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Elusive Community in South Park Part A

Claudia Arana was stumped. It was June 2005, and she had come to South Park, a multi-ethnic neighborhood on Seattle's Southside in June, to deliver the good news that Seattle's Mayor, Greg Nickels, wanted to contribute city resources to help the community address some of its problems. A spate of gang-related youth homicides in South Park's Latino community had gotten the Mayor's attention and he had sent Claudia into the neighborhood to find out what kind of help the community wanted from the City.

The Mayor had handpicked Claudia for this assignment despite the fact that she had only been with the City about two months. As her first major assignment, this was a big opportunity for Claudia to impress the Mayor. But if she failed, it would likely be the end of her budding career with the City. Claudia's own commitment to social justice also made it a personal priority for her to engage South Park's Latinos in the conversation to identify community priorities.

Surprisingly, the forty or so mostly Anglo community members that attended the first meeting she hosted did not seem at all interested in working with her or the City. Instead of the warm welcome she expected, her efforts were met with skepticism and even hostility. Her second meeting attracted more Latinos, but they were unhappy with the City's approach to engaging the community. This would be harder than she expected.

This case was an honorable mention winner in our 2008 "Collaborative Public Management, Collaborative Governance, and Collaborative Problem Solving" teaching case and simulation competition. It was double-blind peer reviewed by a committee of academics and practitioners. It was written by Denise Rodriguez of the University of Washington and edited by Khris Dodson. This case is intended for classroom discussion and is not intended to suggest either effective or ineffective handling of the situation depicted. It is brought to you by E-PARCC, part of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University's Collaborative Governance Initiative, a subset of the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC). This material may be copied as many times as needed as long as the authors are given full credit for their work.

A Community in Crisis

The most immediate impetus for Claudia's outreach efforts was the murder of a local teen, Fernando Esceda, who was shot just two months earlier by gang members in a case of mistaken identity.

As tragic as Fernando's death was, incidents like this were becoming all too common, as gangs had begun actively recruiting among the Latino youth of South Park. Approximately ten gangs operated actively in the neighborhood. In the year prior to Fernando's death four other teens had been killed in gang-related violence. But Fernando was not involved in gangs. His murder was a case of mistaken identity. "Fernando had been making all the right choices," says Officer Adrian Diaz, the Seattle Police Department's new Community Liaison to South Park. "He took advantage of tutoring programs in the neighborhood, the South Park Boxing Club, and often played basketball at the community center on teen nights." The community was heartbroken....and angry.

After Fernando's death, Mayra Ayala, a Latino activist in South Park, went to the citywide Latino Advisory Council (LAC)¹, to let them know what was going on in South Park and ask what they were doing about it. Though it typically met in downtown Seattle, the LAC decided to hold its next meeting in South Park to talk about the community's issues. They invited all the City departments to the meeting and asked the Mexican Consulate, who was a member of the LAC, to facilitate.

The meeting was held on June 1, 2005, and was well attended, both by community members and City representatives. By the time the meeting started, there were more than 275 community members, about 95% of them Latino, in the meeting room at the community center. Also in attendance, dressed in black, were Fernando's family and the families of the previous victims of local gang violence. It was a long night, but the Seattle Chief of Police, the King County Sheriff, Seattle Deputy Mayor Tim Ceis, and other City representatives listened to the community air its grievances. Through interpreters, the community told them not just about the problems of youth violence, struggling community services, and the need for more gang intervention programs, but also about troubles with immigration and poverty. As City officials interpreted the situation, it wasn't clear what the next steps were, but the community obviously could benefit from more attention and resources. As Claudia would later discover, however, the residents of South Park confronted a variety of issues, only some of which could be readily addressed with better municipal services.

At least one City representative heard the community loud and clear that night. Looking back on the meeting, Deputy Mayor Tim Ceis said that what he remembered most was the fear the

* This case was written in 2008 by Denise Rodriguez, with supervision and assistance from Stephen Page, Associate Professor, Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington. It is intended for use as the basis of classroom discussion.

¹ The LAC advised the Seattle Police Department (SPD) on issues affecting Latinos citywide. Officer Diaz initially served as a part-time SPD liaison to the LAC. After the LAC meeting in South Park, the SPD assigned him to be the full-time Community Officer in South Park.

community articulated. “I think the pain of the family was very pronounced, but it was shared by so many of the community that the fear and anger and frustration were just palpable that night...and the sense of the lack of any power at all. That is what moved me to go back to City Hall the next day and say that we needed to take immediate action, that this couldn’t happen anymore, it just wasn’t right. Nobody should live in fear like that in our city.”

