

“It wasn’t a gift...it was a prize”

Celebrating over 10 years of Paseo Boricua

Former Alderman Billy Ocasio 26th Ward

It was exactly 12:00 midnight on January 6, 1995. Everything was calm, except my nerves. Within a few hours, I would be presenting a gift to Chicago’s Puerto Rican community along with *Mayor Richard M. Daley* and *Congressman Luis Gutierrez*. Their was not a gift in the traditional sense of the word -- it was really a prize; a prize won by the Puerto Rican People through their sojourn from the island, through their suffering and toiling in the city’s factory, through their steadfastness and perseverance in confronting discrimination and racism, and most of all through their struggles for dignity. The prize would serve to encase an area that they had claimed over five decades ago as they settled in this cold and unwelcome city.

It was now about 3:00 a.m., and the prize began to make its way into the city as expressways were closed while it slowly inched its way to its destination- “*La Division*.” The workers began to weld together its various pieces as dozens gathered to behold its magnificent and awesomeness.

Twelve hours later, at 3:00 p.m., to be exact, the Three Kings on *Paso Fino* horses, the Mayor, the Congressman, and hundreds upon hundreds of people, particularly children, had gathered on Division and Artesian. As the chorus of children sang “*Que bonita bandera, que bonita bandera, la bandera puertorriqueña...*” as our elders smiled and waived, as the *Paso Finos* hoofed, as the cars honked, and as all marveled, I unveiled a simple plaque that read, “City of Chicago – A gift dedicated to the Puerto Rican community on Dia de Los Reyes Magos – January 6, 1995, *Mayor Richard M. Daley*, *Congressman Luis V. Gutierrez*, and *Alderman Billy Ocasio*.” Now the prize was complete. The world’s largest steel-structured flags were at home in the “*Barrio*,” erected to last half a millennium.

Ten years ago, baptizing the commercial strip – “*La Division*” -- between the two flags as “*Paseo Boricua*,” we were here to stay. The flags were erected on Three Kings Day, the most important day of the Puerto Rican calendar; they were made from steel to recall the Puerto Rican Pioneers who came to work in the city’s steel foundries nearly five decades ago; they were constructed in the form of pipelines which were held together to memorialize the second wave of Puerto Rican migrants who came to work as welders and ironworkers; they were completed in 1995 to mark the centennial of the adaptation of the Puerto Rican Flag by exiled Puerto Ricans in New York City, who inverted the colors of the Cuban Flag to demonstrate solidarity with their Caribbean brothers and sisters.

Today, we can honestly say that we have made a dent; these monuments to the Puerto Rican Flag have won numerous awards, helped to improve the quality of life of the community, as new businesses have opened and more cultural events take place, as more people across the world recognize that this is our “*Fons Origo*” – our fountain of origin - - as a community in the Diaspora. That is why the former Governor of Puerto Rico, Sila M. Calderon, once said: “Every Puerto Rican should make a pilgrimage to Paseo Boricua to see the possibility of a Puerto Rican community.” Most importantly, Paseo Boricua is

helping to shape our collective memory. On a personal level, my wife Veronica and I know that the memory is the greatest gift we can give our children, *Ismael Antonio*, *Gabriel Albizu* and *Antonio Betances* – memories are the greatest legacy to our entire community. Our children will cherish them in their hearts, just as I treasure those memories my lovely mother and father gave me. They are deep in my heart, and I still have them all.

As we think about the ten years of Paseo Boricua and the giant flags, it is important that we thank the giants who have made this area truly a “*Pedacito de Patria*” – the artists, the musicians, the community activists, the professionals, the workers, and the residents - - all those who have toiled and continue to make our community a model one.

Paseo Boricua Flags

For more than five decades, a Puerto Rican presence has asserted itself in Chicago. The first wave of Puerto Ricans came to Chicago in the late 1940's to work in Chicago's many steel mills. A second wave followed to work primarily on its pipelines. It is with their memory in mind that Paseo Boricua's sculptural flags monuments were created. With the intent of rendering homage to these Puerto Rican Pioneers, *Alderman Billy Ocasio*, *Congressman Luis Gutierrez*, and *Mayor Richard M. Daley* had two 59-foot Puerto Rican flags constructed.

The flags, consisting of steel and welded pieces of pipeline, were dedicated on January 6, 1995, Three Kings Day, the most Puerto Rican of all holidays, in a snowy ceremony on Division Street. Alderman Ocasio dedicated the flags to Chicago's Puerto Rican community, namely its contributions over the decades to the City of Chicago and our collective role as a community in shaping the city's future. Since the dedication, the flags have won seven awards, including the prestigious *Building of the Year Award* in 1995 by the American Institute of Architecture. It is currently the largest monument to a flag in the world and the largest flag not made of cloth.

