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Hostos Community College: Battle of the Seventies

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ABSTRACT

A personal historical account by the Coordinator of the Coalition to Save Hostos Community College during the 1975–76 New York City financial crisis. This 9-month, South Bronx-led community struggle began with traditional peaceful civic advocacy and then developed into a civil disobedience movement armed with aggressive militant tactics. The collective nucleus was composed of students, professors, professionals, community groups, constituency groups, and individuals supported by a citywide network. The campaign resulted in the longest takeover of an academic institution in the history of New York City, and emergency legislation that saved the first Spanish-English bilingual college in the history of the United States. [Key words: radicalism, Puerto Rican politics, South Bronx, student movement, social movements]

* There are many names not mentioned in the text of this story that played important roles in saving Hostos, too many names to mention. This piece is dedicated to you.

Editor's Note: CENTRO Journal respects the way individuals write their names. We have checked the spelling of the names for all those mentioned in the essay. Their names are spelled accordingly.

From Harvard to the South Bronx

In 1974, I taught at Hostos Community College, at that time the only bilingual college in the United States. Its main building was an old tire factory, the size of a storage warehouse at my alma mater Harvard University. The college was located on 149th Street and the Grand Concourse, the Champs Élysée of the Bronx.

Over two thousand students, mainly Puerto Ricans, attended the college. There were single mothers, students from every Latin American community, and the Afro-American and Caribbean population comprised 20 percent of the school. For many of the older students, Hostos was the last stop, the final hope, *la última parada* for transfer students who had failed at other institutions, neighborhood folks attempting to get off the welfare lines, brothers and sisters and ex-cons participating in their last opportunity to make it.

I was 25 years old—an underpaid, overworked adjunct professor teaching two courses in the C.U.N.Y. system. Upon graduation from Harvard Law School, I received a John Whitney Fellowship to conduct a first amendment prison project during the day. The South Bronx was now my working base.

The South Bronx: Myths, Values, and Culture

The South Bronx community was known as the poorest neighborhood in the United States. From the late seventies into the eighties each presidential election usually involved a candidate's pilgrimage to Charlotte Street, the worst block in the United States. Inevitably, the candidate would promise to rebuild the area, a vow soon forgotten after the elections. Even John Paul II gave the neighborhood his papal blessings.

I had heard many stereotypes describing the South Bronx. Wild gangs such as the Savage Skulls were roaming the streets at all times ready to rob, steal, and hurt you. I was told to watch out for junkies, who supposedly surrounded every corner. They were searching for weaknesses, which would give them the courage to rip you off. They further told me that the community was flooded with welfare recipients who spent all their time buying Cadillacs, playing the numbers, drinking, producing children and deceiving the system.

I found the South Bronx nothing like it had been described to me. The neighborhood quickly adopted me, treating me like a son... a hero.... I was that rare specimen, a Puerto Rican graduate of Harvard Law School.

My oral Spanish was awful, but my understanding was fluent. I had heard Spanish all my life from my mother Alicia, but I was always hesitant to speak it, even though in many ways my upbringing was Latino. My father Ramón played the music of Tito Rodríguez, Orquesta Aragón, Pérez Prado, and Lucho Gatica, and I loved my rice and beans, *pasteles*, and other dishes of Puerto Rican cuisine. But until the age of twenty, I had always identified myself with my Afro-American friends and community. I was black and only black.

At Hostos, I suddenly received a crash course about my entire “Rainbow culture,” and about my language. I was initiated into the Puerto Rican rank and file. At Harvard, I had become an experienced organizer/activist in the anti-war movement. I gave numerous speeches in Washington D.C., Boston Commons, and New York City. I was a student/organizer for the Puerto Rican group La Organización.

At Hostos, while teaching courses such as “Law and Social Change,” I witnessed the evolution of students who began to learn about the history of social movements (civil rights, labor, women, etc.). They were receptive to the new politics and began to interpret the laws that challenged their past experiences.

