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PEACE & FREEDOM THROUGH NONVIOLENT ACTION

SPECIAL ISSUE



LOISAIDA
Portrait of a Community

COLLECTIVE NOTES

Our special thanks to Josie Rolon who got all the people and articles together, and to Marlis Matthews for her own photographs and for printing those of others. Also thanks to Elinor Nauen, Linda Cohen, Luis Guzman, Richard August and Lynn Johnson for their help with production.

There will be a celebration for the opening of the New Assembly Performance Space at 3:50 E. 10th St. Charas has been renovating it for the past several months. Performances of dance, theater, poetry and music begin at 4 pm. After 1 am there will be disco dancing. Vengan todos!

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Workshop In Nonviolence

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Cover: Edgard Rivera, a community musician, and his daughter Marisol. Photo by Marlis Matthews, of Tylis.



Photo by Tylla.

LOIS

This issue of WIN is devoted to the exploration of a community in transition—a community struggling for economic survival and self-reliance, for cultural autonomy and expression, for ecological balance and growth.

The Lower East Side of Manhattan includes Chinatown, Little Italy, the East Village, and an old Jewish section. Each neighborhood has a rich cultural and political history. But as the home of slaves and poor immigrants for two centuries, the name Lower East Side connotes poverty and crime.

There is one neighborhood whose residents, mostly Puerto Rican and black, have transformed the stigmatic name Lower East Side to Lo-i-sai-da—*Loisaida*. A name with pride, rhythm, cadence—*Loisaida*.

When I first saw WIN Magazine I was interested; it looked very radical because it supports issues for the people and against the government. I saw that our community could fit into the magazine because we are the people and WIN covers really important issues that affect poor and minority communities. The articles I read brought out some ugly stuff and it upset me to know these things. I saw that the people in power don't even care about their own kind: Look what happened to Karen Silkwood and Paul Jacobs, who were white and educated. So they certainly don't give a damn about us.

Then Josie Rolon called a meeting for us to talk about doing this issue of WIN. About 14 people from different organizations came. People really wanted to share their experience with other communities. A lot of our own kind don't even know what bomba and

In many ways this issue is an experiment, both for the people of Loisaida and for WIN's editorial collective. We, the editors, have risked the uncertainty of listening to new forms of expression and opening our eyes to the power of a genuine people's movement. The people of Loisaida have risked voicing their lives to an unknown audience, stepping beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood to speak to their sisters and brothers in the nonviolent left.

We thank them for trusting us with their stories. We hope this issue will inspire everyone who reads it to get close to other cultures and forms of political expression, discover the beauty of our diversity, and find strength from our unity.

—WIN Collective

plena is. If we don't know our own culture, never mind knowing anyone else's! Puerto Ricans have really been confused by the American brainwash. We've been told being Puerto Rican is the worst thing ever.

WIN's readers are mostly white and I guess I was the first Puerto Rican to work at WIN. The reason we don't have a magazine like that is because we don't have the money, access and power to do the things that WIN articles are about, that white people do.

We need more radicals like them; we could be supporting each other's issues and values. Minorities are a pretty large force. WIN and the people in the nonviolent left should have a lot more minority involvement. They'll need our support, to win on the nitty gritty issues that affect communities that are down and out.

—Margie Ortiz

Dancer and community organizer in Loisaida

I've lived in the East Village for several years. Many people who live there never venture across 1st Avenue, one of the four streets that define the boundaries of Loisaida. It's a scary, bombed-out, foreign place and people try not to face that reality. I first crossed Avenue A to paint in Tompkins Square Park. The Latin music of summer evenings drew me further east, where I felt safe enough when on my bike. Through a friend, I met some of the movement people there. Later, Margie Ortiz, from the community, came to work on a special project at WIN.

Getting to know her and other people took some time and work for everyone involved. From earlier experiences I had learned to look and listen carefully in order to get beyond differences in language, culture and background. Misunderstandings and difficulties arose when I acted or made judgements too quickly, insistent on my styles and values. At the same time, I had to know and respect my own strengths and gifts. It felt good to contribute skills and

and resources. Through dialogue, I hoped to find a place in the community.

I wanted this issue to be an honest representation of what that community has to say. There are contradictions: Is it their issue or ours? Does it meet their needs, and what do we do when theirs conflict with ours? They need the access to the white left that WIN can provide. This issue will give them as much as they put into it if it generates support and understanding from the outside.

