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COPS/Metro Alliance - StMU Oral Histories with Christina Castro

Barbara Ortiz

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COPS/Metro Alliance-StMU Oral Histories

Narrator: Christina Castro

Date: 03/26/2024

Location: San Antonio, Texas

Interview Session: 1 of 1

Interviewer: Barbara Ortiz

Transcribed By: Barbara Ortiz

Narrator's Biographical Information:

Christina Castro has called San Antonio home all her life. She grew up and still resides in the St Henry's Catholic Church parish area on South Flores Street. She worked for USAA for many years until retirement. She became involved with COPS after a local resident burned to death in his home due to poor housing conditions in his home. A single mother of three, she continued to make time in her life to work to make better conditions for her neighborhood and local communities through COPS membership.

Summary of Interview:

Christina Castro shared some of her experiences with COPS/Metro advocating for resources and addressing substandard living conditions. She discussed her involvement in various social justice initiatives, including advocating for affordable housing, school tax abatements, and accessible neighborhood libraries. She spoke of the importance faith has in driving her activism. Christina also shared some memorable moments of empowerment, delivering community wins for educational partnerships scholarships, after-school programs, and economic development projects.

Interview Key Terms:

COPS, Metro Alliance, housing, tax abatement, tax moratorium, faith, archdiocese, St Henry's, school board, Project Quest, Carmen Badillo, After School Challenge

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Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

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Christina Castro Interview

Barbara Ortiz 0:02

So this is COPS Oral History Interview with myself, Barbara Ortiz, and I'm interviewing Christina Castro on March 26 2024, at the National Archives of the Marianist Province of the United States at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to interview and have you sharing your experience with us today. So again, would you please state your name, and then your role in COPS organization.

Christina Castro 0:30

My name is Christina Castro. And at this time I'm retired, away from COPS for a while, but I was involved for about 20 years.

Barbara Ortiz 0:42

So what inspired you or motivated you to join COPS originally?

Christina Castro 0:46

Originally back in 1993, there was a ...we did a church census, walked all the neighborhood, got back all the information from the people that lived in the neighborhood. And that was during the summer of 1993. Then in January of 94, one of the gentlemen we had visited that burned to death. Upon inquiry, I realized that he didn't have any public utilities in his connections in his home. And so I got concerned that he was cooking his breakfast, on a cold January morning, and a spark ignited his little jacket, and he burned to death. So was a big write up on the newspaper, and then how can somebody living half a block from my church, two miles from City Hall, be living in those conditions? And so the priest says, I went to the priest, he said because we don't have any money, you know, you didn't know about it, call the Chancellor and call the Chancellor. We don't have any money. Call the District Councilman. I was never involved before. So I didn't even know the Councilman was. But I did, He says you live in the poorest district, district five, there are more people like that in our neighborhood. We don't have the money.

Christina Castro 2:11

So then I contacted the Archdiocese again, and I got involved with Salt and Light. They were giving a workshop. And I was invited. So that summer, I started going to classes. I was frustrated because they taught us that we should be concerned but I'm already concerned, I want to know the resources, how do we solve the solutions. They couldn't give me solutions. But the last presenter was the president of COPS, Ms. Badillo, Carmen Badillo. {Okay}. And so she noticed my frustration. So after her presentation, she says I'd like to talk to you. I'm gonna invite you to COPS. Oh no, because I would go to some of their actions with my dad and said all the hullabaloo with us, with the pom poms and the rattles and the noise. And that wasn't me. But she said that we can help you there's a lot of different committees, etc. So I started going, and I've got real interested in it.

Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

Christina Castro 3:09

So my concern is housing. Because this has happened, people live in those types of substandard conditions. And so one of their committees was in housing. It was different parishes, members, leaders. And they knew the ins and outs of housing programs available, what have you. So I went to one of their meetings. And I always remember they asked me, Well, how much money do you want? I said what do you mean, How much money do I what? How much do you need? Well, what do you have available? She says 100, 200 What do you want? God, what can I do with \$100? So I said at least give me 500, Still not knowing. Because you can't get greedy Christina. She says you're asking for 500,000. Oh 500,000! No, I'll start with 100,000. I didn't know. So they had they were getting the funds from CDBG and HOME funds.

