

CERRANDO LA BRECHA: LATINE VOICES ON COMMUNITY,
IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by

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Latine marginalization is a reality in the United States that im/migrants, Latin American, and Latine people and their descents face. This ethnographic study examines how social entrepreneurship—operating small businesses simultaneously committed to financial sustainability and positive social impact—is a valuable way of placemaking and community building for Latine people. This research, which takes place in Little Village, Chicago, simultaneously illuminates the importance of collective identity and placemaking for Latine people, as well as the role that community-based organizations and social entrepreneurship play in facilitating community building.

To carry out the research, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with Latine social entrepreneurs working in Little Village. After conducting these interviews, I created a thematic code to analyze the interviews so that I could put the different participants' experiences in conversation with one another in my ethnography. This work investigates themes of collective identity, the shared benefits and social impacts of social entrepreneurship, and the vital role of community-based organizations in supporting marginalized communities.

This project is supported by two nonprofit organizations, WeavingImpact and New Life Centers, that operate a joint social entrepreneurial support program in Little Village. Through my

capacity as an associate program manager, I developed personal relationships with the two organizations and the people they support. I conclude that social entrepreneurship is an important and emerging way of further supporting placemaking and community building for Latine people in the United States. This research has broader implications regarding Latine marginalization and demonstrates how localized support is necessary and vital in terms of these larger systems of marginality.

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Introduction

This research analyzes how Latine people seek to make place and form belonging in the United States, and the influence of small-business ownership on those experiences. In response to the historic and ongoing experience of social stigma, systematic marginalization, and legal exclusion, Latine populations build community as a mechanism of contradicting and coping with social marginality (Gomberg-Muñoz 2011). Growing small businesses, participating in faith-based communities, and nonprofit centers are central ways that I observed Latine people building community in Little Village, Chicago, a predominantly Latine and Mexicano community on the westside of Chicago. These forms of social connectivity are different ways to navigate placemaking, which suggests the question: In what ways does social entrepreneurship enable placemaking for Latine people in the contemporary United States?

Through my interviews with six people (see Appendix A for methodology) that identify as Latino/a, and other times Mexicano/a and Colombiana, I found that social entrepreneurship has created four common “social impacts” amongst the participants. These four social impacts include: personal growth and financial support, employing other community members, enhancing the built environment, and helping community members via their product or service. All of the interview participants have started a business in or around Little Village, Chicago. The field of social entrepreneurship refers to enterprises that purposely commit to creating an economic, social or communal, and/or environmental benefit through their business model. These impacts or outcomes include: personal growth and financial support, employing other community members, enhancing their surrounding built environment, and benefiting other community members via their business's product or service. I also investigate the ways in which

being rooted in a culturally important place influences feelings of belonging, and the role of community-based organizations in fostering community.

Prior to interviewing the participants, I had communications and conversations with many of the individuals through my capacity as the associate program manager for WeavingImpact, a nonprofit that specializes in business-support programming for social entrepreneurs in marginalized communities. In between my junior and senior year at the University of Oregon, I had the opportunity to work for WeavingImpact, as I was eager to learn more about the role of nonprofit organizations in supporting and uplifting historically marginalized communities.



Figure 1: Author leading an information session for potential social entrepreneurs at New Life Centers in July 2023. Photo by Pamela Roussos.

Growing up in a multicultural and multiracial family, with two adopted brothers from Haiti, I've had a curiosity for learning about global systems of inequality that influence our diverse lived experiences. Through my brothers' eyes, I have seen systematic inequalities,

injustices, and racism in the United States and Chicago. In my adolescent and adult life, I have aligned myself with experiences, mentors, and education that brings me closer to understanding our global and local systems of exclusion and belonging. In college, I have had the privilege of studying Global Studies, Latin America, and Spanish. I have lived in the Chicagoland area for my entire life, a gateway city known for its multiculturalism and role as a historic and ongoing destination for European, Asian, and Latin American immigrants.

WeavingImpact is a nonprofit organization established in 2022 that aims to “empower social entrepreneurs to build economic prosperity in their communities” (WeavingImpact 2023), co-founded and led by Pamela Roussos. Inspired by the work of the Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship of Santa Clara University, and Innovation Works in Baltimore, WeavingImpact developed The Neighborhood Method™, which means that they serve as a strategic partner to local organizations to help develop and expand support for social entrepreneurs in their communities. Their pilot program launched in October 2023 in Little Village, Chicago with New Life Centers, a community-based organization that offers holistic support to their community members. New Life Centers was founded in 2005 when New Life Community Church was called upon by their constituents to address systemic issues in their community. Since 2005, New Life Centers has served in Little Village and Midway and has expanded to nearby westside neighborhoods in following years. The five pillars of their programming include: mentoring, education, sports, peacemaking, and community care. WeavingImpact and New Life Centers began their partnership in 2022 with the creation of the Abundant Life Program, a system of resources and mentorship for Latine social entrepreneurs in Little Village.

I spoke to many of the individuals that participated in the inaugural Abundant Life Program in October 2023 and learned about their lived experiences at Latine people living in

Little Village and starting a business. This work seeks to amplify voices, creating a collective narrative about social entrepreneurship, placemaking, and Latine identity in La Villita, Chicago. In the work that follows, Chapter 1 examines Little Village as a nexus of connectivity and placemaking for people that identify as Mexicano/a, Latino/a, and/or im/migrant in the United States. As an ethnography that considers place and feelings of belonging, it is necessary to first understand how Little Village, Chicago has transformed into a community influenced by Latine roots in the past several decades. Chapter 2 explores the four central social impacts that the participants have experienced through their small businesses. Business ownership goes beyond financially providing for oneself, but also has the capacity to create prosocial relationships with one's community. Finally, Chapter 3 investigates the paramount role of trusted community-based organizations in providing resources to marginalized communities, while equally importantly creating a space for people of similar backgrounds to form connections and networks of solidarity.

Terminology

Throughout my writing, when referring to the population in a sociopolitical context, I use “Latine.” When speaking about demographic data and research produced by other institutions, I reproduce the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic”, depending on the term deployed by the authors. When referring to individual participants in the ethnography, I utilize the various terms that they self-identify with, such as Latino/a, Mexicano/a, and Colombiano/a. These are the terms used by research participants and, in my efforts to preserve the language used by the people I work with and am accountable to, I reproduce them despite the terms lack of inclusivity of gender nonbinary people.

Chapter 1: Latino/a, Mexicano/a, and Im/migrant Identity & Reconfigured

Belonging in “México Chiquito”

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

Claudia, a mexicana who has lived in Little Village since 1995, calls Little Village “un mi México chiquito” (Little Mexico). The interchangeable names for this southwest Chicago neighborhood of 70,000 people (Chicago Community Data Portal)—Little Village and La Villita—reflect for Claudia and others the Spanish language and Latin American cultural influence. At the age of five, Claudia immigrated to Chicago with her mother. Little Village is a microcosm of latinidad, especially Mexican-American identity and pride. This place isn’t just one of the designated neighborhoods of Chicago. It’s a place where migrants from Mexico, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Colombia come to – whether they heard of La Villita from family or friends or were sent here on a bus by governor of Texas, Greg Abbott.

Claudia and her mother, Celina, immigrated to the United States in 1995, a period defined by high migration flows from Mexico to the United States after the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 (Verea 2014, 109). She spent many years working in the factories around her home in Little Village, but she wondered when she would get

compensated more. They began to offer cleaning services to the factories, but they were paid through a different company. As dedicated members of the New Life Community Church and Centers community, the two women began to offer their cleaning and catering services at community events. In their free time, Claudia and Celina lead the team of over one hundred volunteers for the Pan de Vida food pantry. Since immigrating to Chicago, Claudia and Celina have built beautiful connections and formed a deep sense of community in La Villita, so much so that Claudia sees it as her México chiquito. Claudia has experienced placemaking as a process of immigrating to the United States and demonstrates the importance of finding community with place as a way of forming feelings of belonging.

This chapter investigates how Little Village has grown into a community that fosters a safe space for Latine identity and connectivity amidst a climate of social, legal, and economic marginalization for people of Latine descent in Chicago. Historic and contemporary United States has systematically marginalized people of Latine descent, and as a form of resistance, community building rooted in place is an integral part of the Latine experience. People of different nationalities, im/migration journeys, and lived experiences can build community in Little Village around the celebration and honoring of latinidad. For the interlocutors, social entrepreneurship has been an integral way to develop this sense of belonging and connectivity.

A landmark arch, inspired by Mexican architecture, is a welcoming cue to westside Chicago multiculturalism in this working-class community. It leads to the two-mile corridor of 26th Street, or Calle Mexico (Lightfoot 2021, 8) with two columns dawning the Mexican flag and “Bienvenidos a Little Village” written in between. Architect Adrián Lozano designed the arch in 1990 to build Mexican community pride in a neighborhood that would soon earn its name of “Mexican capital of the Midwest” (Lightfoot 2021, 4). After its construction, former Mexican

president Carlos Salinas de Gortari visited a Little Village rally and gifted the community “a bronze clock manufactured by Relojes Centenario, the oldest clockmaker in Mexico. It was installed in the crown of the arch, with faces on both the east and west sides” (Lightfoot 2021, 10).



Figure 2: Welcome arch on 26th Street in Little Village, Chicago during New Life Centers’ Annual 5K. Photo taken by Esteban Caldero.