Ceis continued, “when that meeting was over, it was clear that the community wasn’t in a position to address its own issues and that the infrastructure wasn’t there, the sense of empowerment, the sense of connection to the city or the government. They were fearful of the police, fearful of the immigration officers.”

Ceis also noticed how much the community had changed over the years. “It struck me that this was a community that the City had indeed forgotten about and that there were serious issues developing as a result of the changing demographics of the community.” What used to be a mostly white, working-class neighborhood was now about 50% Latino and had a substantial Asian community, primarily Vietnamese and Cambodian.

Claudia on the Case

Ceis and Mayor Greg Nickels decided that the Mayor’s Office needed to engage the Latino community in South Park. Ceis recognized that the only comprehensive planning document the City had for South Park was woefully out-of-date and created with little input from the immigrant and Latino communities that now made up the majority of South Park’s residents. Though Claudia had only been with the Mayor’s Office about two and a half months, she was tapped to work in the community to build trust and identify the community’s current needs and priorities.

“We thought it was important that whoever we sent into the community be directly connected to the Mayor’s Office and also someone that the Latinos there could relate to and talk to. We picked Claudia,” said Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, “because she was talented and had a passion for the issues going on in that community. She was untested from our perspective, but that also meant that she had no baggage.”

Some people within City departments thought Claudia was the wrong choice. There were Latinos in the Department of Neighborhoods who were more familiar with the neighborhood and thought they should have been asked to spearhead the efforts. Even among the staff of the Mayor’s Office, there were people who didn’t think Claudia had the skills to pull it off. “In those early days, there was a lot of friction,” says Claudia. “I had the distinct feeling that many people were just waiting for me to fail. It was a very difficult time for me professionally.”

Even Claudia felt skeptical. In her two and a half months with the Mayor’s Office, she had been working as the Boards & Commissions Administrator. In that position, she managed the promotion, screening, and placement processes for more than fifty City of Seattle Boards & Commissions. Her work in that position was highly administrative and, though she had previously worked for Senator Maria Cantwell on immigration policy issues, her background reflected little experience in grassroots community outreach. “I thought it was weird that I was picked to work on this since I was so new and there were other Latinos who had been there

longer than me. Now I know that there were many people who thought it was weird. And, there were people who didn't like me because they thought I shouldn't be the one doing this.”

Though Claudia had been in the audience at the June 1st LAC meeting in South Park, she actually knew very little about the community and its history. And, because she was so new to the City, she was still trying to sort out which department did what and who within each department would be her best source for information, ideas, and assistance improving services in South Park. Despite feeling overwhelmed, and facing difficult environments, both in the City and South Park, she began talking to people in various City departments to get a sense of what the City already knew about South Park's issues.

A Neglected Neighborhood

Claudia learned that South Park is a mostly residential neighborhood in a geographically isolated and industrial area of Southwest Seattle. Shaped like a right triangle, South Park is bordered on the northeast by the working waterfront of the Duwamish River, on the west by Highway 509 and on the south by the Seattle city limits (see Appendix A for a map). The neighborhood is also bifurcated by Highway 99, a major thoroughfare into Seattle. A small piece of South Park along the Duwamish River, called “the sliver on the river,” is technically part of unincorporated King County, outside Seattle (See Attachment 1 for map).

Early in the 20th century, the Duwamish River was straightened and dredged to make way for ocean-going transport. In the 1920s, Boeing Airplane Company set-up shop just across the river from South Park and shipyards and other industrial work followed thereafter. Unfortunately, the industrial activity so polluted the Duwamish that it became a Superfund site in 2001. In what used to be a prime farming area of Seattle in the early 20th century, the topsoil had become so contaminated homeowners could not even eat produce from their own gardens. Thanks to organizations like Environmental Coalition of South Seattle (ECOSS), much progress had been made to clean up the area and educate South Park residents and business owners about pollution. Still, in heavy rains, the polluted water of the Duwamish flooded parts of the neighborhood, earning South Park the nickname, “the New Orleans of Seattle.”

Because the neighborhood had been neglected for some time, its tiny business district languished and there were ongoing issues with infrastructure. The main retail core was mostly vacant storefronts, and the community had no post office, full-service grocery store, library, or bank. Though the city had received a matching grant to help reinvigorate South Park’s retail center the year before, officials were uncertain about investing the funds because of complications with the South Park Bridge.