Barbara Ortiz 4:06

Okay.

Christina Castro 4:07

And so I started getting interested. This is where I started learning a lot of workshops, a lot of research, a lot of programs to go to but the funds were being misused. They were going to build golf courses, they were going to different, they were using public money for private circumstances. So that concerned me. And so I started out like that with 100,000, a few houses but then. So you gather the people together, you get the application, and you tell them about the program. The people were wary about what if I lose my house it's already paid for, that interest. But since I'm a leader in my church, well I start explaining to own, there's going to be a lien on the house etc. But it's forgivable. Ten years goes by real fast, they'll fix your home. So little by little people started applying, little by little got more involved, not just with housing.

Christina Castro 5:16

Now I gotta give a presentation on tax abatements; I didn't know beans about tax abatement. And I had to make due, I went through the training we meet quite a bit. Work with the different leaders from different churches. And that was the beginning. You're supposed to be interviewing me {No, no, no} that's the beginning.

Barbara Ortiz 5:39

That's fantastic

Christina Castro 5:40

It started with housing. That was my passion. But then I was going to about three meetings since I wasn't working. I was disabled. I worked at USAA, sold insurance homeowners, You name it, For 23 years.

Barbara Ortiz 5:53

What parish were you?

Christina Castro 5:55

St. Henry's parish.

Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 5:56

Where was that?

Christina Castro 5:57

South Flores Street? It's two miles south of downtown. That used to always be my presentation.

Barbara Ortiz 6:03

Is that still your parish?

Christina Castro 6:04

Still my parish. I was born actually on the west side. For four years with my mom. My dad was in the service back in the 40s. And my mom stayed with her parents, {was it Airforce} until my dad actually my dad was in the Navy. And then, but then he served and then they drafted him. It was during the war. {Okay} they drafted him into the Army. So he left mom pregnant. When he came back, he bought the house from my grandparents on Kirk. {Okay.} In the St. Henry's area that I was four years old when he moved there. {Okay.} So I was raised there. And then when I got married, I moved into the same neighborhood two streets down. {Oh, wow.} And but then I got divorced, but anyway. So there I am a single mom, with three kids.

Barbara Ortiz 6:55

Okay. So what were the values, or beliefs really drove your involvement with COPS?

Christina Castro 7:05

The values? It's faith. It was faith-based, first of all, because that's how I found out about through the Archdiocese. Well not really because it was St. Henry's. Like I said, my dad was involved way back. And it's a lot about not doing for others what they can do for themselves. Yeah, I wanted everybody to give me the money to fix that up, but I had to learn how to go about it. So I considered COPS like a mini-university. I didn't have a college education, just high school. But the point I knew I was going to so many workshops with professors, and what have you, presenters that they would bring to us and I enjoyed it. It was getting people to, to use their power. We're all have power, but we don't with a purpose.

Barbara Ortiz 7:58

Absolutely. Now, was it something that you would express your interest? And then the organization would find the education for you guys?

Christina Castro 8:06

No, actually, since we were all from different parishes, different, We met also with Metro Alliance, at different parts of the city, we all have, we looked one thing I've learned and then you negotiate a compromise, which is how you win everything for yourself. And you learn how to work with it, the relationships were built. And that was very important to me.

Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 8:34

So speaking of some of those relationships, and some of those challenges, so can you think of some of the challenges or obstacles that you did face in your work and how you overcame them?

Christina Castro 8:45

I guess my own lack of education was an obstacle. My first real action that I call it was against we were going with the San Antonio school board, because they were given away tax money, tax abatements to big corporations, and here you had Edgewood, which is a poor district, San Antonio Independent School District, that needed the funds for their schools and they were giving the money away. And so my first, what would you call it, a presentation, you get different people to give their stories. And so we had people that had kids in school get their stories and poverty and this and that. And mine was to go and ask him for a moratorium on tax abatements. I had to go home and look up what is moratorium, they make me say these big words and I don't even know what it means. You know, so I'd go back and then I'd check with somebody else. What this is what's going on Christina, and then you'd learn how can they do that? Here they consider us so that we're on welfare because that's corporate welfare. They would look down on people that needed the funds for their food and whatever. And yet the corporations could get by with getting their welfare. So that anger, it is still like, I can't do that. Well, you got to do something about it. And we were very successful in doing that. I asked for the moratorium and we got it. That was with a school board, going against somebody that doesn't have an education going against the superintendent and everybody else ...recall about when, When was that?