La Villita is filled with aromas of carnitas and tamales from the food carts at every corner. Hundreds of rose and lilac quinceñera dresses in dozens of windows. Brick wall murals imagine mexicano pride, Dia de los Muertos iconography, or the “Que la Libertad Nos Bese en los Labios Siempre” mural that tells the story of the Haymarket affair, a monumental case in Latino labor rights and the establishment of the eight-hour work week. Artist Arturo Fresán worked with Little Village teenagers to create a collective memory of historic moments

(Gunderson 2022). Between the arms of the murals bordering the corridor are Mexican markets and restaurants.



Figure 3: Dia de los Muertos mural on the corner of 26th Street, outside of Nuevo Leon restaurant. Photo by Gwen Lyman.

Between two of my interviews, I walked one block north from New Life Centers to 26th Street to grab a bite to eat. I chose Nuevo Leon, a favorite amongst the staff at NLC. I sat in a booth close to the door and took out my journal to protect myself from my fear of eating alone. A waitress came to take my order in English, to which I greeted her in Spanish. Initially taken aback by my gringa accent and professionalized Spanish, she quickly smiled and responded with “¿hablas español?”. After ordering Mexican Coke and chorizo tacos, she asked whether Spanish and English are easier to speak. I told her that I love to write in Spanish, but sometimes have a

hard time understanding what people are saying. She told me that I'm always welcome to come to Nuevo Leon to practice and proceeded to bring me arroz con leche on the house, welcoming me into her home.

Since the late 19th century, Little Village (officially called South Lawndale) has been home to working class people who work at the nearby factories. Lawndale was originally home to German, Czech, and Polish immigrants beginning in the early 20th century. Wealthy Anglo-Saxon Chicagoans moved out of this area as Eastern Europeans grew their community around 26th Street, and the neighborhood would continue to evolve in the following decades. In the 50s and 60s, Black Americans began to move to North Lawndale due to racialized real estate loan restrictions (Little Village History 2020). This migration created a stark racial division between North and South Lawndale, which still exists today.

The history of Little Village exists within a larger history of Chicago, as a major industrial city in the Midwest that has historically been a common destination for im/migration, which has produced a landscape of diversity and discrimination. The City of Chicago “is the traditional homelands of Hoocąk (Winnebago/Ho’Chunk), Jiwere (Otoe), Nutachi (Missouria), and Baxoje (Iowas); Kiash Matchitwuk (Menominee); Meshkwahkîha (Meskwaki); Asâkîwaki (Sauk); Myaamiaki (Miami), Waayaahtanwaki (Wea), and Peeyankihšiki (Piankashaw); Kiikaapoi (Kickapoo); Inoka (Illini Confederacy); Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe), Odawak (Odawa), and Bodéwadmik (Potawatomi)” (History of Chicago, n.d.). Due to the intersection of several major waterways, Chicago has been a point of travel and exchange. Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable was the first non-indigenous permanent resident of Chicago, a free black man from Haiti.

This city was founded and built by immigrants. Incorporated as a city in 1837, Chicago grew at an exponential pace (History of Chicago, n.d.). During the 19th and 20th centuries,

Chicago was a desirable destination because of the jobs at factories and meatpacking plants. By 1870, Chicago had the largest foreign-born population in the entire United States, 48% (Paral 2003). Not only did immigrants from other countries gravitate to Chicago, but the city also became a destination of internal migration, with waves of African American populations from the South and Latino populations from the Southwest moving en masse. Today, Chicago is a diverse city - 32.7% White, 29% Hispanic or Latino, and 28.8% Black or African American (U.S. Census, 2022). However, the city is characterized by its extreme geographic segregation, largely a product of redlining policies in the 20th century (Greer 2014, p. 212), which were engineered practices meant to exclude African American and Latino residents from White neighborhoods (AJ+ 2017). Chicago has been a site of diversity and segregation, industrialism and labor reform, and immigration and naturalization. Latine Chicagoans have shaped the fabrics of this urban metropolis.

Before 1916, there were only 1,000 Mexicans living in Chicago (De Genova 2005, p. 114), but this number grew insurmountably as braceros, imported contract workers (Ngai 2004, 128) were recruited to the Chicago railroad industry during both World Wars. Between 1900 and 1930, about “1.5 million Mexicans crossed into the United States, and their entry was facilitated by American employers” (Flores 2018, 23). In Chicago, by 1930, the “Mexican population had climbed to more than twenty thousand persons, and Mexicans came to represent about 40 percent of the maintenance-of-way railroad workforce” (Flores 2018, 24). Since the 1960s, Mexicans have been increasingly siloed into two neighborhoods - Pilsen and Little Village, with 90% of the population identifying as Latino (de Genova 2005, p. 119). Mexicans in Chicago have been secluded into ghettoized enclaves, subject to poor working conditions, and left economically marginalized from the rest of the city (de Genova 2005, p. 119). In the 1970s and 80s, Latino

populations moved from Pilsen to Little Village. Since the 1970s, Little Village has become increasingly populated with people of Mexican descent and continues to represent Mexicano and Latine pride. Overall, Chicago is 28.7% Latino, whereas Little Village is 84% Latino, and 77% of Mexican descent (Little Village History 2020). 29% of the people currently living in Little Village are foreign born, and 25% of which are undocumented. Given the demographic landscape of La Villita, the community has a rich past of activism and a current focus on immigration reform.

La Villita has become a community with strong Latine and Mexicano roots, allowing immigrant populations to construct a sense of community and belonging in a country that continues to marginalize Latine people. It's useful to consider anthropologist Leo Chavez's Latino Threat Narrative, which suggests that Latino immigrants, specifically Mexicans, are viewed differently than other immigrant groups because of their perceived failure to assimilate and inability to subscribe to the Anglo-Protestant American Dream (Chavez 2013, 24). This has constructed a racialized, Mexicanized identity for Latine people in the United States, where they are perceived as a threat to American nationhood. Tobar adds that American mainstream culture has "a sense of us as a conquered people who are allergic to the discipline and the good manners of Anglo-Saxon culture" (Tobar 2023, 19). Given the rich Latine history in Chicago, and the context of Latine marginalization in the United States, it is important to see how Latine folks in Little Village conceive of their identity and sense of belonging.

When speaking with the different social entrepreneurs, their Latine and Mexicano/a identities were often one of the foundational ways used to describe themselves. Most of the participants immigrated from Mexico and have lived in the U.S. for many years, however, Sandra is a refugee from Colombia that migrated just a year ago with her partner and two

daughters. Describing Little Village, she said, “sí, estamos ahora afuera, pero como el papá de mis hijas trabaja aquí, él se queda de lunes a viernes acá...por la facilidad del transporte. Entonces sí que él sí vive aquí por la 26, sino que es una pieza cuarto, entonces no podemos quedarnos los cuatro, ahí sí” (yes, right now we’re outside, but the father of my daughters worked here, and he spends Monday through Friday here...for the ease of transportation. So, yes, he does live here on 26th, but it is a one room apartment, so we can’t all stay there). New Life Centers and its two pastors, Chris and Paco, were the first people that Sandra encountered in Chicago.

Given their refugee status, they were assigned housing outside of Little Village. Sandra explains, “en realidad nos sentimos muy solos allá, pero pues fue donde nos ubicaron los del programa de Del refugio, entonces o lo tomábamos o lo tomábamos (in reality, we feel very alone there, but, well, it was where the refugee program places us, so you take what you can get). Despite Sandra’s vending and her partner’s work in Little Village, they haven’t found a place that can house their whole family comfortably. Little Village feels safer and more familiar than the rest of Chicago, and Sandra explains that they have been fighting to find a place in this neighborhood, which is very difficult. La Villita represents a place where Sandra can sell her Colombian products and they are well received. It also represents a place where she can speak her native language without judgment or confusion. Little Village has been a safe haven for refugees and migrants that came before Sandra and will continue to be a place where Latin American migrants come to find a new home, or at least something that feels like it.

Despite the welcoming nature of Pastor Chris and Pastor Paco, Sandra repeatedly expresses feelings of isolation and supreme loneliness. She works night shifts in a factory and catches up on sleep during the day. On the weekends, her and her daughters come to Little

Village to sell their Colombian tamales. When discussing her product, Sandra mentions that the predominantly Mexican clientele often make suggestions and bring their own pique salsa, since Colombian cuisine doesn't use as much spice as Mexican food. She then jokingly explains that the "inglés" clients don't have the same issue, since they aren't as preferential to spice. It stood out to me how Sandra has begun to create cultural connections in this foreign environment through mutual understanding of food. While Colombian and Mexican tamales are different, Sandra tells me that people are excited to try "un producto nuevo" (a new product). Tobar discusses the *mexicanization* of Latin American immigrants (Tobar 2023,19), thus it is important to note that Sandra is not only navigating the United States as a Colombian refugee, but navigating a Latine neighborhood in a country where *latinidad* assumes mexicanness. *latinidad* is a diverse and complex identity that allows for mutual understanding and simultaneous division. The five other interviewees immigrated from Mexico or are of Mexican descent, making their experience in Little Village and Chicago distinct from Sandra's.

