

**Peter Bloom**

Interview Date: 11/10/2008

Location of interview: Juntos office, Houston Community Center, 8<sup>th</sup> and Snyder

*Peter Bloom is the director and one of the founders of Juntos, the first formal organization formed in South Philadelphia to aid and organize the growing Mexican immigrant community.*

Interviewer: What's your name?

Peter Bloom: My name is Peter Bloom.

Interviewer: And Peter, how old are you?

Peter Bloom: Twenty-six.

Interviewer: And tell me what your official position is?

Peter Bloom: My official title is Executive Director of Juntos.

Interviewer: I know that you were one of the founders of Juntos as well. How did that all get going?

Peter Bloom: How did it get going? Well, I guess from my point of view, there's other people that were involved in the creation of the organization, but I can tell you sort of how I came to it. A friend of mine named, Adam Ureneck, and myself, we were friends from high school, we were actually trying to do an urban agriculture project in the city, but we wanted to do it specifically with community.

We didn't have a community defined, and so we sort of went around talking to different communities in the city and weren't having much luck. I mean, we were 19, 20 at the time, so we kind of also had no idea what we were doing either. So from that, we got in touch with the Mexican community, actually through some relatives of mine, some of my cousins have contacts in the community.

And began some conversations with some folks in the Mexican community, and there were very few people to talk to at that time, and their advice to us was, "Well, why don't you go check out this church on 18<sup>th</sup> and Morris, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church.

They're having a Mass in Spanish on Sundays, it just started not so long ago, and that's basically where all the Mexican people in Philadelphia who live in South Philly go to Mass."

So, we did that, and we met with the priests, and actually, to this day, there's still no permanent Spanish-speaking priest, which is interesting, but we can maybe take that up later.

Interviewer: I didn't realize that the priest who replaced the pastor who started sort of –

Peter Bloom: Well, you might be thinking of – are you thinking of Father Taraborelli? (*Interviewer is talking about Father Taraborelli, who first reached out the immigrant population as pastor of the parish; he passed away in 2006*) Or are you thinking of – basically, what – there are specific orders of priests that kind of just like have reserved priests on hand. And since there are so many Catholics in Latin America, a lot of different orders sort of cycle young priests down to Latin America, and a lot of them learn Spanish.

Then they come back up here, and they get sort of deployed to different churches. And if they have Spanish experience, they'll get deployed to a church that has a big Spanish population. We actually, at some point, not so long after the beginning of Juntos, had a whole conversation with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and specially, the Office for Hispanic Catholics, and they were like, "You know, we have 200 churches that have a need for a Spanish priest, and we have like four permanent priests."

Because we were like, "Hey, when are we gonna get a permanent guy down here?" Because, from our point of view from organizing, it was really important to have someone that we could form a relationship with that would be long term, rather than having to re-establish something with a new priest every six months. And also who didn't – most of them would've been very good, but they don't really have a stake in much, and they don't have much pull so you're actually dealing with church, sort of functionaries for a lot of stuff, and church functionaries aren't really that open minded most of the time, unfortunately.

So anyway, long story short, the priest at the time, a guy named Father Steve Cantwell, had a meeting with us, this is again me and Adam, and sort of vetted us kind of, and was like, "Okay, this is

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just two young guys, everything should be fine,” invited us to the church shortly thereafter. We had a meeting with some of the lay leaders of the church from the Mexican service. There was also a nun there named Sister Maria. We talked to them. We were like, “Hey, we just kind of wanna help out, basically.”

Because at this point, we had sort of abandoned the – we did abandon the urban agriculture thing due to these prior conversations we had had with Mexican folks. And the reason we decided to do this was basically because what we were hearing from the few Mexican people we could actually find to talk to was, “There’s basically nothing, we have nothing, and our community’s growing really rapidly, and we’ve nowhere to go. The Mexican Consulate isn’t particularly helpful. No one understands what our particular issues are, and all sorts of shit happens to us. But again, there’s nowhere to go to get information to just feel like comfortable or anything.”

So although that wasn’t our original intent, it seemed really compelling, and since we weren’t having much luck convincing anybody that urban agriculture was a really good idea --- which since has changed, which I think is really great, and there’s like a million people doing it, which is great. We basically said, “All right, well, this is actually a more tangible thing that we could do.” And really the idea was just to do something like just not being in college anymore, do something with impact for people, you know, get the kind of experience in our city, you know, in a real way.

So we more or less abandoned the original idea and said, “Okay, this seems like it has some legs to it,” and just kind of followed it and all kinds of stuff. That sort of was the genesis, more or less, of our involvement. So we started these English classes. The church gave us space, sort of. There was a bit of a misunderstanding. The lay leaders gave us the space, but didn’t talk to the church management. So, they kind of stormed in one day and were like, “Who are you? And what are you doing?”

And we were like, “Well, we were given permission by this person to do classes here.” They’re like, “Well, we never gave you permission.” So we said, “Well, okay, we can leave.” They’re like, “But it seems like what you’re doing is really great, so you’re welcome to stay, and not only that, we’ll give you this other space, and this and that.” So, that’s sort of the preceding story, and the

beginning of the organization. It started as a volunteer English program, and then quickly grew into a whole sort of host of other things.

Interviewer: What are some of the other things that go on?

Peter Bloom: Well, from that, again, and since people had expressed this, we have nowhere to get information thing, since we were teaching English, people had someone to connect to that actually cared, and was willing to help them figure out whatever – navigate whatever problems they were having. But through that process, we also learned quite a bit about the community.

So, we'd be teaching English, and after class, there'd be a line of students with issues. They'd have pieces of paper that they needed translated or this or that or my boss didn't pay me or I need to find childcare for my kids or my husband is beating me, how do I get out? You know, every possible issue that anyone could have. So we also had no, I mean, what expertise did we have: none. But we could at least understand what the letter said.

Interviewer: Did you speak Spanish?

Peter Bloom: Not really, and that was the other problem, so that was always an interesting thing at the beginning. But kind of where there's a will, there's a way. We kind of made it work. I really don't know how we made it work, but we did make it work somehow. And so, sort of through that, we kind of began understanding quite a bit better what the real sort of main issues were. And so we also would use the church kind of as a place to do other events related to the community, and that would help the community, but that – a very loose population did have a way to organize themselves.

So we invited a lawyer to come to the church to give a workers' rights training, and then a bunch of people were like, "I have a case, I have a case," and she would say, "We'll take the cases." We did a ton of work trying to force the Mexican Consulate to look more in its own backyards and really understand that there was a growing population, that they weren't getting the services that they needed. Specifically, we organized around the consular identification card. We call them Matrícula Consular.

So basically, one of the big issues that everyone that's here, and

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pretty much to this day, it still is – it's undocumented, and this society is pretty much based on having an identity. I don't mean in like a sort of theoretical term. I mean in a very real, who are you, where do you live, all of this stuff. And if you're not a citizen or resident, it's hard to get a documentation that's gonna be accepted. But Mexican consulates throughout the country provide this thing called a Mexican Consular ID card, which is just like this person is this person, you know, they live at this place, etc., etc., but it's issued by the Mexican Consulate.

