

JULIAN SAMORA LEGACY PROJECT

Personal Reflections on Community Service

by

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Frank Castillo received a master of peace studies degree from the Kroc Institute in 1990. This essay, written in 2004 as a tribute to the late University of Notre Dame Prof. Julian Samora, reviews Castillo's own progression as a social activist and physician.

I was introduced to Professor Samora during a time in my life when I was searching for answers and direction. I had recently had my late adolescent life turned on its head by two close brushes with death and one intimate encounter with it. As a direct consequence, in 1978, I transferred from the University of Chicago to the University of Notre Dame on a transcendent spiritual search for a deeper understanding of my faith and my purpose in life. It was during this particularly impressionable time that I met Professor Samora.

It was while choosing courses for my Sociology major that I read about an undergraduate course entitled *Chicanos in the US*, described as an introduction to the Mexican-American experience in the USA. I was enthralled to imagine an academic study and analysis of the experiences of families like my own and individuals like myself. In fact, I later learned that one of Professor Samora's early research efforts had been focused on studying the population of Indiana Harbor, the urban Mexican barrio of East Chicago, Indiana where I was born. Through his teachings and his book *A History of the Mexican-American People*, a whole new world with very familiar details was revealed to me by looking at the struggles of my parents and all my family through the academic lens of social research.

As an undergraduate student, I was impressed by Professor Samora's gentleness. His was a very personable and approachable teaching style. His humbleness, sharp wit, and willingness to offer encouragement and assistance to students stand out in my mind. Outside of the classroom, he served as the faculty sponsor for a fledgling chapter of MECHA there at Notre Dame. He encouraged me to join, along with a small number of other interested students. There were few Latino undergraduate students on campus then in 1980, but he encouraged us and challenged us to be more socially conscious and politically aware, always with an eye toward serving the larger community.

Through his words and his teachings, Professor Samora captured my interest and my imagination. I petitioned him to allow me into his graduate colloquium on the *Chicano Movement* during my fourth year as an undergraduate. I wanted to learn more about my heritage and the larger epic and struggle of la Raza. He graciously allowed me into the weekly colloquium, which profoundly affected my understanding of where and how I was to fit into the dynamic story about which I was learning.

It was while under the direct tutelage of Professor Samora that I learned about political activism and the power of organizing thoughts and ideas into statements and actions. My maiden activist effort was around 1980 and a direct result of what I had just learned from Professor Samora. As part of a small group of Notre Dame students, I traveled to Dayton, Ohio to lend support to a group of migrant farm workers protesting unfair labor practices through a farm labor organization action. There were no arrests. It did not get much press; and I do not even remember if it was effective. But it was an experiential introduction to the role of activist and the tool of political protest.

The words of two other men on campus also greatly influenced my thinking at that time. Fr. Bill Toohey, the Director of Campus Ministry, had written an essay in his book Life After Birth about the threat of nuclear war and the horror wrought by nuclear destruction. That impression was galvanized by Fr. Ted Hesburgh's comments during my last year as an undergraduate that the threat of nuclear war was the single most apocalyptic danger to our world then in 1981. So, as I was wrestling with the choices for a career path in my life, the words and inspirational examples of Professor Samora, Fr. Toohey, and Fr. Hesburgh were all working together to shape the direction of things to come.

In 1983, I enrolled in medical school at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Professor Samora's teachings to be socially conscious and politically aware manifested themselves there. I became involved with issues of civil rights and minority affairs. That activism led to my membership on the University of Wisconsin's Center for Health Sciences Minority Affairs Committee and to my spearheading the reorganization of the minority medical student group on campus into the Medical Students for Minority Concerns. This heightened awareness of social justice issues led to my involvement with a medical student group at the University of Arizona called Commitment to Underserved Persons (CUP), and served as the impetus for my involvement with Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), the USA affiliate of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)—recipient of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize.

The bridge between these two areas of my burgeoning activist energy—minority affairs and the prevention of global thermonuclear warfare—was the theme “Destruction before Detonation”, first introduced to me by Dr. Victor Sidel at the 1986 PSR National

Convention in Chicago. The message behind the thematic phrase was that our tax dollars were being used to build and maintain a multi-billion dollar military establishment and nuclear weapons arsenal at the expense of educational and developmental programs for the poor and disadvantaged—such economic and social destruction all occurring within our own borders without the weapons of mass destruction ever being detonated.

With Professor Samora's words of encouragement etched in my mind, and those of Fr. Toohey, Fr. Hesburgh and Dr. Sidel spurring me on, I became an unexpected player in the international peace movement as a medical student and physician activist. That role in pursuit of peace took me on romantically intoxicating journeys to the Soviet Union, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan, the Kazakhstan Republic, Sweden, Cuba, Mexico, and El Salvador.

Just before starting my post-graduate medical training, however, the lessons I had learned in Professor Samora's graduate colloquium were put into a much larger arena than my first protest participation in Dayton, Ohio. As part of a small group of anti-nuclear peace activists from the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, I traveled to the Kazakhstan Republic, which was still a part of the Soviet Union at that time. This journey took me to Alma Ata and Semipalatinsk to participate in the International Citizens Congress for a Nuclear Test Ban.

We were there to give support to the "down-winders" protesting nuclear testing at the site in the Soviet Union that was the equivalent of the Nevada desert test site, where US nuclear weapon test explosions had been conducted. The "down-winders" are the indigenous peoples who are suffering from higher than epidemiologically predictable

rates of leukemia, various cancers, and birth defects, after exposure to the radioactive winds and fallout from the nuclear test explosions there in the Kazakhstan.

