

Chapter 20: The Dining Room Table



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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“José, I need a favor.”

“Anything. Just ask, and I’ll do it.” This was the only possible response to a request for a favor from our program officer in one of the largest foundations in the country. He had been instrumental in the creation of the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) and had provided extensive handling for our various student advocacy projects through the years.

“I want you to go to California for a few days and provide technical assistance to a teacher who has been in contact with our foundation. We have been receiving a lot of correspondence from her for some time now with requests for assistance. Now, we are receiving correspondence from other persons recommending that we provide her with assistance. The impressive thing is not the number of recommendations we are receiving, but who is sending letters of recommendation for her. I want you to go to California, check out what she’s doing, and write me a brief report. I’ll underwrite all your expenses and even provide a fee for your technical assistance.”

I have had sufficient relationships with foundations to develop an understanding of the ways in which most foundations function. All foundations get an unbelievable number of unsolicited proposals for financial assistance. I believe that many of these requests go unread, since I have personally seen the storage rooms at various foundations where thousands of requests for funding are kept until staff has time to go through them. Since foundations receive extensive criticism if the amount spent on staff is disproportionate to the amount spent on philanthropy, they never appear to have sufficient personnel resources to properly address all solicitations received.

Most unsolicited requests for funds eventually are responded to by a form letter acknowledging the request and stating either that all of the foundation’s funds for the current fiscal period are already committed, or that the proposed activity is not within the programmatic interests of the foundation.

Most foundations that I have worked with are in constant communications with experts in their fields of interest, and it is this expertise that receives most of the foundation’s support. Some experts are such eminent figures in their fields that they are sought out by foundation staff and urged to conceptualize activities which the foundation will be eager to fund.

An alternative to providing funds for solicitations is the provision of technical assistance, which is less expensive for the foundation, may create a short-lived relationship through a limited commitment, or may even prove interesting and lead to subsequent funding.

The teacher in California that I was going to assist was interested in the development of an international school records transfer system between the United States and the Republic of Mexico. As director of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL)’s Center for Migrant Education, I had been a member of the U.S. Office of Education’s task force, which conceptualized the Migrant Student Record Transfer (MSRT) system currently based in Little Rock, Arkansas, so I figured that I had at least a basic understanding of the issues and problems involved.

I made all necessary logistical arrangements with the teacher and flew to California. During my service in the U.S. Army, I had lived in California and was fairly well acquainted with the lush fruit-producing region I was to visit. Subsequently, I have done extensive work with school districts and universities in California, and I like to revisit the state periodically.

In various ways, California amazes me. I am always expecting the big earthquake to level a large portion of the state. Even before this happens, it is possible that when vegetation has been completely stripped by the developers, a good, hard rain will wash most of the state into the Pacific Ocean. The people of California similarly fascinate me, with their conviction that if they eat enough oats, or whatever the current health food fad is, they will live forever. They jog continuously, engage in all kinds of strenuous sports activities, eat disgustingly healthy, and yet they are all sick. A person can't light a cigarette in the middle of a 40-acre park without a dozen people coming up and requesting that the cigarette be put out because they suffer from a deadly respiratory ailment. I estimate that 90% of the population of the state has some form of a deadly respiratory ailment.

They do have the classiest cars. You can stand for half an hour outside the lobby of your hotel and see more vintage carriages than there are in the whole City of San Antonio.

The teacher picked me up and gave me a tour of the region in which she worked. Part of the tour included visits to several of the many migrant camps, temporary housing provided for migrant agricultural workers and their families as they harvested the local crops. Almost all the people in the camps were Mexicans. I don't mean Mexican American like myself, but Mexican. The cars in the camp parking lots had license plates from most of the Mexican states, although the majority appeared to be from the Mexican state of Michoacan.

I like Michoacan. The word comes from the Nahuatl language spoken by the Mixtecas (Aztecs) and means "land of many lakes." It sounds very much like our own word, Michigan, which is also a Native American word which means "land of many lakes." Maybe the pre-Columbian native Americans were not as uncommunicative as historians lead us to believe.

These cars with Mexican license plates stayed in the parking lots most of the time, since very impressive bus service was provided to and from the fields where they were harvesting the crops.

All of the migrants I encountered spoke fluent Spanish, few spoke any English. I asked several migrants what type of documentation they had for this temporary residency in the United States. A few indicated that they had no documentation, but most of them evaded answering the question. My hostess indicated that I was being rude and shouldn't persist in asking this question, since almost all of the migrants in the camps were undocumented, and I was embarrassing them.

I was amazed to see thousands of undocumented people undetected by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In Texas, INS scatters sand along the border, and the immigration officers, looking like John Wayne scouting around Fort Apache, check several times a day for footprints, which indicate that someone has walked through there. If they find a footprint, they then follow up using four-wheel drive vehicles, horses, airplanes and even helicopters in their attempts to capture each and every person who may have entered the country illegally.

In California I saw thousands of undocumented people residing in very well-organized camps, living right under the very noses of the unsuspecting Immigration and Naturalization Service.

In Texas, all major roads leading from the border have checkpoints at which each and every vehicle is stopped and inspected for the presence of “undocumented aliens.” In California, they were being moved up and down to different fields along the major highways, by the bus load, in broad daylight without drawing the suspicion of the “migra” (INS).

