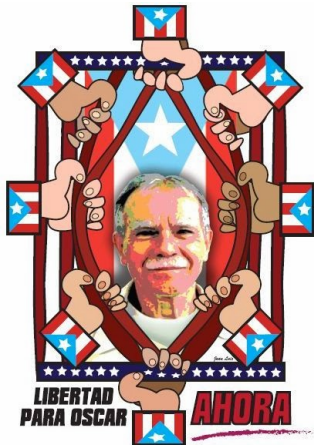


## In His Own Words: Oscar Discusses Poverty and Education

Escrito por Oscar López Rivera / Preso político, 33 años encarcelado en EEUU  
Miércoles, 08 de Octubre de 2014 10:29 -

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La Respuesta is proud to announce a new page titled “Oscar’s Corner”, where we will provide news on the campaign to free political prisoner Oscar López Rivera. We are also excited to share with you our direct correspondence with Oscar from inside prison, facilitated by Dorian Ortega and the National Boricua Human Rights Network.

Every month Dorian asks Oscar a question relevant to our community and he responds with an essay. You can participate too! If you have a question for Oscar, send them to [dorian@larespuestamedia.com](mailto:dorian@larespuestamedia.com). Here is our second letter from Oscar, covering the topics of poverty and education:

**Dorian Ortega:** Tell us about your experiences combating poverty and educational inequity in Chicago’s Puerto Rican community in the 1960s and 1970s? Is there anything you would have done differently? What is your advice to young Boricuas working to improve access to formal education in their communities?

**Oscar López Rivera:** The two issues need to be put in historical perspective in order for me to explain what I was trying to do while organizing in the community and addressing issues like poverty and educational inequality.

As soon as the Puerto Rican community started to consolidate itself in the West Town community the system of public education began to eliminate some of the institutions that had existed in the area for years. There was a Teachers College that was eliminated. There were public libraries that were eliminated. And many of the best teachers transferred to other communities. Most of the schools became overcrowded as the Puerto Rican population grew, and most of the teachers didn’t know how to teach students who only spoke Spanish. And if a principal was asked how he or she was addressing these problems there was no honest answer forthcoming, because principals didn’t know how to deal with them.

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The solution for the overcrowding problem the Chicago Board of Education came up with was to place mobile units on the school yards. That meant that the recreational space had to be reduced or eliminated completely. The overcrowding problem and the lack of recreational space made it almost impossible for the students to get an education. And if the students were recent arrivals and spoke no English the problem of not getting an education was even worse.

West Town was surrounded by factories and many of the residents worked in those factories. But the factories started to move to the suburbs and the working opportunities went with them. In order to find jobs in the suburbs cars were needed, but most of the Puerto Ricans had just come from Puerto Rico and didn't know how to travel, and didn't have access to any means of transportation, be it private or public. On top of that they didn't speak English and they didn't have the necessary skills the employers demanded. If they were lucky they would find work in hotels at the lowest wages. They also faced discrimination even if they had skills. I remember Puerto Rican carpenters, electricians, plumbers, etc who couldn't get a job in the construction industry just because the employer thought he couldn't do the work.

In the area of education the community needed schools with space and an environment that was conducive to learning – teacher who were bilingual and programs that met the cultural needs of the students. Most teachers were monolingual, had race issues and weren't prepared to teach in overcrowded rooms. But the community wasn't organized and most parents thought that just by sending their children to school they would get an education. And most school's administrators weren't encouraging the parents and the community to be involved in school issues.

When I started organizing it was the most basic level. I had to go knocking on doors, talking to the parents and try to get them involved in the education of their children. What surprised me most was to see the positive response of the parents. What little we accomplished during the years I was organizing was because the parents took an interest and responded to the challenge of going to the schools and forcing the administrators to listen to their concerns. In the schools the administrators listened to the parents and some of the issues were resolved.

I also ask: how could an unemployed Puerto Rican find a job where most of the factory jobs were only available in the suburbs and there were very few jobs available in the inner city? They spoke no English and had very few work experiences.

The first step in dealing with the issue of poverty is for the individual to be able to sell his labor power. On Division St. there many boarding houses. Most of the men who came from Puerto Rico lived in those houses. Sometimes there were two or three men living in a single room. If one was working he would help the other one or two. It was heart wrenching to see men, who had left their family behind in Puerto Rico, living under those conditions. Because I was the one who spoke English and knew how to move around many of them would ask my parents to allow me to take them to an office the Puerto Rican government had opened downtown. I used to take them there, and to my surprise the staff person would look in the wanted ads of the Chicago papers and send them there. I never saw a single one of them get hired. I would tell them it was better for me to look in the newspaper and see if they could get hired that way rather than spending money going downtown. I took quite a few Puerto Ricans to that office. I

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also took a lot of Puerto Rican women to the welfare office.

If there aren't employment opportunities, what were the new arrivals to do? My father did labor work in a factory and my brother-in-law worked in a hotel. Both worked for minimum wages. By the time I was an organizer the level of poverty had not changed. The only way to attack poverty is by looking for ways to create employment opportunities. We focused on taking the problem to the employers. With the construction industry we just followed the example set by Operation Push. It was this organization that took the lead in challenging the construction industry to stop its discriminatory practices. One of the ways to force it was by stopping progress in any construction site where it was obvious there was discrimination. In some of the sites we joined Operation Push and in others we did it by ourselves.

The housing and health issues were also addressed. We tried to get the absentee landlords to fix their property if the conditions of their buildings weren't up to code. Again it was by organizing tenants. And in some of the buildings we had success.

If I were organizing today I wouldn't change the basics of effective organizing. Knocking on doors, talking with the people, finding out from them what problems they see that need to be resolved and bring them together. When people come together and talk about a particular issue they identify that needs to be dealt with and are willing to tackle it most likely the issue gets resolved or improved. I would focus more and more on whole families. Education, employment, housing and health are basic problems that if resolved will help families to come out of extreme or dire poor conditions. Education must start while the child is in the mother's womb. That's how I would start addressing the most basic issue that are the roots of poverty.

EN RESISTENCIA Y LUCHA, olr.