

A History of Activism: The Organizational Work of Juvencio Rocha Peralta

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Abstract

This account is based on a life history interview with Juvencio Rocha Peralta, community activist and founder of the organization *Asociación de Mexicanos en Carolina del Norte* (AMEXCAN)—an organization widely known across the state and in many parts of the United States, Mexico, and Central American for its work promoting culture, leadership, and education on behalf of Mexicans, Central Americans, and other Latino immigrants in North Carolina and beyond. Developed for the School of Advanced Research seminar, “Managing and Mismanaging Migration: Lessons from Guestworkers’ Experiences,” the account is meant to highlight a critical dimension of the guestworker experience: that of the work of Latino community formation and advocacy among long-time Latino residents in a social context, rural North Carolina, that has been a heavy importer of H-2A in agriculture and H-2B workers in fisheries. Juvencio’s experience as an immigrant and eventual immigrant advocate in North Carolina began in the tobacco, sweet potato, and cucumber harvests, and his subsequent work in the poultry industry and as a business student and outreach worker for a community college were all instrumental in his perceptions of and responses to injustices facing immigrant Latinos, guestworkers, undocumented, and settled legal immigrants alike. His understanding of the depths of discrimination and his efforts to promote appreciation for and understanding of Latino culture have been instrumental in building bridges between immigrant and native communities in North Carolina and in inspiring many young Latinos to leadership and advocacy.

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At the age of 16, Juvencio Peralta Rocha, the founder and executive director of the *Asociación de Mexicanos en Carolina del Norte* (AMEXCAN—Association of Mexicans in North Carolina), migrated from Mexico to North Carolina to live with one of his uncles from Veracruz and work in tobacco, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, and other harvests. It wasn't his first migration. Two years earlier, as the crisis facing Mexican small peasant farmers—the *ejiditarios*, or tillers of community lands throughout Mexico—deepened, Juvencio was forced from his father's fields into the internal migrant circuit in Mexico, working in agricultural harvests. Although he was only 14 at the time, he had already been working for eight years. His was a poor family in a poor community, he said, adding "I had to work very early, at six years of age... I grew up very quickly. At fourteen I left the village to look for work in other places." The village was Aguadulce, Papantla—a small *ejido* outside the larger city of Poza Rica in Mexico's oil-rich Veracruz, where Cortés landed and burned his ships in 1501. Juvencio's father, a farmer, worked his own lands but was struck, like so many others, with the deterioration of the Mexican agricultural economy in the mid-1970s, forcing his children to look for work. Juvencio's mother, a powerful influence in his life, was instrumental in keeping the family "always united," teaching her children the importance of kindness and the awareness of their roots. "She influenced me fundamentally," he said.

Juvencio's arrival in North Carolina preceded the vast settlement of Latinos in the state that took place beginning in the mid- to late-1980s. At that time, most of the Mexicans and other Latinos working in North Carolina agriculture migrated through the state. Juvencio was fortunate, he said, finding work on local farms where he could stay through the year. "My father grew tobacco," he said, which made him particularly well-suited to tending a crop that many tobacco farmers claim takes 13 months a year to grow. He was fortunate, too, in that he had a network of uncles who had migrated to North Carolina during the 1970s and who, in the rural county of Duplin, in Southeastern North Carolina, could find work not only on farms but in the expansive poultry industry of the region. "At first, it was a little difficult. I

remember that I was almost crying all the time for two years—apart from my family, apart from my people. There weren't many Latinos there. It was difficult.”

At the same time, the experience strengthened him. Perhaps because there weren't as many Latinos in North Carolina at that time, he was fortunate to meet North Americans who were willing to teach him English. He also seized the opportunity to learn more about agriculture in the region, improving his chances of employment without having to migrate from state to state; still, work in agriculture was limited. The other occupational alternative open to him was in the construction industry, but this too posed a challenge. “To be able to leave agriculture to work in construction was difficult, because at that time we [Latinos] were few in number, and, for example in North Carolina, the only opportunities were in agricultural labor, construction, or services. For me it was a matter of professional development,” he added, “to make the transition from working in agriculture to working in construction.” In so doing, Juvencio would replicate the experiences of many of his fellow Latinos over the coming years, entering the state's labor market through agriculture but transitioning, in time, to construction. When Juvencio made that transition, however, in the early 1980s, still a teenager, the Latino population in the state, and in construction, was still thin. Of this experience he says: “For me, to be able to move into construction presented the opportunity to have my own car, my own apartment, and these kinds of things.” More importantly, the move made him more responsible, giving him, in his words, “the power to go to school.” Of this fundamental transition, the stepping stone to school, he says: “For me, what I looked for was what I wanted.”

