

Honorary Degree Symposium

Friday, May 19, 2000

"Speaking to Power:

A Symposium on the Achievements of Honorary Degree Recipient Ernesto Cortés"

2:00-3:30 p.m. Walsh Classroom, Underwood Law Library

Followed by Afternoon Tea with Ernesto Cortés

hosted by Dean Jasper Neel

the Department of Political Science

The Ethnic Studies Program

The William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies.

Chair, Mr. Tom Luce

Panelists:

Mary Beth Rogers, author of biography of Ernesto Cortés, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics*

Minerva Carcao, Perkins School of Theology, SMU

William Julius Wilson, Geyser University Professor at Harvard University, author of—among many others—*The Declining Significance of Race*, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, and *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics*.

For more information, contact:

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Biography of Ernesto Cortés (from the website of the Heinz Foundation)

Ernesto J. Cortés, Jr. is dedicated to making government more responsive by increasing citizen participation in the political process at the community level. Mr. Cortés, who serves as Southwest Regional Director of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation, has worked to organize communities in the poor neighborhoods of Texas and throughout the Southwest. He emphasizes the development of local leadership, training cadres of organizers who become a permanent resource capable of mobilizing their communities at the grassroots. This approach has proved highly successful in increasing the political power of the traditionally disenfranchised populations with whom Mr. Cortés works. In his commitment to helping these populations master "the system" rather than be discouraged by it, Mr. Cortés exemplifies the importance to political democracy of individuals who speak sensibly about issues, work publicly for their goals, debate subjects on their merits and give voice to others who lack ready access to power.

Ernesto Cortés left post-graduate work in economics at the University of Texas at Austin at the same time that he recognized the power of community organizing to improve the lives of others. His early commitment led him first to Cesar Chavez and the farm worker's movement, and then to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In 1971, he moved to Chicago to study at the Saul Alinsky Training Institute, founded by the legendary labor organizer, which provides leadership training to poor communities.

Returning to his native Texas in 1974 under the auspices of Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, Mr. Cortés founded the first IAF affiliate there, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), in his hometown of San Antonio. This church-based grassroots organization has gained national recognition for transforming fragmented, low-income neighborhoods into an organized and politically savvy group capable of taking on the city's power structure. As neighborhoods became organized, junkyards were removed, drainage systems installed and traffic signals erected. Increasingly aware of their own power, residents began to reach out across neighborhood boundaries to develop a master plan for public service equity, which resulted in new libraries, innovative economic development initiatives and new parks.

In the more than two decades since Mr. Cortés began his involvement with the IAF, the foundation has grown to include more than 50 such organizations nationwide. The Southwest Region of the network includes 23 organizations, many of which he originally organized and all of which he now supervises as director of the region. These organizations represent some 500,000 families across the Southwest, for whom Mr. Cortés plays the role of teacher and facilitator and not, he stipulates, of problem solver.

Possessed of a deep respect for the dignity of the people he seeks to help, he adheres to what he calls the "iron rule" of community activism: Never do for others what they can do for themselves. Rather than seek to impose an outsider's view of what a community needs, he helps citizens to organize into trusting relationships and to develop the tools they need to exercise power on their own behalf.

Ernesto Cortés has successfully translated his passion for justice into helping the politically disenfranchised of all races and faiths discover their political strength. That passion burns in him as brightly today as it did over 25 years ago.