

Motivated by Her Two Children, Mayra Lopez Learns To Be an Activist



“It was a light that just popped up and I thought, ‘Hey, maybe I can be doing this. Maybe I can help other parents.’”

Mayra Lopez has gone from being one of only three parents at a Head Start meeting to a leader of efforts to make her Oakland neighborhood a better place to raise children. While her story is a very personal one, it also communicates a lot about the process that people living in challenging neighborhoods go through to change their lives and their communities.

By Bill Wong

When Mayra Lopez’s oldest child, Roberto, started in the Head Start program located near the family’s apartment in Oakland’s struggling Lower San Antonio neighborhood, she became an instant parent activist.

She started attending Head Start’s monthly meetings and was startled to learn that she was one of only a handful of parents who bothered to go to those meetings.

“The first time I went, I only saw three other parents there,” Lopez said. “It really shocked me. I just couldn’t believe that. There were two classes of 32 chil-

dren per class, but only four parents were there.”

This was in 2001, about three years before Lopez had ever heard of the Annie E. Casey Foundation or its *Making Connections* comprehensive community-change initiative. *Making Connections* is trying to help lift up lower-income families and their children in Oakland’s Lower San Antonio neighborhood and nine other American cities.

Since her exposure to *Making Connections*, however, Lopez has felt a significant change in her life as a parent activist and concerned resident leader.

“I don’t know how else to explain it. Our responsibility is not just to say, ‘OK, go to school.’ It’s to step in there and see what’s going on.”

—Mayra Lopez

Her first inkling of the Casey Foundation was when she was hired to help at the registration desk for the Foundation’s three-day meeting in Oakland in the summer of 2004. She remembers meeting Ralph Smith, Casey’s senior vice president, and Frank Farrow, who manages *Making Connections* nationally.

She didn’t think much or know anything about what Casey did and why it was in Oakland, a city of about 400,000 people with a working-class history, a reputation of having significant pockets of poverty and crime, and a highly diverse population.

Lopez was a volunteer at the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) center at the San Antonio Community Development Corp. However, she didn’t know that *Making Connections* supported San Antonio CDC, nor that it was part of a coalition that was using the tax assistance site to help more low-income residents get their Earned Income Tax Credits.

In January 2005, she heard much more about the Casey Foundation and *Making Connections*, almost too much to digest at once. Two other *Making Connections* Oakland-related opportunities converged on her.

One was an invitation to join a new Neighborhood Grants committee of *Making Connections*’ Oakland (MCO). The other was an invitation to be one of the local *Making Connections* representatives at the Casey Foundation’s Resident Leadership Network “cross-site” convening in Baltimore. This invitation came as a result of her volunteer work at the VITA center.

Now, almost three years later, after attending six resident cross-site meetings, after taking two Resident Leadership and Facilitation Trainings, after going on several Casey-sponsored peer visits and topical meetings, Lopez says that her life as a parent and community activist has changed dramatically.

“Before, my community work wasn’t so organized. I didn’t know how to put things together,” she said. “Just from going to that first convening and sitting and listening to what other sites were doing, it was a light that just popped up and I thought, ‘Hey, maybe I can be doing this, maybe I can help other parents.’”

In fact, she had already been helping other parents prior to her involvement with *Making Connections*. After her initial shock at seeing only three parents at the Head Start parent meeting she attended in 2001, she asked the teachers why more parents didn’t show up. They didn’t really know, despite repeated outreach efforts.

At that first Head Start parent meeting, she noticed another parent staring at her. “She didn’t understand the meeting. It was

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“I was having hallway talks with parents. They always threw me to the front. ‘You ask the teacher.’ I asked why. ‘Because you are the one who knows better English than we do.’ They always felt the language was intimidating for them.”

—Mayra Lopez



Lopez says that the training she has received through *Making Connections* helped her “develop the skill of not being afraid to ask [people] questions, whatever position they have.”

in English. I turned around and asked, ‘Do you need help?’ She said [in Spanish], ‘I don’t understand English.’

“I switched my seat and sat by her and started explaining to her in Spanish what was going on in the meeting. After the meeting, she told me this is the reason why parents aren’t here, because they didn’t understand English.”

From that point on, Lopez, a 27-year-old Mexican immigrant who is bilingual, served as a volunteer Spanish-language translator for the other parents whose grasp of English was slim.

Her work paid off. She translated Head Start documents that went to parents. The Head Start administration surveyed parents on what services they wanted. Invariably, one of the highest priorities was translation, something Lopez provided. The parents also said they wanted information about health care for children and women, as well as information about nutrition.