And they do whatever due diligence in order to make so that the information is correct. So we sort of had a campaign. This is sort of the first organizing work we started to do where you're sort of branching out from just doing English. And you know, whatever sort of advice giving, was: one, to get the Mexican Consulate to come out to the community, and sort of help people understand how this card could help them. And: two, start talking to banks about accepting the card, so the big issue at the time was, and one of the first really major issues that we worked on a little bit down the road was sort of violence and safety issues in South Philly, specifically as it related to the Mexican community. So a lot of people were getting robbed and beaten up and stuff.

Interviewer: Because they know people have –

Peter Bloom: Yeah, and so there's this whole – yeah, everyone's sort of a lot more familiar with this whole sort of narrative now, but basically, you know, undocumented people get paid in cash, they also don't open bank accounts so they're walking around with cash, which makes them particularly easy targets. And since they're undocumented, you're not gonna call the police. So, it's like the perfect crime or whatever.

So yeah, we sort of started working on getting folks to go to the consulate, and getting the consulate to come to people, and help them get these I.D. cards, and then making sure those cards are accepted at different banks. So, I remember we did – we went to Wachovia Bank Corporate Office and gave them some presentation about where the Mexican community lived and this and that.

And we said, "Look" --- you know, part of the work was also trying to get them to put more bilingual staff in their bank

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branches. Because what we were doing is --- we made a couple of relationships with some bank managers because Wachovia was one of the only banks that was accepting these cards. And the only place that we could find a Wachovia that there was any Spanish-speaking tellers --- that was in North Philly.

So we were sending people to North Philly to open bank accounts, which is stupid, but that was sort of – that’s kind of how the organization, this sort of genesis, of the other work that we do now, and what we’re more known for now, which is kind of doing community organizing. Basically, that grew out of – it grew out of a few things, it grew out of us, the organizers not being able to find anywhere to send people.

So, people would come to us with really basic issues, and we clearly didn’t have the resources to deal with them. But when we would try to find someone who did have the resources to deal with it, it was sort of like this epic struggle to find anything. And so, a lot of what our work has been over the last six years has been to kind of get other institutions, whether they be non-profits, whether they be city agencies, whatever you wanna call them, to recognize and respect our community. Respect what they bring to the table, and also respect the sort of issues that they face mainly around not having documentation and mainly around not speaking English.

And so that whole sort of energy, all of the energy that we’ve put into the work that we’ve been doing, has been around getting other people to do what they’re supposed to do already, but now do so with this new population of people. That’s more or less been the sort of external work that we do. And then internally with the community, we work on – I guess the question is how do you push on these institutions to do those things, and we feel like the best way is for the people themselves to do it.

It makes the most sense, but people have – there’s capacity issues, people don’t speak English, they don’t know how the system works here, they’re afraid of, you know, people taking revenge on them, if they speak up or whatever. And so our internal work with the community is based on leadership development and just sort of prepping folks to be able to push back on these institutions and get things done. So, that’s kind of what we do at a really sort of macro level.

Interviewer: I'm glad you brought up sending the folks to North Philly thing. Because I wanted to talk a little bit about how the Mexican folks started arriving in South Philadelphia. And I know there's Mexicans and Central Americans all over the city, but not flocking to North Philadelphia in the same way.

Peter Bloom: Right, this is kind of the eternal question of why South Philadelphia. There's not – no one has a good answer, I don't think. There's a couple of things that I think are – let's put it this way, there was a Mexican community in North Philadelphia, I mean, as you know, from – but tiny. The Mexican community that's here now has essentially nothing to do, if you look at a sort of demographic or – what's the word I'm looking for? There's not a relationship between the sort of traditional, historical, but very small Mexican community in North Philly, and the sort of much larger, constantly growing and changing Mexican community in South Philly.

So, the question you're raising is how did it come to pass that people who probably would've had a better shot living in North Philly, at least in terms of Spanish, moved into this neighborhood where there were basically no Spanish speakers. And there is a very small Puerto Rican and small Dominican population.

Right, so how did people move to South Philly? I mean, I don't know. I think that there's probably a couple different reasons. I think one of which is most likely that it was just closer to where people were working, and the transportation infrastructure's a bit better or easier or you could ride your bike and it wasn't that big of a deal.

It's not – well, I don't know. At the time, I mean, this was also – we're talking, like, late '90s, early 2000. South Philadelphia wasn't as gentrified as it is now, and so we're still fairly inexpensive, and you could still get a pretty nice house for, like, 600 bucks a month or something in a neighborhood that was okay, you know, probably better than something comparable in North Philly on that level.

Other than that, who knows? I mean, it's really difficult to say what precipitated it. What we do know a little bit about the sort of settling of Philadelphia by Mexican folks is that it has a lot to do actually with Camden and somewhat with New York City. So

basically --- do you wanna have this conversation now?

Interviewer: Yeah, please, yeah.

Peter Bloom: The who's here and where they're from and everything?

Interviewer: Right.

Peter Bloom: There's two different, like, genesis stories of the community that are all pretty interesting and somewhat contradictory sometimes. But basically, there's a really high representation of people from certain regions of Mexico. The principal one, and the one that we've done the most work with and that we know most about, but that has been here probably for the most time, is a region in Mexico between these two volcanoes in the State of Puebla. And there are a number of different towns; San Mateo Ozolco is one of the towns. San Lucas Atzala, Calpan, San Andres Calpan, San Nicolas de los Ranchos, all these different little towns, who are all sort of in this valley created between these two volcanoes in Puebla.

It's a very rural area. It's a very poor area. It's an indigenous area of Puebla. There have been people from San Lucas, which is one of the towns in this region, living in Camden for longer than there have been people living in Philadelphia. Another question, why Camden? Who knows? I mean, I don't know the answer to that. But we know, more or less, that the people that ended up in Philadelphia probably came through Camden and were sort of – the way that Mexican migration works, and I mean, you don't need to hear from me, but basically, it's sort of a chain migration.

So at some point, all of these people from this one town settled in Camden, and then they had relationships with people from other towns, who came to Camden, but then were also like, what am I doing in Camden? I mean, one of the stories is the guy – this one particular guy looked across the river and was like, "What is that? It looks sort of nice compared to where we are now." And so went over there, went over --- "there" being Philadelphia, and just settled and then started bringing people over. So, he's sort of like the guy that brought all these people over, and that was in the mid-'90s, mid to late '90s. And he just sort of made it his mission to bring as many people as he could here because there were so many jobs.

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And this was also at the time – and this is really the other question, this is really what I’m really interested in --- was kind of what was happening in the city at this time, right, when a lot of stuff – I don’t know, in my sort of more academic-like look at the thing. For me, this is really a story about Philadelphia and Philadelphia’s economy, and Philadelphia’s economy sort of being in such a position at this point in time that it made sense and it was necessary for there to be this sort of flexible labor, right.

And that flexible labor, once the sort of ball was in motion, it just sort of continued. And so, you had all these – but it’s also not just you had all these restaurants or you had all this construction happening whatever, and these Mexican people showed up and got all these jobs. It’s that those things fed each other. There was sort of an ability for more things to open, and more construction to happen because of the availability of labor. And labor that could – I don’t know. It’s not totally a story about labor exploitation, exactly, but it’s kind of people were able to find jobs here that were paying them enough, and that they were able to do well enough that they were happy with them, even if, you know, from a sort of objective standpoint, they were like some of the worst jobs in the city or whatever.

