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The Four Amigos: Uniting Cultures and Crossing Boundaries

Seattle's 98118 zip code contains more diversity than any other zip code in the United States. Despite this, Seattle also has a history of geographic segregation and institutional racism. In the aftermath of Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, four individuals joined forces to fight against the city's discriminatory policies and represent their respective minority groups in Seattle's community sphere. Bob Santos, an Asian American, Larry Gossett, an African American, Roberto Maestas, a Hispanic American, and Bernie Whitebear, a Washington Indian, became known as the "Gang of Four" or the "Four Amigos" as they worked together on issues that affected all minority groups. They discovered that as a united force they could enact powerful change, and created important spaces and programs which have lasted even to today.

Bob Santos was born in Seattle in 1934 to Filipino and Native American-Filipino parents. As a child, he spent his time in the International District, discovering the diversity of cultures there. In 1942, as his Japanese classmates were sent to internment camps, Santos and other Asians in his school wore badges that said "I am Filipino" or "I am Chinese" in order to protect themselves from discrimination. Santos joined the Marines in the Korean War until 1955, and then returned home to work for Boeing. During this time, Santos began to work with the Catholic Interracial Council, and this is where his activism began. Along with the influence of his Uncle Joe Adriatico, a union supporter, Santos began to fight for the rights of minorities and against housing discrimination in the International District. He took over the Saint Peter Claver Center in the Central District of Seattle and at this point met Larry Gossett (Chesley "Santos").

Gossett also grew up in Seattle, attending Franklin High School and then joining Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA). With that program, Gossett visited Harlem in New

York City where he began to see a new side of the African American experience. He also learned about the Black Power movement and began to follow Malcolm X, calling himself a Revolutionary Democratic Socialist. Back in the Pacific Northwest, Gossett helped create the Black Student Union (BSU) in Washington and Oregon. He attended University of Washington and pushed for reforms in admissions, staging a sit in at the UW president's office. The demands were met and admissions of minorities shot up (Merlino.) When two girls at Franklin High School were suspended for wearing afros at school, Gossett staged another highly publicized sit-in at the school to the shock of many in Seattle who thought racism was a Southern problem and not a local one. "Nothing rattled Seattle like that sit-in at Franklin did," he said ("Larry Gossett"). Gossett himself was arrested on the same day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and sparked a discussion with the other black prisoners about the importance of King's legacy, believing education was more influential than violence. He was released soon after (Santos). When the principal of Franklin still refused to recognize the school's BSU, Gossett searched for a place to house their meetings (Reynolds.) He brought them to the Saint Peter Claver Center to meet, and here they met Bob Santos. The protesting students had already had an encounter with another member of the Gang of Four, Hispanic leader Roberto Maestas.

Maestas grew up in New Mexico, but after losing his parents, he ended up on the migrant trail working as a field worker until arriving in Seattle in 1955. He spent roughly a year attending Cleveland High School, where a supportive teacher sparked within him a love of the Spanish language. He was unfortunately forced to drop out (Santos). He graduated from what is now Seattle Central Community Center at the young age of 19. While busy supporting his family, he attended University of Washington, graduating with a major in Spanish and a minor in journalism. He became a Spanish teacher at Franklin High School. As tensions grew in the face

of the protests led by Larry Gossett, Maestas was the only teacher to speak with the protesters in person. He received a fellowship at the UW with the newly created Latin American Studies program and attended graduate school there beginning in 1969 (Chesley “Maestas”).

While Santos, Gossett and Maestas intersected in the events at Franklin High School, Bernie Whitebear too began to speak up. Whitebear was born in 1937 on the Colville Indian Reservation to a Native American mother and a Filipino father. After leaving the reservation, his parents’ marriage fell apart, and Whitebear lived in poverty and instability for much of his childhood. Whitebear began to see the poor conditions that many Indians lived in as he grew up in Inchelium. After briefly attending the UW, he began salmon fishing in the Puyallup River. Indian salmon fishers in western Washington were treated terribly by competing white sports fisherman (Santos). Whitebear began to fight for the fishing rights of Indians, staging “fish-ins” with the support of celebrity names, and eventually succeeding in winning 50% of the catch for Indian fishers. He also stopped the Colville Indian Reservation from terminating itself, protecting their land and tribal identity (Madsen). He helped found the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation (UIATF) and led it for many years, becoming more and more interested in the idea of pan-Indianism and the importance of unity in order to enact change (Santos).

The Four Amigos would truly begin to work together as they took part in two separate occupations. The first, at Fort Lawton, spawned national media attention and paved the way for occupations in the future. The military planned to surplus Fort Lawton and turn it over to the City of Seattle, but Whitebear, along with other activists, planned otherwise. In the year preceding, Native Americans had occupied Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay Area attempting to reclaim it as their land. Inspired by this, Whitebear wanted Fort Lawton to build a cultural community center. Organizing at Saint Peter Claver Center, the United Indians People’s

Council planned an occupation. They infiltrated the fort on March 8, 1970, setting up teepees and demanding a Native American center, university, school and restaurant. Military police removed the occupiers, despite the presence of press and supporters waiting outside the front entrance. Whitebear was arrested along with seventy-one others (Santos).