Maybe I just happened to make my observations at the wrong time of the year, that is, during the harvest season when there is a beautiful symbiotic relationship between agriculture and the INS. Once all the crops are in, INS is shocked to learn that there are undocumented people in the region, and all hell breaks loose, resulting in a massive effort at apprehension and expulsion. Then the California governor expounds on how all of the state’s problems stem from the unwanted flow of undocumented aliens and their drain of public money through their extensive demands on schooling and other social services.

Like I said, Californians are strange people.

My hostess also took me to various schools to observe the excellent educational programs provided to the elementary and preschool-age population. These programs were the fulfillment of every educator’s dream with what appeared to be unlimited resources to address the needs of children from birth through the elementary grades.

I did note two discrepancies. The first was that in some of the schools, the portion of the campus that was being used for the summer migrant program was separated from the rest of the campus by a chain link fence. It was regrettable that this physical segregation precluded the integration of students with differing lifestyles. I feel that the segregation prevented a golden opportunity for providing priceless experiences in multicultural education, including the possible development of bilingualism among members of both student groups. It is alright to have children learn about Mexicans sleeping under a cactus and see pictures of them leading their cute little burros to market loaded with firewood, but it is no substitute for personal contacts with the real thing.

The second discrepant was the absence of programs for high school-age youth. My inquiries led to an assurance that the school did not wish to compete with agriculture for the time and attention of students old enough to contribute to the harvesting of the crops. This is regrettable, since I feel that it is the responsibility of education in a free society to provide feasible alternatives for the exercise of choice, rather than to predetermine which children will have the opportunity for socio-economic mobility and which will be doomed into a stoop labor existence for the rest of their lives through the provision or denial of educational opportunity.

During all this travel through this lush area of central California, my hostess teacher informed me of the history of her involvement in migrant records. She had been a teacher in a summer migrant program, and she had felt frustrated at having little or no information about the past educational experiences of Mexican students. On her own initiative, she had written a letter to the Ministry of Education in Mexico explaining the desirability of having such information. She was surprised to receive an immediate reply from Mexico City, recognizing the problem and volunteering to transmit such records if she would furnish them with the names, places of origin and other identification data for students enrolled in the California migrant educational program.

She sent the necessary information and, in a few days, personnel from a nearby Mexican consulate delivered a diplomatic pouch with all of the student records she had requested. The records from the various Mexican states included grade placement, achievement data, anecdotes, inoculations and other health information and standardized test data. It was interesting to note that the standardized test industry is doing as well in Mexico as it is in the United States.

Other teachers then asked her to obtain records for their students, which they readily received. This was followed by other schools and other districts requesting student records, to the extent that she was no longer teaching any students. Obtaining requests for student records, sending the information to Mexico, obtaining the records and distributing them throughout the region had become a full-time job in the migrant program.

We stopped by her house, which had become the headquarters for the international record transfer system, and she showed me her dining room table where she sorted and organized incoming student records for distribution to the appropriate schools.

During the operation of the system, she had maintained extensive communications with the Mexican Ministry of Education and the education departments of several Mexican states. She had gone to Mexico City at her own expense and met with their education agency personnel. At one point she had suggested holding an international conference on record transfers in California, and the idea was found appealing in Mexico. The teacher had gone so far as to schedule the conference and obtained a commitment for participation by the Mexican Secretary of Education and the education secretaries of several Mexican states that were already providing records for her.

Obtaining a similar commitment in the United States proved much more difficult. The United States Secretary of Education was in the midst of a reorganization of the Department of Education (in football, if you don't know what to do, punt; in education, if you don't know what to do, reorganize), and he expressed regrets that he could not attend. The teacher contacted the California Department of Education, and, by coincidence, the State Superintendent of Schools was also involved in the reorganization of his department and could not attend.

Finally, the California education agency informed her that a program officer, from the Migrant Division, of the Special Populations Section, of the Instructional Services Department, of the California State Department of Education would be available to represent the United States in the international conference.

This created a problem in the implementation of the conference in that some of the Mexican secretary's aides took it as an insult that the Mexican Secretary of Education would visit the United States to meet with a program officer from California, rather than with his counterpart in the United States. The Mexican commitment for participation was withdrawn when the teacher could not find a higher level official willing to meet with the Mexican delegation, and nothing ever came of the conference.

Another problem that the teacher experienced in the transfer of records was the lack of acceptance of inoculation records received from Mexico. California law requires that all school children submit proof of specified inoculations, and all the international migrant children were being routinely inoculated, in spite of many of them having already been inoculated in Mexico, as verified in the transferred student records.

While still in California, I called up Mario Obledo, the California Secretary of Health and Human Services at the time. Mario had lived in San Antonio when he was head of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and we had worked together on various court cases in education. I explained the problem, and he promised that he would take care of it. By the time I left California, the secretary had already issued a memorandum to all state agencies stating that health records, including vaccinations administered, bearing the seal of the Republic of Mexico were to be accepted in meeting the requirements of the California law.

By the end of the trip, I was astounded by what I had seen. If the foundation program officer had asked me to develop an international migrant student record transfer system, I would have probably requested at least \$250,000 per year for a two- or three-year period to conceptualize, develop and pilot test the system.

The California teacher had done this single handedly, with a minimum of expense, which she had underwritten with personal funds.

Just before she took me to the airport for my return to Texas, we sat in her living room organizing my notes for my report to the foundation.

I repeatedly expressed my admiration over her accomplishments and promised that I would submit a strong recommendation for foundation assistance.

“What assistance do you need from the foundation?” I asked.

She took a long time to respond, “I don’t know.”

I persisted. She eventually looked at the student records stacked on her dining room table, and finally responded, “Well, I could use a bigger dining room table.”