

“We ourselves are part of the solutions and not dependent on outsiders coming in and testing things out with us.”

Fanny Diego Alvarez, MSW
Associate Director,
Enlace

Voices of Health Equity in Chicago
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CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH EQUITY



Center for Community Health Equity

The Center for Community Health Equity was founded by DePaul University and Rush University in 2015 with the goal of improving community health outcomes and contributing to the elimination of health inequities in Chicago.

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Voices of Health Equity in Chicago

Our *Voices of Health Equity* project collects the stories of people who have made health equity a central concern in their work. We are interviewing academics, clinicians, public health advocates, community organizers, and others to better understand how different disciplines and professions could work together to eliminate avoidable, unnecessary and unfair health disparities.

Sunday, July 30th, 2017
Interview by Rosio Patino

Background: Fanny was born in the southern state of Guerrero, Mexico. When she was six years old, her family immigrated to the United States and arrived in Little Village. Fanny was first introduced to Enlace when she was a sophomore at Farragut Career Academy. She later earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a graduate degree from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration. She is a 2016 Civic Leadership Academy fellow at the University of Chicago. Fanny started working at Enlace in 2005. Most recently, Fanny served as Education Director, overseeing a wide spectrum of education initiatives at nine neighborhood schools that serve more than 5,000 families each year. In this role, she supervised a team of 11 full time staff and more than 100 seasonal part-time staff. Fanny played a key role in piloting and growing Enlace's work in college readiness and postsecondary, and has worked as a tireless advocate for undocumented youth. In October 2012, she was awarded the Community Schools Leadership Award from the Illinois Federation of Community Schools. Fanny enjoys being able to work in her own community and considers it a great responsibility and privilege.

Rosio: Can you tell me who you are, and what you do at Enlace?

Fanny: My name is Fanny Diego Alvarez and I am the Associate Director at Enlace. I work with the education, violence prevention, immigration and health teams. I oversee all the strategies that are utilized. Everything from services delivery, community planning to individual and community capacity building, community research and organizing in advocacy. These are the four issue areas that we concentrate on but we understand that they interact and feed each other and none of those issue areas live in a vacuum. Our approach is really comprehensive in the way where we address the challenges, understanding there are systemic barriers that also need to be chiseled and broken.

Rosio: Was there a specific reason why you chose Social Service Administration for your degree?

Fanny: I think that I was fortunate enough where things kind of started making sense as I was moving along in my career. I started organizing at a very young age and I was part of many leadership development spaces. Coming from a family that does a lot of community organizing and a lot of work that is beyond yourself. I think the history of my family back in Mexico, really, was carried over when we came over to the United States, understanding that our role was *bigger*. So I started organizing when I was in elementary school and really got into it in high school mostly because when I was in 8th grade everyone was telling me that "you need to get out of the neighborhood" "you need to go to high school outside of the neighborhood." I didn't want to, but my mom listened to other people and said that I should and that "you should at least try it" so I cut a deal with her. I said "If I do a year and you see that I do well, will you allow me to come back to a neighborhood school?", and she said yes. I went for a year to a magnet school downtown and I didn't like it at all. I finished the year and I told her that I wanted to go to Farragut. It was the deal that we cut and she transferred me over. At Farragut is when my organizing really kicked off, so I didn't really know what profession that I wanted to get into but I knew that no matter what it was it will be about community development, about organizing, it will be about figuring out how to use my skill set in a way that was advancing us as a community. So I started volunteering with Enlace when it was Little Village Community Corporation a really long time ago. This was before the Little Village Lawndale High School Campus was built. When I graduated high school they had a few positions opening up because we (Enlace) were so tiny, I became a part-time leadership development

instructor, I worked with fifth and sixth graders. They would come up with projects and I would support them. The projects were mostly around health like diabetes, asthma, and others. Some of the challenges at the time and currently continue to exist in our community. So I went through all of my undergrad and master's degree education while employed at Enlace. I began to understand how the education that I was getting was directly connected in how I was going to pilot certain programs and solutions. My work and my education always was in tandem and continues to be in so many ways, Enlace has taught me a lot and I have brought a lot of what I learned outside. I grew into the positions that I have held in the last 13 years.

Rosio: Did you have any inspiration or major influence on your work?