Save Hostos Community College Committee

Early in the 1975–76 school year, rumors began to circulate that Hostos Community College was on a list of institutions to be closed. A small group of professors, counselors, and students began to meet in order to plan a response. Only five years old, Hostos had nonetheless produced success stories. Born out of community struggle, its existence had always been tenuous.

Enemies of bilingualism had attempted to abort it even before its birth. Mayor Abraham D. Beame and other powerful elected and appointed officials decided that Hostos had to be sacrificed to satisfy the ravenous appetite of this monster that had invaded New York City, called the fiscal crisis. At that time, the budget at Hostos Community College was only four million dollars, but there was a fiscal crisis; it was a time for budget balancing... a time for cutbacks.

Hostos Community College organizers included professors Gerald Meyer, María Barbosa, and Leopoldo Rivera; counselors Félix Ruiz, Carlos Gonzáles, and Wally Edgecombe; students Efraín Quintana (president of the ex-prisoners organization), Nilsa Saniel (a single mother of three challenging the welfare system), and ex-Vietnam veterans Victor Vásquez and Amos Torres. The group circulated a simple petition demanding that Hostos Community College be kept open. As experienced organizers we understood that for many staff and students this was their first act of resistance.

We collected over five thousand signatures and organized a letter writing campaign. The Save Hostos Committee included community organizations such as United Bronx Parents and St. Ann's Church. We informed South Bronx elected officials of our concerns. But many of us felt it was absolutely necessary to wage a creative, disruptive, civil disobedience campaign to force Mayor Beame to change his decision. Powerful political forces had little compassion and respect for the Puerto Rican/Latino community. They expected little or no resistance to the closing of the old tire factory. We understood that our potential army, consisting of students, staff, and community, had little experience and were fearful in confronting the enforcers of the political order.

The battle had its David vs. Goliath dimensions: a few people from a community that was from the poorest per capita income area in the nation were engaged in a struggle against Mayor Beame, a mostly hostile City Council, the City University of New York, and the Emergency Financial Control Board. No one believed that Hostos would survive the blow. Other institutions facing closing or significant budget reductions were public elementary schools, libraries, hospitals, fire and other essential services.

The official rhetoric consisted of the following: Everyone had to sacrifice, or the city would go into bankruptcy. Everyone had to join in the effort to save the city. But the powerful, the upper- and middle-class strata, faced no such reductions. Mayor Beame was offering Yankee Stadium over sixty million dollars for renovations, a figure more than fifteen times the yearly budget of the only bilingual college in the United States.

Coalition to Save Hostos Community College

Around December 1976, there were strong rumors that Hostos would be merged with Bronx Community College, a bigger campus with numerous buildings. As a bilingual college, Hostos would be eliminated. The first demonstration, worked out by the Save Hostos Community College Committee, was held in December 1975.

Over one thousand protesters marched through the streets distributing flyers, asking people to join our campaign. The march ended at the Chase Manhattan Bank on 149th Street. Thousands listened to speakers condemning Mayor Beame and all the powerful political interests orchestrating the cutbacks. As MC/speaker, I gazed at the crowds from the platforms and felt the stirrings of a new force being born in New York City politics.

The first march created great enthusiasm, for it was an action unlike any ever seen in the South Bronx. Shortly after, the Community Coalition to Save Hostos was born as an expansion of the original committee. It had no relations to the Hostos administration, included community participation, and was more militant. I was selected as Coordinator. The Save Hostos Committee had members of the administration who reported all decisions to President Candido de León, who was negotiating behind the scenes for the Presidency of Bronx Community College merger. We distrusted him. When the time came to become more militant, it was impossible to plan with the administration represented. Thus, the Coalition was born. Despite the split, many members of the Save Hostos Committee supported us. They continued pursuing more traditional efforts, such as lobbying and letter writing.

My tasks were many, but perhaps the most difficult was keeping all the groups together and united. In the South Bronx there were so many divisions among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, South Americans, blacks, and Latinos, Afro-Americans and those from the Caribbean, men and women, younger students and older students, minority and white professors. Only by working together would we be successful in keeping Hostos alive.