Olga is another interlocutor who also migrated to Chicago recently. She identifies as a mexicana woman, una hija de Dios (a daughter of God), and a mother to three sons. She migrated to Chicago just a year and a half ago, to find work in order to support her sons through university. I asked her if Chicago feels like home and she responded: "me gusta, sí, me gusta, pero estaría yo más completa con mis niños" (I like it, yes, I like it, but I would more complete with my kids). Her sons live in Mexico with their father, whom Olga does not have a good relationship with after their divorce. In her middle age, Olga moved to Chicago to put her son through dental school and support her other sons' education. She explains that, "yo que vengo así, sin documentos, sin nada, para mí es una gran oportunidad que... Porque me están ofreciendo porque siento que no a cualquier persona o lo recibo tiene la oportunidad, y, para mí yo estoy

muy, ahora sí, muy agradecida y muy contenta de poder estar aquí con ustedes” (Since I’m undocumented here, and came without anything, for me this is a great opportunity that...because you all offered me because I feel that not every person has the opportunity, and for me I am very, very grateful and very content that I can be here with you all). As someone who is undocumented in a country that villainizes “illegal aliens” (Chavez 2013), Little Village and New Life Centers have created a welcoming environment for which Olga is grateful, and a sense of social safety and belonging.

Like Claudia, Francisco has lived in Little Village for most of his life. Francisco and I spoke over the phone, and I asked him to tell me about himself. His immediate response was, “Ah, pues es como mucha gente soy ya un inmigrante que llegó aquí a buscar una nueva oportunidades para seguir adelante y a tener una mejor vida que en nuestros países” (Ah, well like a lot of people I am an immigrant who got here to look for a new opportunities to pursue and have a better life than in our countries). While he was only describing himself, Francisco identifies with other immigrants from the start, using the collective “nuestros países” (our countries) to position himself as a member of a larger immigrant community. He goes on to tell me about his immigration and his background in México: “pues soy de de familia humilde, pobre y pues pienso que la mayoría queremos a una mejor vida que la que tuvimos en nuestros países” (Well, I’m not from a well off family, poor, and well I think that the majority of us want a better life than we had in our countries). The repetition of “our countries” felt poetic. Francisco and his family migrated in 2000 from Guerrero, a state of Mexico that he describes as “es un Estado, se puede decir pobre y a la vez está muy violento, pues” (it’s a state, one could say poor and at the same time very violent, so). Given these conditions, his family decided to move. Francisco’s family was amongst millions of other Mexicans that im/migrated to the United States after free

trade policies created economic devastation in Mexico, especially for rural farmers. NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, was originally offered as a “win-win” proposition (Tuttle 2012, 1). Eliminating barriers to trade, American subsidized corn flooded Mexico, destroying the livelihood of rural Mexican farmers. In fact, since NAFTA’s inception in 1994, the United States has increased farm subsidies by 300 percent (Holmes 2013, 41). Holmes astutely explains that:

Many white U.S. citizens blame the country of Mexico or ‘Mexican political corruption’ for the poverty in rural Mexico that is impelling people to migrate in order to survive. However, this narrative eschews the power of the economic interests in the United States that pushed for NAFTA, effectively producing poverty by banning Mexico from protecting indigenous small corn producers while allowing American corn subsidies for large corporate agribusiness (Holmes 2013, 167).

While NAFTA was posited as a mutually beneficial trade agreement, it consequently produced “massive Latin American emigration to the United States” (Gonzalez 2011, 252) and increased negative sentiments towards Mexican people migrating due to the economic crisis produced by the United States. Francisco and his family immigrated in 2000, and Claudia in 1995, a period where Mexicans were forced to leave their homes due to economic depression. Francisco, Claudia, and Magda have lived in Little Village for most of their lives, experiencing a transnational, dual sense of belonging. All the participants have unique experiences of immigration and movement, but they all exist within the context of U.S. and Latin American history.

The United States and Mexico have a rich, entangled history that impacts the livelihoods of Mexican Americans and Latin Americans living in the U.S. today. After four hundred years of Spanish conquest and colonial rule, Mexico gained independence in 1821 (Mexico - Independence, n.d.) with a rich *mestizo* culture and Spanish as their first colonial language. It

didn't take long before the United States embarked on a war of conquest during their campaign to become the imperial power of the Western Hemisphere, in the era of Manifest Destiny expansionism. The Mexican American War was a conflict of inequality and land theft. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 resulted in politically tumultuous Mexico ceding 55% of its land to the United States (The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848), a treaty signed while American troops occupied Mexico City and flew the American flag over the Mexican federal palace (Lindsay 2013). This cessation included modern-day California, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming (Aguirre 2022). Between the years of 1845 and 1848, the United States' territory grew by 70%, and tens of thousands of Mexicans became American citizens (Aguirre 2022).

Despite this new legal status, Mexican Americans were treated as second-class citizens, experiencing systematic legal persecution, racism, and lynchings (Gonzalez 2011). The Mexican American War marked a turning point in history between the two countries defined by immigration, othering, and marginalization. Not only did the physical border between the United States and Mexico change, but a socio-cultural border was born. The United States' imperial grasp did not end in 1848. Rather, our foreign and domestic policy has perpetuated immigration to a country that continues to view Latine immigrants as second class and aliens. Perhaps the most prominent example is NAFTA, which removed barriers to trade between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada, and forced millions of Mexicans to migrate due to the economic crisis that this policy caused (Gonzalez 2011, 269).

The Latino Threat Narrative explains the mainstream discourse that portrays Latinos as a reproductive threat, unable or unwilling to learn English, unwilling to integrate into larger society, unchanging and ahistorical, wanting to reconquer the Southwest, and overall, a threat to

national security (Chavez 2013, p. 53). This creates a pervasive narrative of inferiority that manifests itself into social and economic marginalization. The *barrio* and community building were key tenants of the Chicano movement, as a way to form networks of solidarity and collective identity (Alturista 1969). For Claudia, Little Village represents her “México chiquito”, and for others, it symbolizes a place where Mexican and Latine identity is celebrated rather than chastised. The arch on 26th street is symbolic of the gateway that Little Village represents for Latine immigrants that migrate to Chicago, entering a safe haven of *latinidad*. Vibrant communities like Little Village exist in response to the systematic marginalization of Latine peoples in the United States. Community building around shared experiences is a way to push against stereotypes, exclusion, and monolithic representations of personhood.

Chapter 2: Social Entrepreneurship as a Community Building Block for Prosperity and Prosocial Relationships

Calle Mexico, Little Village's 26th Street, is the second highest grossing retail sales district in the City of Chicago (Little Village Retail 2015), just after Michigan Avenue in the Gold Coast. The 14-block stretch grosses \$900 million in sales annually (Little Village Retail 2015), with over 500 businesses, from brick and mortar to street vendors. The entrepreneurial spirit runs deep through Little Village.

On the Monday afternoon that Sandra and I arranged to meet, she sent me a Whatsapp message that she was running late. Despite the nippy 37-degree weather, Sandra and her daughters had been selling their Colombian tamales around the corner from New Life Centers. After her sales were done for the day, Sandra was able to meet me in the multipurpose room at New Life Centers. She has been living here for just over a year and has already familiarized herself with the vending dynamics of the *calles* of Little Village - where she should sell and when she will get the most business. Selling her Colombian tamales is a way for Sandra to get by, and she is just one of the many people around Little Village that have turned to entrepreneurship. In this chapter, I argue that social entrepreneurship is an integral way for Latine people to meaningfully provide for themselves and create systems of connectivity through the "social impacts" that their business produces.

Hector Tóbar describes Latinos as "the laboring backdrop to this country's affluence" (Tobar 2023, 5), as the scaffolding that supports the opulence of America from below. Throughout the past century, American corporations and the U.S. government have encouraged millions of migrants to cross the Southern border to work in inhumane conditions for unlivable wages. Mai Ngai defines the systematic importation of a racialized, transnational workforce as

“imported colonialism”, which she explains creates a “new social relations based on the subordination of racialized foreign bodies who worked in the United States but who remained excluded from the polity by both law and by social custom” (Ngai 2004, 129). This imported colonialism is a “legacy of the nineteenth-century American conquest of Mexico’s northern territories” (Ngai 2004, 129). Whether in the Central Valley of California or in the industrial factories of Chicago, Latine people are traditionally producers in our economic system due to a historic and ongoing neocolonial relationship between the United States and Latin America.

De Genova explains that “the tenuous distinction between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ migration, which has become increasingly salient throughout the world, was deployed to stigmatize and regulate mainly Mexican migrant workers in the United States for much of the twentieth century. Indeed, the Annual Reports of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) long divided statistics for their apprehensions of “deportable aliens” into two discrete categories – Mexicans and All Others” (de Genova 2002, 433). The deportability of Mexican migrant laborers makes this population more vulnerable and exploitable. This illegality and deportability of Latine migrants is met with selective enforcement of immigration policy due to the United States’ revolving door policy “whereby mass deportations are concurrent with an overall, large-scale, more or less permanent importation of Mexican migrant labor” (de Genova 2002, 433). The illegality of Latine migrants has created an economic and social marginalization that is unique to this racialized group of laborers working in the United States.