Soon after our international citizens protest, President Mikhail Gorbachev closed the nuclear test zone in Semipalatinsk and gave credit to the International Citizens Congress and to the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War for focusing the educational spot light to help bring this about. The message that Professor Samora had planted in me about political activism and the power of organizing thoughts and ideas into actions had grown to tangible fruition and become part of a larger global movement that truly made a difference.

My involvement with the medico-political, lobbying arm of preventive/social medicine revealed my lack of background regarding issues of international relations and hegemony. Therefore, soon after finishing medical school, I accepted a minority fellowship to earn a Master's Degree at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies back at the University of Notre Dame. The focus of my studies and research was Latin America and the use and, at times, misappropriation of foreign aid funds for an inappropriate military build-up in developing countries.

My time at the Institute for International Peace Studies also allowed me to study with Professor Samora's first graduate student, Jorge A. Bustamante, Ph.D., whose work and expertise on Mexican-USA border issues secured him a role as a teaching Fellow with the Institute. My work with Professor Bustamante heralded back to my time with Professor Samora as an example of the living legacy he left through the many former students carrying on his scholarly work and activism.

In 1990, I returned to post-graduate clinical medical training at the University of Wisconsin in Family & Community Medicine. Throughout my Residency training, Latin America seemed to be the arena calling to me. I continued my peace activism with my travels to Cuba, Mexico and El Salvador. As I began to focus more and more on the care of individual lives in my practice of medicine, however, the international/global perspective of preventive medicine that had so attracted me as a student began to become more domestic in focus.

I did travel to El Salvador to investigate a possible position with Doctors of the World at the end of my Residency training. It was while I was climbing the lush jungle pathways of the mountains of El Salvador, that the shingles fell from my eyes and an obvious but profound realization occurred to me. The role of a physician in a Spanish speaking community for which I was searching was readily attainable and equally needed back within the borders of the USA.

My journey was brought full-circle back to the dynamic microcosm of the Latino community about which Professor Samora had taught me so much. I returned to the USA to pursue my career as a community Family Physician. My first position out of residency was with the Health Centers of Northern New Mexico, working with the poor and largely Spanish-speaking population of northeast New Mexico. After a year, my family drew me back to Indiana, where I set up practice in South Bend.

Soon after my arrival to South Bend, through my work at St. Joseph Medical Center, I became a regular volunteer Staff Physician at St. Joseph Health Center (the Chapin Street Clinic). Once there, I recognized an unfilled need of the underserved Latino population of South Bend Indiana and the surrounding St. Joseph County. Professor

Samora's encouragement of community service echoed in my mind and the inspiration of my newly acquired friend Sr. Maura Brannick, the founding visionary of the Chapin Street Clinic, gave me direction. Subsequently, I successfully spearheaded a Spanish-speaking evening clinic at the Chapin Street Clinic. Soon after, I became the Medical Director for the Hispanic Health Task Force of St. Joseph Medical Center. I used that role to reach out and develop working partnerships and trusted relationships within the local Latino business and educational communities.

Since I was working only one mile from campus, I became involved with the Hispanic Alumni of Notre Dame. My memories of the support and assistance that Professor Samora offered to students when I was an undergraduate encouraged me to become active with students on campus while I was on the Board of Directors from 1995 until 1998.

One of the initiatives of the Board was to try to establish at Notre Dame the presence of an institute dedicated to the study of the Latino culture, in posthumous honor of Professor Samora. Because of the tireless efforts of the Board of Directors of the Hispanic Alumni of Notre Dame and the support of Fr. Tim Sculley, C.S.C., the Institute for Latino Studies was established on campus in October 1999. Under the leadership of Dr. Gilberto Cárdenas—another former student of Professor Samora—and Allert Brown-Gort, the Institute has flourished and grown on campus with multiple grant awards and research initiatives. The Institute's library/reading room was named and dedicated in honor of Professor Samora in March of 2000.

Although I had thought that I was going to grow old and retire in South Bend, an opportunity to expand my service to the larger Latino community presented itself in

Chicago. Alivio Medical Center, a community health center in the large immigrant Mexican community of Pilsen on the lower west side of the city, was in need of a Medical Director. It seemed to be a role for which I had been preparing during all of my adult life. In June of 1998, filled with a spirit of zeal and mission, my bride of less than a year and I moved to the city.

In late 2001, an opening became available to refocus my career on my original interest in Family and Community Medicine. I left Alivio Medical Center and became the Director of the Department of Family Practice at Erie Family Health Center, where I have been since December 2001. There I am the primary clinical preceptor in Family Practice for the training of medical students who rotate at the Humboldt Park Site of Erie Family Health Center, which serves a 90 percent Spanish-speaking population. In that role, I believe, I have been a positive model. Many Latino medical students have shared with me their excitement of seeing and working with a Latino doctor who is serving the Latino community in ways they hope to be able to do as well some day. In this role, I feel one of the legacies of Professor Samora continues, i.e., his willingness to offer encouragement and assistance to students.

My career as a physician trying to care for the unmet needs of the most marginalized of la Raza and my historic role as an anti-nuclear activist were profoundly influenced by my time at Notre Dame. The most important driving force for the direction of those roles was my time learning about my heritage from Professor Samora. As I stated at the Planning Session for the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame in February 1998, “no matter what major I had chosen or career path I had sought, the

passion instilled in me by Professor Samora from the scholarly understanding of my roots would have permeated my efforts.”

Professor Samora taught me that community service, first and foremost, was to be directed back into the community from which I came. His gentleness and humbleness modeled for me the way to try to do that. My brief time with him also showed me that who we are is not so much measured by our achievements, but by the individual lives we touch, the seeds we plant, and the encouragement and guidance we give along the way.