

## CIVIL RIGHTS OF IMMIGRANTS

# Pilsen Neighbors Community Council

Fix our immigration laws now

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Gamaliel's First National Issue



Teaching ordinary citizens to unleash power within themselves to collectively impact social, political, environmental, and economic decisions affecting their lives..

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The Chicago of Pilsen has always been a port of entry for immigrants. Lithuanians, Germans, Poles, and Italians have all at one time called Pilsen their home. Upton Sinclair, in The Jungle, called it "that slum." In the 1960's and 70's Mexicans began to replace these Eastern Europeans.

By the early 70's this community of over 40,000 people was 95% Mexican and Mexican American. The majority of these were not citizens and were undocumented. The "Pilsen Neighbors Community Council" began to organize this constituency to shut down drug houses, to clean up parks, to get better garbage pick up and to improve schools.

The organization went on to fight for and obtain a brand new high school for the community, which the people named Benito Juarez (the first indigenous president of Mexico). They created a community development plan and a housing development corporation. They created a four-day festival called the "Fiesta del Sol" which now draws over a million people each year. They created a nationally renowned center for people with disabilities called "El Valor" and helped create a health clinic called "Alivio Medical Center."

When this organizing began the average age of the 10 grade schools in the community was over 100 years. Today there are ten new grade schools in Pilsen. They also organized to win a \$60 million Technical College. The immigrant people, most undocumented, achieved these things, by calling public meetings, organizing peaceful marches, attending public hearings, utilizing the press, and negotiating with politicians and business leaders.

In the process these new immigrants claimed this community as their own. They bought houses, created chambers of commerce, became active in school and park councils. When the organization began its work in 1970, a house could be purchased for between \$10,000.00 and \$30,000.00. Those houses are now worth between \$200,000.00 and \$400,000.00. Importantly, those houses are owned by immigrants.

Gradually many obtained legal status and became citizens. Pilsen became the first ward in the city of Chicago to elect a Mexican Alderman, state representative and state senator. They are now served by a Latino Congressman. Through their activity and their involvement they acted as citizens act and they became motivated to legalize their status. Pilsen once known as "that slum" is now a flourishing community in Chicago. This transformation of the community was accomplished by undocumented immigrants.

The leaders and organizers that created Pilsen Neighbors Community Council went on to found the Gamaliel Foundation. What happened in Pilsen – a massive in migration of poor, non-citizens, and all too often undocumented, is now happening in community after community throughout the United States. What happened in Pilsen by utilizing the tools of participatory activity can happen in these new immigrant communities

The Gamaliel Foundation has the methodology, the capacity, the track record and the credibility to repeat what happened in Pilsen in scores of communities across the country.