



(Left), Jerry Tello, NCN; (Center) Henry Domínguez, Barrios Unidos; (Right) Otilio Quintero, Barrios Unidos

The History of Barrios Unidos, Cultura Es Cura, Healing Community Violence

Book Excerpt: Frank de Jesus Acosta

Henry Domínguez, Barrios Unidos Elder and Spiritual Leader

The activist journey that enabled Henry Domínguez to become the spiritual elder of Barrios Unidos originated in the *barrios* of San Jose. Having gone through the gauntlet of street violence, substance abuse and incarceration as a young man, Henry credits his community movement engagements as the source of eventual change in his orientation to life. More specifically, he talks of consciousness-raising and cutting his political teeth as a member of the Black Berets in San Jose during the peak of the Chicano movement. Working under the leadership of Sal “Chemo” Candelaria, he remembers being fully committed to the militant ethos of the time and doing whatever was called for to deal with the blatant discrimination and mistreatment of Latinos by police authorities and other civic institutions. “Many of us believed that armed resistance, if needed to protect the dignity and rights of our people, was a reasonable and viable option,” recalls Henry. “This was the romantic notion of revolution that guided many of us coming out of the 1960s.” Like Henry, Chemo and his wife Teresa would later become part of the circle of Barrios Unidos elders and spiritual leaders transformed by *La Cultural Cura* and the philosophy of non-violence.

A bell-weather moment in Domínguez's leadership development was a Black Beret-supported organizing campaign to challenge racist public celebrations sponsored by the City of San Jose. As Henry recounts, "the struggle revolved around an annual, city-sponsored parade called *La Fiesta de las Rosas*. The event commemorated the conquest of Mexico by Spain in terms that were offensive to many of the city's Chicano residents. The conquest remains a particularly painful historical period that many Chicanos view as the beginning of a long struggle with colonialism. The parade included a famous western actor of the times dressed in the style of the *Gauchupines* (Spanish-born ranchers likened to cowboys), riding on a white horse as he pulled along a Mexican *campesino* seated on a small donkey. In 1971, after many years of enduring this public humiliation, Black Berets active in northern California, including Domínguez, organized effective protests that eventually helped to end this outrageous act of public-sponsored social irresponsibility.

Like the Brown Berets in the south of the state, the Black Berets advocated justice, challenged racist institutional policies, and played an important role in providing a buffer between Chicano communities and abusive police authorities. Domínguez believed in the Black Berets and was a committed participant in their efforts to address manifestations of anti-Chicano racism, like the *La Fiesta de las Rosas*. In time, however, he became concerned that he might not be doing as much as possible for the movement or his family by failing to pursue a higher education degree. These factors led him to enroll at D-Q University.

While at the University, Henry immersed himself in learning more about the traditions of his mixed cultural heritage as a Chicano and a Chiracawa Apache Indian. He also continued to deepen his skills as an organizer, becoming part of the AIM and serving as a coordinator and participant in "The Longest Walk" and "The 500 Mile Indian Marathon." Along the way, Domínguez fully dedicated himself to learning the healing power of Aztec ceremony, melding other northern indigenous traditions such as the sweat lodge and vision quest into his spiritual practice. Under the sponsorship of Dennis Banks, Henry was among the first Chicanos at D-Q to participate in the Lakota-Plains sun dance ceremony.

Henry describes Banks as a mentor and guide in helping him to reconcile his mixed heritage. Having been reared in the Catholic Church, Domínguez was staunchly devoted to his Christian faith and saw the *Virgin de Guadalupe* as his guardian spirit. It was during his vision quest ceremony that Henry chose the path of peace over violent political militancy. He tearfully describes the revelation of his vision quest experience as follows: "My spirit guide made me choose. I had to put down my gun and pick up the sacred pipe and my rosary as the tools of a peace warrior."

Henry's decision to abandon the militancy and ethos of armed resistance he had embraced as a member of the Black Berets and a staunch supporter of the AIM manifested a poignant and profound transformation. It was a transformation he would later seek to bring to other Latino and Latina street warriors through the Barrios Unidos movement.

When Domínguez was called back home to assist efforts to bring peace to the *barrio*, street violence had reached unprecedented proportions in San Jose. Upon his return home, Henry was

committed to build on the lessons of his life-changing revelations at D-Q University. He made a vow to himself, which he later recalled in these terms: “[I decided that] as a carrier of the sacred pipe, I would make spiritual ceremony the center of all my activism as a peacemaker in the *barrio*.”

In 1979, Henry Domínguez organized an historic spiritual walk through the streets of San Jose in an effort to unite its warring *barrrios*. He also organized the first Barrios Unidos Conference at Lincoln High School incorporating the best elements of Coalition to End Barrio Warfare conferences, such as *teatro*, arts, culture and motivational speakers. This time, however, he organized these activities with a more visible spiritual message and presence. Since the mid-1980s and into the present, Domínguez has served as an organizing partner, elder and spiritual guide for Nane Alejandrez and Barrios Unidos. Henry’s personal transformation and embrace of the non-violent approach to organizing thus marked a critically important moment in BU’s development—the positioning of spiritual ceremony and traditional healing as a centerpiece in the Barrios Unidos peace movement.