberto has recently accepted an elementary school principal position. During the field research, Alberto was a guest speaker at several forums; he served on the committee organizing the Cinco de Mayo fiesta, he worked on the Mexican American voter registration drive, and he is a member of the Mexican American Caucus.
Lawyers constitute another group of Mexican American professionals. Each Mexican American lawyer has a practice or governmental position that enables him or her to assist the Mexican American community. The four lawyers residing in southwestern Idaho believe from their experiences that the criminal justice system discriminates against Mexican American offenders. The two Mexican American legal aid lawyers say that most of their Mexican American clients' cases involve not receiving payment for one's work, having checks garnisheed, or being denied social services.

Middlewest has two Mexican American lawyers in private practice. Tony DeRose has a civil practice and Roberto Torres a criminal practice. They primarily serve Mexican American clients. Tony has a reputation for being the most radical Mexican American in Middlewest. He attends many community meetings, including the city council meetings, where he criticizes Anglo leaders for their prejudiced attitudes. Most Anglo business and civic leaders in Middlewest dislike Tony; they believe that his charges of racism are "unfounded" and "border on hysteria."

In the past, DeRose has fostered a radical image by wearing a black beret and black leather jacket. He writes articles for the Idaho Law Review and at one time had a regular column in Boise's daily newspaper. Tony articulates one viewpoint on the problems facing Mexican Americans in Middlewest, yet most Anglos in town immediately dismiss his views. Most of Tony's practice involves low-income Mexican Americans, and he has worked with many clients seeking amnesty. The mayor recently appointed him to the Middlewest Housing Authority. Most of Tony's fellow Mexican American leaders believe that his radical tactics are counterproductive because of the conservative orientation of Middlewest.

Rose García has become the most important female Mexican American leader because she writes a weekly column in the Boise newspaper. Her column has educated and informed many Anglos in Idaho about the issues and problems facing the Mexican Americans of Idaho; however, many Anglos in Middlewest dislike her "biased" editorials. Rose, because of her
visibility, receives many requests to lecture and participate in issue-oriented conferences. She also serves on many citizen committees.

García works for the IMC as the director of a mental health project that receives state money to assist Mexican American clients. She says that the mental health problems of Mexican Americans are not being met because the state of Idaho does not provide adequate staff and resources to meet their needs. The problem is intensified because Mexican American culture inhibits clients from discussing their personal problems. Only a few Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans in Idaho have social work or counseling credentials. Rose says the state's Department of Employment should recruit Mexican American social workers from other states in the region.

**Mexican American Business Leaders**

The local Mexican American businesspeople and professionals not only make financial donations for cultural celebrations but also participate in fiestas by playing musical instruments, singing, and preparing food. Rodolfo Cortez operates two Mexican restaurants, one in Middlewest and one in Boise. He sings and plays in a mariachi band. Mexican American leaders frequently use his restaurants as meeting places. The most common business for Mexican Americans is operating Mexican restaurants. Mexican Americans own seven restaurants in southwestern Idaho, which, for the most part, are small establishments that only provide a family living. The next most common Mexican American businesses are small auto-repair shops and bars.

Don Flores has a small contracting business in Middlewest which he started twenty years ago. Flores began as a construction worker. He built his own house, and that led to the realization that he could operate a construction company. He provides financial assistance to many Mexican American projects. Flores said that being Mexican American has not hurt his business, because he has light skin and also does not use his name in his business operations. He does believe, however,
that he lost a significant small-business loan because of his race. He shared the following story:

My two sons were moving their furniture from our old house to a new one I had just purchased. A relative called me and told me my boys were being arrested. By the time I arrived on the scene, both boys, ages 13 and 15, were in the back of the police car in handcuffs. Apparently, a person in the neighborhood called and reported a burglary underway. The police thought the boys were robbing their own house. Both my sons were crying because of the rough treatment from the police.

Flores claimed that the police only treat Mexican kids that way and that he had never been so mad in his life. The police later apologized for their mistake, but Flores was still angry as he told me the story.

The only Mexican American with a large business in Middlewest is Oscar Mireles. He started in the fields and now has a tortilla factory with forty employees. He and his son have plans to open another plant in the state of Washington. Mireles shared with me an account of the difficulties of establishing his business. The whole family made tortillas while he went to the stores seeking accounts. He now has his own trucks and several large accounts. Oscar Mireles belongs to many Anglo community organizations but he has not forgotten his heritage—the Mexican American community counts on his generous donations. His family cooks the beef-head barbecue that is sold on Sundays.

**Priests**

The two local Mexican American Catholic priests, one from Middlewest and the other from a nearby town, automatically have leadership positions in the Mexican American community of southwestern Idaho. They conduct a separate Spanish-language mass on Sundays and they preside over Mexican American weddings, Quinceañeras, and the Virgin of Guadalupe mass. Mexican Americans frequently rely on their priests to
assist them in times of crisis. Both priests said that attempts to integrate masses among Anglos and Mexican Americans failed, having caused stress and discomfort. Many Anglo Catholics do not want to attend church with Mexican Americans. Both priests said that many Anglo Catholics hold prejudiced views about Mexican Americans.