With this transition, he moved again, from Duplin to Pitt County, where he began attending Pitt Community College. This transition, too, replicated the experiences of many Latinos settling out of agricultural labor, moving from a rural to an urban area. Shortly after he made this move, he had an accident on the job and was incapacitated for a year. Despite the fact that he was undocumented at the time, the company he worked for agreed to compensate him for the injury and gave him a salary for a year. He took advantage of this time to begin the process of legalization. With the help of the company, he was able to take advantage of what he called “the Reagan amnesty,” receiving temporary authorization

in 1983. This ended a five-year period in the United States without documents, freeing him to begin working toward an education and laying the organizational groundwork for his future activism. He began studying at Pitt Community College, taking business courses and working toward permanent legal status. The latter work involved familiarizing himself with the systems of local and federal governments, leading to assistance from Congressman Walter Jones's office, who was able to secure a green card for him two months later.

With his documentation, he began working for the Pitt County Department of Transportation four days a week as a driver while still attending Pitt. Over the next two years he secured his GED and a degree in business; he continued working for the DOT for six years, initially transporting cargo and later establishing weight limits for buses carrying agricultural labor. Although Juvencio's life seemed to be progressing smoothly, working in the county through the 1980s, as the transition from African American to Latino labor was taking place in the surrounding fields, he was witness to many of the factors that prepared him for leadership. "For many years," he said, "I had been experiencing many incidents that, from my point of view, were injustices. For example, when I worked in construction, most of the workers were white North American, a few blacks, so they called me names. They called me 'wetback,' they called me 'nigger,' they called me those types of things. After this I began investigating the meanings of these terms, asking, why do such injustices exist in this society?"

Already Juvencio had learned that injustices weren't confined to construction workers or the construction industry, but in fact permeated even those branches of society that, supposedly, work against prejudice and discrimination. Always having a desire to help children, Juvencio once approached the Greenville Boys and Girls Club. "I went to apply for a volunteer position with them, but they didn't accept me." Although they said it was because he didn't have a social security number and didn't seem very strong, he believed that the real reason was that he was Latino. Determined to use his free time volunteering, he applied to help out with the Greenville Special Olympics, working with children with special needs, and there he was accepted. While working with the children, he perceived injustices

directed toward them. Ironically, these injustices were coming from within their own families. “How could their own parents,” he asked, “discriminate against their own children?”

Working against this injustice he dove into the programs designed for them—football, softball, and other sports programs. Eventually they assigned him six children to work with especially, teaching them all they could learn while becoming an activist for them. Dedicating himself to volunteerism thus prepared him for later social activism, giving him the opportunity to advocate on behalf of the children in the program. [26:00] As is common among leaders, this service to him community snowballed into other opportunities, including the Pitt County AIDS Service Organization (PICASO), whose members invited Juvencio to join them in their fight against sexually transmitted diseases in the county. In his work with PICASO, he was witness to more discrimination and racism. “Most of the people were African Americans,” he said, “or people with few resources—most were also women—and they experienced racism and discrimination. Some couldn’t access services, food, housing—all those kinds of things.” Hearing about and witnessing this, he became was newly inspired to advocate on behalf of the downtrodden, asking, “How could this exist in a country that was so rich?”

He worked primarily in the areas of education and health and began, at this time, toward the end of the 1990s, to direct his efforts toward the growing Latino population in the state. 28:46 Among his first projects was to organize soccer tournaments on the weekends, as well as locating ESL classes for farmworkers. “During this time,” he said, “the majority of Latinos in Eastern North Carolina were still working in agriculture, so along with the soccer we organized classes in English and instruction in how to become legal.” This was in the late 1990s. At this time, too, in response to growing public attention—good and bad—directed toward the Latino population in the state, he began meeting with other Latino leaders and others interested in the welfare of the state’s Latinos, traveling to Raleigh three to four times per month. However, this was costly in terms of expenses for gas, meals, and such, and at the same time he continued to perceive that Latinos in the eastern part of the state had many, many needs. “There arrived a moment at which I had to concentrate my work, my services in this region [eastern North Carolina].”