As a mechanism of escaping these systems of exploitative labor practices, the participants have pursued starting a business to more independently empower themselves financially. Social entrepreneurship is a way for some people to control the means of production and provide for themselves and their family in an economically meaningful and empowering way. The

interviewees are similar because of their commitment to social entrepreneurship, whether they use this term to explain their business. The field of social innovation and entrepreneurship has emerged over the past two decades, with the goal of finding “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals” (Phills et al. 2008). Social entrepreneurs practice social innovation and focus on the “Triple Bottom Line” which is when an enterprise simultaneously and equally prioritizes the economy, society, and the environment (Elkinton et al. 2006, p. 7). While this is an emerging and novel field, scholars agree that social entrepreneurship is fundamentally concerned with creating social value in an innovative way (Bornstein 2008, Saebi et al. 2018, Smith et al. 2010, Phillips et al. 2015, Zahra et al. 2008).

I spoke to six individuals that have successfully started a business, but it is important to look at who has access to social entrepreneurship and what barriers there are to starting a business. Perhaps the most pertinent barrier is a lack of access to capital necessary to start a business. Connected to access to capital is the emotional and mental load of starting an enterprise. Many of the entrepreneurs are working one or more jobs on top of their business which is both physically and mentally exhausting. Time and money largely influence one’s ability to start a business, which are structurally influenced by a person’s socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and legal status. Interestingly, one’s legal status is not officially a barrier to starting a business. People without social security numbers can get an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) which allows them to use this identification to legally start a company in the United States. While some of the interviewees have pursued starting a business with an ITIN, this is not accessible to everyone due to the cost and tools needed to go through the

application process. The Abundant Life Program recognized this as a barrier and tailored the curriculum to walk individuals through obtaining an ITIN and incorporating their enterprise. People who do not have legal status can officially incorporate an enterprise, but a related challenge could be the perceived vulnerability that comes with the visibility of starting a business that interacts publicly in a community. There is a particular visibility or vulnerability unique to undocumented people that selling a product on a street, sidewalk, or behind a retail counter could exacerbate. Public-facing social exchanges are places where people might encounter law enforcement officers, which can be both anxiety-inducing and legitimately dangerous and threatening. While social entrepreneurship is an opportunity that allows people to support themselves and their communities, there are many barriers that make starting a social enterprise challenging and inaccessible. It is important to recognize the financial, emotional, and logistical restraints inherent to starting a business. Many of the participants have experienced these different barriers, and some of these barriers have been alleviated with the support of the Abundant Life Program.

Given the significant barriers to social entrepreneurship, this emerging field is not accessible across race, gender, socioeconomic, or legal status. Thus, it is important to demonstrate the benefits of social entrepreneurship for historically marginalized populations as a form of financial empowerment and community connectivity so that it becomes more accessible and widespread in the future. The six interviewees identified aspects of their experience that I consider to be four shared “social impacts.” These include personal growth, employing other community members, enhancing the built environment, and helping community members via their product or service. All participants identified that one of the main motivations for starting a business was to find a more empowering way to financially support themselves and their

families. Business ownership offers more autonomy, which in turn has created a sense of emotional empowerment for many of the entrepreneurs that have long experienced alienating and dehumanizing work environments. The three other “social impacts” are outward facing, and each entrepreneur had a unique way of benefiting other community members and their neighborhood. Claudia actively employs other community members that are socially vulnerable and might not find work otherwise, and several of the other participants explained their desire to mentor and employ younger community members. Samantha wants to enhance her surroundings with affordable tiny homes, while simultaneously helping community members by making home ownership more accessible. Many of the interlocutors strive to offer a product or service that improves the lives of others, such as Olga’s homemade school uniforms or Magda and Sandra’s food products. All their entrepreneurial journeys are unique but united by a social entrepreneurial desire to benefit themselves and their communities in diverse, innovative ways.

Personal Growth and Financial Support

Perhaps the most obvious reason for starting a business is to financially support oneself and their family. In the United States, and Chicago in particular, there is a pervasive racial wealth gap due to systematic factors that continue to economically marginalized Afro-descendant, Latine, and other nonwhite people. The participants identify as Latino/a, and five out of six participants im/migrated to the United States, meaning that they have experienced the racial wealth gap and economic marginalization that is omnipresent amongst Latine populations in Chicago. All of the participants explained in different ways how their businesses have allowed them more financial freedom and feelings of empowerment of being their own boss. Claudia, who runs a cleaning and catering business with her mother, reflects on her time working in factories. She was obligated to do more and more work, but never with more compensation. She

asked herself, when am I going to make more money? After informally offering cleaning services to the church after events, Claudia began to see “la forma de cómo podría ser yo mi propia jefa entonces” (the way in which I could be my own boss). Her mother is 73 years old and still helps Claudia run the business, but she explains that “mi plan es que en un futuro ella ya no esté trabajando, que pueda descansar en casa” (my plan is that in the future she won’t be working, that she can rest at home). After being subjected to working conditions in a factory that alienated Claudia from her work and did not compensate her adequately, she started a business that financially empowered her and her mother and other community members.

Samantha and her husband Oliver started their construction company, All Modern Construction, in September of 2022. They have two properties that they are renovating to sell, and in the future, they hope to build affordable tiny homes on the West and Southside of Chicago. Oliver had a long career as a barber and transitioned to working at New Life Centers as the facilities manager to develop his carpentry skills. Samantha worked at New Life for many years as well, and recently worked as an executive assistant while raising two toddlers as it was more manageable. Samantha told me that their biggest goal was for both of them to leave their jobs and focus solely on their company. She had actually quit her job three days before our conversation. Sam and Oliver both maintained jobs for over a year after their business was incorporated since starting an enterprise is a huge financial undertaking. With their renovation jobs, they were able to make enough revenue for both of them to leave their previous employment and “focus their energies” on the large-scale home renovation projects they’re undertaking. It is noteworthy to see how their business has allowed the couple to leave their other jobs, focusing on All Modern Construction and raising their children. However, it goes to show how much time and money must go into creating a sustainable social enterprise.

Magda is an older woman who has lived in Little Village for 32 years with her husband and two sons. Her beloved husband was a pastor for 27 years until he passed away four years ago. In Mexico, Magda taught kindergarten for many years. In the United States, Madga has spent her time volunteering for LAMDA (Latino Alzheimer's and Memory Disorders Alliance), and recently started her own business. When I asked her why she started a business, she told me “para sostener y sobrevivir después de mi esposo murió” (to keep going and survive after my husband died). Magda described her relationship with her husband as the core of her life, and his loss took a grave emotional toll. To fill the emotional void and to provide for herself, Magda began to make artisanal, organic tortillas with her sisters. After the loss of her life partner, Magda needed something to help her survive. Along with her work at LAMDA, her tortilla business provides Magda with both financial and emotional support. Claudia describes the feelings of empowerment of running your own business, and Magda shares similar experiences of using her business to keep going after the loss of her husband.

Francisco, who operates a construction company with his brother and three uncles, expresses similar sentiments about how starting a business has granted him and his family more financial flexibility. He explains that, “Me gustaría buscar una forma de crecer más para, para obtener más ganancias o más trabajos para yo, pues apoyar a mi familia y personas que conozco que pueden hacer esos trabajos” (I would like to find a way to grow more, to obtain more profits or more jobs for me, to support my family and people that I know that can do these jobs).

While some entrepreneurs can rely on their businesses alone, Sandra sells Colombian tamales when she's not working the night shift at a cardboard factory. Sandra and her family sought refuge in the United States, yet she and her partner must juggle several jobs to survive. They use their enterprises to fill the financial void that *fabrica* jobs cannot fulfill alone. Without

legal protections, migrant workers are disposable, deportable, and exploitable. Thus, they are paid low wages, and must work side jobs or start enterprises just to get by in the “land of opportunity”. Entrepreneurship alone cannot reform our labor system, but for many, it is necessary to provide for themselves and their families. In Little Village, business ownership has been a path for many to support themselves, as well as leave jobs that do not allow them autonomy, dignity, or liveable wages, like Claudia explained.

Employing Other Community Members

Little Village is a community that values collaboration and connectivity. Over the summer, I sat in on a neighborhood delegation with nonprofit leaders, the local alderperson, and even the state and U.S. representatives for their district. New Life Centers hosted this delegation in their gymnasium, which often feels like the epicenter of action in Little Village. Everyone at the delegation conversed as they snacked on the Mexican food catered by a local restaurant, switching back and forth between English and Spanish. The local politicians look towards community members and leaders like Matt DeMateo, the executive officer of New Life Centers, to get a pulse on the needs of their constituents. These leaders not only collaborate, but they go to church together, play on the same softball teams, and support one another. Little Village and New Life Centers is a community centered around helping neighbors for mutual prosperity. Half of the entrepreneurs shared that one of their primary goals when starting a business was to employ other community members, which is the second key social impact I observed.

Magda and her sister are in the early stages of growing their artisanal tortilla business. Francisco runs a construction company with his brother and uncles. Both of these older entrepreneurs expressed that beyond working with family members, they hope to employ and teach younger generations about their type of work. Magda told me that she wants to “enseñarles

a los jóvenes una forma de ganar dinero y trabajar” (teach young people a form of earning money and working). She explained that the younger generation is too busy doing this and that, and then jokingly apologized as I too am a part of this younger generation. After our interview, Magda told me that we could catch up on the phone and practice each other’s native languages together as I thanked her for her time. Francisco similarly shared that “me gustaría en el futuro ayudar un poco más a, mis a mis familiares y personas que pueda llegar a emplear” (In the future I would like to help a few more family members and people that I could get to employ). He continued to say that “me gustaría mucho ayudar a los jóvenes que ya no quisieron estudiar para que aprendan a la construcción” (I would really like to help young people that no longer want to study to learn construction) since construction pays well in Chicago. Both Magda and Francisco are in their middle ages, and I found it interesting how they emphasized employing “los jóvenes” (the youth) as a way of intergenerational support and passing down their expertise. Despite Magda and Francisco only working with family members for the time being, they both demonstrate a desire to share the opportunities that have granted them more financial freedom with the younger generation. Francisco recognizes that not everyone may want or be able to continue with formal schooling, and construction is a lucrative industry that has allowed him to succeed.

