



Recruiting the Heart, Training the Brain

The Work of Latino Health Access



America Bracho, MD, MPH

Ginger Lee, MPH

Gloria P. Giraldo, MPH

Rosa Maria De Prado, MFT

and the Latino Health Access Collective

Preface

by Robert K. Ross, MD

I first met the remarkable America Bracho and the good folks at Latino Health Access in 1999, and what a treat it was. At the time I was about to wrap up a seven-year stint as Health and Human Services Agency Director in San Diego County, and poised to embark on a new career in health philanthropy. The half-day site visit taught me more about the future of public health than any graduate course I had taken, book I had read, or article I had reviewed. In fact, the visit began the process of opening my eyes to the new public health – years after receiving an Ivy League education, completing a pediatric residency, and running two major-sized urban public health departments.

Here's why, and here's how. Under America Bracho's stewardship, Latino Health Access has emerged as the leading pathfinder in community-based public health practice and community empowerment. Those of us who are engaged in the battle for health equity and the reduction or elimination of health disparities tend to talk a really good game about "community empowerment" and "community engagement" – but we often fall short of reaching meaningful heights on both fronts.

Latino Health Access begins every health journey and every health battle (and make no mistake, addressing health inequity routinely involves battle) with the idea of participation. Neighborhood residents, parents, young people, the elderly, the poor, the non-poor, immigrants, citizens, butchers/bakers/candlestickmakers – are respectfully but assertively reached out to and engaged. It is as if the members of Latino Health Access have discovered that there is something fundamentally therapeutic

about civic engagement – the path to health equity and healing begins with participation in the process. Key words and phrases soon follow: leadership, outreach, strength, training, learning, commitment. The chapters of the book you are about to immerse yourself in will challenge you to think deeply about these concepts.

There is an adage that community organizers and youth organizers often utilize, that goes something like this: “Nothing about us, without us.” America Bracho and LHA have mastered the art and science of community health by putting community first and foremost. This is the first critical lesson about the new public health: community participation is not a box to be checked; it is, in fact, the fuel that drives the car on the road to health equity. Data and research help with understanding how far the car must go, but the fuel of community participation and empowerment is what gets it there.

While LHA did not invent the *promotora* model of community health improvement, they darn sure make it work here in the U.S. Their approach is the quintessential “assets-based” model; every participant has something meaningful to bring to the table, and every cultural tradition or practice is a potential lever in advancing towards a state of wellness. I recall a story related to me by several *promotoras* during one of my visits there.

It seems that several of the LHA *promotoras* – during the course of their community visits in diabetes and chronic disease management – were picking up clear indications of domestic violence occurring in several of the homes in a certain neighborhood in Santa Ana. They also observed that suspicious bruising increased after a weekend featuring a big boxing match on television, as the sport of boxing is cherished by many Mexican and Mexican-American men.

The *promotoras* had deciphered the epidemiologic trail of these domestic violence incidents: a big boxing match is scheduled for television, a group of men agree to join one another at a bar or someone’s home, beer and liquor flow freely, and inebriated men later unleash frustrations on their partners or spouses at home. The *promotoras* engaged one another and devised a simple approach to begin the process of addressing domestic violence as a local public health problem.

The intervention in this case was for LHA, working with local leaders and involving a church, to host the next televised boxing match, making it a family affair featuring children, families, tamales, and alcohol-free beverages. This simple but brilliant approach demonstrated a family-friendly, culturally anchored alternative to the boxing-beer-brutality problem – a disruptive innovation of sorts – and its success also paved the way for the *promotoras* (and *promotores*) to develop a men’s support group on family violence. This approach was embraced by the women in the community because a campaign encouraging battered women to “just dial 911” on their husbands was not the desired outcome here – particularly when matters of immigration and poor relations with law enforcement tainted this approach as a viable strategy.

As a former public health official, I can say with assurance that no one who has ever worked for me in a local public health department would have conceived the idea of using a televised boxing match to catalyze a community-based domestic violence prevention strategy. Such is the wisdom of community.

Recruiting The Heart, Training the Brain is a powerful reminder that addressing inequality in our nation – in this case, through a health lens – indeed requires the discipline of data collection, science-based analysis, and carefully constructed prevention and early intervention strategies. But even more importantly, it calls upon those of us in health and public health settings to engage, to listen, to be willing to look into someone’s heart and allow their story to be told. As a mentor of mine advised me early in my public health career: If you are embarking on moving a health strategy or policy forward, “no numbers without stories and no stories without numbers.” Engagement and storytelling by marginalized and disenfranchised communities not only provides meaningful data, but empowers health as well: health activism, health advocacy, and community health organizing



Dr. Robert Ross and America Bracho at the Latino Health Access Gala in 2014

are unleashed. What soon follows are more and safer community parks, healthier food options in stores and schools, and health-promoting policies in city, county, and regional plans.

America Bracho tells us how the road to health equity in our nation begins with meaningful community engagement, trust building, data gathering, and action oriented power building. Welcome to the new public health for our nation.

Robert K. Ross, MD
President and CEO
The California Endowment