And so, what you had was you would have a restaurant, let’s just say or whatever, Restaurant X would hire some guy. Let’s call him Juan, right. And Juan would work there for a few months in Restaurant X, you know, since this was like the restaurant boom in Philadelphia, would just, you know, it was growing. There was more people coming into the city again, whatever. And so the owner of the restaurant would say to Juan, “Hey Juan, you work really hard, you don’t expect that much pay. Do you have anybody else like you that will work here?”

And so Juan would be like, “Well, no, but I can get someone here in like a month.” I mean, people would literally call home to their town, their village and say, “Hey, send me all the able-bodied guys in the family and we’ll do well. It’ll be an economic sort of bump for us and our family.” And so, all of a sudden, you have – and to this day, the entire restaurant industry in the city is – and we’re not talking about like crappy restaurants wherever. We’re talking about all the really fancy, nice restaurants in the city. All of this sort of back-of-the-house work is done by folks from our

community.

So that sort of is part of the story of how it happened, and most of those restaurants, I guess, on a sort of just distance level, are closer to South Philadelphia than North Philadelphia. But again, what it's really about is where people started living first. What we don't know is why that happened, but once that happened, then there was a store and then, oh, this is the Mexican neighborhood and then – you know what I mean? It just sort of builds on itself.

So when we started working, there was a couple of stores in the Ninth Street Market and a couple of restaurants. We just did a study last year, and there was 85 stores and restaurants in a five-block radius. So now, it's sort of self-perpetuating.

Interviewer: Right, and now you see other businesses; you know, the barbers and the bike shop –

Peter Bloom: Yeah, for me, the breaking point, this sort of – well, the interesting thing was that when you would talk to people, it was like, “Well, you know, we're not here to settle.” And for the first sort of couple of years of our job – our job, of the work that we were doing, the general consensus from everybody in the community was this is just sort of like a temporary thing and we're all gonna go back at some point. It wasn't like there was some planning, but individuals were gonna – were saying, “I'm only here for a few years, I'm gonna go back.”

Interviewer: And it seems like there were mostly young guys at that time.

Peter Bloom: There was a lot of young guys. We also had a bit of a skewed view of it because the next part of the story after we started teaching English and coordinating stuff and working on the Mexican ID cards and all that, was we linked up with another organization called, Women Organized Against Rape. And specifically, this woman named Cristina Perez, who's a counselor there, and was essentially sent by Women Organized Against Rape to South Philadelphia to work with the Mexican population.

And so she had created this whole sort of like group of women, and what happened was they were using a space at the church, and then the church put us in that space with them. And together we actually created the sort of – what actually became the

organization, and the sort of community center aspect of the organization and the sanctuary part of the organization was together with them.

And so we were actually hearing from women a lot and men. We were sort of attracting the men and she was attracting women. So we, from the beginning, had a very sort of women-focused thing going on, even if maybe women were less of the general total population.

Interviewer: But you were saying – I’m sorry, because I interrupted you, – that sort of change from people saying they’re leaving to people sort of –

Peter Bloom: Well, I don’t know if anyone will actually admit now, but what I was trying to say was that once I saw the barber shop, I was like, “Okay, this is permanent.” You know, like once you start diversifying and using other services –

Interviewer: That’s okay, yeah.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, I mean, once you sort of get – and it still hasn’t totally happened, but once a community starts opening its own businesses, if they’re sort of repetitive – so, like, a Mexican restaurant is a Mexican restaurant. You’re not gonna get Mexican food at a restaurant that isn’t a Mexican restaurant. But you can get a haircut basically anywhere, right. But once a community starts sort of having its own barber shops and –

Interviewer: There’s an appliance store, right?

Peter Bloom: There’s an appliance store. There’s a butcher, right. I mean, meat is meat, right. But you have your own people go – and you know, in some ways – and in most ways, the way that this community has settled is, like, completely and totally identical to the way that all the other immigrant groups in South Philadelphia have settled, with the exception of some of the Asian folks, which has been, like, resettlement and refugees and all that.

But if you look at the Jewish sort of story, the Irish story, the Italian story, it’s pretty much the same thing. And it’s interesting that we’re sitting in a building that was, for many years, a settlement house. And so, we’re basically the new millennium

version of a settlement house, I guess, in some weird way. It's a bit different, but –

Interviewer: This is something that I heard in terms of why the Mexicans were in South Philadelphia, that I heard during the Latino Project, that I think one individual said to Joseph, which was we don't want – there was sort of a – at least in his mind whatever, there was sort of a choice that was made against going up to North Philadelphia because of a feeling of like, "Well, you know, there's no connection to the – besides the Spanish speaking -- culturally there's not –."

Peter Bloom: Totally, no, yeah, right.

Interviewer: – and we don't wanna – basically, we don't wanna move to the ghetto. We wanna move to –

Peter Bloom: Right, but I think – well –

Interviewer: I don't know if that's –

Peter Bloom: Well, there's a few – part of that, I think, is on point, but I think first of all, if you look at where most of the people settled originally here, it was the ghetto. And it was an African American ghetto, which for a lot of Mexican folks, is actually a bit more tricky for them. So, that's one thing. I totally agree with – I mean, there is no affinity and there continues to be no affinity. I say this, and people get angry at me, but there's a sort of upper level affinity. But there's not really much of a connection between the Puerto Rican population and the Mexican population, other than the Spanish.

And that was the issue that we were facing at first was that most of the organizations in Philadelphia say they're basically Pan-Latino, right, but actually they're not, they're Caribbean-based, which is fine and there's nothing wrong with that. But when presented with thousands of people that have very little in touch with that, didn't have much in contact with that – like the concept of Latino in Mexico, it's not – you're Mexican. You're not Latino. That doesn't exist.

So when you come to the United States, people wanna just basically stick you in the same barrel with these other people, who

don't have much – you don't have that much in common or you feel like you don't have that much in common with them and that was really the issue. And the other issue was is that there's a lot of folks in the Puerto Rican community don't speak Spanish – I mean, like they're very sort of quote-unquote “Americanized.” Again, it is what it is. It doesn't – it's not like a value judgment.

But for the Mexican folks, they were sort of like, “I don't get this. This doesn't make sense to me.” But I think whether right or wrong with that vision, I think that it's taking too much of a sort of as if there was a planning element going into this and I don't think that there was. I think that a few people ended up in South Philly by whatever reason and then everyone else basically followed.

And you can sort of trace everyone through – I mean, I think if I spend more time doing this, and it's really interesting and I used to spend a lot more time trying to sort of figure out all the relationships –

Interviewer: Right, like the family tree almost?

Peter Bloom: Yeah, like genealogy of the Mexican community in Philadelphia. Everyone is more or less connected, and then when you have someone from a totally random place in Mexico, it's because their spouse is from this region in Puebla or another region in Puebla or some part of Tlaxcala. Like, there's a few different nodes of people.