While Magda and Francisco hope to employ other community members in the future, community employment is one of the central pillars of Claudia’s business model. She has five employees - two are young men in their twenties, and the other three are women in their “tercera edad” (older age, elderly, third age). The two young men that she employs might not be able to find work otherwise. Claudia tells me that

Tenían uno, está saliendo de creo que tiene problemas un poquito de enfermedad de droga o algo, entonces no capta muy bien las cosas y por eso también muchas

personas a veces no le no le dan la oportunidad que necesita para salir de eso, verdad? Entonces es él y el otro muchacho era de DACA, pero tuvo, no sé si no pudo renovar su su...estadia por cierta razón, entonces estaba batallando por dinero...por, cómo, su renta, su sus cosas, prioridades... (I have one, he is coming out of I think he has some problems with drug addiction or something, so he doesn't understand some things very well and that's also why many people sometimes don't give him the opportunity he needs to get out of it, right? And the other boy was from DACA, but he had, I don't know if he couldn't renew his, his status for some reason, so he was struggling for money, for like, his rent, his things, his priorities).

Given these two young men's vulnerable and socially marginalized identities, whether from their citizenship status or use of drugs, most employers won't hire them, and certainly not for a liveable wage. Claudia spoke with pride and love as she told me about her employees. When she gave the young men their first paychecks, one of them started to cry. He told Claudia "que por fin alguien le había dado una oportunidad y que él sabía que trabajando podía, poder lograr sus cosas sin estar en la calle (that finally someone gave him the opportunity and he knew that by working her could achieve things without being on the street). Similar to Magda and Francisco's desires, Claudia is actively mentoring young people in her community and providing them with essential life skills.

Not only does Claudia support young people in her community, but she also provides work for three women in their "tercera edad", women who are entering the workforce at an older age, making it more difficult to find jobs. After telling me about her two young employees, she says: "a tratar de ver qué tan grande Dios puede abrir las puertas para poder bendecir a más gente como personas, como te digo que sean de la tercera edad. O, o maduras, que, que no tengan la, la posibilidad de tener un seguro social (let's try to see how big God can open the doors to be able to bless more people, like people, like I told you are of older age. Or, or mature, that don't have the possibility of having social security). Older people, when losing a spouse, often question, *what am I going to do with my life?* Claudia invited an older woman who had recently lost her

husband to one of her catering events, and asked the woman, “will you help me”? Rather than making someone ask for help, Claudia extended an offer to someone in a time of need. The older woman embraced her and said, “gracias por la oportunidad, porque ahora mis hijos me me ayudan, pero prefiero tener mi propio dinero para yo poder hacer lo que yo necesito hacer (thank you for the opportunity, because right now my kids help me, but I prefer to have my own money to be able to do the things that I need to do). Claudia sees her entrepreneurial ability as a gift from God and wants to share that gift with other community members, young and old. After years of wondering when she would earn more money and when she could be her own boss, Claudia started her own business. Rather than running it by herself, she called on her neighbors and provided them with work. In fact, “no los considero trabajadores, los considero amigos” (I don’t consider them workers, I consider them friends). Employment and working relationships can foster a unique intergenerational network that allows for mentorship and friendship. When starting a business, many of the entrepreneurs prioritized not only employing themselves and their family members, but employing their neighbors, fellow churchgoers, and other latinos and mexicanos who have similar lived experiences of migration, structural marginalization, and workplace discrimination.



Figure 4: Claudia and some of her employees working at a catering event. Photo from Claudia.

Enhancing the Built Environment

The third social impact shared amongst the social entrepreneurs was a desire to improve their local community and environment through their business initiative. Samantha and Oliver's construction company, All Modern Construction, is currently flipping vacant properties to sell. In the future, they hope to also build affordable tiny homes using repurposed materials to increase homeownership on the south and west sides of Chicago. These areas are where Black and Hispanic populations have historically lived with astoundingly low home ownership due to redlining policies that make it far more difficult for people of color to purchase property (Greer 2014). Samantha told me that they first liked the idea of reusing storage containers that would otherwise go to waste, but the idea grew to much more than that. Samantha and her husband

realized that new, beautiful homes could help revitalize their neighborhood and its many vacant, abandoned properties. They live just south of Little Village, and she describes that, “It's just, I mean, I think it's gotten better since we moved here, but it's a lot of vacant properties. Just a lot of properties that are kind of like an eyesore in the neighborhood. And I feel like a big part of renovating neighborhoods or kind of bringing them to life again is more home ownership. People proud of where they live”. Their social enterprise offers an alternative to neighborhood revitalization. Rather than gentrification or a major corporation developing divested neighborhoods, Samantha and Oliver want to reimagine home ownership in their community to make it beautiful and accessible through their Latine-owned small business.

Helping Community Members via Product or Service

The fourth category of social impact shared by the interviewees was their desire to help other community members through their product or service. This took many forms. Continuing with Samantha and Oliver’s idea for affordable tiny homes, Sam didn’t just tell me about her hope to revitalize their neighborhood. She also spoke at length about the people that she wants to help with these repurposed homes. At first, she and Oliver really liked the idea of reusing materials. This idea transformed beyond the aesthetic aspect, as they imagined how they could make home ownership more inclusive. As she consoled her baby in Spanish, she says to me:

It was just kind of thinking more about how expensive rent is now and the idea of like Chicago...really needs more affordable housing. We know people who are either single moms, or just...single men who don't have families, right? And they're like it's so hard because, like, I don't know if I want to settle down and buy a house. But rent is so expensive. And sometimes it's painful to spend that much on something that's not an asset. Right? So, we were just kind of like tiny homes could be, you know a solution to that.

The geographic segregation in Chicago is a product of racist mortgage lending in the mid-twentieth century, when banks systematically refused to lend mortgages in “red-lined”

neighborhoods where black and brown populations lived (Jackson 2021). This race-based exclusion is not unique to the 20th century. In recent years, “68.1% of dollars loaned for housing purchases went to majority-white neighborhoods, while just 8.1% went to majority-black neighborhoods and 8.7% went to majority-Latino neighborhoods” (Lutton et al. 2020). Samantha and Oliver’s future construction projects could make affordable home ownership more accessible to minority populations in their neighborhood. They recognize that home ownership is difficult to obtain, especially for people like single moms. Through the renovation of their own home in 2015, Sam and Oliver found a passion for construction and remodeling and want to share this opportunity with other people in their community.

Olga similarly wanted to offer a product that would improve the lives of her customers. She migrated in 2022 in search of economic opportunity to support her sons’ education and has recently started an alterations business since she was a seamstress for many years in Mexico. Her goal is to replicate her microempresa (microenterprise, small business) that she ran in Mexico, hand making school uniforms for children. Olga tells me that school uniforms are very expensive and “¿Este digo, cómo le hago para poder así ayudar a los demás papás, verdad? ¿Y pues una de mis metas yo me pongo en su lugar y yo estuve en ese lugar porque pues al principio pues sí me costaba comprarles uniformes” (I mean, how can I help the other parents, right? And, well, one of my goals I said, no, well, I put myself in their place and I was in their place because at the beginning it did cost me a lot to buy the uniforms). Olga understood the financial burden of the product, so she established a line of credit with her customers so that they could pay “poco a poco” (little by little) overtime. She also realized that the uniforms sold by bigger companies weren’t very size inclusive. So, Olga set out to make uniforms for different body types so that all students could feel comfortable in their uniforms. Sam and Olga’s business ideas connect back to

the core value of supporting community members, which they are setting out to do in an innovative way.

Conclusion

Amongst the interviewees, helping other community members through their product also took form through food. Sandra and Magda both share parts of their cultural heritage with their customers through their food products. This social impact takes many beautiful forms and motivates the social entrepreneurs to share their product with the goal of benefiting others. For each participant, business ownership meant something different. All the social entrepreneurs started a business to support themselves financially, either to leave their prior job or to supplement their income. For many, starting a business represented a career path that allowed them more autonomy and feelings of ownership. Beyond personal finances and growth, all entrepreneurs expressed other impacts of their enterprises, whether employing other community members, improving their neighborhood, or helping others with their product or service.

There can't be a discussion about Black and Brown owned businesses without recognizing the inequalities and barriers that exist for small businesses. In Chicago, Black and Latine entrepreneurs have 46% of their equity capital needs met, compared to 80% of White entrepreneurs (Conanan Johnson et al. 2020). Equity capital is cash given to a business in exchange for ownership stock in their enterprise (Conanan Johnson et al. 2020). Banks and venture capitalists prioritize white entrepreneurs. In fact, 79% of funding for "diverse founders" from venture capitalists goes towards white women rather than people and women of color only receive 10% of diversity investing (Hinchliffe 2023). Beyond access to capital, entrepreneurs need technical training and mentorship to thrive. The Abundant Life Program fosters community

for these Latine social entrepreneurs and provides them with tools to thrive, uplifting businesses that aim to make a positive impact on their community.