The South Park Bridge was a major freight corridor for the City. It was also the main entrance to South Park and a vital ingress for potential customers for South Park’s businesses. In 2001, the already decrepit 75 year-old drawbridge was severely damaged by the Nisqually earthquake and was then rated a 4 out of 100 by the Federal Highway Administrator’s criteria for bridge safety.² Because the bridge’s footprint was firmly grounded on the sliver by the river, it was the responsibility of King County – not the City of Seattle – to operate and maintain it. Unfortunately, the County did not have the \$90 million needed to replace it and said that, if funding could not be identified to repair it, the bridge would simply close in 2010. “If that happened, we would just be dead in the water,” said the manager of a local restaurant, which like most businesses along South Park’s retail strip drew much of its trade from workers at Boeing and other industrial businesses across the river on the other side of the bridge.

The sliver by the river also made it hard for the community to get timely responses from law enforcement and other emergency personnel. The Seattle Police Department provided these services to most of South Park, while “the sliver” was served by the King County Sheriff’s Office. Residents would sometimes dial 911 only to be told that their call had been routed to the

² A higher score is better. By contrast, the I-35W bridge over the Mississippi River, which collapsed in August 2007, had a score of 50.

wrong agency and that they had to call the other agency directly. In addition to slowing emergency responses, this caused difficulties for law enforcement officers trying to apprehend criminals. Well aware of the jurisdictional issues, criminals would often simply cross the street to evade whichever officers arrived on the scene.

Community Activism through the Century

Originally the territory of the Duwamish tribe, South Park had been settled as a farming community in 1851 and remained largely agricultural throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, Seattle's Pike Place Market got its start as Seattle Public Farmers' Market in 1907 when South Park farmers in need of an outlet for their crops set-up the now famous open-air market. During WWII, the neighborhood's proximity to Boeing and other industry jobs meant the community was swamped with new residents and the neighborhood rapidly became less agricultural, more densely populated, and more industrial. Housing projects were constructed to accommodate the influx of blue-collar, industrial workers to the area.

In the 1970s, the neighborhood became less popular. The I-5 Freeway sliced it in half with the local school on one side and most of the residents on the other. The infrastructure also deteriorated as the industrial economy of the area contracted. During this time, South Park started to become a destination for Latino immigrants, though a recent survey of the neighborhood revealed that some Latinos had lived in the neighborhood since the 1950s. In 2005, the city estimated that approximately 50% of South Park's 4000 residents were Latino and 20% Asian Pacific Islander (API), mostly from Cambodia and Vietnam. A very small number of African Americans called South Park home, but some East Africans from neighboring communities had churches there.³

South Park residents had a significantly lower level of income and education than Seattle as a whole, possibly due to the combination of the older blue-collar households and the more recently arrived immigrant populations. According to the 2000 census, thirty-seven percent of South Park's 1000 or so households were linguistically isolated. Overall, 89% of the students at the local elementary school qualified for free or reduced lunch programs.

Records show that South Park's proactive farmers were not the only residents to pursue their needs actively. The community had been agitating for a library since it was annexed to Seattle in 1906. In the early 1960s, housewives led a march on City Hall to protest open garbage burning in a nearby dump. That same decade, when the City of Seattle tried to rezone South Park for industrial use, 4200 residents protested City Hall until the zoning was changed to "low density residential." Then, in demanding better public safety from the police, today's Latinos were continuing a long tradition of community activism in South Park.

Ready to Engage

Armed with the information she had gathered, Claudia decided it was time to go out into the community. The Department of Neighborhoods, the Deputy Mayor, and the Mayor had given her

³ The 2000 Census put the figures at 37% Latino and about 13% API, but immigration subsequently increased, making the 2005 estimates considerably higher.

names and e-mail addresses for some of their South Park contacts. She decided to hold a community meeting on June 22nd, and sent out e-mails inviting folks to come. Her supervisor in the Mayor's Office was scheduled to attend as well, but cancelled at the last minute, leaving Claudia on her own for the meeting.

The attendees were mostly from the South Park Neighborhood Association (SPNA) and the South Park Area Redevelopment Council (SPARC). Both these groups were exclusively Anglo and led by long-time residents of South Park. Founded in 1976, SPNA initially focused primarily on reducing crime, but later expanded its mission to include "making South Park a great place to live, work, or own a business." The SPARC served as a community council and as the stewards of the South Park Residential Urban Village Plan, the official planning document created ten years earlier through a City-sponsored neighborhood process. Unlike the earlier LAC meeting on June 1st, few Latinos attended Claudia's community meeting. Those that did were mostly Latinos active in the City-wide Latino community, but not residents of South Park.