There's people here from Guerrero near Acapulco. There's some people here from Oaxaca. The folks that are here from Oaxaca have more to do with a New York and a New Jersey immigration, like near the Jersey Shore and in New York City. I know less about the Oaxacan stuff. And then, there's people here from Puebla from a couple of different places. One is this region with the volcanoes. Another region is near Libres Puebla, which is a city in sort of northwest Puebla. And there's people here from Tlaxcala, which is north of Puebla. That's a tiny state.

But more or less, this sort of band of people – if you look at a map of Mexico, it's kind of like a semi-circle. They have very similar characteristics. Their communities are similar in terms of sort of per capita income and resources and natural resources and sort of the level of indigenous languages being spoken and all that.

Interviewer: When I first moved back to Philadelphia in '99 -- and I moved from Chicago, so I was very familiar --

Peter Bloom: Yeah, nothing to do, right. It's a whole other level.

Interviewer: When I came here, I was, like, "Where are all the Mexicans? Ooh, there's some guys. Is that all?"

Peter Bloom: Yeah, at that time it probably was basically.

Interviewer: How have you seen the community grow over almost ten years now in terms of families coming, in terms of people starting families here?

Peter Bloom: Well, right now, that's kind of the thing. That's the -- I remember talking -- you know, we were young. So, we were 20, and we would talk to other 20-year-old guys, and they're like, "There's no women. It's impossible to get a girlfriend." We were like, "Yeah, we know what you mean." They're like, "No, you don't know what we mean." So yeah, there's definitely more women here. There's more couples. There's a lot more couples, and there's a ton of kids, and there's, like, a ton more on the way.

So yeah, in that respect, I don't wanna sort of overdo the single men here thing, but -- because there were a lot of women here, and there were a lot of single women and there were a lot from these regions of Mexico. It's not uncommon for a woman to do exactly what a man does, in terms of their sort of migration story. So you get a lot of women who were like, "I need to support my family." Like, "I'm the breadwinner. It's me. My brother is younger, and I want my brother to go to school, so I'm gonna come here."

So there was always this sort of feminization of this immigration, I think, to a larger extent than maybe people wanna recognize. Right now, there's still plenty of single people and young people coming, but you definitely notice also families and women pushing strollers and, you know, like a family thing going on.

Interviewer: Yeah, I've noticed that. The other day I was watching one of the kids soccer games over in -- where you're like, oh, it's the whole little soccer league.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, exactly. So, with – we're still not there with the stuff for kids yet, but it's happening slowly. And we just had this big event yesterday around language access in the schools, so you know, at least we're trying to make it a family focus, you know. I mean, we still – there are plenty of single guys that are just here working, whose families are back home, and we work with them sort of through a laborer lens kind of around their jobs and stuff that happens at my work.

But we do a whole lot of – I mean, the sort of pillars of the community are gonna be families and are families. They're the ones who have more of a stake, in terms of what happens here, and they're probably here for longer. And that's when you start from people, and this is precisely when people – sort of their own personal story or forecast of what's gonna happen changes. They have a kid, and they're like, "Oh, I want my kid to finish high school in the United States." So that right there is 18 years of – from the moment of birth.

So once you're here for 20 years, it's like you're here, you know. You've been here for more than half of your life probably, depending on how old you are. So it's sort of like okay, you're here, just stay, basically. And the issue, and then I think the most interesting thing about that is it's kind of like in spite of all these barriers, right, like there – maybe there is on the horizon something, but there has been very little possibility of there being an amnesty. Everyone just lives kind of in an undocumented fashion and it's kind of become normal.

People are more or less able to do the stuff they have to do. There's huge gaps in the things that they can do. Some of that's caused by language, some of it's called by lack of status, but it's sort of like, "This is our community, this is what it is, this is what it's gonna be and it's okay, and we're gonna open doors." People are still sort of – how many people bought houses. People do all kinds of stuff just kind of in spite of the conditions, which I think is really great. But it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be fighting to get a little bit further ahead.

Interviewer: In terms of people settling down – I guess, two questions. One, in South Philadelphia, I feel like I see Mexican folks living everywhere. Are there areas where people are concentrated more do you feel or is it –

Peter Bloom: Yeah, I mean, we're not talking about that huge of an area. Mainly people live on the east side of Broad Street, past like Fourth Street, you're not finding many people, and past like Tenth Street, you're not finding many people. And then basically between like Oregon and Christian, you have people. Probably there's a few like really dense concentrations like near Seventh and Morris that's probably the main – that's always – we've considered that as like ground zero.

Interviewer: Yeah, because the bigger grocery store just opened up at Tenth and Morris, I think.

Peter Bloom: Okay, yeah, that's like sort of on the edge a little bit. Yeah, I mean, there's stuff down here like there's this – it's always kind of a sad story, but right across the street from us here on the other side of Snyder Avenue, there's a Mexican restaurant that's had basically five or six different iterations and had five or six different owners and always goes out of business.

So there's also a very recognized, like, commerce and commercial place, but there's also – there's like a tiendita on Eight and Shunk, right. It's basically, like, has an old Italian sign since the colors are the same, they just like wrote Ventura Family Market on it. You can barely even tell, but it's a Mexican market. So you can go pretty far down.

Interviewer: It's interesting because I live about two blocks, three blocks away from, I think it's called El Maguey, it's on the corner on Tenth and Tasker, really yummy.

Peter Bloom: El Maguey? Right, right.

Interviewer: And they have a place over on the other side of Broad Street.

Peter Bloom: Right. So yeah, so then there's also – and this actually, to some extent, was – there were people on the other side Broad Street for a really long time, and a lot of like single – before the complete and total gentrification of the sort of – I don't even know what to call it. Now what do they call it? I guess Center City South – I mean –

Interviewer: East -- Passyunk Square?

Peter Bloom: No, no, I'm talking – no, no, the other side –

Interviewer: Oh, like Graduate Hospital.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, south of that, what's it called, Center City South now, or whatever. They make up all these ridiculous names.

Interviewer: Southwest Center City, I don't know.

Peter Bloom: There were a lot of people living over there, actually, because it still was fairly cheap and whatever, I don't know, who knows why. But you still find some people over there, and actually the church, that -- the church was drawing some people from the neighborhood. And now they've actually started a mass at Tenth and Dickinson, which is actually the parish where most people live, but there have always been people living like – you know, I remember going to visit people 22<sup>nd</sup> and Fitzwater --- like, places that are now a lot more expensive.

But at the time, ten years ago, five years ago, were still kind of whatever, cheap enough, dicey enough, whatever you wanna call it that it was like, you know, a sort of legitimate option. So that's probably not the case anymore, I would say. Most of those people have moved over this side. And honestly, now, just like everyone else, they're kind of getting pushed into different neighborhoods in other places.

Interviewer: Yeah, interesting that you brought up Tenth and Dickinson, Annunciation. I went to the Padre Pio Festival, which I didn't realize was sponsored by Joey Vento. We had to process down to Geno's and to the blessing of Joey Vento. But I also noticed – and I had spoken to Father Gary over there about some other things just connected to my neighborhood, and I was interested to see that they were having a Spanish Mass.

Peter Bloom: Let's put it this way: Joey Vento is a huge benefactor of the church, and the Italian community has been the traditional bedrock, but the people that are left in the Italian community that go to Mass are, like, average age 85 years old. That church is basically a funeral, I mean, it's like a funeral parlor. Unfortunately, it's really sad. So all of a sudden, you have all these Catholics in the neighborhood again, and it's kind of, like, they were basically rebuilding the church, and keeping the church

alive because of the Mexican population.