Social entrepreneurship is an enterprise that fulfills the Triple Bottom Line by enhancing the economy, society or community, and the environment in an innovative and sustainable way. The mechanism of business ownership is not available to everyone, given the structural barriers including access to capital, ability to dedicate time to developing a business, and the physical visibility that running a business requires. Through the research participants, it is evident that their social enterprises have personally enriched them, while simultaneously offering meaningful employment with income stability and, moreover, a prosocial, fulfilling way to work. While the Abundant Life Program is providing necessary resources to these social entrepreneurs, there needs to be wider access to business support resources and access to capital so that it is no longer a niche field or opportunity amongst marginalized communities.

Chapter 3: The Role of Community-Based Organizations in Supporting Marginalized Communities

On a humid Sunday in July, I walked from my car to New Life. Community volunteers collected clothing donations for the New Vecinos (new neighbors) program. Across the hall is a conference room where we will hold our Abundant Life information session, with circular tables and foldable chairs. On the second floor, the former-sanctuary-turned gymnasium has basketball hoops, a stage for the choir, and chairs for the weekly church services. Down the hall are communal offices for the New Life Centers staff, a constantly growing team. On the third floor are children's colorful after-school classrooms: tiny chairs, arts and crafts, whiteboards. Across the street is Pan de Vida, the new food distribution center with a technology lab on the top floor for community use.

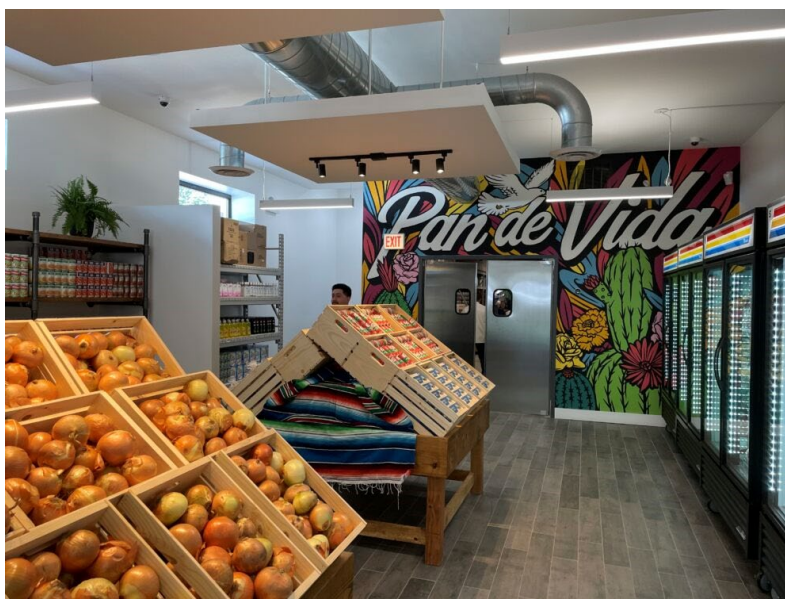


Figure 5: The Pan de Vida food distribution center looks more like a grocery store and serves thousands each week. Photo from New Life Centers and Greater Chicago Food Depository.

The brick walls of the industrial buildings are painted with murals that reflect the vibrancy of their community, reminiscent of the murals throughout *Calle Mexico* just a few

blocks away. Volunteers welcome a dozen Venezuelan migrants who were told at the Texas border to find New Life Centers in Chicago. There is a constant flow of new faces as migration surges throughout the summer. As I walked up the stairs to meet Pamela, I heard the cacophonous bouncing of basketballs as adolescent boys practiced their free throws. Churchgoers mingled outside after the morning English and Spanish services, waiting for the catered food that we were providing for the Abundant Life info session. The church also offers services in Mandarin and Q'eqchi', a native Guatemalan language, to address the diversity of their patrons and community members throughout the city. Pastor Paco and NLC director Matt talk back and forth with community members in a mix of Spanish and English as their kids play in the corner of the multi-purpose meeting space. Every day of the week, the facility is an epicenter of activity and socializing, serving as a meeting place and safe space for Little Village residents of all ages. New Life Centers is a community-based organization (CBO) that creates kinship relationships for their predominantly Latine community that has faced generational social, legal, and economic marginalization. This chapter examines how CBOs often fill gaps where resources are needed in marginalized communities that do not have access because of historic injustices and inequalities, while also providing a space for emotional connectivity for individuals that may have migrated to a new country or experience feelings of social isolation.

A Community Epicenter

New Life Centers was originally created in 2005 to “address the needs of the communities surrounding New Life Community Church locations” (Our Story n.d.), a multi-sited, nondenominational Christian church in the Chicagoland area. Now an independent auxiliary organization, the two organizations collaborate closely. New Life Centers began in the Little Village and Midway neighborhoods, and later expanded to Humboldt Park, Cicero,

Jefferson Park, and Oak Forest. In Little Village, the 150 employees and many volunteers reflect the community they serve, as most of them live in and around the neighborhood. I was struck by how many young people had grown up at New Life Centers and decided to continue to work or volunteer for an organization that impacted them. New Life Centers is committed to the vision of creating a beloved community, “a global vision envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a society where all people share in the wealth of the earth creating authentic community. It is a vision achieved through nonviolent resistance of the injustices that divide us and proactive commitment to (the) right relationship with each other. It means that no one is left out of creating the community, so we go out of our way to center the people who our systems often exclude. For us at New Life Centers, that means especially centering the leadership and voices of young people in our communities” (Our Story, n.d.). Their role and programs in each community vary, because NLC is committed to a culture of “creating programs that address neighborhood needs and empower neighborhood involvement” (Our Story n.d.).



Figure 6: Constant activity outside of New Life Centers, even Benny the Bull is there! Photo by Gwen Lyman.

The nonprofit has five central pillars: mentoring, education, sports, peacemaking, and community care. Mentoring and education programs focus on kids in elementary, middle, and high school and provide access to after-school programs and technology, support groups, and trauma-informed group therapy. New Life Centers also has basketball, baseball and softball, an open gym, and a running program for various ages. They have gained national recognition for their peacemaking and violence prevention work. My Brother's Keeper, Obama's program to address opportunity gaps for young men of color, recognizes that the value of Centers' violence prevention is the personal relationships they have with community members (New Life Centers of Chicagoland, n.d.). Seventy-five per cent of the street outreach workers are from the

community (Street Outreach n.d.). The outreach workers respond to violence, provide mentorship, and walk alongside youth experiencing gang violence. New Life Centers isn't alone in their effort to minimize the impact of violence throughout the west side of Chicago. Rather, they are integral partners of: Community Restorative Justice Hubs, Communities Partnering 4 Peace, and the Violence Prevention Collaborative.

New Life Centers don't just support the youth of their community. Their community-care has three central programs: Pan de Vida (bread of life) and the recent additions of the Abundant Life entrepreneurial program and New Vecinos (new neighbors) program. Since 2010, Pan de Vida provided meals to 100 families every Friday, actually led by Claudia and her mother Celina and their team of volunteers. During the pandemic, food insecurity was greatly exacerbated. In a partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, they scaled up their capacity and opened a food distribution site across the street from the NLC facilities. Most recently, NLC has scaled up their New Vecinos program which began in May 2023 in response to the new migrant crisis in Chicago. In collaboration with other nonprofits, city, and state governments, they are leading an effort to house migrants, furnish their apartments, and address other needs. So far, they have moved over 1,500 families into homes (New Vecinos n.d.). The Abundant Life Program was born out of a partnership with WeavingImpact, as a way to address the apparent need to support the many entrepreneurs within the New Life and Little Village community.

CBOs providing tools and resources for entrepreneurial prosperity

Over the past several years, Centers has informally supported the entrepreneurs in their community by connecting them with resources like accountants and hiring them for their services. When the New Life team was approached by WeavingImpact in Fall of 2022 to start an entrepreneurial support program, it seemed like a natural continuation of their community care

pillar, as they already saw the need from individuals like Claudia, Samantha, and Oliver. The Abundant Life Program launched in October 2023 with eight social entrepreneurs, six of whom I got the experience of interviewing. The program began with a “Boost”, a three-day intensive Spanish workshop with international business professionals from Mexico, San Francisco, and Chicago. WeavingImpact is a part of a larger network of social entrepreneurship, and through these partnerships they are able to recruit mentors from around the world. This offers rich and diverse perspectives on entrepreneurship. After the workshop, the entrepreneurs remained connected with the instructors and received their own local mentor to work with.

The Abundant Life Program is a way of addressing the needs of Latine social entrepreneurs in Little Village first by offering a workshop to develop business principles, which is followed by long-term mentorship. During the workshop, the social entrepreneurs learned about marketing, creating a business model, raising capital, growth strategies, and more. After three days of learning and collaboration, participants walked away with a business plan to continue developing. Many of the entrepreneurs expressed the value of the tangible tools that they walked away with. Francisco, Claudia, Sandra, all emphasized that the program helped them think about calculating expenses and how to make profits. Sam told me about defining her target market, and how she began to think, “what is it about the product or service that you're offering that is different from others? And like documenting that.” Magda echoed a similar sentiment about promoting her business and explained that the program gave her the tools to put her vision into action. These tangible skills are highly valuable for creating a sustainable and successful business.