The Loisaida tradition is oral and "Spanglish"; it is not possible to translate voice, accent and excitement onto paper. We hope it will come through in spirit. Because of time and space limitations, many important groups are not represented here; we apologize for that. And I regret that we cannot better present the music, which is very impressive and beautiful. To check it out, you'll just have to come to Loisaida....

—Susan Beadle

Painter and WIN Collective member

LOISAI DA

Loisaida: The Reality Stage

by Bimbo Rivas

"In Loisaida there is Fertility roaming the caverns of the brains," begins a poem by a citizen of that place. Loisaida, like Dulcinea, the heroine of Don Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote*, is an entity that dwells in the minds of its creators and its lovers. Romantic?

Some people of Loisaida are an explosion transcending what humans know about how to struggle. They are breaking the barriers that have blinded and kept us from seeing and thinking. The magnetism created by these human beings attracts—is positive—and belongs to every living organism on this planet. Romantic?

The flowers growing in the East 4th St. anfitreato and pocket community garden can give testimony without speaking. The solar energy panels on 523 East 5th St. nourish and warm with their collective heat the bodies of its dwellers. Romantic? Positive? The very sun, provider of the energy necessary to sustain nature, has become Loisaida's ally. Romantic?

Water tanks, built by children of Loisaida, adorn once murky basements with swimming organisms (fish) that will provide food and fun for generations to come. The same children sweep with tender love and care the perimeter of "La Plaza Cultural" where proud edifices once stood built by immigrants of yesteryear who have passed on; immigrants whose children used the very same stones to climb away from the Lower East Side and into the voids of America the Dream. They are proud of "La Plaza."

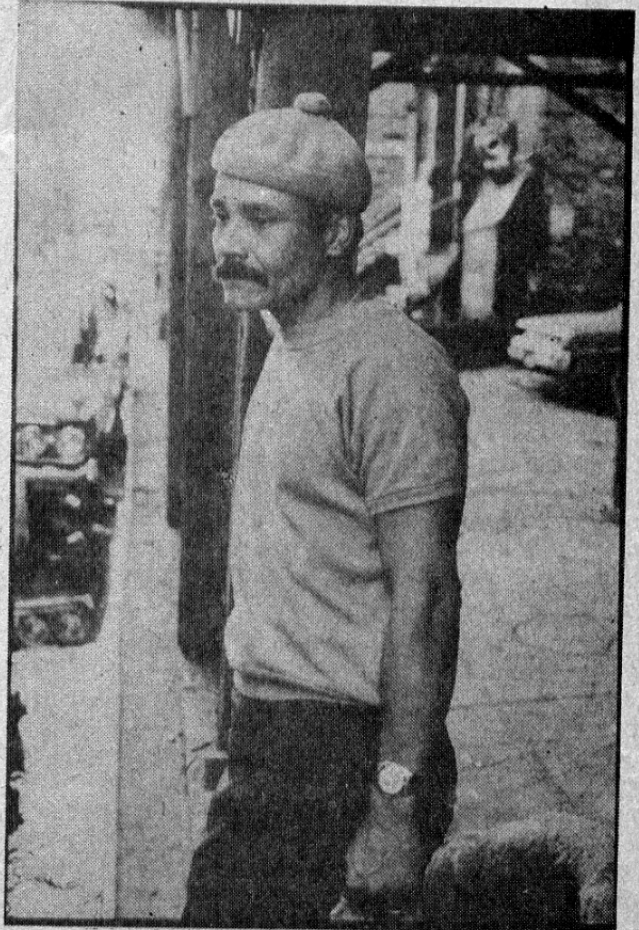
They are proud of their immediate heritage—Chino Garcia, Alfredo Hernandez, Grupo Cemi, Peter Acevedo, Tato Laviera, Lolita Lebron, Hazel and Mambo, the Crosstown Committee, Roberto Badillo, Dona Carmen Pabon, Jorge Brandon, Luis Guzman, Luis and Jose Ortiz, El Committee, Tu Casa Studio, Charas Incorporated, Carmen Carnales, El Teatro Ambulante, the 6th St. Block Association, Max Olivas, El Perro, El Gallo, El Machete, Pupa, Pastor Juan Hernandez of the Pentecostal Church, Josie Rolon, Edgard Rivera, Juvenal Calderon, Father Bradley and all the other miracles and silent heroes who touch their everyday existence. They are proud of the dream promised to them and believe no other. Romantic? Positive? Cervantes should see it now. Incredible....