Father Acuna came from Mexico a few years ago. He has a gregarious nature and enjoys interacting at the socials and fiestas of the Mexican American community. Occasionally he sings with the mariachi band at a fiesta. Father Acuna more actively pursues a social agenda for the people. He has the respect of the people and their leaders. Father Acuna has a regular Spanish-language radio program in which he criticizes the Anglo community for its racist treatment of the Mexican American people. I asked him how the church hierarchy views his editorials. Father Acuna laughed and said they do not speak Spanish.

Because of his work with Mexican American Catholics, Father Acuna has no doubts about the discrimination facing Mexican Americans. He said that less of the church’s resources matriculate to Mexican American parishes than to Anglo parishes. He feels that Anglo priests demand assimilation, and he thinks that Anglo priests reject the use of Spanish and do not respect Mexican American culture.

Father Acuna believes that the Catholic church remains important to Mexican Americans because religion is in their blood and the church operates as a support system against racism. He thinks that the situation of rural Mexican Americans resembles that in South Africa. Father Acuna regrets that Mexican Americans have so few opportunities. He claimed that the police and courts operate in a racist fashion. He has received two citations for driving violations, and he said that the arrests occurred because he was Mexican. He has spent many hours in court and at the jail supporting Mexican American offenders. Father Acuna concluded by stating that Mexican Americans in southwestern Idaho face systematic exploitation.

Father Correro heads the Catholic church in Middlewest. He does not approve of priests becoming involved in social and
political issues. However, being a Catholic priest automatically places him in a leadership role. He believes that as a Mexican American priest he must teach Mexican Americans the rules of the church and how their faith can sustain them.

Father Correro conceded that race relations is a serious problem in Middlewest. He claimed to hear many racist comments from his Anglo parishioners. He said Anglos think Mexican Americans do not have a work ethic and that the Mexican Americans cannot help but feel the rejection. His Anglo parishioners keep demanding that Mexican Americans speak English. He recognizes that the Anglos and Mexican Americans of Middlewest live in separate communities.

Father Correro became incensed when discussing how the Anglos of Middlewest refuse to provide adequate social services to disadvantaged Mexican Americans. He said, "Anglo attitudes are the problem. They feel no responsibility to help others. In America, people place too much emphasis on consumerism and too little on Christian charity."

The observations of Mexican American Catholic priests have special significance because these priests are in a unique position of observing and interacting intimately with both Anglos and Mexican Americans. Both priests agreed that Middlewest and Farm County have a high degree of racism. I asked them about solutions to this problem. They both replied that a major increase in resources must be provided for disadvantaged Mexican Americans. They focused on social services, education, and employment-training programs. They called upon government officials to provide the leadership to improve race relations in Idaho.

Conclusions

This chapter reveals the need for immediate programs to improve the position of Mexican Americans in Middlewest. A national health-care program would be of great benefit to many in the Mexican American community. That community needs to increase its efforts to register voters. Anglo business and
government leaders need to create more college scholarships for Mexican Americans.

In my opinion, there need to be established cultural awareness workshops for Anglo farmers, factory owners, businessmen, school personnel, criminal-justice employees, and community leaders in general. The city council should create a community race-relations committee which would ensure affirmative action in hiring practices. This committee could have a grievance subcommittee trained in conflict resolution to handle racial disputes in the community. Factory and farm workers need to develop strong unions. The Catholic church needs to support a more liberal theology; Catholic masses should be integrated. Mexican Americans need to be educated about the types of federal assistance available.

My research on Mexican American leaders supports the theoretical orientation of Mirande (1985) and Blea (1988), who recommend creating a Chicano paradigm. The Chicano paradigm recognizes that the Mexican American community is not passive but actively resists the oppression of Anglo society. Middlewest's Mexican American leaders and organizations came to the defense of individual Mexican Americans being mistreated by the criminal-justice system; they also interceded on the behalf of Mexican Americans to enable them to gain access to social services. The Mexican American leaders also challenged the dominant social institutions for not providing more opportunities for members of the Mexican American community. For example, to assist Mexican American youth the leaders created conferences, scholarships, and programs to encourage and support the education of their youth.

I asked the Mexican American leaders who in the Anglo community they trust, who they could count on for assistance. Their response: "Not many." The Mexican American community represents less than six percent of the population of Idaho and, consequently, it has little political power. My respect for the Mexican American leaders grew as I began to appreciate the precarious situation of many Mexican Americans in Idaho. My respect increased for their efforts to pursue social justice for the Mexican American community. I soon understood their
frustrations, as one race crisis after another flared across southern Idaho. These racial conflicts generally happened without response from the politicians, the media, and the government entities that have a responsibility to address these problems. The Mexican American leaders have extraordinary commitment, tenacity, and dedication. Anglo Middlewest, Anglo Idaho has little perception of their efforts and contribution to the community and state.

I interviewed several Anglo government bureaucrats who did not want to be quoted, who did not want to speak out, because their superiors and the public were known not to be sympathetic to Mexican American problems. They presented themselves as concerned persons, empathetic to Mexican American problems, but they were afraid to challenge the status quo. The mood and social environment inhibit them from speaking out because of the potential for being labelled a radical. Apparently in Idaho you are a radical if you support bilingual education, defend civil rights, demand affirmative-action programs, request access to medical care, believe in decent housing for all, and address the need for a living wage for the Mexican American people of the state.
Mr. Ángeles, a migrant worker, attempted to organize the residents of a local labor camp.