

## National Conference Examines Historic Chicano Community Organizers

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In a year when the phrase community organizer has taken on currency as a buzzword, a punchline and a dream during the presidential campaign, a group of activists and scholars will gather to document and discuss one of the earliest, most significant community organizing efforts in California history.

More than six decades ago, the Community Service Organization (CSO) was formed to empower a generation of Mexican-Americans who thought themselves powerless to fight a racist system that denied them civil rights. From Nov. 16-18, the veterans of CSO, both famous and anonymous, will meet with leading scholars and current activists to document, probe and debate their history at the Asilomar Conference Grounds in Pacific Grove, Calif., site of the first national CSO conference held in 1954.

Through voter registration and citizenship drives, English classes, lawsuits, lobbying campaigns and hundreds of small organizing meetings, CSO became the vanguard of the Latino civil rights movement.

Founded in 1947, the organization launched the careers of dozens of organizers and leaders - including Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, U.S. Rep. Edward Roybal and California Supreme Court Judge Cruz Reynoso. CSO also changed the lives of thousands of first and second-generation immigrants, who found they could successfully challenge a system through grass-roots organizing.

"The Leadership Lessons of the CSO" is the theme of the conference hosted by The CSO Project, which is run by a group of former CSO members, with the help of UC San Diego Extension. Conference guests and speakers include CSO members, leading academics in the field, educators and students of California and Chicano history.

"Until now, the history of the CSO has gone largely untold, even in academia, where the importance of CSO is well established," says Gretchen Laue of UC San Diego Extension, a member of the CSO Project organizing committee. "The story of CSO is about the ways the organization changed the lives of its members, and the way their actions in turn changed life for thousands of others."

The conference will feature stories of the original participants in the CSO movement, juxtaposed with the experiences of community organizers today. During the last year the CSO Project has been in a race against time to record 41 in-depth, videotaped interviews with CSO pioneers. Those videos -- along with a tribute to CSO founder and legendary organizer Fred Ross Sr. - will be on display at the conference. Academics from the University of California, Stanford, USC and other schools will deliver presentations on the relevance of the CSO experience to current community struggles.

Conference organizers include Gilbert Padilla and Herman Gallegos, early leaders of the CSO movement. Conference advisors include Fred Ross, Jr., an organizer carrying on the activist tradition pioneered by his father; UC San Diego Associate Vice Chancellor of Public Programs and Extension Dean Mary Walshok; Stanford University professor Al Camarillo; Director of the Institute for the Study of California and the West William Deverell; and CSO Pioneers, Louis Zarate and Alex Zermeno.

For more information visit the Web site at [www.csoproject.org](http://www.csoproject.org) or contact Gretchen Laue at UC San Diego Extension at 858 964-1344.

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