The Head Start administration asked La Clinica de la Raza, a Spanish-speaking clinic in the neighboring Fruitvale neighborhood, to provide speakers to talk to the Head Start parents about birth control, cancer exams and other health topics.

Lopez told other parents, “You guys asked for these things, so now you have to come. Don’t ask me for something if you’re not going to do it. They said, ‘OK, OK, Mayra, we’ll be there.’ The next time we met, we had 12 people. That was better than having three parents.

“We had one of our teachers watching the kids. We had snacks there. So the parents looked happy. It wasn’t the biggest turnout, but to me, it was satisfying to spend a couple of hours translating documents or just calling people around the neighborhood who have resources for them.

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With that kind of self-taught organizing, Lopez built on her community work with the help of *Making Connections* Oakland and Casey Foundation trainings and meetings. During this evolutionary period in her life, her community work melded with her highest personal priority—to be a caring parent of 9-year-old Roberto, a fourth grader at Garfield Elementary School, and his younger sister, Lesley, who is an 8-year-old Garfield third grader.

She liked spending time at Head Start as a parent volunteer, while both Roberto and Lesley got pre-school experience. But when Roberto transitioned into kindergarten at Garfield, a block from their apartment, she got a rude awakening.

Unlike the welcoming atmosphere for parents at Head Start, the elementary school was more forbidding, or so it seemed to her. “When it came time to go to Garfield, I couldn’t believe I had to leave my child and go home and not be able to see what goes on in class. It was hard for him too. Right away, I had like a million questions for the teacher. ‘What’s going to happen? How are they going to have lunch?’”

She was reassured after an open house for Garfield parents answered her questions. Her son’s new teacher told Lopez how important it would be for her son if she became involved at the school and said Lopez was welcome to visit her son’s class anytime.

That entrée established and reinforced Lopez’s leadership role among mostly Spanish-speaking parents who also had children in Garfield’s kindergarten class.

“I was having hallway talks with parents. They always threw me to the front. ‘You ask the teacher. You ask the principal.’ I asked why. ‘Because you are the one who knows better English than we do.’ They always felt the language was intimidating for them,” Lopez said. It also helped that Lopez knew Garfield well because she herself was a student there in her childhood.

Because of her bilingual skills and willingness to help her neighbors, Lopez gets calls from elderly monolingual Spanish speakers. “There are people who come to my house, elderly people. I read their bills for them. I make out checks. They come here, or they’ll call my mom. ‘Is your daughter home? I have a problem with my bill. Can she call the company?’”

“I help people with setting up appointments on email. This couple is going on a vacation for their honeymoon, and I made reservations in a hotel, I got them a map, I got them everything. They’re set up.”

Her involvement in *Making Connections* since early 2005 has meant a great deal to Lopez. When asked if *Making Connections* has been responsible for some or all of the changes in her life over the past two-plus years, she said, “I would say all of it. I feel like the foundation has invested so much in me personally

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because of all the trainings that they’ve offered and that I’ve been able to attend.

“When I don’t know people very well, I am very cautious about asking for stuff. They are helping me develop the skill of not being afraid of asking questions of people, whatever position they have.”

At first reticent and cautious, Lopez has opened up at resident cross-site meetings and at MCO and San Antonio Neighborhood Network (SANN) meetings.

“The various activities [at the resident cross-site meetings] had us interacting with the staff and other people from the sites. In talking with them, I find out they are people like me. They are struggling with the same issues as I am,” she said.

“And maybe they have overcome one of my issues and I ask them for advice. Or maybe I have overcome something that they need. We give each other advice. The feeling they gave me was, ‘You’re one of us now.’

“You feel warmth in those rooms. I don’t feel like I’m going to a convening. I feel like I’m going to my family reunion. Those convenings that are designed by residents for residents are the best idea I’ve heard anywhere.”

Back home in Oakland, Lopez has used her national *Making Connections* training to help her in her community work. She started attending more meetings and got involved in the MCO process of creating a resident social network. Her

involvement in that process temporarily derailed her growing participation with MCO.

This process began shortly after Lopez had taken the first Resident Leadership and Facilitation Training in Oakland. That training stimulated her growing activism. “I got the feeling that I could really start moving things,” she recalled. “I kept asking [the *Making Connections* Oakland staff], ‘What do you want us to do?’ The answer was always, ‘What do you want to do?’

About halfway into the 10-week process to deepen MCO’s resident engagement through a resident social network, Lopez became frustrated.

“After all this training, I want to practice it. I want to be active in the community using what you just taught me. And then this thing comes where we were going to have sessions about bringing on the network.