So as much -- it puts the administration of the church in a really weird position because they still traditionally get a lot of money from Italian-American immigrants, most of whom, at least the ones that go to that church, are not very sympathetic to the Mexican community, which still to this day, boggles my mind. But it's really like -- that, for me, is the most sort of upsetting thing that happens in this neighborhood. It's just the animosity that -- and it's mainly Italian-American. I mean, like it really is very -- and it's not just Joey Vento, it's like a whole -- I mean, it's just kind of like, c'mon, you know, what's the deal here?

Interviewer: And it is, I think, even, you know, there's so many parallels between the Italian and Mexican communities in terms of faith, in terms of -- even just stories -- the stories of immigration and sort of how people were regarded and even the jobs that people did --

Peter Bloom: But the interesting thing that there could be some like actual class-based animosity, but that's not even the case either. There's no competition, specifically, the Italian-American community on who they are and what they do more or less, but there's absolutely no competition. It's just pure rhetoric. It's just a totally rhetorical animosity. The Mexicans don't care. I mean, they don't even look at it like that, but they're like all of a sudden, why are these people -- why are they saying this about us, you know, why do they hate us, this and that. I don't have an answer, I don't know, I don't get it.

But it's just really sort of disgusting, nationalistic, white -- it's a very like, you know, feeling of being white also, and it's just kind of like, what, you know, how twisted are you getting the story here.

Interviewer: It's funny, it's a whole other discussion -- in a way, it's a whole other discussion, but I think you do have these sort of -- almost like the last group in, and the group who's like bumped up from a previous perception --

Peter Bloom: But I don't think the Italian-American community has -- that's not even in question. I mean, there hasn't been an issue for 30 years --

Interviewer: Yeah, but I think people do harbor sort of some deep-seated

feeling. You know what I mean? Like there's these internalized feelings, especially all the older people in the community remember being on the bottom of the ladder in a certain way.

Peter Bloom: But if you're like 80 years old, who cares?

Interviewer: I know.

Peter Bloom: No one's taking anything away from you. No one's trying to do that. I don't know, I can't – I don't assimilate it, I can't get it. So any way, I mean, that's an interesting issue and part of what happens in the neighborhood, you know, this sort of dynamics of all the different sort of people that are here.

Interviewer: I think there are all these things that you see on the surface that I find interesting. Like, one thing was when I first got here and there were very few Mexican restaurants, and I would go have pho and you'd see the Mexican – there'd be Mexican guys in there eating pho, which, you know, makes complete sense. But in terms of the relationship between the Asian and Mexican community, a lot of Mexicans work in Chinatown or in factories –

Peter Bloom: I don't know. There's definitely more affinity there, but the language stuff, it makes it essentially impossible for like anything to happen. I mean, there's, you know, people have friends and their buddies, but it's not like a deep communication going on for the most part. So yeah, I mean, we don't have any like problems with the Asian community. We don't necessarily have anything like that we're doing together, which isn't totally true from like an organizational standpoint, we're doing some things, but a sort of community-level, and it's also a slightly different neighborhood, a slightly different settling pattern.

Interestingly enough, most of the house owners, most of the owners of the houses where people live in are Chinese, which is a whole other thing, which is very interesting as well, and actually, somewhat problematic sometimes. But in terms of the sort of like Cambodian, Vietnamese populations that are pretty strong, I don't know, it's a pretty limited contact I would say. Everyone just kind of does their thing. People don't really get in each other's way. But, you know, it's gonna be the kids, it's gonna be the next sort of generations that they're gonna create all those interesting links.

Interviewer: Right. Yeah, because I guess now – you know Cynthia Alvarez? She's with the school district and she's been up in North Philadelphia. She's an administrator, and she's gotten – her family is one of the oldest – one of the first Puerto Rican families to settle and they first settled in South Philly, in parts of South Philly which are really no longer South Philly. But she's gotten transferred down to South Philadelphia now, she's very excited.

Peter Bloom: Great, where is she?

Interviewer: I think she works with – she works in the administration –

Peter Bloom: The regional office?

Interviewer: – sort of regional office, but talking about sort of the growth. She's just like, "Thank God, at least the school district, hopefully, is trying to do something now getting more Spanish language services." Especially since, I guess, I'm sure you have people who are school age, who are coming here from Mexico, and then now you also have kids who are starting to have pretty much, you know, grown up here.

Peter Bloom: Well, this issue is – we just had this big event yesterday at Annunciation Church, which is basically – we got the chiefs from the school district to come in and make public commitments to the community about marshalling more resources for bilingual sort of staff and other things. Yeah, it's a big issue for us for sure.

Interviewer: Correct me if I'm wrong, the only organization in South Philly is Juntos –

Peter Bloom: Yes and no. I mean, we're the only organization that operates on a level that's sort of like part of civil society kind of thing, which we don't have much of a concept of in the United States. But yeah, we're sort of like an NGO in the sense of like we sort of operate in that world with other NGOs. There are other organizations that are really important and that have happened, but are not sort of – they have a much different sort of mission and vision of stuff.

So one is, for instance, this bilingual Head Start program, which is really interesting. It's run by this woman named Dolly O'Gorman, who's an educator, Mexican, and they're running a bilingual, bicultural Head Start program down here and it's like great. And

so all these little three, four, five-year-old kids get to sort of learn about U.S. stuff and preserve the Mexican stuff and it's really cool.

So that's an example of stuff that's happened. There are dance groups. There are all these other things that are technically organizations, but they're not sort of like multi-issue, I guess. We're the only multi-issue – yes, we are.

Interviewer: I know about the dance group, whose name it is –

Peter Bloom: Well, there's like three dance groups, Ollin Yoliztli, there's Fuego Nuevo, there's Tonaci Qualique. Those actually started in our –

Interviewer: Okay, and the Aztec one is the –

Peter Bloom: Ollin Yoliztli, but they're all –

Interviewer: Okay, they're all Aztec –

Peter Bloom: Well, how do you even define Aztec? I don't know, yeah. They're pre-Colombian dance groups.

Interviewer: Are there fraternal organizations or groups – I don't know if it's just because so many people are from the same area –

Peter Bloom: Some of that stuff runs through us. So we do some of this hometown association organizing, and then there's other sort of hometown associations or fraternal groups. But they're pretty rudimentary and basic and aren't operating on a big level like they do in Chicago or LA, where you have these like federations of hometown associations that have political power and thousands and thousands of members.

Interviewer: But have a little more history.

Peter Bloom: Oh yeah, no. It's not like it's not gonna happen, it's just sort of bubbling.

Interviewer: Well, it's interesting, too, because again, like going back to the Italian community where so many people in the Italian community also came from the same village. You know, you had like people being like, "Yeah, my whole block was all from the same town." And then you have – still, you know, you have the Messina Club,

the –

Peter Bloom: Yep –

Interviewer: – you have the Circolo Ricreativo Sikania, and all these different little things that are still puttering along.