One of the worst effects of oppression is that the oppressed, humiliated by the power structure, often turns around and does the same. The Puerto Ricans criticize the Dominicans and vice versa. Psychologically there is always someone less human who receives the blame. The oppressed Latino or black male looks down on the female, justifying his domination by using irrational theories of inferiority. The Afro-Americans make fun of Latinos unable to speak English, or ridicule Caribbean blacks for having an accent. The phenomenon of one group attacking another is both so devastating and so entrenched that it enables the powerful to maintain the status quo. All through the campaign, this issue emerged. It was our job as leaders to help overcome these problems.

Consensus Building

Consensus building was not an easy task. The original Save Hostos Committee had been dominated primarily by white professors and staff. The division between the Community Coalition to Save Hostos, coordinated by myself, and the Committee to Save Hostos, led by Professor Gerald Meyer of the Communist Party, continued throughout the entire campaign. Jerry Meyer had been the resident radical professor/advisor to young black and Latino students before a group of young Latino professors came to Hostos and took his place. He was used to having everyone agree with him. He felt very threatened by young Puerto Rican radical professors such as Leopoldo Rivera and myself. The coalition that broke away from the Save Hostos Committee, composed of professors and staff (mostly black and Latino), student groups, community groups, and individuals, was more democratic.

The Coalition was an umbrella-type organization that included many different groups espousing a myriad of ideologies, attitudes, and tactics. An important group within the Coalition was the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). There was constant

friction between groups such as Puente Unidad Latina and Federación Universitaria Socialista Puertorriqueña (FUSP). The Puente Unidad Latina students (ex-prisoners) viewed FUSP as young, idealistic, and more prone to rhetoric than action.

The Vietnam Veterans often sided with Puente Unidad Latina. There was an intense schism between independent women (who were evolving into feminists) and the super macho males, who often led subcommittees within the Coalition. At one time during the first takeover, the women actually walked out, demanding equal representation and the opportunity to be involved in all levels of leadership. The women's walkout ended with "the sisters" having more representation and less of the dirty work. Nilsa Saniel, a student in my Introduction to Sociology class, was one of the leaders of the women's movement. She was a long-time tenant organizer in East Harlem. I still tease her about how reluctant she was to speak in front of the college. She froze, and only after much coaxing did she finally make her first political speech.

The Coalition also included the People's Park, a street gang in a small public park located on 141st Street near St. Ann's Church. Its members consisted of ex-gang members, ex-cons, and active addicts, some of whom were involved in crime and practically living in the park. They were all Puerto Rican nationalists and, when sober and straight, good soldiers in the war to save Hostos. They supported us in full force but were extremely difficult to control. During one march, they took over the front lines drinking liquor and smoking marijuana at the same time. We forced them back. Some time later they attacked me with a lead pipe, fracturing two of my fingers. Despite this we forgave them, and they continued to support us and accept our directions. Thanks to the members of Puente Unidad Latina and the Vietnam veterans, we were often successful in bringing out a good aura.

Meetings were often very tense. Group after group attempted to promote its philosophical and political point of views. The meetings at first were hot and heated, often full of rhetoric and therefore very long. In the nine-month period of our struggle, I participated in and chaired more meetings than perhaps I would do for the rest of my life. We had PSP meetings, Committee to Save Hostos and Community Coalition to Save Hostos meetings, steering committee meetings, and assemblies of students, local, civic, and citywide organizations. There was always tension and conflict.

In recalling some of the adventures that took place during these meetings, I remember the rhetoric of some of the Dominican leaders who had faced the 1965 U.S. Marine invasion of Santo Domingo. When they gave speeches to the students, their slogan, *educación o la muerte*, tended to scare the older students, who were just becoming involved in protest politics. Leaders such as Juan Valdez (Dominican Students Organization) and Nelson Pérez were often extremely radical but nonetheless very important to our campaign.