“So many things were thrown out there. I said, ‘Hold on, time out. You’ve built up all this training for me to do and then you want me to spend the next couple of weeks sitting down and deciding, should we do it? What are we waiting for?’”

She was told there was a process that needed to play out. Lopez replied, “This is good and all, but this is not my thing. If you tell me right now, ‘I need five people to interview,’ I will go get them for you. But don’t have me sitting looking at data.

“As much as I learned that data is important, so that you’re not struggling with

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your work, and you’re not going about it the wrong way -- but guess what? I live here, and I know what people are yelling, ‘This is what we need.’

“It’s really frustrating for me to hear in year four or five (of *Making Connections* Oakland), ‘Should we do this? Should we do that?’ I said, ‘You figure that part out and call me when you’re ready to move the work and actually start doing things and I’ll be right here.’”

And she *was* right there when the process of planning the San Antonio Neighborhood Network (SANN) was complete. She rejoined MCO at that point and became a Community Builder, one of a handful of Lower San Antonio residents who have been hired to recruit members for the network and do other outreach work.

She is also using facilitation skills she has learned at various Casey trainings to chair one of the MCO work groups, Community Outreach.

She has even used skills she’s learned through Casey trainings to facilitate meetings at the welding company where her husband works. This company has mostly Spanish-speaking employees, and Lopez has volunteered to facilitate management-employee meetings to help improve internal communications.

Lopez has also become even more involved at Garfield Elementary School. She is part of the Garfield Complementary

Learning Council, which is a partnership among Garfield, the school district, *Making Connections* and other partners to help improve test scores and attendance. She is also a voting member of Garfield’s School Site Council.

The past two plus years have been both a learning and growing time for Lopez as well as a time for her to get to know the Casey Foundation. Before 2005, however, she wasn’t sure she could trust the foundation, or any other outside organization.

Trust is important to Lopez. “I’ll say it: I don’t trust people. There have been different situations when I was younger that made me distrust people, who said, ‘You can do this, you can go to that place.’ They don’t keep their word, or they may pass the message on differently where my words get misinterpreted, and I end up getting into trouble.”

As a young Garfield student, she got involved with an organization that promoted recycling. Her volunteering continued for several years. The organization promised to help students from low-income households like hers go to college. “They built these expectations on how the kids can do stuff,” Lopez remembers. “All of a sudden, poof, they left with no warning.”

That kind of betrayal left a bad taste with Lopez. Cultural differences compound the trust gap. “It’s very hard for Latinos to open up,” she said.

“Two years ago, when I started, I didn’t know where the money [for *Making Connections*] was coming from. I couldn’t trust them. I didn’t know what they wanted. Again, it’s my issue of trust. Why would anybody come in here and invest money?”

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This is true even when they are asked to respond to a survey, Lopez believes. “Maybe you don’t look like me. I don’t know if you understand where I’m coming from. I always put myself in that spot when I want to ask people.”

As a Community Builder, Lopez has conducted financial services and early childhood education surveys in her neighborhood. She asks, “Are they going to feel comfortable? Is the question going to be clear? Is it going to be suitable for them?”

Now, the barrier between her and the foundation has apparently been removed. “It’s been a positive learning experience for me with the foundation,” she said. “Two years ago, when I started, I didn’t know where the money was coming from. I couldn’t trust them. I didn’t know what they wanted. Why are they picking my neighborhood to come to? Again, it’s my issue of trust. Why would anybody come in here and invest money?”

“I kept asking, ‘What do you want us to do?’ And they said, ‘Whatever you want.’ It was frustrating for me because I wanted to know, ‘Just tell me what is the foundation’s interest.’”

She has learned that foundations like Casey make commitments for a certain period of time. “So at least I know not to get the newcomers to have big expectations because we’re getting ready to do the transition. We need to start thinking about what we want to focus on, what we want to keep in the community. The foundation

has helped me understand that process of prioritizing and thinking about what could be possible changes.”

One ironic benefit for Lopez in her connection to *Making Connections* was meeting some neighbors who are also doing volunteer community work. The irony is in where they met—Baltimore, some 3,000 miles from the Lower San Antonio neighborhood.

She actually met one neighbor, Goldie Simmons, as both were preparing to fly to Baltimore for their first resident cross-site meeting in February 2005. Because Lopez hadn’t ever flown cross-country (she has flown to her native Mexico several times), she was paired up with Simmons, who also was getting involved with MCO for the first time.

“When we started getting tickets and hotel reservations, Goldie shows up and that’s the first time I met her, and she’s only a couple of blocks from me. I didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t know what I was doing.