Culture

Three Kings Day Winter Festival

On January 6, 1995, the first annual *Three Kings Day Winter Festival* was held. *Alderman Billy Ocasio*, the *Latin American Motorcycle Association (LAMA)*, the *Division Street Business Association* and the *Puerto Rican Cultural Center* distributed over 6,000 gifts to community children. Despite the near freezing temperatures of some years, the event begins with a mile long walk through Paseo Boricua, as thousands of Families join in preserving and creating memories dear to Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Puerto Rican People's Parade

The *Puerto Rican People's Parade*, organized as a cultural protest against the assassination of the two young Puerto Ricans in 1977, frames the Puerto Rican cultural experiences within the language of social criticism and the discourse of possibilities. This popular parade is held in the heart in the Puerto Rican Barrio, and comes to raise issues as freedom for our political prisoners, the removal of the U.S. Navy from Vieques, and Puerto Rican self-determination.

Fiesta Boricua

Chicago's Puerto Rican Community is known for its huge festivals and cultural celebrations, each of which accentuate the hot summer calendar. Returning for its 16th year, the cultural giant *Fiesta Boricua* always takes place the Sunday before Labor Day. Fiesta Boricua, one of the largest free, outdoor music festivals in the Midwest, attracts anywhere from 150,000 to 200,000 attendees annually, who gather to enjoy live music on two enormous stages and experience the culinary and artistic richness of Puerto Rico and its Diaspora.

The celebration takes place on Paseo Boricua, a cultural/commercial corridor along Division Street between Western and California that exemplifies the Puerto Rican historical and cultural experience in Chicago and on the Island. In addition to music performances from celebrated Puerto Rican artists, over 100 booths offer food, merchandise, artisanry, and informational materials in the central corridor of Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Fiesta Boricua is co-sponsored by Alderman Billy Ocasio (26th Ward) and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) to promote Puerto Rican music, culture and community.

Paseo Boricua Walk of Fame

A tradition that began in 2002, the "*Walk of Fame*" medallion is Chicago's equivalent to the famous "Walk of Fame" in downtown Hollywood. Presented to prominent Puerto Rican men and women who throughout their careers have elevated Puerto Rico's name and image across the globe, these five foot bronze circular medallions with the image of Paseo Boricua's famous steel flags are embedded in the walkway of Paseo Boricua for all to admire for years to come. Past recipients of this award include such renowned figures as *Andres Jimenez*, *Andy Montañez*, *Eddie Palmieri*, *El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico*, *Congressman Luis Gutierrez*, *Roberto Clemente* and *Lucecita Benitez*.

Puerto Rican Murals

Puerto Rican murals have a longstanding tradition of creating socially expressive murals, the essential storybook for communities that have experienced a myriad of struggles and triumphs. These murals carry powerful messages that outlast them. Their vibrant colors, precision and creativity symbolize the versatility and richness of the communities they represented or may still represent. In recent years, Paseo Boricua has blossomed into the center of Puerto Rican mural-making in Chicago.

Cocineros Unidos de Humboldt Park

Rain or shine, snow or sleet, you can always find “*Los Cocineros Unidos*” selling the very best of our Puerto Rican cuisine in Humboldt Park. With dozens of vendors selling everything from *alcapurrias* and *bacalaitos* to *piraguas* and *agua de coco*, these dedicated Puerto Ricans provide that extra culinary touch that makes for a great day in the park. The “*cocineros*” host a magnificent celebration every summer which brings out hundreds of people all over Chicago who come to enjoy a good Puerto Rican meal as they dance to the best of our local musical talent.

Haunted Paseo Boricua

In 2003, Batey Urbano, Division Street Business Development Association and Billy Ocasio organized the first annual “*Haunted Paseo Boricua*” on Halloween, to provide a safe and culturally relevant space for Puerto Rican families. Since then, this event has grown to include dozens of organizations, businesses, and thousands of families from throughout the Puerto Rican community.

Films and Documentaries

As the accomplishments of our community became tangible and different community programs began to reach their goals, Chicago’s Puerto Rican community started to garner national and international attention with programs such as *Univision’s Primer Impacto and Al Rojo Vivo*, dedicating frequent sections to covering different aspects of the community. In addition, many filmmakers took interest in the Humboldt Park community, producing a wave of documentaries and full-length films that capture the essence of our struggles. The following are just a few examples:

Urban Poet (Full Length, 2005) – *Director Antonio & Gloricelly Francheski of New Film Production,*

Dream Makers (Documentary, 2006) - *Produced by Banco Popular*

Chicago Boricua (Full Length, 2006) – *Writer / Director Marisol Torres*

Flags of Steel (Documentary, 2008) – *Director/Producer Mildred Amador*

Chicago Puerto Rican Story (Documentary, 2008) - *Director Antonio & Gloricelly Francheski of New Film Production*

Nothing Like the Holidays (Full Length, 2008) *Director ?*

Health

Community of Wellness Project

An ambitious and broad-based initiative that encompasses a variety of projects from several health-related community groups, which aims to educate, empower, and advocate for Chicago's Puerto Rican / Latino community by promoting culturally responsive health care / resources that enable health affirming behaviors and attitudes.