Peter Bloom: That's happening here slowly. Like there was this Carnival, but there's a traditional celebration of Carnival in Puebla, actually. That's where it started. And there was like a parade this spring like down pass Passyunk Avenue to Washington Avenue. It was like hundreds of guys had brought their traditional costumes from Mexico.

Interviewer: How did I miss that?

Peter Bloom: I don't know how you missed it. It was really awesome. But that was a big deal because that was totally self-organized. Like, we had nothing to do with that, nobody else had anything to do with it. Someone helped them get the permit, but they – and people spent loads of cash getting their costumes here, but it was important to them. So it was really funny because right when it went in front of Geno's, like, everyone like danced a little bit harder. It was pretty funny.

Interviewer: I remember going to the Holy Thursday, I guess, or the Good Friday procession at – (*St. Thomas Aquinas*)

Peter Bloom: Yeah, and now there's like a whole Mexican contingent, yeah.

Interviewer: Are they still doing the –

Peter Bloom: I guess. Yeah, I don't know. Yeah, I think they probably are. Well, this year the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe is gonna happen in the cathedral. They're moving it to the Basilica. Yeah, because it doesn't fit in St. Thomas any more, so that's kind of like a big step up, I guess in some weird way.

Interviewer: Going to the Cathedral.

Peter Bloom: Well, everyone's like, "Oh, it's at the wrong time." Everyone has some complaint about, but I'm like, "Well, at least everyone will fit."

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you a little bit about this thing with – sort of when you're talking about the hometowns and sort of the relationships – I know I read something about those that are sort of establishing these initiatives going back and forth and the relationships there.

Peter Bloom: Yep, we've done a lot of work with this town San Mateo Ozolco, which is one of these main towns. And we've done some other work with another town called Oje Metepc, which is like a tiny village. The San Mateo stuff is much more well known and better documented and has a longer and richer history kind of. Yeah. Basically, we just started noticing that a lot of people – we always made a point to ask people where they were from just to sort of get an idea, you know.

I mean, people would always say, "I'm from this town in Puebla," like everybody, like two-thirds of the people, I mean, like some crazy number. So we just kind of started, you know, naturally have more sort of – started forming more relationships with people from this town, and started learning more about their town, and why people were coming here, and also listening to people tell us, "Well, I'm going back in two years."

So we would sort of say, "Hey, you know, might you be interested in doing X, Y or Z? Coming to this rally or whatever." And they were just like – nobody says anything. People don't say no, really, but they don't show up. And so it kind of made us think, well, why would that be the case, right? We know people are suffering, we know people are in need of some sort of relief, but they don't participate. Why not? Okay, they're scared of this or that, but what we also found was that people are like, "I don't have a stake here. I'm going back."

And then we started saying, "All right, well, if you're going back, what are you going back to? And why did you come here in the first place? And is what you're going back to, and the place that you left in the first place, are those the same thing? Has there been a change, has your town or your village or your whatever, all of a sudden, you know, grown to such an extent that you're gonna have a job when you go back?" Because most people are like, "You know, I'm here to raise money to build a house or to send my whoever to school or to like pay for medicine for my mom."

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But the minute they go back, they don't have an income anymore because they're going back mainly to rural areas that have just been totally devastated by free trade and before that like structural adjustment programs in Mexico or whatever. Having a three-year sort of plan here is just not sort of – it's wishful thinking, basically. And so we were like, "Look, it's not ideal for you to be here, right." This particular migration, elements of it, are not – they're not voluntary, people don't have any other option so they come here.

Some people come here because they wanna come here, and so it's important to kind of be able to distinguish that, but it is important to understand that, for the most part, these areas in Mexico don't exist apart from the migration that they experience. They're not sort of – they're no longer autonomous regions. They're just kind of totally connected and totally dependent upon the contingency of people from the region, who live in the United States, and that's sort of problematic.

And it's mainly problematic from a human standpoint. It's kind of like you're forced to basically put your life on the line because you can't come here legally, and then you're sort of existing in this like shadowy world. And it's kind of like that's what young people in these towns have to look forward to, and it's kind of like on some level, they like getting out of the town, which is like these little dinky towns. And if you're a young person, you don't really appreciate all the whatever, but nevertheless, you know, it's a human rights' issue, right. You shouldn't have to risk your life and then be exploited in order to sort of live out of the course of your life. It shouldn't have to be like a necessary element of your life, right.

So we started talking to people about, "Well, you know, what are you going back to, and why is this place the way that it is?" And certainly, then we started analyzing the sort of globalization issues and all that, which as a small group of people, it's not that much you can do about. But there are very local things that we can do stuff about. And so we started engaging people on that sort of – "Let's work on your hometown from here, as much as we can so that when you go back, there's something there for you, for the rest of the people there. Let's get people there involved. Let's just get people thinking critically about not only what's happening there and what's happening here, but the relationship between two things

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and how those things operate together.”

So we did some real basic stuff. I mean, some of it started --- “Let’s celebrate the town’s saint” --- and so we’d do that as a way to raise money or as a way to sort of do, you know, whatever. Just make people feel like they’re part of something. And then we would also – we started helping folks raise money, so we would get in touch with the town government, and we’d say, “Hey, are there any projects that you’re working on that you need help with?”

The idea was to kind of try to break out of just the individual remittances being sent, and say, “What are the ways that we can do something a little bit more collective and harness?” So you have towns that one day were just kind of these dinky towns in Mexico, and they had some people in Mexico City that would sort of remit money back. And then like one day, we have like thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars a day flowing into these towns, but through individual transactions.

And so now the housing stock is super nice, yet there’s still no economy. I mean, it’s like nothing actually changed except the sort of facades of the buildings. And so the question for us was kind of like how can we help these people take advantage of the millions of dollars a year that are being invested in their town. And even if it’s just like a small sliver of that, that some of it get put towards infrastructure, that some of it get put towards investing in human capital, that some of it get put towards economic development. Because otherwise, it’s just a totally lost generation, and it was lost for no reason.

Like, people’s quality of life hasn’t gone up, that’s the thing, that’s the issue. It’s like people’s lives have changed, but their quality of life hasn’t really changed. They have consumer products. They have stores in the town, but who cares? That’s not actually – that’s not a fundamental change of anything. Also, it’s all just built on these remittances that can come or go, and there’s plenty of studies that have been done to say if this sort of – like, you know, all the young people are here.

If all those young people stayed even though there’s not enough jobs or whatever in Mexico, if they stayed and tried to just figure something out, it’s likely that the town would be equally as

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successful or whatever than if everyone had come here and just started sending money back because it changes the game. I mean, the social relations are changed and all kind of stuff changes. I mean, the sort of – we're talking about indigenous towns that for thousands of years had sort of like collective things going on and a lot of that has been lost due to the migration. It's been traded in for something else.

And so we're not trying to go back to some golden past or whatever, but the idea is to say, "Look, let's at least get something out of this, so that there's something to show for all of this." And so we had a project where we helped build a high school because we were finding that the young people would graduate middle school and come here. And so the idea was like well, all right, they're probably gonna come here anyway, but let them at least come here with a high school education. It's better. Help them defend themselves. It'll give them options in the future.