Fanny: I tend to think that we are constantly being influenced by the people around us. I don't have that one person that changed my life but I have very specific people in my life and throughout my life. My fifth grade teacher who really talked about owning your story and understanding who you were and talked about the courage that some of us had already exercised by being undocumented children, coming to a different country. I had teachers in high school that talked about sexism, classism and racism in a way that really transformed the way that I was able to analyze certain situations without necessarily thinking about "what's wrong with that person?" but rather "what's wrong with the system that leads to that person to interact that way or behave?" At home it was the same thing. My mom was always challenging us in understanding that by standing idly by is just as complicit as doing harm. Young people that were older than me that really inspired me was a woman, Rebecca, here at Enlace. She was one of the first employees at Enlace. She was a mentor of mine in high school. When I started working at Enlace, my first supervisor happens to be our Executive Director now so I think there has been so many people. I have been open and have allowed for there to be that mutual learning and they have allowed for that too, one of the real benefits of working at a place like Enlace is that you have a variety of ages and a variety of experiences. Even when the majority of the individuals live in Little Village, we don't all have the same story so I wouldn't say there was this one person but there has been so many people. Since I've been here forever (laughs) I have worked with our founding directors, including Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, he is a great story, person, leader. But I also think that very early on we understood that it needs to be a collective effort/struggle to have a large impact and a sustainable impact. Because if we continue to depend on individuals or individual institutions or and individual approach then we are not really solving anything because so much of this is connected to -

Rosio: The greater picture

Fanny: Yeah!

Rosio: If you stroll down Little Village you know the name Enlace. How do you see the relationship between Enlace and the community?

Fanny: When we first began as the Little Village Community Corporation we really thought we were going to be a brick and mortar corporation, that we were going to build buildings and that didn't happen. Part of the reason for that not happening is when we first started door knocking, we started to get input, people wanted to talk about safety, education and people guided us and that is how we changed our focus. That's how we embarked in the education campaign that led to the hunger strike that led to the building of the Little Village Lawndale High School Campus. Because we listened. The essence of that continues to help us maintain the authenticity. Those of us that have been here a long

time, for like 13 years like myself, have to be humble and I remind myself that I also have a level of disconnect at this point. When I'm hearing something, I need to really listen and then figure out, how does that fit into this or that plan that we created two years ago, maybe some things have shifted. It's a constant listening tour and also being intentional about creating and maintaining spaces where people are giving you direct feedback. Where people themselves are engaging in the solutions, and that has to be part of your mission. One way, I would say, to maintain this type of engagement is that most of the staff at Enlace are Little Village residents or grew up in Little Village. We also have a tremendous amount of spaces, schools, gardens, parks and churches, where we are constantly engaging people and they are telling us, guiding us. I think that the times we have steered away from that style, because we got too busy or either grant and reports all the other bureaucratic aspects of running an organization, then we have seen the effect of that. Maybe we embark in a program that is not that successful or it doesn't have as much momentum as the other things. The times that we are most successful and have had the largest impact is when people themselves are leading. I think that it needs to be part of our identity as Enlace to continue to seek that out.

Rosio: What are the biggest challenges when you are listening to the communities, if there is a problem you cannot solve how does Enlace manage it? With every struggle there is a success story, what is Enlace's success story?

Fanny: This is the part that is hard to quantify but there is quite a bit. When we started there were very few community based organizations, maybe some programs, but there was not an emphasis or focus in Little Village. When I was growing up in Little Village there was a real big void in services and programs and political education. In the 90's we were the port of entry for immigrants, there were new people coming in regularly. Some things have changed since then, when we first did our Quality of Life, which is a strategic plan for the neighborhood in 2003-2005, we identified the issue areas and our strategies. We went back to it in 2013 because we wanted to engage a broader audience, even broader than the first one. The first one we had about 120 people and about 20 organizations, the second time we had about 700 people and 80 organizations. It was a much broader plan and we also divided into issue areas and into strategies. I think what was hard in the beginning was that it was almost like the 1.0 of community organizing and development, back in 2003. People would say something like, "I want afterschool programs" or "I want a stop sign" it was the beginning and that type of planning was important. Now we are at the 2.0 phase now we are talking about racial equity, we are talking about systemic barriers. The schools that we have been at the longest or invested the most amount of time and resources, we have seen a tremendous amount of success. Overall we have doubled our high school graduation rates over the last 15 years and most of the indicators have seen improvement except income for families. You can imagine that is a big challenge because we have the largest concentration of undocumented people in the state of Illinois. That is directly correlated to what jobs you have access to, what you don't have like health benefits, a third of our community residents do not have any type of health insurance that is also connected with the undocumented status. Our families are mixed status families so there is going to be a lot of challenges and there is going to be barriers that they may not be able to overcome within 5-10 years or not until something at the federal level changes. So the challenges as we see them today are a little bit more advanced because we ourselves have a greater understanding about what those challenges are, it's not just the fact that Chicago Public Schools is not properly allocating funds, that's a part of it. Another part of it is the funding formulas in Springfield.