“In 1999, we had Hurricane Floyd,” he remembered, “one of the largest natural disasters in the history of North Carolina.” Following the hurricane was an even more devastating flood. “The county wasn’t prepared for its people, and they didn’t understand our community. At this moment, we felt as if, with regard to human rights, we were an afterthought, of the second class. The county wanted to provide for North Americans first, and only later provide for immigrants. In Pitt County, there was a county commissioner who said, ‘Let’s give the leftovers to the immigrants, and let’s take care of our people first.’” In response to sentiments like this, Juvencio and three others founded the North Carolina Latino Coalition. This was around 1999 or 2000. Out of this effort came several activities—marches, meetings with politicians, discussions—that collectively led the governor’s office and state to consider the needs of this new population, including establishing a Latino advisory group for the governor.

“This was a critical moment for the state of North Carolina,” he said, with the recognition by the Mexican government of North Carolina as a new destination for its people. There began to spread through the community a general recognition that North Carolina did not have Latino leaders. There was thus a need to develop Latino leadership in the state—leadership capable of responding to the growing Latino population in the state. “At that time, we began to organize as a group of Mexicans,” he said, adding that they were bolstered by the 2000 census figures that showed one of the fastest growing Latino populations in North Carolina in the United States. [38:14]. “We called the Mexican government and, in part because the census figures had reported a great increase in the Mexican population, the government listened to us and established a consulate here in the state to see to the needs of Mexicans.”

“At this time, we began to formalize the organization that, today, is known as AMEXCAN.” This was possible because of the good relations they had with the Mexican consulate, giving them a basis from which they could provide liaison services between Mexicans in North Carolina and the consulate’s suite of services. “We began working on more and more of a transnational project,” he said, “between the two different governments—Mexico and the United States. This was also a time of a great change in the Mexican government. The ruling party changed from PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) to PAN (National Action Party) and the new president, Fox, formed the Institute of Mexicans Abroad.” This

moved the issue of Mexican-U.S. immigration to the forefront of government policy, thus creating an opportunity for Juvencio and leaders like him to represent the Mexicans living in North Carolina. “I was the first Mexican in North Carolina to occupy the position—the *cargo*—of advisor [to the Mexican government].”²¹

Juvencio held this position for three years, considering a great opportunity to provide valuable services to the local Mexican population while representing the government of Vicente Fox. “It opened up for me a national experience,” he said, “but also a transnational experience of seeing the problems of both sides.” This was a period (2000 to 2005) of a great expansion of the Mexican population in North Carolina and its diversification into many different economic sectors, with many opportunities. “In this stage [of the development of the Mexican population] several actors came forward with their own ideas about the [Latino] community, some of whom were more for themselves and some of whom were more for the community.” Most of the Latino leadership, however, was concentrated in Raleigh. “There were only two of us in the east,” he said, “me in Pitt County and another in Halifax. The rest were in the Triangle. I began working at the grassroots. Several initiatives came from this, for example courses in leadership in Duplin, in Wilmington, groups who became part of AMEXCAN. Another group was formed in Newton Grove.”

This geographical expansion across the eastern part of the state entailed organizational changes as well. They began working particularly hard in Duplin County—one of the largest in terms of proportion of Latinos in the population. “AMEXCAN moved to Duplin and established partnerships with the county, with the college (Mt. Olive College), and with the cooperative extension service, and then we began to work. Inside the organization we began to work concrete projects—for example, in agriculture (for farmworkers), in the Festival de la Raza—we began promoting leadership, education, and other very concrete projects. We worked across this region—in Duplin, Wayne, Sampson...” Through these efforts they achieved the momentum that allowed them to make the most of their own personal resources and past experiences, marshalling what social scientists refer to as social capital to work on behalf of the community. At that time AMEXCAN consisted of nine core individuals, each with experience in

different kinds of organizations—El Pueblo, Community Development Centers, Non-profits—and from these experiences they acquired leadership skills that were valuable at the grassroots level.

Without significant resources, however, they had to form partnerships with various entities in the county. “We went to the county commissioners and presented the idea of their organization appealed for their help.” By this time they had already formed good relations with some county commissioners and had agreements with the county. “The director of county Community Development invited us to his office and we told them we were working without pay, without anything.” They continued working for Latinos in the county even when they received no help, in particular working to promote Latino culture. There were Latinos from many countries—Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans—in the county at that time, and they attempted to promote the idea that, “We are equals.” They began promoting cultural events across a wide range of venues—dances, music, and so forth. “This was a region very rich in Latino culture,” he said, “but we were different.”