In Don Quijote's mind, there is no room for reality. He does not believe Sancho Panza's pleading attempts to manifest to Don Quijote the fact that the woman whom he thinks is a beautiful princess bewitched by a powerful sorcerer is really an ordinary farm girl whose charge is to feed the pigs. Don

Quijote refuses to accept that reality and sets out to rescue the beautiful Dulcinea.

Don Quijote clearly identifies the evil doers who have imprisoned his love. And with the purest motivation in his own conviction embarks upon a series of adventures all leading toward the rescue and liberation of his princess.

Loisaida is plagued with the highest incidence of early death, the worst housing facilities, the most chronic unemployment, the highest percentage of fatherless families, the greatest number of drug addicts, the highest prices, the lowest number of cultural and educational institutions, and the worst sanitation, medical, recreational, nutritional and economic development facilities. Nevertheless, some of its citizens talk about the days when there will truly be a hometown with all the mechanisms and institutions, civic centers, educational and political virtues promised to the children. Those who have promised are anxious to serve the town of Loisaida and have made the lifelong commitment to heal the



Eddie Cruz, construction worker, poet, activist. Photo by Susan Friedman.

Bimbo Rivas is a poet, builder and administrator at the community Townhouse in Loisaida.



Photo by Rosalie Poznachowski.

cancer and make out of it the model that will insure the happy existence of all its citizens forever. Romantic?

Coming back from a state of death brought on by abandonment, greed, irresponsibility, bureaucratic, democratic-technocratic government, hate, prejudice, intolerance, egotism, bigotry, and dishonesty is not going to be an ordinary effort. It will require something these citizens call "The miracle of Loisaída." They even identify such miracles. They go to those places or individuals that have been certified as miracles because of the impact that a particular action or activity has had toward making the dream a closer reality. Romantic? Boy, oh boy!

The milagros ritual takes place during Christmas time. The citizens march together from miracle place to miracle place putting homemade banners in front of those buildings that house a miracle. A miracle could be an institution or an individual. The banners read "I am a miracle of Loisaída." They stay up until they are destroyed by the wind, snow, heat or rain. What's happening here? On Labor Day, while every other group is out of town celebrating, these human beings take to the streets with brooms and plastic bags and sweep all the garbage from the streets. Then they all meet in Tompkins Square Park and have a festival where music, poetry, dance, puppets, plays, artistic exhibitions, food, drink and merriment abound. This is done without any fanfare and is considered a day to celebrate work.

Traditional cultural events that had not been celebrated by the Puerto Rican citizens of Loisaída in New York City since the early days of the great migrations

of the late 40s and early 50s are being revived.

Among these are "La Fiesta de Cruz," a religious spring welcoming fiesta dedicated to the cross that Jesus carried on his way to Calvary, and the "Fiesta de Reyes," held in January celebrating the Epiphany or the Adoration of the Magi. In the last five years Loisaída citizens have added other fiestas such as the birthday of Don Pedro Albizu Campos who is considered to be the great patriot of the revolutionary movement to free Puerto Rico from the dominion of the United States government. This fiesta is becoming a High Holy Day in Loisaída.

During the 1979 celebration of Don Pedro's birthday, one of the poets reciting remarked to the hundreds of spectators at La Plaza Cultural, "If anyone should ask you where the spiritual guidance comes from to the people of Loisaída, you can answer immediately. Don Pedro Albizu Campos!" The response was a thunderous "Viva Puerto Rico Libre! Viva Loisaída Libre! Viva Don Pedro Albizu Campos!" (Don Pedro died some years ago after a prolonged incarceration in United States federal prisons where he was held because of his activities to launch an armed revolutionary struggle in Puerto Rico to end the island's colonial status. This status derives from 1898 when, at the eve of the Spanish American War, the United States military forces, led by General Miles, invaded Puerto Rico and overthrew the autonomous constitutional government that the people had won from Spain after a long, arduous struggle.)

Another festival which has found a place in the Loisaída calendar is "La Fiesta de Loisa" where the tra-

ditional dances of bomba and plena are manifested in a pageantry of dance and chorus reflecting the ancestral heritage the Loisaída citizens received from the African slaves that were brought to Puerto Rico by the Spanish. Loisaída also participates in the Puerto Rican Day Parade on 5th Avenue and in the "Fiesta Folklorica" held in Central Park in August. Romantic? You bet.