Christina Castro 9:28

Oh, gosh, that might have been in '94, '95, 1995 or so

Barbara Ortiz 10:37

so that was about when you started housing, the tax moratorium. That was another one. What were some other issues that you were involved in?

Christina Castro 10:46

We were beginning with Quest, Project Quest. And I knew what it was about, with under unemployed or underemployed. And San Antonio, I worked in USAA, and they had these big CEOs, with all their laws or whatever, they would sell San Antonio, so she played retail, and then encourage new businesses that were coming in not to pay more than the minimum wage or whatever, because that meant that they didn't have to pay more than competition or whatever. And I worked for USAA. So they would have skits and I always remember that putting them up first action at St. Henry's, in my church, We had a big hall. So they had a look there. We had about 500 people or so. So who was there? The president of USAA and I was sitting right in front because we were the host parish. General McDermott. Tom Frost. you had the [biggee]. So here they are, our skit, you get a guy dressed as a general, more like Hitler. And then you have Tom Frost in snowman suit, frosty. And so we were making fun of them what they in so that week, the following week at USAA, the General is going to make a tour to the buildings. Put your button up COPS. No, I want him to know who I am. They walked away from where I sat, and I would see him on the hallway and other Oh god, I wonder if he remembers me, but because we were going against the labor and so so that was the tax abatements and Project Quest.

Christina Castro 12:42

Levi's had just closed and I live close to Levi Strauss. And so they were introducing Quest to because these people were getting paid good manufacturing, sewing or whatever. But they didn't have the education, there were over 1000 employees that were laid off, lost their jobs. So that was one of the COPS main idea to get together with him and with other businesses or whatever to see in schools, that meetings were going on constantly. So since I wasn't working, I was on disability, I had the time to sometimes I'd attend three meetings, different education, Quest, After School Challenge. I'd say you know, three o'clock, everybody in USAA stand stills and calls home, maybe women working for you. Johnny, don't fight with your sister, is your kid in the latchkey kids fine enough with the kids. So we designed the program After School Challenge for parents that are working that kids can stay after school, and it couldn't be just playing. You have to have tutoring, do their homework. And so we designed educational partnership, which was giving a scholarship program. We started with about five schools that my school so we're Burbank, and Brack {Brackenridge} so then I get involved because my kids were in school. And so, so you go with what's interesting you right so beside housing and abatements that it was education for the my kids by the time everything gets through they had already graduated from high school. We could. But I always said that at least it's there.

Christina Castro 14:43

And then Senate says well you can't just give scholarship what make sure that it's a B above average, and that their attendance because kids if they're not in school, they're not learning. So that was an incentive. So I thought quite a bit for you, my schools, and they finally got them, Burbank and Brack. And, and then you let go, you know, you do a project or something and it's successful. Move on. And so when later much later, I went to my nephew's graduation from Burbank, so I got the program. And I was like, my God, all these kids got Educational Partnership Scholarships, about 300 of them, and I thought, we started with nothing, you know, and so you know, it makes you feel good. That's your reward. You don't get paid anything. It's all volunteers, all of us. But your reward is seeing the success and seeing somebody else prosper. So, so I got involved with everything now.

Barbara Ortiz 15:46

No, that's amazing that you know that, you know, you let go but then you can still see the fruits of

Christina Castro 15:52

Project Quest. Now it's, you know, we'd have to go every year, to ask for the funds, that we have to lobby your councilman, to each council person and all that, the mayor. And so then when Scully, the city manager came in she asked to meet with us, people, we they were meeting with everybody. She came in she asked me [?] COPS/Metro. And this is the first, she said, y'all come around every year, we're just going to put it as an item on the budget. \$2 million, you don't have to come. But now it's a nationwide I think that's better jobs. They just they take the idea and they just, but they're not having success, because they didn't give it to COPS to manage.

Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 16:42

the empowerment to the community.

Christina Castro 16:45

They gave it to somebody else and you know something. But anyway,

Barbara Ortiz 16:49

but you did say you saw or your father was involved in COPS even earlier. And so what are some of your memories from those?