And then right now we're working on an interesting project around corn prices, and how we can work trans-nationally to increase corn prices in the town, which is what the main source of economic sort of movement in the town is that isn't remittances. And so we're trying to sell the corn here through the network of immigrants here and their connection with the restaurants here for a just price so that –

Interviewer: And it's a special kind –

Peter Bloom: Yeah, it's organic blue corn that they're growing in the town. It's like not transgenic or anything.

Interviewer: Right, right, it's just the sort of thing that people want –

Peter Bloom: Yeah, people wanna buy, right. No, it's great. It's a slam-dunk. You just have to get all together.

Interviewer: In terms of people who are indigenous like what is the percentage roughly? Are there many people who are coming here who don't speak Spanish?

Peter Bloom: Yeah, not that many. There's a few and there's been some stories about the folks that basically – there is some people with pretty low literacy rates in Spanish and who prefer to speak in their

indigenous language, but it's not worth over-emphasizing that. Again, percentage versus people that identify – I mean, for me, all of the people in the Mexican community are essentially indigenous. I mean, they don't look any different than the people looked 5,000 years ago in that sense.

A lot of stuff has been lost over time, which has to do with Mexico and durity in Mexico and all this stuff. The people from Ozolco, from San Mateo, that's like the most indigenous of the parts of Puebla. You're talking about a town, then two kilometers away, there's another town. In this town, they still speak Nawat, and then the other town they don't really or the old people do, whatever. But I don't know what percentages are. It's really hard to say.

The people from Oaxaca, most of them, speak indigenous, but it's not – they speak it at home or they speak with their parents. It's not sort of like – most of the little kids, I would say, are not learning indigenous languages, which is actually upsetting in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: How large would you say the Mexican community is here now

Peter Bloom: In South Philly or in the city?

Interviewer: Well, in both, if you could – I know it's hard to –

Peter Bloom: I have no idea, but somewhere between 30 and 50,000 people.

Interviewer: In Philadelphia?

Peter Bloom: In Philly and probably two-thirds of that is in South Philly. But then you start thinking about where would they all fit? It's hard to – it's difficult. I mean, it's definitely upwards of 30,000 for sure, and part of that is based on the Consulate's ability to sort of look at patterns of how many documents the press has in, and also just kind of – just real rudimentary calculations. The census and all that is not helpful, unfortunately, but it's a fair number of people.

Interviewer: Going back just a little bit of how people got here. I mean, in terms of migrant workers and people who were working on in Kennet Square, is there connections there –

Peter Bloom: Nothing, no connection. I mean, pretty definitively no connection.

Interviewer: Are they from different areas?

Peter Bloom: Um hm.

Interviewer: So, the people here pretty much were coming to – originally coming to the city, coming to Camden, or coming to Philadelphia –

Peter Bloom: Some were from New York and moved down from New York.

Interviewer: Moved down, yeah, because I know there was a bump in migration after 9/11 –

Peter Bloom: Right, which everyone's like, "Oh, it's because of 9/11." I mean, the economic downturn, this and that. Basically, from what I understand, was that the market, the labor market was somewhat saturated in New York and the cost of living was really high and was going up. And that's really what it was about. It just got too expensive for people to live in New York.

Interviewer: And then once there's enough of a population in Philadelphia, people actually know –

Peter Bloom: Right, and there's also the – all of these places are established first by an internal migration and then by an external migration. Once that sort of a few – it's like 20, 30 families are here that's enough of a magnet for it start becoming a hub. And there were jobs and it was cheap and, therefore, people came because they could and it made sense.

Interviewer: So do you see the people from Kennet Square at all moving in Philadelphia now?

Peter Bloom: Not really. It's really not. It's a totally different thing.

Interviewer: Totally different population, yeah. What about the folks in Norristown?

Peter Bloom: That's a bit more connected. And again, still, Norristown has even been around for a bit longer, but there's a lot of people from Michoacán. Like it's these weird slight differences. There's some – and a lot of people that are here have lived in Norristown for a

little while, but it's also more or less not that related.

Interviewer: Just out of curiosity, how did the population start --- do you know how people started in Norristown --

Peter Bloom: Norristown, I don't. I mean, I know very vaguely, but I don't --

Interviewer: That's interesting though because, of course, in Norristown, it's largely Italian as well.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, they just swallow the Italians.

Interviewer: Swallow the Italians to irritate them.

Peter Bloom: No, I don't know. It's such a weird place to even try to, like -- Norristown of all places.

Interviewer: Anything else that comes to mind to talk about, in terms of just looking at South Philadelphia and the community feeling? Did the people have any concept of South Philadelphia at all? In terms of the way that other people in the city ---

Peter Bloom: Yeah, no, they're aware. People are aware, but it's also like their South Philly is also -- but it's also representative of them because now it's just like the hub. I mean, when we started working on this stuff, it was like there was no concept of a Mexican community that wasn't -- it didn't exist. It didn't exist for Mexican people. It didn't exist for other people, and now, it does. And for other people, it like this sort of outward appearance of this and that. People know where the Mexicans in the city live. It's just okay, you know where they live. It's easy. Just like people know where the Italians in the city live.

So, South Philly is as much what they've contributed, I guess, as much as it is the sort of traditional stuff that's been there. And that also on some level is kind of slowly dying out and isn't -- you know, like go to the Italian Market, it's over half immigrants, and look at the part of the Italian Market from Washington to Federal, it's all Mexican basically. I mean, it's like --

Interviewer: Yeah, that's such an amazing little strip there --

Peter Bloom: Because that entire thing was blighted ten years ago. It was

abandoned and now all of a sudden, it's not. And so I think the concept of South Philly, it's being reinforced, but it's also changing, right. And I think that's cool, that's a cool thing. But do people have a concept of South Philly as the traditional South Philly? A little bit. I think they know. They're like, "Oh, yeah, cheese steaks and all that crap." I mean, whatever, you know, but they're also – it's also like I go to the Italian Market, but it isn't the Italian Market for me, it's the Mexican Market or the Ninth Street Market. It's not – they experience it in a different way.

Because not only that, most of the people that work at the things are Mexican now, so like even if they're going to like – what's the place on the corner of Ninth and Washington, the big green one, Giordano's. There's like a bunch of Mexican guys that work there. So if you're buying, you're just dealing with the – you know, it's not – and that happened like the authentic South Philly experience, whatever that is anymore. But you are, at the same time, you are having an authentic South Philly experience.

Interviewer: Right, and whatever that was because the Ninth Street Market used to have those –

Peter Bloom: It was all kinds of –

Interviewer: And you know, talking to – I was talking to this really interesting woman, who goes to Annunciation, but was a teacher for a long time and is completely, you know, excited about what's happening in South Philadelphia now. But she was talking about, you know, the changes, you know, like the whole Jewish community that used to be here that's no longer here.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, the person that does our printing is next door, Huberman Printing and Mrs. Kravitz and yeah, I mean, she was just telling me about all the – she was like how many Jews used to be here and all the synagogues. Have you ever been to the Khmer Buddhist Association Temple on Sixth and Marshall, which is basically in this old synagogue? It's really incredibly interesting because they still have these frescos.

Interviewer: Yeah, I haven't been side, but yeah.