Education

Roberto Clemente High School

In 1974, Roberto Clemente High School was established after an intense community struggle which involved the demand that a new high school be built for the growing Puerto Rican community in the West Town / Humboldt Park area.

Humboldt Park Vocational Center

The Humboldt Park Vocational Center (HPVEC) of Wilbur Wright College is located at 1645 N. California, on Chicago's near northwest side. The center opened its doors in 1995, and serves as an educational and training resources for the Humboldt Park / West Town Community.

The center provides community residents with occupation skills training in areas with high employment potential. Occupational programs are offered in the manufacturing, medical, and business fields. Tuition-free courses are offered for students in need of basic literacy, ESL (English language proficiency), and GED (High School Equivalency), and test preparation through the Adult Education at HPEC. Additional career training and special interest courses in computer, health education, business, and basic skills are offered through the Continuing Education Department (CE) at HPEC. Courses are

offered in the morning, afternoon, evening and on weekends. Advising, counseling, and tutoring services are available to help students succeed in their coursework.

Humboldt Park Chicago Public Library

Chicago Public Library's Humboldt Park branch first opened its doors on May 27, 1912, at North and Fairfield. The name was taken from the nearby park, which was named after the German scientist and naturalist, Alexander Von Humboldt (1769-1859) and designed by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Over the years, the branch occupied six locations before today's full service facility was completed in 1996, at the corner of North Avenue and Troy Street, across from Humboldt Park.

Humboldt Park Branch's modern 13,000 square foot facility features an auditorium and meeting room, a computer room with access to Internet, and a full range of services. Bilingual librarians and staff are available to assist visitors with information needs. The collection includes a wide array of books, magazines and newspapers in Spanish and English, as well as audio books and a selection of educational videos for adults, young adults and children. The Chicago Public Library's electronic databases offer valuable references resources and full text access to thousands of periodical articles. The branch also provides family museum passes through the Kraft Great Kids Museum Passport Program, Book Start theme kits for preschool and daycare programs, a Puerto Rican Heritage Collection, fishing poles for local outdoor enthusiasts, and historical information on the Humboldt Park community.

Economic Development

Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA)

For the last 21 years, the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA) has facilitated the participation of individuals in Humboldt Park's burgeoning economic structure, while at the same time remaining dedicated to the cultural development and empowerment of this Puerto Rican / Latino community. DSBDA works to make Paseo Boricua a cultural / ethnic district where residents are able to afford to stay and buy homes, and maintain generations of business and cultural venues.

Paseo Boricua Restaurants and Cultural District

Paseo Boricua serves as the cultural and entertainment anchor for the Puerto Rican community of Chicago. The "Paseo Boricua" district is aesthetically designed to mirror the façade and streetscape of historic Viejo San Juan. The long-term implementation of the project will attract additional restaurants, nightclubs, and entertainment

establishments, giving Paseo Boricua a strong ethnic and economic presence in Humboldt Park while protecting the community from further gentrification.

Banco Popular Checks

Created in 1997 when Banco Popular opened on Division Street, the Paseo Boricua checkbook has a rendering of our unique flag monument on each check. This check was reinstated in 2001, when Banco Popular initiated the Paseo Boricua loan program, a three million dollar loan initiative designed to create new businesses and homes on Paseo Boricua. Banco Popular designed these checks to show its general support of Paseo Boricua and our community plan for economic development.

TIF Districts

Alderman Billy Ocasio, the Near Northwest Neighborhood Network, and other community advocates worked tirelessly with the City of Chicago Department to create two Tax Increment Financial Districts (TIFs) for the Humboldt Park community. The first, the Humboldt Park commercial TIF, begins on North Avenue and Central Park, runs east to Western and North, south to Western to Division, then west to Division and Mozart Street. This TIF district will help create the resources necessary for the revitalization of the North Avenue and Division Street Corridors. The highest priority in this process is the attraction of new businesses. Existing businesses will also benefit from new initiatives through additional technical assistance and programming.

The second is the Conservation TIF, which will work towards the preservation of existing homes and businesses. This TIF is southwest of Humboldt Park and includes the Humboldt Park stables, as well as areas beyond the triangle bounded by Grand Avenue, Kedzie Avenue, and Division Street. Both TIFs enjoyed public support and input. Together, they are expected to generate over \$69.5 million.