The variety of minority organizations still meeting at the Saint Peter Claver Center joined in supporting Whitebear's quest. Larry Gossett enlisted thirteen other members of the Black Panthers to join the occupiers and met Whitebear there (Santos). After four months of occupying and being removed, the city finally agreed to negotiate, and in 1972 they gave the occupiers twenty acres of land to build a cultural center, which they would eventually call the Daybreak Star Cultural Center in Discovery Park (Madsen). Forty non-Native American organizations signed letters supporting the People's Council, which was soon transformed into the UIATF (Santos).

Maestas had seen the success of the Fort Lawton takeover and the occupations at Franklin. With this in mind, he decided he would stage a takeover as well. He planned to turn the abandoned Beacon Hill Elementary building into a community center. In October 1972, he led around fifty others into the building. Gossett and twelve others joined him, and Maestas called Santos for his support as well. Santos began to lobby the Seattle Human Rights Commission, and with their help, members of Maestas' group formed "El Centro de la Raza" or "The Center for all Races." Gossett was the only non-Chicano to sign the Articles of Incorporation which formally organized El Centro. However, negotiations were still slow, and although City Council had agreed to lease the building, Mayor Wes Uhlman still refused to sign off. So together Maestas and Gossett both staged another occupation at City Hall, and after five hours of protesting, the mayor finally agreed to meet. Soon after, El Centro de la Raza won their battle and Beacon Hill

Elementary turned into a center that provided ESL, childcare and food bank services to the community (Santos).

By 1973, Gossett and Maestas had formed the first Third World Coalition and debated issues that affected minorities worldwide (Santos). All four men helped create Making Our Votes Effective (MOVE) to mobilize votes among minorities and specifically for Charles Royer in the 1977 mayoral electoral race (Merlino). Santos continued work as the executive director of the International District Improvement Association (Inter*Im) and fought against the King Dome planning to be built right on the edge of the district, out of fears it would increase crime, pollution and gentrification (Chesley “Santos”). Gossett helped with the creation of the Central Area Motivation Program (CAMP) which supported at-risk youth and provided services for the unemployed in the area (Merlino).

Together, the four men led their respective groups. Santos with Inter*Im, Maestas with El Centro, Gossett with CAMP and Whitebear with UIATF all began to work together to improve conditions for people of color city-wide. Santos spoke of the system, “The city would have a little pot of money out there, and each of us, Inter*Im, CAMP, El Centro, and United Indians, we’d bring our troops to City Council Finance Committee Meetings.” In an unparalleled display of unity, Whitebear’s Indians played drums, Santos’ people shared hum bows, Gossett and his group proudly wore Black Power t-shirts, and Maestas testified in Spanish (Reynolds). They discovered that together they could be far more effective in pushing for change. “Because of the show of unity, the local civil rights movement became very very successful in bringing in mainstream adults in minority communities, the church groups, the mix of people in the church groups, students,” Santos said (“Bob Santos”). They decided to present a unified front on all issues, defying the city officials which tried to pit minorities against each other (Santos).

The four respective Executive Directors formally organized themselves into the Minority Executive Directors Coalition of King County (MEDC) and began to coordinate on local and international issues. They lobbied and testified on issues that affected communities of color and multiple other organizations joined the fight (Santos). In 1984 they supported Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign and his multicultural "Rainbow Coalition" (Reynolds). They were invited to visit Japan in 1992 in a tour to help improve US-Japan relations. They caused a stir wherever they went, providing information about the effectiveness of grassroots democracy (Santos).

Bernie Whitebear died in 2000 from colon cancer. Five years later, the Gang of Four would be given the prestigious national Bridge Builder's Award for their working in improving Seattle communities. In 2010, Roberto Maestas died from cancer as well (Santos). Together, the Gang of Four dramatically altered the faces of leadership in Seattle and created long lasting groups for minorities that had been virtually invisible in city policy before. They contributed to almost every major civil rights movement in Seattle since the 1960s. The display of unity they demonstrated was and is vitally important to the state of race in this country. As many mid-century civil rights movements moved in parallel motions but not in unison, they stood out as a unified force that bridged the gaps between races. By working as a group, they succeeded in achieving policy change that allowed minorities the rights they deserved and the benefits they needed. The Daybreak Star Cultural Center continues to support the local Indian community. All four of their respective organizations serve Seattle to this day. Bob Santos, Larry Gossett, Roberto Maestas and Bernie Whitebear were enormously important to the progression of Seattle as a whole in race relations, and their legacy carries on today.

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