Peter Bloom: It's really awesome. It's like, whoa, this is crazy. But I think there is a specific sort of myth about South Philly -- that, like, most

popular culture myth about what it is, and I think that there is some – there's an element of understanding of that in the Mexican community, I guess, if that's kind of what the question is. Is there this deeper understanding of these histories of migration to South Philadelphia? No, probably not.

Interviewer: Any further observations or any ideas about the future?

Peter Bloom: Well, I mean, I think, you know, part of the future has happened already in the sort of settling, and I think it's the kids now. It's all about the kids, and it's kind of what happens with them, I think really determines what happens in the community. With that said, and something I've said earlier, this sort of feeling like we're always gonna be undocumented, that's not gonna – something's gonna happen.

As cynical as I am, there's gonna be – there's too many undocumented people in the country. It just isn't – it's crazy. So that's gonna change a lot of stuff, a lot. I don't know how. It's hard to figure out how much being undocumented is holding people back. But one day, we're not gonna be a community of illegal immigrants any more, you know, as seen by the outside world. We're gonna be just like, you know, and sort of a lot of the stuff that people wanna say are just not gonna be the case any more. So, I think that's gonna have a big impact on the community.

Interviewer: I would think it's gonna empower people even if it's just in small, everyday ways that have a cumulative affect. You know, where people don't fear being talked to or, you know, a fear being speaking up or –

Peter Bloom: Right, so that – I mean, that's like, you know, the dream in a weird way, is just be legal, to just be – to be decriminalized kind of, and be able to live our lives with dignity and everything. Hopefully, that's what's on the next horizon. At the same time, there's this huge economic crisis right now that is felt and like we, as an organization, I'm like better than Ben Bernanke. I know when there's an economic crisis because I hear it from people, who work in the lowest, most fragile sectors of the economy, and they're basically the canaries in the coalmine.

And six months to a year ago, people were like, you know, "It's

not as easy to get a job now, we're not getting paid." And when people aren't getting paid, when that sort of trends up, it's because there's pressure on the person paying them, economic pressure.

Interviewer: When people are just being –

Peter Bloom: Right, people get screwed all the time, but when it like surges up, there's a reason for it. So yeah, I mean, a year ago – and also you see people sending few remittances back home – it's a very good thermometer for the economy. So with that said, it's tough. I mean, this community exists and is here for economic reasons. There's all these other anchors that they have now, but you know, if that's not firing on all cylinders, it's tough.

I mean, we're talking to people, "I've been out of work for six months." If you're undocumented, you're out of work for six months, it's a big deal. I mean, these people, you know, the folks that were working whom I'm talking about, they'll work, I mean, and even they'll work in conditions that most other people won't work in. And if there's still no jobs after all that, there really probably are no jobs. I mean, it's very likely that there's nothing to do and that's scary.

It's scary not just for our community, but for everybody else. So I don't know how much that's gonna factor into the long-term future of the community, but it's definitely an issue right now. Our community's under a lot of pressure right now just like everybody else is. But there's no safety net and that's really the issue. What happens to people who don't have a safety net, who don't have savings, who don't have –

Interviewer: Well, that just made me think of two other questions. One was, I mean, I don't know if this is something that I remembered hearing just about some of the surge of migration happening, and how that was also based on demographics in Mexico in terms of the younger population demographic. And I was just curious, is that something that is dying down at all, do you think?

Peter Bloom: I don't think so. Whatever those sort of demographic projections are, it's still pretty much going on, I think. I think Mexico's still a young country, very, very young predominantly.

Interviewer: And the other question was just I know a lot of folks who are

coming here --- they're working in restaurants, they're working construction. Are some people who are coming here skilled laborers in certain ways?

Peter Bloom: Well, that's kind of a tricky question.

Interviewer: I guess, are there skills that people are coming here with, in terms of being tradesmen? I'm coming at this because I had heard from – I think I heard it from Joseph when I bought my house – of hearing about guys who were – Mexican guys who were plasterers, which is something that you don't have a lot of people know how to do any longer. But because they do more of it in Mexico, now there are these guys who know how to plaster.

Peter Bloom: In Philadelphia?

Interviewer: In Philadelphia.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, yes.

Interviewer: You know, what are some of those things? Again, that for me, is an interesting link to the tradespeople who came here, a lot of them were Italian, who were skilled in certain areas in building and construction.

Peter Bloom: Yes, I would say the answer is yes, there are people. There's also plenty of people that are just sort of itinerant laborers that have no skills whatsoever, but there are plenty of guys that are incredibly talented. And who essentially help a lot of these small contractors operate because even the contractors don't know how to do it, and they're hiring these guys who do.

Interviewer: They know how to do things that people don't know how to do anymore.

Peter Bloom: But they also know how to do electricity and plumbing and stuff that they're not supposed to do, but they still do it. And so if you look at the way a lot of stuff gets built, it's getting built by Mexican guys and then sort of certified by the official plumbers and it's fine. It's all fine, it's all totally legit and up to code and everything and they're building it up to code. They're not supposed to be building it.

Well, actually, construction is something that people talk about the most and there's studies on it and this and that. But even the restaurant industry is a professional industry, and a lot of these guys actually have experience working in restaurants in Mexico. And so actually come as skilled restaurant --- and cooks and -- but even just in the service element, like waiters, but they don't speak English and they can't ---

And if you talk to restaurant owners and if you talk to the owner of Tequila's, who's like kind of the big cheerleader of all this, there's a very, very high level of professionalization in sort of restaurant work that actually comes here, even though it comes as undocumented labor. It's guys that have experience. It's not like some college kid, who may be getting a Ph.D., but doesn't know shit about working in a restaurant versus these folks who have maybe ten years of experience.

So yeah, no, there's definitely skills here. It's not like the sort of like Nigerian thing where it's like doctors driving taxicabs quite as much, but there are some people here who are nurses or pharmacists. It's not that many though, but of course, there's --

Interviewer: Yeah, there's people that are primarily coming from -- at least here are coming from rural backgrounds.

Peter Bloom: Yeah, but again, some of the rural areas have experience of migration to the larger cities in Mexico for generations.

Interviewer: Is there a population of people who are coming from Mexico City?

Peter Bloom: Oh, I would say it's like 40 percent of the people are from Mexico City.

Interviewer: -- have gone to Mexico City

Peter Bloom: Yeah, generations ago.

Interviewer: But they still have --

Peter Bloom: Yeah, half of the population here is Mexico City. It's not as interesting to talk about them, but yeah, no, definitely.

Interviewer: Right, but that seems like that would also be an important

component of the community in that you have – not everybody who’s coming here is coming from the village and going, “Oh, look at the big city.” You have people who are coming who are urban, and so they’re able to, you know, they know how to go down the subway and cross the street.

Peter Bloom: Sure, sure, definitely. I mean, there’s this other theory that Philadelphia was just kind of like a bit more calm for people and they liked it. They liked living here because it was more sort of nice.

Interviewer: When I was working with the African immigrant community that was a lot of what you heard --- that people would first go to New York and then they’d go –

Peter Bloom: “Jesus.”

Interviewer: Yeah, and then they’d go to Philadelphia and they’d be like, “Oh.”

Peter Bloom: “This is nice.”

Interviewer: Well, thank you Peter.

Peter Bloom: You’re welcome.

**Duration: 80 minutes**

**Journeys South**

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Interview with Peter Bloom

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