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## The City

THE VOICE

### Since the '60s, a Place on the Ramparts

By SAKI KNAFO

WHEN a former community organizer named Barack Obama began his bid for the presidency, it cast a spotlight on an uncelebrated profession. In New York, the history of community organizing is long, and Luis Garden Acosta has been around for much of it.

Born in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, to a Puerto Rican mother and a Dominican father, Mr. Acosta, 63, started out in the 1960s as a Catholic antiwar organizer and then as a member of the Young Lords, a militant Puerto Rican activist group, before founding El Puente, a community organization in Williamsburg, where he now lives.

Last week, Mr. Acosta attended El Puente's annual Three Kings Day celebration at a nearby public school. As he hunched over in a child-size desk, he spoke of his life in community organizing.



G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

Luis Garden Acosta

In December 1969, the leaders of the Young Lords went to the pastor of a church in El Barrio and asked if they could use the space to basically perform works of mercy: feed the hungry, clothe the naked.

The pastor was a refugee from Cuba. He saw the berets, and all he could see was Fidel. He immediately reacted: "No, no, no!" So the Lords thought, "Well, this is a Protestant service, and in Protestant services you can get up and say what you want, so let's go there and talk to the people."

Apparently the police were informed. There were policemen waiting outside the church, and when Felipe

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Luciano, the chairman of the Young Lords, got up in the church to speak, a nod was given to the officers, and they came in and beat every single member.

I was a Catholic social activist in league with the [Catholic Worker Movement](#), and when I heard that young people who wanted to basically live out the Bible were bloodied by police officers in the very church they wanted to use, I was shocked. The next Sunday I went there in support of the Young Lords. I, a pacifist, coming from a religious perspective, was unsure whether I should join. But I did.

One day, I came home with my beret, and my mother started screaming. Thank God my aunt was there. She consoled my mother. I asked my aunt, "What happened?" And she said: "Mijo, take that beret away. You've never been told; it's a big secret in our family how your mother came here."

My mother came on a boat. She came simply to forget the horror that has gone down in American history as the [Ponce Massacre of 1937](#). On Palm Sunday, one week before she was to be married, her fiancé was one of about 20 people who were killed in a peaceful demonstration supporting the independence of Puerto Rico.

The man who would have been my father is said to have taken blood from his side and written on the sidewalk, "Que Viva Puerto Rico Libre!"

When my mother saw my beret, she immediately made a connection with the protesters. She thought that the same thing was going to happen to me.

My mother, Nina Garden, used to have an underground railroad. Our Dominican relatives, and friends of relatives, would somehow get to this country and they would stay at our house. And she would bring these wonderful women to her factory.

It was as oppressive a factory as you can imagine. I used to cry when I picked her up and would see how the boss talked to her. But it was a job, and my mother was able to pass off these undocumented immigrants as Puerto Ricans, and then they went on to legalize their status and become great contributors to America.

The influence of the Catholic Church was very strong in my family. When I started El Puente, I felt like a bridge between my colleagues on the left who would never be caught dead in church and progressive Christians.

I wanted to create a bridge, which is what El Puente means.

I founded El Puente in 1982. At the time, Williamsburg was the city's teenage gang capital, according to the media. Between 1979 and 1980, in the Southside alone, a small section of Williamsburg, we lost 48 young people. I was the director of community medicine at Greenpoint Hospital, and I spent a lot of time in the emergency room, where the young people would come, mostly dead on arrival.

One weekend I decided to figure out if there was some way we could save their lives. And you know, as God would have it, it was maybe a half an hour into my weekend when a young woman was brought in, 19 going on 20. Her name was Sugar. They tried to resuscitate her.

I saw that the doctor was about to pronounce her dead, and I said, "Do it again." He looked at me, and he said, "O.K., let's do it again." They tried again. Nothing. And I said, "Do it again." And he looked at me rather sternly. "O.K., we'll do it again." Again, nothing. And I said, "Again!"

I didn't want to lose another kid.

This was the old Greenpoint Hospital — there was no grieving room, no nothing. The doctor had to go out into the hallway and tell the young woman's husband that she had died. I still remember, because it haunts me, the cries throughout that hallway: "How can it be? What do I tell my daughter?" And I started crying. And that's when I decided that this would end.

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