What does that mean at the end of the day? It means that some people get prioritized and some people don't and why? If we dig deeper than we are talking about history of disinvestment in communities of color. A history of housing segregation that contributed to how schools receive funding, based on

property taxes. It's all interconnected so I would say that the challenges today are, how we turn those large problems into issues so we can organize around them. Once you start thinking about them, they are so large it can be overwhelming, so we need to break them down. The breaking down part also means we have to concentrate on an issue like equitable funding for schools for example. At the same time remembering that the issue is connected to other things like health, public safety, etc.

Another challenge/need that I have seen grow, that we used to not address, is mental/behavioral health services. The more we have delivered services, the more we have realized that there is a large need to address trauma. When you are talking to people about empowerment and leadership involvement and let's organized! How do we do that in a way that is appropriate and when we are addressing people's immediate needs. It can be real idealistic to think that we are going to mobilize a thousand people but some people, *they might not have anywhere to sleep*. When you dig deeper there are some real issues that people don't talk about, not even just mental and behavioral health but even housing. I mentioned that we are the largest port of entry in the 90's, at that point it was really normal for you to see 2 or 3 families in one apartment. There is still some of that, but we don't see it because it's behind closed doors and we don't call that homelessness and therefore those families are not receiving the services that they deserve from the school, the city or the state. There is some real issues when a student doesn't show up to class because they didn't get enough sleep or their running late because they're taking care of other siblings and struggling to get ready. How that affects the classroom, it affects the school, the parents who are working temp jobs and not being able to come back till 12 AM. Once you start working with families more intimately you begin to understand that some of their struggles are a lot deeper than what we see every day as we are walking down 26th street.

In terms of success, I think as a community we have increased our individual and our community capacity to understand some of these challenges. We have seen a doubling in graduation rates, we also see more people going to college. College persistence is not where it needs to be but we have a lot more people going to college, including undocumented youth. That to me is the real success. What we are doing is engaging in real culturally competent work or ideally working towards that. We ourselves are part of the solutions and not dependent on outsiders coming in and testing things out with us. I also think that because of that, the work we that we do is very transparent and we understand there are challenges but we also understand that so many of our families came with nothing and they have been able to establish themselves or working towards it. Maybe still working poor but making some strides, working so their child gets into college. The work that we have done has been geared to working more comprehensively and not thinking that we are saving people but that people are the ones that leading the effort in their own lives, that they have self-agency and we are here to provide tools and facilitate spaces and a process. At the end of the day it is their knowledge that is feeding us.

Rosio: Would you give any advice to any outside researchers, doctors, epidemiologists wanting to do work in Little Village?

Fanny: One, I think that community agencies should hold researchers accountable. That starts with understanding that just because someone has a research question doesn't mean we need to give into it. Over the years we developed a way to vet researchers, a set of questions that they need to answered before we can even look at a proposal. We would get outrageous requests all the time, "I'm doing this research on the Latino experience, can we come in and observe two of your classes?" and we didn't have a relationship with that researcher, this was a random request that we would get from a PhD student from whatever university. It wasn't really clear what the benefit was for us in the greater

scheme of things there may be some type of benefit but how was it going to directly benefit us? What is the reciprocal relationship here? What are you contributing today? And what would it look like tomorrow? I think we have gotten a lot better at asking a lot of questions. Even before you came on board I asked Amanda about you and what you do? I know that I researched The Center for Community Health Equity and talked to Fernando and Raj before. So we don't just engage now in a way that is very loose, we understand that most of our capacity should be on the ground.

I think a part of the reason that a lot of my work in and the work in Enlace has concentrated on education is because it's a cycle. It's not enough that Latino children are graduating from high school and going into college and graduating from college and enter a master level program. That is the beginning. Based on today's numbers, odds are they're not going to be the researchers, they are going to be the subjects. We don't have enough Latinos that are going into PhD programs and graduating. Latinos are underrepresented in spaces including, institutional review boards. They get to decide all of the things that come with research so we, all of us, need to think about what is our immediate role in research and making sure that it's as culturally competent as it can be. But also what are we doing to create better and more intentional educational pipelines so populations lead their own research and not just be the subjects of study?

Some advice that I would have for researchers is, I think that you can try and learn a lot with books but the best education that I have gotten is being on the ground. I think that more researchers should be on the ground and I'm not just collecting data. I'm saying actually doing internships and volunteer work (giving forward) for them to even get to the point of engaging in research.