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Guevara: Valley Interfaith makes the politicians look good

By **Steve Taylor** October 28, 2013

PHARR, RGV – Groups like Valley Interfaith make the work of a politician easy because they bring people together, hold house meetings, listen to concerns and rally a community around issues that matter.

This is the view of the Rev. Alfonso Guevara, pastor at St. Joseph the Worker Church in McAllen. Guevara had been a priest for six years in Brownsville when Valley Interfaith formed 30 years. He has proudly been associated with the group ever since.

“Sadly, the political parties today have lost the capacity to build a community based organization, where they know the neighborhood and the concerns in those neighborhoods. Today, the political parties organize around money. We are different because we organize around people and we help the people formulate an agenda for action,” Guevara told the Guardian.

Guevara likes to call Valley Interfaith’s house meetings relational meetings. He said they serve to allow residents to learn about what is happening in their community. “We make the politicians look good because we bring them issues that should be important to them. You have to decide how public money should be divided and the agenda formulated at our relational meetings helps to do this. It has been a wonderful privilege for me to have done this part of my ministry.”

Valley Interfaith celebrated its 30th anniversary with a delegate’s assembly at the Pharr Events Center on Sunday. Almost 900 supporters and members attended. Guevara spoke at the event about leadership development and made the case that Valley

Interfaith is a university of public life. In an interview with the Guardian after the event, Guevara told of his admiration for the group.

Guevara said that when Catholic priests are trained they do not learn much about the public sector. The focus is all about theology and preaching and teaching the doctrine of faith. However, Guevara said that when the doctrine of faith calls upon ministers to “look for the least among our brothers,” it poses the question of how a pastor does something positive, something concrete, within a community.

“Where does this theology go from the head to the heart? That is a big question for me. For me it was through Valley Interfaith. This group gave me the capacity to become a public person, to reach outside of my parish, to do wonderful things. It was a challenge for me because I am naturally a quiet person, an introvert. I therefore had to step out of my comfort zone, many, many times. The result was I became much more confident and later I was able to mentor people that became extraordinary, wonderful, leaders.”

A big part of Valley Interfaith’s work is finding and developing new leaders in a community. Guevara said he found and nurtured a great leader in the late Lupita Torres when he served at Christ the King in Brownsville. Torres was a widow with eight children. She had a great marriage but her husband had died in an accident. Guevara met Torres at Christ the King where she served as a Eucharistic minister and Lector.

Lupita Torres, Brownsville community leader. November 7, 1938 – February 8, 2012.

“Lupita would teach Bible classes to the children. At first, she was very hesitant to get involved. But, on hearing her story, it was clear she was a leader all the time. She had

been in Mexico and she had been working as a migrant. She was always speaking on behalf of those that were taken advantage of. She was a natural leader.”

Guevara said the work Torres did for her community, calling meetings to develop plans of action, was exciting.

“When she began to understand the power she had, because she was relational with all her neighbors, she blossomed. She would call a meeting and everybody came. Lots of wonderful things happened. The same thing happened with another leader in Brownsville, Judy Vera,” Guevara said.

Lupita Torres was born in Nueva Rostia, Coahuila, Mexico, in 1938. She worked at Haggard’s for ten years and later picked fruit and vegetables to support her family. She never forgot her humble roots and for years she and her family donated food and clothes to families in Valle Hermoso, Mexico. She died, aged 73, in February, 2012.

Guevara said Torres was a woman of profound faith, compassion and good will. “When I had these women on my side, I had great power. I did not have to speak. They were very appreciative of me working with them,” Guevara recalled. “These women were in their 50s or 60s. They had a motherly touch when talking to the politicians. They were not intimidated by the politicians. I am very proud of that kind of stuff.”

Guevara wants to see more priests and pastors in the Valley get involved in Valley Interfaith. He said he is pleased the Industrial Areas Foundation is organizing two major training sessions in the coming months for ministers and lay people alike.

“To be a good pastor, we have to know the people and what are their concerns are. By getting involved with Valley Interfaith we can be agents of change for the better. For me the group has become my family. And I know this is of God because it is of the people. So, I challenge younger clergy to become involved, to take on the responsibility of calling forth the talents of the parishioners so they can make a difference,” Guevara said.

“The training sessions are great because we get our hands dirty, we work. There are no thrones. There is no hierarchy. We simply listen to each other’s stories and see what makes us click. Where do we get the energy to want to make a difference? We get it from hearing the stories. So, I urge the younger clergy to be a participant, to learn about Valley Interfaith and learn how it is really connected with our ministry.”

Asked if he would like to make any other comment for this article on Valley Interfaith’s 30th Anniversary, Guevara said: “I am looking forward to next 30 years.”