Christina Castro 16:59

To be honest, I wasn't interested. {Okay.} But he, you have an action and so, Okay, how many people from your church? So I was one of those numbers. They put you on the bus, and you go and rah rah haha, and I didn't. I didn't care. {Okay.} Because I was the when I did get in, it was one of theirs when there's meaning, I guess a leadership, {okay.} That was like in the 25 or 30. My dad was already 40 or 50. So that leadership, they wanted libraries, and for their communities, because we only had the city library. So I did an action but I didn't know that's what I was doing. They asked me to come and speak. And the mayor, Cisneros, and they brought in business people, Southwest Bill was presented. So I had to give my story because you get the stories from within the neighbors of whoever's confident. And so my daughter had gone to the library, she's about 12 - 13, took the bus went to the library, City Library. And when she had finished, she got mugged or whatever, they dragged her backpack. And stole her money. So she came home. And I said, and I had shared the story with some of my friends, you need to come to this meeting we're going to have, we're going to get presentation, give that story. So I got up and said, you know, we need a library. We don't have computers, we have an encyclopedia. So the kids need to go, and it's not safe. So we have it in the name of this is my dad is also retired and he likes going to the library and says you can learn how to do a lot of things by reading books. So I said, Okay, so I gave my presentation.

Christina Castro 18:46

And Cisneros gets talks me afterwards, says you said your son's getting ready to go to college. Where is he going. I says he's applied to MIT. And he says, I'll be there this next week. I'm on the board. That's his love. He tell him to come I'll write a letter for him and I'll make a presentation. David, the mayor said blah blah blah. I will not have any strings attached to my, but he's going this week. No, I already sent my application. That weekend he gets a rejection from MIT. And I said, Chuck, he's the mayor has already gone and come home. Monday, he was going Thursday. He sees me at a meeting that they had at our cafeteria. So he goes and he says, What happened to your son? He never came by and I've told him he laughs. He says he'll go a long way. If he didn't want any strings attached to his education. And I said, she laughed with me, I said can you imagine. And the lady from Southwest Bill had told me it's not what you know, but who you meet. So that kind of gets sometimes that so many people are have the potential but they don't have the doors open.

Christina Castro by Barbara Ortiz

Barbara Ortiz 20:09

So kind of one final since we've been talking a lot of good amount here. So looking back on your experiences with COPS, what do you think has been the most meaningful or fulfilling aspects of your time with COPS?

Christina Castro 20:27

Most fulfilling has been that when I worked, you weren't recognized. And actually, I was only in my forties, and I wouldn't get it at USAA. They had like 300 people applying for the same job. And I was always passed. But I always had, good, good, what do you call it, my activity, my production was good. Everything was the top. And they were telling me, Christina, look around you, you're just dead wood. you're just sucking air. And who do you tell that, there was nobody there to hear that. It was just because I wanted to know how come the matrix is okay, I'm okay. And so that puts you down. And this, COPS builds you up, your self esteem. Like I said, I didn't get paid for this. I had never been so much rewarded by what I did, by seeing my my solutions, you know, profit other people, you know, and that's one thing with COPS, no one person gets the credit. It's an organization. But just to know that you did it, that want to learn because USAA wouldn't give me any recognition, even though sometimes that turned in. So you'd have a promise of, Want me to put that on the computer? And I say yes. And then the boss would get recognition. And I'd look at, that was my idea. So but anyway, that's basically knowing that I could do it and I did it.

Barbara Ortiz 22:16

Thank you. I mean, thank you for all that you've done for COPS. All you've done for San Antonio, I want to thank you for your time this evening for sharing your story with myself and with my classmates with you know, the further project that we're working on. Thank you, Christina,

Christina Castro 22:35

I want to thank you for doing it actually, because not that COPS wants or needs a recognition but still. and I brought some information with me because like you'll see what else I've got, you know, presented myself with the arts collaborative. I've got a whole bunch of letters from the mayor's interview.

Transcription Notes: This interview was lightly edited as needed for readability which may include inserting paragraph breaks, removing redundant words, or adding clarifying words. Added words or words difficult to decipher typically appear inside brackets []. Simple responses from the interviewer may appear in { } as to not affect the stream of narration.