As Juvencio’s activism during this time was entirely voluntary, he had to work full time to support himself and cover expenses associated with AMEXCAN that could not be covered with other resources. Interestingly, he worked for Carolina Turkeys—at that time the largest turkey processing firm in the world and a principal employer of Latino immigrants, like other poultry processing plants, in the county. [57:45]

He worked in Human Resources, in a program that assigned housing to processing plant workers. During this time, he began focusing on the needs of Latinos in the plant and elsewhere. “They had 3,000 employees,” he said, “and seventy-five percent of these employees were Latino. The business solicited his ideas about how to initiate projects that would reflect the interests of the Latino community.” One day the president of the company came to him and said that, as the largest company in the county and a main employer of Latinos, they needed a spokesperson for the Latino community. Juvencio became that spokesperson. “They gave me the responsibility and the flexibility to assist the company with the task of developing various activities for the Latino community.” This fit into his principal responsibility of

assigning housing to the workers, in the sense of enhancing their living situations with different social activities.

Although the company drew heavily on the Latino population, they did not import guestworkers from Mexico. Juvencio knew of the H-2 program, but the only labor importing scheme that he became familiar with was one in which the company imported Puerto Ricans—U.S. citizens—to work in the plant. “But they discontinued this program because it wasn’t working. At the same time, there were famous labor contractors who went from state to state recruiting people to work on farms. Carolina Turkey contracted with these labor contractors to recruit seasonal workers to the business during periods of peak labor demand. They would get people from Mexico, from other states, from all over.”

Duplin County also had large numbers of H-2A workers who worked in the farms near the turkey plant. “They arrived but didn’t return,” he said. “They arrived [to work in agriculture] in Greene County. They arrived to work in crab. But many didn’t return.” Instead they would come to the plant to work. “They found that they could earn a little more [at the plant] than they could on contract, and during this time the plant wasn’t too restrictive in relation to documentation. Many workers with H-2 visas worked with social security numbers and could easily get drivers licenses. They made the transition to establishing themselves with this status and went to work in these types of businesses—Carolina Turkey, Mt. Olive Pickle, and all the businesses that process turkeys, chickens, hogs.”

To Juvencio, those with H-2 visas seemed to have higher levels of education than the rest of the Latino immigrants. They also seemed to come from states in Mexico that had industrial zones—or at least neighbored industrial zones—or they came from the southern or central states.ⁱⁱ Just like other Latino immigrants in the state, however, the H-2 workers who left their employers, breaking with the terms of their contracts, or stayed in the state after their work was finished, took advantage of the activities of AMEXCAN. “Some among them integrated themselves into AMEXCAN,” he said, “working to promote various activities. They became part of the efforts to develop culture, leadership, and other activities, volunteering [with AMEXCAN]. They were able to be effective on account of their [higher] levels of education.”

Juvencio worked for eleven years for Carolina Turkey, from 1995 to 2006, using his position with the company to improve relations between Latino workers and the company as well as expand his base of leadership and his knowledge of the Latino population in Eastern North Carolina. Duplin was an ideal place to begin his work with the community and to begin AMEXCAN, which he founded in 2000—more or less half way into his tenure with Carolina Turkey. As noted earlier, Duplin had a higher proportion of Latinos than many other counties in North Carolina, given the number of farms and farm-related processing industries that hired them. It was here that they began establishing partnerships. “We collaborated with community colleges, with Mt. Olive College [on the border of Wayne and Duplin Counties] and with many county departments—social services, health, and other departments that provided services to the community. We signed agreements or established collaborations with them. Mt. Olive College helped us a great deal, and Mt. Olive Pickle helped also,” he said, indicating that Juvencio they sought out resources from diverse sources—public, private, business, industry, health care, education—but not all equally. “Our strongest collaborations were with community colleges,” he said, “with Lenoir Community College, with Pitt Community College, with Brunswick Community College—most in the field of education. They gave us space for the Latino community.”

During this time, he said, the economy of the state was booming—much of it due to the labor of Latinos—and the availability of resources was much greater than it would become later, after the crisis beginning in 2007. Juvencio listed resources coming from the state and from the private sector, providing opportunities for Latinos, including Juvencio himself. In 2006 he left Carolina Turkey to work with Lenoir Community College specifically to provide outreach to the Latino community across the eastern portion of the state. “My role at Lenoir Community College was to coordinate programs for Latinos, establishing occupational programs, careers, and everything associated with a basic education,” he said. “This was a great opportunity for them to develop [better relations with the Latino community], but then the economic crisis hit, and they eliminated the programs for Latinos.”