“But we partnered up. When we got to the convening, I met Sandra [Beal]. I didn’t know what Sandra was doing. She’s two blocks from me. She’s at Garfield and I was at Garfield every day.”

In one way or another, the three remain friends and active with MCO and the new San Antonio Neighborhood Network.

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The Lower San Antonio neighborhood has been Lopez’s home for almost her entire life, but not long ago she thought of moving because of persistent crime. One incident literally landed at the front door of her family’s modest two-bedroom apartment.

“There was a time when things got very frustrating around here. The safety was just unbearable. We had a big amount of shootings, like twice a week.

“The worst situation I had was when some young man was running from the alley. He had gotten shot in the leg, and he stood right here, outside my door. He was banging on the door for help.”

Lopez opened the door and saw a young man with “a big hole” in him, something her son Roberto saw. He had the wherewithal to reach for the phone and to tell Lopez to call 911.

Galvanized by that scary incident and by the sporadic gunfire and criminal activities nearby, Lopez and her family decided to stick it out with her parents, who live in another apartment in the same building, and her neighbors.

They took it upon themselves to form an informal neighborhood watch group and even chipped in money to clean up the immediate surroundings, paint the fences and fix the outdoor lights.

The Lower San Antonio is where Lopez wants her children to grow up. “I can’t just tell my kids, ‘I’m going to take you



Lopez first connected with Sandra Beal, a neighbor who also spends a lot of time in Lopez’s son’s school, at a national meeting in Baltimore.

out of the school.’ That’s the only school they know. I know it’s hard for kids to jump from school to school.

“[Lower] San Antonio is such a diverse culture and they’re going to have friends from all the cultures. My kids have African-American friends, Asian friends and Mayan friends, all kinds of friends, and I’m glad because I didn’t get that exposure.”

And she vows to continue her parental involvement and her activism to make her neighborhood a better place to live, even after the Casey Foundation reduces its investment in the Lower San Antonio.

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Reflections on Mayra Lopez’s experiences

Some of what can be learned about change from Mayra Lopez’s personal story is quite simple, such as the importance of overcoming distrust based on past experience. But what could otherwise be a somewhat abstract bullet point comes alive when it comes from the context of a person’s story. Here is one reflection on some of the bullet points that are brought alive by Lopez’s story:

- **Trust is a huge issue for many people who grow up in tough neighborhoods because their trust has often been undermined.** Lopez’s story is especially poignant because of her deep disappointment: she thought she had been promised a college education by a local organization, but that organization “left with no warning” before it could make good on this promise.

“I’ll say it: I don’t trust people,” Lopez said. Indeed, one of her initial reactions to the Casey Foundation making a big investment in her neighborhood was, *“I couldn’t trust them. I didn’t know what they wanted. Why are they picking my neighborhood to come to? Again, it’s my issue of trust.”*

- **The connections with other residents, both locally and nationally, can help build trust and confidence.** Lopez began trusting *Making Connections* after she began connecting with other

residents who were also involved with *Making Connections*.

Initially she says now that she was “very cautious.” But she learned to open up because the national *Making Connections* meeting included many activities that *“had us interacting with the staff and other people from the sites.”*

“In talking with them,” she said, *“I found out they are people like me. They are struggling with the same issues as I am.”* She began to take—and give—advice about these issues.

“The feeling they gave me was, ‘You’re one of us now.’ You feel warmth in those rooms.” She says it is like going to a family reunion. *“Those convenings that are designed by residents for residents are the best idea I’ve heard anywhere.”*

- **People who share similar interests and live very close to each other may never meet.** It doesn’t require going to a meeting 3,000 miles away to connect with and learn from other resident leaders. One of the people Lopez met on her way to a national *Making Connections* meeting was someone who lived “a couple of blocks from me.” Another was someone who was often in the school that Lopez’s son attends.

These people obviously shared many of Lopez’s interests in improving the schools and the neighborhood, but

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despite living so close, they had never met. “*It was really weird to go thousands of miles across the country to meet people in my neighborhood who were doing things just like me.*” This would seem to underscore the value of bringing people together into networks.

- **The value of leadership training for residents is not just the skills they learn but the confidence they develop.** Lopez says that she learned a lot from the training she’s experienced, such as how to facilitate a meeting and put together an effective agenda.

But what has really changed is her confidence in herself. “*The trainings have also helped me break the ice with people in higher positions. Before, I would feel intimidated by anyone who had a higher education than me. You hear all these terms, college words. Just tell me how it is. Don’t try to go around it, putting fancy words on it.*”

The training has “*helped me develop my skills to stand up and ask the right question.*” She even stood up and asked a question of Casey Foundation Senior Vice President Ralph Smith. “*At the first meeting, I never would have asked Ralph Smith a question....*”

Now she is confident enough to not just ask questions but to give advice. “*My recommendation to [Casey] is to be more clear on what you might be able to fund [in the next three years], and make sure that everyone is hearing it,*

not just people like [the local staff]. Say it to us.