Claudia had hoped to accomplish two things with this meeting. First, she would announce the Mayor's interest in working with the community. Second, she and the community would begin a conversation to identify its needs and priorities. "Instead, the meeting participants were really angry," remembers Claudia. "Their reaction was basically, 'Who are you? You're not the Mayor! We've been telling the City what we need for years. You should have been listening.' The meeting basically got us nowhere." Claudia felt deflated, but realized she needed to have more of a plan.

She called together an interdepartmental team (IDT) to identify projects that various departments had in the neighborhood and requests the neighborhood had been making of the City's various departments. The Departments of Transportation, Neighborhoods, and Human Services all had representatives on the team who supplied her with information about completed, ongoing, or requested projects. Through the IDT, Claudia could help foster a coordinated City approach to South Park's issues.

From discussions with the IDT, Claudia confirmed that the community had been asking for many things for a long time, yet the City still had no idea what the community's priorities were. It was already July and the budget was typically settled in August. If the City was going to be able to allocate any funds to address the community's needs, they needed to move quickly. Yet, Claudia also knew the list she had compiled from the IDT's work was incomplete as there was hardly anything in there about public safety issues, which had been a core concern of South Park's Latinos at the LAC meeting on June 1st. It became very clear that the mismatch stemmed from the lack of Latino representation in previous neighborhood planning processes and in current interactions with City departments. Claudia took this information to the Deputy Mayor.

On July 28th, Ceis responded by calling together the Executive Directors of four city-wide service organizations with substantial connections to Seattle's Latino community – Consejo Counseling Services, El Centro de la Raza, Sea Mar, and Casa Latina – and asked them to put together a package of services to address the needs of the South Park community. They had little time to do so, as the budget was due in August. With just two weeks to come up with a plan, the organizations worked on a proposal, ultimately requesting about \$2,000,000.

Ceis also directed Claudia to go back to the community and continue trying to build trust. Claudia thought her second meeting would be much better. She was prepared with a spreadsheet of previously stated needs of the community that she had compiled through the IDT meetings. And, she had great news about the package of services the four Latino leaders were developing. The four Executive Directors working on the package would also attend the upcoming meeting. With just ten days to put together a proposal, there wasn't time to build in an extensive community input process, but community members would be invited to attend the planning sessions.

This time, Claudia's outreach was more effective among South Park's Latinos. Her news about the four Executive Directors' joint proposal for service funding, however, was received poorly by the Latino community members who attended the meeting. According to Claudia, "People were really upset. They felt they hadn't been asked for their opinions, and that the four organizations the City had asked to develop the request for funds weren't part of their community." Other than Sea Mar, a community health clinic that was founded in South Park in 1978, none of the four organizations was seen as operating in South Park. There were some activists involved in grassroots organizations in the community who felt they hadn't been given any opportunity to apply for funding. They thought that since they were the ones working at the grassroots level in South Park, even though their organizations did not work in the areas of youth development or gang intervention, they should be a higher priority to receive funding for the neighborhood. From their perspective, this arrangement smacked of cronyism. Both City officials and the citywide service providers slated to receive funding were the targets of bad feelings. Toward the end of the two weeks of planning, CASA Latina pulled out of the planning process, citing concerns with both the process itself and with the vagueness of the proposed funding for its services.

When the City budget came out in September, it included only \$296,000 for the South Park service package. Now, the citywide "Latino leaders" who crafted the proposal were angry as well. Roberto Maestes, Executive Director of El Centro de La Raza, known for his outspoken nature, summed it up, "the City asked us to come up with this proposal and then they give us chump change. It isn't even enough to run the program!" His anger helped both grassroots leaders and the Latino community in general to see that the City was not playing favorites and that the organizations were not benefiting substantially from the funding. Yet, some grassroots leaders still had hard feelings about how the City allocated the funding and how the decision was made.

It seemed to Claudia as if everything the City had tried to do to help South Park had backfired. She really wanted to be successful. She cared about the community and also wanted to prove wrong all the naysayers who thought she couldn't do it. Now that the budget was finalized, she had some time to focus on a long-term plan to build trust between the community and the City and engage the community in identifying its needs. But, if everything she had tried had failed, what more could she do?