Abundant Life is unique and stands out from other business support programs in many ways, including the geographic, linguistic, and cultural sensitivity to the community that it caters

to. The three-day program took place at New Life Centers, in the computer lab above Pan de Vida. This location is accessible and familiar to the community members, as all of them were connected to New Life Centers or Community Church previously. The curriculum was adapted from a partner entrepreneurial program, and I worked on a team of Spanish translators to ensure that the material was translated appropriately. To adapt the program to meet the needs of the participants, they added another module addressing ITIN for business owners that don't have a social security number. When Abundant Life launches its next cohort, it will be interesting and useful to learn what was most relevant to the participants, and what could be improved.

The workshop also seemed to instill a sense of confidence and allowed the participants to imagine the “big picture” and future of their entrepreneurial journey. Samantha tells me that “with the boost program, I feel like it was really helpful for me to like step back and document what goals we have. Because for me personally, sometimes I just want to dig into it and just get into the small details, right? It's hard for me to step back and look at the big picture, and figure out where are we steering the ship? So that was super helpful”. Until recently, Sam and Oliver were both juggling their prior jobs and starting a business, so naturally it was difficult for the pair to find intentional time to look at the big picture. Sandra echoed a similar sentiment, that a large part of forming a business is the “parte teórica” (theoretical part) of having a vision and elevating it, and the different foundations needed to grow a business.

For other participants that are in the more preliminary stages of their business development, the workshop provided many with confidence to take the next steps. After telling me about her school uniform business in Mexico, Olga shares with me that “Más bien como que me daba miedo no sabía cómo por dónde empezar y eso y pues ya que tengo el apoyo de de usted, como que ya dije” (More like I was afraid I didn't know where to start and well now I

have your support, like I already said). Having a support system that allows entrepreneurs to theorize their vision and give them the confidence to carry that out is critical to the success of small businesses. It was the combination of technical skills and emotional support that stuck out to me from my conversations with the participants.

The growth and support didn't end after the three-day workshop. A key tenant of the WeavingImpact and New Life Centers partnership is the accompaniment model, which is a cross-sectoral theory that explains the need for collaboration and a mutual exchange of knowledge and long-term relationships for a more sustainable, equitable future. Paul Farmer, a physician and anthropologist and founder of Partners in Health in Haiti, revolutionized global health through accompaniment. Farmer explains that, "to accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end...The companion, the *accompagneur*, says: "I'll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads...Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it's deemed completed— not by the *accompagneur*, but by the person being accompanied" (Watkins et al. 2019, 19). Accompaniment means to walk alongside a person or community in a long-term sense. WeavingImpact and New Life Centers are in a long-term collaborative partnership that values a mutual exchange of knowledge. WeavingImpact has a specialized knowledge about running entrepreneurial support programs, and New Life Centers has a unique position as a CBO that has a critical pulse on the needs of their community and a long history of trust. With the joint Abundant Life Program, it was crucial that the principle of accompaniment was applied to supporting the social entrepreneurs on their continuous journey. Accompaniment is applicable, especially working with Latine populations because "the practice of accompaniment is rooted in the seemingly simple, yet radical understanding that there is power in mutual relationships, and

that the intentional presence of another, committed to walking alongside, deeply listening to, and collectively responding with action against systems of oppression can be transformative. With origins in Latin American Liberation Theology, accompaniment views individual and community struggles as products of structural issues, including but not limited to neo-liberal globalization, structural violence, militarism, and environmental injustice” (Wilkinson et al. 2019, 151). While accompaniment allows for trust building and systems of connectivity that prioritize equality and addressing injustices, there is a challenge of maintaining equality and an environment where all voices and parties can find synergy. This must be a constant consideration when the accompaniment model is being applied. The accompaniment model makes the Abundant Life Program a sustainable and culturally informed way to support community and is rooted in the exchange of different lived experiences and sets of expertise.

After the three-day training entrepreneurs are connected with a one-on-one or small group mentor that has business experience. This long-term relationship building is an application of the accompaniment model that attempts to walk alongside entrepreneurs on their journey, rather than giving them the tools over three days, then radio silence. Before the Boost program, Samantha and Oliver got connected with fellow community member Mark, who has been mentoring them since. She described her mentor, “Mark, he's been...he's super smart, he's like, very financially savvy...he's just like a great encouragement, like he's very positive, like very uplifting.” Mark has supported them in developing their business model and having conversations about juggling their home renovations and the idea of affordable tiny homes.

Claudia has built a similar working relationship with her mentor Juan. Months after our interview, I sent Claudia a WhatsApp message to ask about her experience working with Juan. Within minutes, she replied, “realmente me ha ayudado mucho en diferentes formas ver más allá

(para el futuro) como poder organizar más a detalle mis eventos” (Actually, he has helped me in many different forms to look further [for the future] how to organize my events in more detail). She ended her message by saying, “lo que más me gusta es la amabilidad con la que te explica las cosas y también sabe escuchar las necesidades y a base de eso trabajamos en equipo” (What I like the most is the kindness with which he explains things to me and also he knows how to listen to needs, and based on that we work as a team). Juan and Claudia embody the accompaniment model by listening to each other and working as a team, rather than having a unilateral relationship.

Claudia has benefited from the Abundant Life program through the curriculum and from her work with Juan, but the benefits are not unilateral. As I mentioned, Claudia and her mother are an integral part in the volunteer operations at Pan de Vida. The relationships at NLC are symbiotic and community centric. The process of placemaking and community building is complex, entangled, and quite beautiful. Claudia and other community members consistently reap benefits from New Life Centers, while simultaneously volunteering and offering support to others through other avenues.

Many mentors are from the Little Village community, such as Laura, the owner of the Nuevo Leon who is mentoring the food entrepreneurs in the cohort. When they find time in their busy schedules, Laura, Sandra, and Magda meet to gain insight about running a food business in Little Village. It was difficult for the WeavingImpact and New Life Centers team to find mentors who could dedicate time to helping others. After months of conversations with potential mentors, they found individuals who were willing and eager to walk alongside their fellow community members and build long-term working relationships.

The food entrepreneurs are working closely together in their mentor group, but collaboration was a constant amongst the entire cohort of participants. During the workshop, Claudia explained that her favorite part was the small-group, collaborative nature of their three days together. She reflected,

Me gustó saber de mis compañeros su que cada uno tenemos una visión diferente cada, yo creo que Dios nos creó a cada uno diferentes y cada uno como por por tal tiene sueños diferentes, ¿verdad? ... Lo que y también me gustó mucho la explicación de que había personas como que te pudieron dar consejos. Y también me gustó mucho que pudimos, como éramos un grupo pequeño pudimos, pudimos interactuar por con personas directamente y no tanto que si hubiera sido un grupo muy grande... si no ellos llegaban y nos decías, bueno, dónde te quedaste, cómo te ayudo o qué puedes hacerlo así? O de esta manera es algo que me gustó poder interactuar con con esas personas. (I liked knowing my colleagues and that each of us has a different vision, I think God created each one of us differently and each with their own different dreams, right? ... I also really liked the reason that there were people who could give advice. I also liked that we could, since we were a small group, we could interact with people directly and not so much if it had been a large group... they came and told us, well, where are you at, how can I help you or what can you do like this? This manner was something that I liked that we could interact with these people)

The program prioritizes smaller cohort sizes so that the entrepreneurs can get to know each other and the different instructors on a personal level. Entrepreneurs were able to learn from each other's visions, prior experiences, and ideas in a very collaborative environment. After the workshop, the participants and instructors created a group WhatsApp thread to continue their group communication. At least once a week, my phone pings with a WhatsApp message from the group, whether someone is sharing a personal success or a resource with the group. The group doesn't just communicate about business related things, rather they send warm wishes on holidays and exchange photos. Sharing business opportunities is tremendous, but equally important is that a group of people who identify as Latine and have faced many of the same structural barriers are able to have a space to connect over their shared identities as Latine social

entrepreneurs. The Abundant Life Program and all the other pillars of their programming provide the community with holistic support. However, CBOs are so much more than the services that they offer.

An Epicenter of Emotional Connectivity

Sam grew up in Michigan and moved to Chicago for college. She discovered New Life Centers through a student-living program when she lived in Little Village. After an internship with New Life Centers, they brought her on as a full-time office manager. She worked at Centers for four years until she had her second baby. Samantha met her husband Oliver through New Life, playing on a recreational soccer team. After renovating their own home, Oliver felt a push to leave his career as a barber to learn carpentry. He was brought on as the facilities manager at New Life Centers to learn the craft and was instrumental in the construction of the Pan de Vida food distribution center. The couple decided to launch their own company, All Modern Construction, in September of 2022. While Oliver had to leave his role as facilities manager to pursue their business full time, Centers continues to be one of their main clients. New Life was the community where Samantha and Oliver met, which also served as a launch point for their business.