Of his time at Lenoir Community College, however, he said that he was able to learn how to negotiate among different agendas, because he was working both for the college and for AMEXCAN—in

a paid position for the former and a voluntary position for the latter. In that position he also learned more about the varied needs of the community and the ways in which various agencies addressed those needs. “At times the agencies had their own agendas and we had our own agendas,” he said, “and we were more... more revolutionary, and so could run against the interests of the public agencies.” He had the sense that he was more outspoken than the college wanted him to be at times, which, he felt, posed a threat to them. With the elimination of the programs for Latinos came the elimination of Juvencio’s job. Following his dismissal, he was able, he said, “To view Lenoir County panoramically. Lenoir is a county controlled by the [white] majority, and the minority has no power. They’re kept very much in check. They don’t want to initiate progress in the areas where the minority lives. They resist change, progress.” When he began being interviewed about immigration, he felt that he encountered a great deal of negative reaction, because many in Lenoir County were against immigration. He would say, “We need immigration reform. We need to legalize those without documents.... Many didn’t like this.” Many in the county were further threatened, he believed, because he was saying these things as part of this work with a community college, exposing many of the county’s youth to his ideas. Those in administration in the college began saying, “‘He’s not part of our team. He’s not part of us.’ We were progressive leaders, human rights leaders, and they weren’t going to tolerate what was going to go against them.”

Reflecting on this time, he realizes now that it was very stressful for him, that he was denying himself and his family, his health and his person, in his position working against the county. Yet, as noted earlier, his relations weren’t restricted to Lenoir Community College. Through his relations with Pitt Community College, he was able to secure space for AMEXCAN’s offices and the various training sessions they would provide over the next few years. These have included projects educating the local Latino population about diabetes and developing local community health workers in the region. It was in the offices of Pitt Community College that Juvencio established himself after leaving Lenoir Community College, and with the transition he began working at a somewhat different level, organizing meetings as well as working more in the transnational community, most importantly with NALAC (National Association of Latin Arts and Culture).

Now, for the future, Juvencio envisions securing resources for AMEXCAN that will allow him to work for the organization full-time. Part of his new direction involves increasing his transnational work, traveling to Agua Dulce and other locations in Mexico as well as continuing his work in Eastern North Carolina. “NALAC is an organization with a transnational vision,” he said. “They are helping me position myself in both places, both sides of the border, and from this has come the opportunity to participate in meetings and trips. During this time I also had the opportunity to work with East Carolina University, with Rebecca Torres, on a transnational project—on something concrete—looking at the total panorama of migration from Mexico. Now, NALAC is looking at remittances from the United States to Mexico and from the United States to El Salvador.” This project is part of an attempt to begin changing the government of Mexico. “We have to change the federal government, the state governments, and the local governments,” he said. As part of this he is trying to initiate project between sending and receiving communities, again emphasizing his growing interest in the transnational, building on, he said, “Models from Michoacán, Zacatecas, and Guanajuato.” He wishes to apply some of these tried models to Veracruz, which doesn’t have a history of transnational projects.

While this poses challenges in terms of working in the local settings of Eastern North Carolina and working in transnational settings, Juvencio believes in both settings political changes are possible. Through transnational connections, local communities can achieve the strength they need to effect political change. Currently, in Juvencio’s mind, they haven’t achieved this. Yet they will. “I believe that in the next five years,” he said, “I’ll be working with progressive groups at the state level, at the national level, and also at the transnational level.” Through this work, he hopes to open spaces for immigrants to advocate for their own human rights.

ⁱ The use of the word “cargo” is significant as a reference to the civil-religious hierarchy known as the “cargo system” in Mexico, in which community members serve their communities for periods of a year or longer, often at great personal expense yet receiving the benefits of recognition and prestige (Cancian 1969).

ⁱⁱ Juvencio’s impressions here conform to some observations others have made concerning the sending regions for workers with H-2 visas as well as those who enter Canada with temporary visas. Women in the crab industry with H-2B visas, for example, come from either Sinaloa—a zone of industry and industrial agriculture—or from the southern state of Tabasco, while Oaxaca, Michoacán, and Central Mexico are major suppliers of H-2A workers.