And say it in a way that residents like her will understand it. “*So just pretend we’ve never heard about the transition. Explain to us the whole theory or whatever it is. Be clear to us so that we’re not working behind each other’s backs. Let’s be on the same page and let’s have a mutual understanding....*”

Lopez said that, through the trainings, “*My confidence built up. I can talk to you one-on-one and say, ‘Give me an answer because, if you don’t, I’m going to push.’*”

But Lopez didn’t just learn how to push. She also learned how to work with others in her community. “*I know important people in the community. I know they are here, but I didn’t know they cared about our community. I am now more aware of how elections can change our community and what change can mean to us.*”

- **Language can be a huge barrier to engaging residents and parents.** This seems obvious, but not to everyone, like the teachers at Lopez’s Head Start, who told her they didn’t know why only three parents showed up at a parent meeting. When Lopez talked in Spanish to one of the parents who did come, “*She told me this is the reason why parents aren’t here, because they didn’t understand English.*” With Lopez’s translation help, more parents began participating.

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For Lopez, this experience seemed to give her more confidence about her skills being useful.

- **The process of building a change initiative can be a big barrier for many potential resident leaders.** As she became more involved in *Making Connections* Oakland, Lopez was asked to be part of a 10-week process of designing a local network of residents, something that could help people like her and her neighbor connect without having to go to a national meeting. But the process was extremely frustrating for her.

“After all this training, I want to practice it. I want to be active in the community using what you just taught me.” Instead, she was attending meetings about building the San Antonio Neighborhood Network and deciding the future work of the local *Making Connections*.

“It’s really frustrating for me to hear... ‘Should we do this? Should we do that?’ I said, ‘You figure that part out and call me when you’re ready to move the work and actually start doing things and I’ll be right here.’”

This is a bit of a paradox: initiatives like *Making Connections* strive to involve residents in basic decisions such as how they should be using their resources. But some potential leaders simply don’t want to be part of processes like this. Finding the right roles for various resident leaders seems crucial.

“We have people who like data and who like to do process. That’s fine and dandy, and I applaud those people. But we’re the feet.... I see myself more reaching out...to the community.”

“We’re on the ground. We can move around. We can bring communities in.”

- **Residents often have little knowledge of programs and initiatives operating in their neighborhoods, even those with which they have some direct contact.** Lopez worked for a few days for a national meeting of the *Making Connections* initiative, but she never understood what the local *Making Connections* was doing or how it was connected to her volunteer work at a local tax help center. *“It was confusing,”* she remembers now, *“because I couldn’t put it together....”*
- **Connecting with residents who have a connection and commitment to their neighborhood is crucial,** especially if the work of an initiative like *Making Connections* is to be sustained.

One lesson from the data about *Making Connections* communities is that a huge percentage of families move. But someone like Lopez, who grew up in the San Antonio neighborhood, has a deep commitment to that neighborhood that has so far kept her from moving.

This commitment was tested by a wave of crime near Lopez’s apartment, one that landed at her doorstep

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when a young man who had been shot knocked on her door. But Lopez and a few other parents decided to stay and work at making the neighborhood safer.

“I got frustrated. I can’t believe we’re going to let these people run us out when we’ve been here for years. So I got together with my neighbors and instead of taking the easy way out, I said, ‘You take care of that side, my mom and my other neighbor will take care of this side.’ Kind of like a neighborhood watch, but we did it on our own.

“So we chipped in some money and we repainted the fences, we fixed the parking lots, we fixed the lights outside. The lady in front and her sons keep up with the front over there. My dad and me and my neighbors, we take care of the trash.”

She says that this commitment won’t change. “Yes, definitely I will be going on with my work. My investment is my children. I grew up in this neighborhood. I think there’s a lot of richness and culture in this neighborhood. This is a good place for my kids to grow up. It is my investment for them to grow up here.”

—Reflection written by Tim Saasta



Her children’s education is what got Mayra Lopez to take the first step toward becoming a community leader. This girl is at a farmers’ market held at her son’s school, Garfield Elementary.

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This is one of a series of reflections, stories and reports about the work of *Making Connections*, a long-term community change initiative supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. They are written by The Diarist Project, a new approach the foundation is using to document and learn from this initiative. Diarist publications are available at: www.DiaristProject.org. For more information, contact Tim@CharityChoices.com.

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