In the "Loisaída movement," as some observers call it, there is not a visible identifiable organized central leadership. The ingredients that make up the "movement" are elusive, sporadic, germinating and in flux....

The movement has begun, there is no turning back. These people of Loisaída intend to reach their goals, transforming whomever they touch with the virtues inbedded in their souls, in their everyday interaction with each other as well as with the transient visitors that come by.

Loisaída is still in the "Reality Stage." The stench of putrefaction sometimes feeds the summer air because the pest control forces are not enough to clear the mountains of garbage that develop in many of the abandoned buildings, in the streets and in the sidewalks. Empty lots become garbage depositories, and junkies looking for a high cannibalize the citizens with their bad habits of mugging and burglarizing.

Too many Loisaída children are in jail. The economics of the town is not enough to compete with the returns that cocaine and heroin, amphetamines and methadone bring. Young men and women earnestly seeking a decent future are destroyed by the lack of outlets, places to develop and activities to heal their anxieties. Funding for programs that can provide some jobs is for the most part given to those established bureaucratic, non-relevant programs which produce institutions that spend their time giving advice but doing nothing for Loisaída or its citizens.

Recruitment into the most productive groups of Loisaída is achieved by a self-selective process. Therefore, converts are very rare. The number that become lifetimers in making the dream a reality is uncannily small. One organization had a party to celebrate the addition of two more members with lifetime commitment in a year's time. That was considered such a great accomplishment that they created a holiday for themselves celebrating that day from then on. For the most part there are no salaries yet; for the lifetimers committed to the movement survival becomes a hobby.

The colonial dependency state of mind is one of Loisaída's greatest enemies. The will to be self-sufficient is a foreign entity. It is not readily understood.

The welfare check is the main income. Minds become sleepy and work, hard work, is not associated with progress. The dependency syndrome infuriates the organizers who are trying to motivate these people to do something for themselves, to be self-starters.

The environment tends to further decay some Loisaída human beings into passiveness. The lifetimers are furiously trying to develop the open spaces with gardens, plazas and playgrounds in order to compete

with watching TV, getting high, and hanging out.

The lifetimers are multi-skilled, multi-artistic, but there are not enough of them to make a dent in the general state of laziness and dependency that cripples the town.

The road to a healthy community is going to be a long one. Important sub-movements such as the housing movement have too many contradictions, and internal bickering between these organizations is appalling.

The main organizations that could accelerate the rate of growth work too far apart from each other to be effective. There is too much waste and too much overlapping, with no central communication network to serve the town.

The cultural movement is at its fetal stage and chronically undernourished. The main artists are starving. Too many people from outside the community hold positions of power and direction. This has to be turned around. As a result of this reality artists and citizens don't trust the organizations. No faith in leadership has evolved. Apathy and lack of action is instead their way. The self-selected citizens of Loisaída have vowed to change these things, to overcome all obstacles.

When Sancho Panza told Don Quijote that the windmills were not dragons, he did so without intimidation. He told Don Quijote exactly what he saw. Don Quijote told Sancho that he was crazy. By the end of the book, Don Quijote finally accepts Sancho's view of the world as his mind returns to sanity. Don Quijote dies and Sancho and his family are well provided for in Don Quijote's will.

The lifetimers in Loisaída believe that their sacrifice is not in vain. They believe that if they develop and take care of their community that the community will eventually take care of them. Romantic?

These people see themselves as the modern renaissance of goodness. They have reactivated the values of honor, respect, morality, integrity, tolerance, peace of mind, belief in God and Jesus Christ, and helping one's neighborhood help itself—and they have made these qualities and beliefs an integral part of their characters and their existence.

They have searched into their history and found strengths and values that parallel those of the greatest civilizations that have ever existed. They have identified their cultural heritage and the nobility of their blood lines. They have reactivated the dormant juices of spiritualism and are motivated by love for a community, for a fatherland, for a motherland. Romantic?

They are artistic, prolific, intelligent, humane, understanding, healthy in mind and body, proud, hard-working and family-loving. They call themselves brothers and sisters. They want to reassess humanity and build the foundations for the dignity and well-being of a happy and peaceful future for all people in a safe environment. Romantic?

Don Quijote would have no complaints should he ever stop by Loisaída.