La Estancia Affordable Commercial Space

In addition to providing 57 affordable residents units, the La Estancia Project will provide 12,875 square feet of commercial space for community residents and will provide small business owners the opportunity to establish new business that will cater to the community's needs at an affordable square footage cost (between \$8-\$14 a square foot, where the city average is \$19-\$20 and the country average \$22). As part of the creation of this new commercial space several non-for-profits will be included. This new endeavor will be an import / export company that will make available Puerto Rican products and artisanry not found or available in Chicago, and sell them to the public in a 4000 square feet facility that will be modeled after a "Plaza del Pueblo" style concept, making this a year round attraction for Puerto Ricans and Latinos from all over the Midwest.

Housing

Hispanic Housing Development Corporation Teresa Roldán Apartments on Paseo Boricua

In 2005, Teresa Roldán Paseo Boricua Apartments opened on Campbell and Division Streets. The \$11.6 million yellow façade, reminiscent of Viejo San Juan, contains 59 one-room units for elderly residents displaced by gentrification. The building's Caribbean appearance is designed to further claim Division Street and Humboldt Park as a Puerto Rican place, a "*pedacito de patria*."

Latin United Community Housing Association (LUCHA)

Inspired by single working moms in the community who saw the severe shortage of decent, affordable apartments for families in Chicago's Northwest Side, the project consists of 36 units in eleven two-to-three story flats. This project was the dream and vision of a community with a large number of single working mothers. Seven years and several neighborhood-wide petitions and rallies later, a partnership between LUCHA and community leaders broke ground on the project in 2005. All eleven buildings are named after famous women who have made a difference in the lives of others. Two notable Puerto Rican women who have been honored with this naming are Lola Rodríguez de Tío and Julia de Burgos.

Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation: La Estancia

A mixed-used development project currently under construction, La Estancia, will bring new affordable rental housing and retail space to three vacant parcels on Division Street. "La Estancia" will include more than 12,000 square feet of affordable retail space and 57 affordable retail units, intended for families earning 50% or less of the area median income. This project will provide new two, three, and four bedroom units to serve our larger families in need of rental housing opportunities.

La Casa Norte

The tragedy of homelessness is all too common in Chicago, and the disparity between the number of homeless people and the services available to them is increasing in many parts of the city. La Casa Norte is committed to providing a safe and nurturing environment for homeless abandoned youth, where they will benefit from a comprehensive program of education, guidance, and counseling in a community setting. Working primarily with homeless male youth in the Humboldt Park community between the ages of 16 to 21, La Casa Norte is filling a service void for a segment of our community that is frequently

overlooked. The organization recently inaugurated its new transitional housing facility. Aptly named “Solid Ground,” this facility has the capacity to house 16 homeless male youths for a period of up to two years, depending on their individual goals and needs.

Fannie Mae America Dream Community

In January of 2004, Fannie Mae, a national financial based out of Washington DC, pledged to help 6 million families – including 1.8 million minority families – become first time homeowners over the next decade. They launched the American Dreams Community Program, a plan to invest three trillion dollars over the next ten years in to underserved communities throughout the country. Under the direction of Congressman Luis Gutierrez and Alderman Billy Ocasio, several community groups joined forces and put together an exceptional application on behalf of the Humboldt Park community. After a rigorous selection process, not only did Fannie Mae select Humboldt Park to become its first American Dreams Community, but also named the Humboldt Park application the best in the country and used it as an example for future applicants. This designation will provide over \$200 million dollars in affordable housing development resources to the Humboldt Park Community over the next five years.

Affordable Condo Initiative

Over the last few years the Humboldt Park community has seen a massive influx of new condo development projects. These condos are generally sold at a price the existing community cannot afford, contributing to gentrification and displacement of our established Puerto Rican neighborhood. We felt it important to establish a community mechanism to promote socially equitable development within our communities. With this goal in mind, Alderman Billy Ocasio created the Humboldt Park Redevelopment Area Housing Committee, a group of dedicated community housing advocates that meets monthly to discuss new housing opportunities within the community. Alderman Ocasio and the Housing Committee meet with private developers one-on-one to encourage responsible development within their projects, taking into consideration the needs of our existing community. These private developers many times agree to benefit the Humboldt Park community by providing affordable residential units in their projects. Alderman Ocasio is proud to state that through this housing committee he has averaged a 30% set aside rate for new housing projects in the community and has provided a mix of approximately 550 market rate units and 200 affordable units in 2005 intended for deserving families who have grown up in Humboldt Park and would like to see their children grow up in Humboldt Park.