CBOs emotionally fulfill each person that they interact with in a different way. In a study of Puerto Rican migrants after Hurricane Maria, Ramos Vargas and colleagues found that “the majority of migrants relied on kinship networks from largely working-class communities. Both community solidarity and the work of nonprofit organizations provided resources for migrants to reconstruct their lives” (Blackwell et al. 2, 2023). New Life Centers has done extensive work welcoming migrant peoples to Chicago, most recently Venezuelan migrants. They do this by addressing their physical needs, such as finding housing and furnishings, but also by opening a

door to community. Whether at church services, holiday celebrations, weekly outdoor gatherings, or sporting events, New Life Centers creates space for people to share food and company. Pastor Chris, an integral leader in the New Life community, explains: “What’s cool is, because there’s so many people who are at different points during the immigrant story: people who came 20 years ago and whose kids are going to college right now; people who are pretty recent, but have got themselves settled; and other people who just got here...I think we’re able to give hope to the people who are coming” (Pérez 2022). When Sandra and her family arrived from Colombia, Pastor Paco and Chris were the first to welcome them to Chicago and Little Village. Sandra expresses that “Nosotros solos y ya ahorita, pues que empezamos aquí en Nueva Vida que nos han dado, pues asesorías y charlas, entonces porque hay muchas cosas que uno no conoce...pero pues bueno ahí vamos ya apoyándonos un poquito” (We are alone and now, well we started here with what New Life has given us, like advising and seminars, because there are many things that one doesn’t know...but well, here we are supporting each other a little). For Latin American people migrating to Chicago, Little Village opens a network of shared experiences and identities and creates a multicultural community woven together by *latinidad*.

The nonprofit sector alone cannot replace social, political, and legal changes that are necessary to include marginalized groups more comprehensively. Yet, they are a critical way of supporting people in ways that wouldn’t exist in the absence of the nonprofit sector. While there is a call for more radical change for a political structure that would address social, economic, and legal inequalities in an upstream, radical way, something must be done before radical change comes. Heyman discusses the difference between radical and reformist approaches to social issues. He explains that radical change addresses deeper levels of causation of injustice and suffering and envisions a clear counterpart (alternative) to the status quo. Radical approaches aim

to “build a large, sustained community that acts on new socio-cultural principles” (Heyman 2015, 124). On the other hand, reformist change “addresses injustice and suffering through specific changes and chooses not to accept existing suffering while waiting for long-term, fundamental changes”, there is a focus on amelioration and meaningful, positive changes (Heyman 2015, 124). While radical approaches reimagine social spaces that target the roots of injustices and suffering, reformists take action in the present because people wouldn’t have access to the tools to ameliorate their suffering if organizations didn’t take reformist action. For example, New Life Centers provides housing for migrants, teens with tools to cope with violence, children with after-school programming, and new entrepreneurs with tools to grow. If this community-based organization didn’t exist in Little Village, this instrumental work likely would not be carried out by *anyone*. Heyman posits that “we thus should reject any argument that insists on one approach being correct and the other false or pernicious, when so much that needs to be done simultaneously concerns different issues, time horizons, and political arenas” (Heyman 2015, 121). Reformist activism and action addresses the needs of marginalized communities in Little Village, where local, state, and federal governments have failed. New Life employees and Little Village community members advocate for change. The other day on LinkedIn, New Life Centers executive officer Matt DeMateo posted: “Our very own Eduardo Fuentes testified before the city council today on the importance of caring for our new neighbors and investing and caring for all neighbors. May we continue to build unity, resources, and community for all Chicagoans, regardless of status or labels” (Matt DeMateo, 2024). Radical and reformist change must exist at the same time to make meaningful progress against the systemic inequalities in our contemporary United States. New Life Centers and the Abundant Life Program address inequalities and provide their surrounding Latine, Mexicano/a, and migrant

populations with tools necessary to thrive and allow a physical and metaphorical space for community connectivity through shared life experiences and faith. Amidst offering tangible and emotional support, New Life Centers has created a kinship network of solidarity and trust amongst Little Village.

Conclusion

This work examines how Latine people in Little Village have pursued different avenues of community to confront realities of marginalization in their lives. Leo Chávez explains, using the Latino Threat Narrative, that mainstream American culture assumes that Latino people are unable or unwilling to assimilate to the United States. This theory and the “truths” it posits goes as far to say that “they are part of the invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. Southwest) and destroying the American way of life” (Chávez 2008, 3). Unlike other immigrant groups, Latinos do not become a part of the national community, thus making them a threatening immigrant group to the national identity and integrity of the United States. This research challenges the assumptions of the Latino Threat Narrative that are deeply embedded into our culture. Little Village, New Life Centers, and the Abundant Life Program demonstrate the intercultural weaving, kinship networks, and mutual prosperity that occurs when marginalized communities are uplifted and supported, not ostracized. The participants show ways in which Latine people make place and livelihoods in the United States, through small business ownership and the vibrant community ties that this entails.

We see how collective identity building and the creation of safe spaces to celebrate Latine heritage fosters feelings of pride and safety. Through this cultural grounding, the interlocutors were able to grow prosperous social enterprises that brought personal and communal prosperity through the four “social impacts”. All this placemaking and connectivity is fostered and augmented by a community-based organization that serves as the epicenter of activity. This ethnography of Little Village and New Life Centers provides a voice to the necessity of social entrepreneurship and corresponding support networks for marginalized communities.

As an emergent field, there are serious barriers to starting a social enterprise. This research makes a case for how social entrepreneurship can help historically marginalized communities prosper and connect with the example of Little Village, Chicago. There is also potential for other CBOs in Chicago and the United States to support community members that either have a small business or have wanted to start one but don't have the resources to. For these programs to be successful, they require accompaniment, partnership, and collaboration. The social entrepreneurs I interviewed exemplify how collaboration and support systems can produce prosocial relationships and augment the social impacts of their businesses. This ethnography is a tangled, complicated web of community strength, overlapping histories of im/migration and marginalization, and emergent Latine pride and solidarity with New Life Centers as the nexus of connectivity. Latine social, economic, and legal marginalization is historically and currently pervasive in our country, yet this population of Latine individuals shows forms of resistance through placemaking and community strength.

Appendix A – Methods

Data Collection

This community-based research stemmed from my experience as the associate program manager at WeavingImpact, where I started working with Latinx-identifying small business owners in June 2023. I conducted six semi-structured interviews, five in Spanish and one in English, with Latinx-identifying social entrepreneurs or small business owners that participated in WeavingImpact and New Life Centers' Abundant Life Boost Program in October 2023. I had met or had contact with some of the participants before they participated in the program, either at the information session in July before the program began, or through email and WhatsApp communications. Before I returned to Chicago for December, I reached out to the Abundant Life participants on WhatsApp and asked if people would be interested in interviews for a research project. The interviews took place both in person and over the phone, with four of the interviews held at the New Life Centers' facility in Little Village. The New Life Centers team kindly provided me with a multi-purpose space to conduct interviews on multiple occasions. Five out of six interviews were audio recorded. The interviews took place for 15-45 minutes on average. The interviews followed the prepared interview guide. However, some interviews focused more on specific questions and follow-up questions, depending on what the interviewee was interested in talking about and the semi-structured nature of the interview process. I wrote ethnographic field notes during and after each interview. My research with human subjects received exempt approval from the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board, Study 00001140.

Interview Guideca

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. *Hábleme un poco sobre usted.*
2. How long have you lived in Little Village or Chicago? *¿Cuántos años ha vivido en La Villita o Chicago?*
3. Does it feel like home? *¿Considera que ha echado raíces en Chicago ya??*
 - a. Is there another place you call home? *¿Cuál es su lugar de origen??*
4. Right now, how do you support yourself and your family? Do you have another job along with your business? *¿Ahora, cómo mantiene a la familia? ¿Tiene usted otro trabajo aparte de su negocio?*
 - b. Tell me more about that...what has your experience been? How do you feel treated? *Hábleme más sobre esto...¿Cómo ha sido su experiencia con el trabajo? ¿Cómo lo/la tratan ahí?*
5. When did you start your business? *¿Cuánto estableció su negocio?*
6. What made you want to start a business? Why that type of business? *¿Por qué quería establecer un negocio? ¿Por qué este tipo de negocio?*
 - c. What improvements do you hope to see in your community? *¿Cuáles mejoras espera ver en la comunidad?*
7. What are your goals for your business in the future? For your community? *¿Cuáles metas tiene usted para el negocio en el futuro? ¿Para la comunidad?*
8. What tools did Boost/mentorship give you to help you think about building your business? *¿Cuáles capacidades o conocimientos le proporcionó la consejería de Boost para poder poner un negocio?*

9. If you met someone that is considering joining Abundant Life, what advice would you give them to get the most out of it? *Si conociera a alguien le interesaría inscribirse en la Vida Abundante, ¿que consejo le daría para maximizar los beneficios del programa?*
10. How do you expect your business to support you and your family's livelihood and your community? *¿Cuál impacto anticipa que tendrá su negocio en su familia y su comunidad?*

Data Analysis

After conducting six interviews, I used the transcription feature on Word for the web, which transcribes recordings in several Spanish-language regional varieties. I transcribed five of six interviews, as one interview was not recorded. After listening and revising the transcriptions, I identified rich points in the data and created eight themes, which I used to code the interviews. The thematic codes analyzed the interviews for belonging, immigrant/Latinx identity, and the various impacts that entrepreneurs feel they have on their livelihoods and their community.

Thematic Code

Religion

Benefits of Boost Program in
October/Abundant Life Program &
Mentorship in general

Feelings of Belonging (or lack thereof) and
Community and support from New Life
Centers and Church generally

Immigrant, Mexicano, Latino Identity

Social Impact - financial support for
themselves and family and personal
empowerment

Social Impact - employing and supporting
other community members

Social Impact – improving
community/environment (physically, socially,
sustainability, aesthetically)

Social Impact – helping community members
via product or service

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