Many community groups participated, but none were as important as United Bronx Parents. This multiservice community and citywide agency supported us with community experience, contacts, foot soldiers, and last but not least, food. Rosa Escobar and Evelina López Antonetty were among my first elder political mentors. It was their spirit and strength that inspired us in times of despair. Evelina and Rosa had begun their activism during the Marcantonio days. Their struggle for free breakfast and lunch programs and other issues were nationally acclaimed.

Our PSP nucleus was made up of professors, former leaders of student movements both in Puerto Rico and in New York, Vietnam veterans, single mothers, gays, ex-pimps, and community and civic leaders. The nucleus was anti-dogmatic and in conflict with

what we felt was the upper-class arrogance and air of superiority showed by some of the PSP leadership. There were many socialist leaders/ participants, many of them members of the PSP. I was the leader of the PSP Hostos nucleus, which grew from four to at least twenty-two members. Many of the strategies discussed and developed by these individuals later became the strategies of the entire movement. But I was always in conflict with the PSP National Committee, led by José Alberto Álvarez Febles, who often wanted to inject the issue of Puerto Rican independence into discussion as a primary concern. We believed first teach/organize people about basic issues, such as education. It is in the process of fighting for education that the people would develop and struggle for greater things. Individuals such as PSP New York leader José Che Velázquez made peace between our rebellious nucleus and the PSP National Committee. Despite our differences, somehow the common greater goal, saving Hostos, won out. As we struggled and socialized together, we found less conflict and tension.

Closing of 149th Street and the Grand Concourse

The Coalition joined a citywide movement protesting proposed cutbacks. Often we were the largest contingency. A small leadership cadre believed it was time to go beyond petitions, letter writing campaigns, and demonstrations. We had received only sporadic media coverage.

Nothing had changed the decision to close the school. We believed that our initial group was now prepared to participate in more militant tactics. A decision was made to stage a massive civil disobedience action.

We pondered many issues. Would the students follow the organizers? If the actions failed, would the leaders be arrested? We did not fear detention, but we understood that to achieve a goal in a campaign of civil disobedience, an arrest should push a movement further, create support, and sympathy and win public opinion. Arrests for the sake of arrests have no place in a serious movement for social change. We made decisions as to who would be arrested if we failed to mobilize faculty and students.

It was early March; the temperature was comfortable. We had picked a perfect day, and our adrenaline made it appear warmer. Classes began. We split into two groups. One group began dragging chairs to the Grand Concourse. Another group went from classroom to classroom with or without the professor's permission. We began announcing our intentions, exhorting people to join us.

Outside, hundreds of passersby were shocked! What were these crazy students and staff doing? The Grand Concourse invaded! We proceeded quickly to overwhelm our adversaries! Older women were dragging and pushing chairs!

Desks were blocking all traffic... in all four directions... we began shouting *consignas* and chants... united in our demonstration. The circle completed, we began street classes with one thousand students and staff.

The traffic, confused, screeched to a complete halt. Bystanders and drivers were surprised, even amazed as well as being angry and upset because of the intrusion in their lives. "You are closing our school! We are continuing our classes, our education. Where? Right here in the streets of the Bronx." Standing in the middle of the crowds, I slowly stepped back in amazement and began my class, Introduction to Psychology.

The police arrived in chaos and confusion. We declared to the officers that we indeed intended to disrupt business as usual. Television cameras, newspaper and radio reporters arrived at the scene. We had alerted them. This was the kind of

story they enjoyed; headlines might read: "civil disobedience by hundreds"... "possible violence"... "mass arrests!" More police. More officials. We continued class. More people joined the classes, even those who had no relationship to the school. Firemen with water hoses, intending to disperse the crowds and protected by the police, slowly began approaching the demonstrators. We did not budge. The crowd of onlookers grew larger and more supportive.

The confrontation was looming. Participants would be hosed. Arrests would take place. There was a traffic backup, as far as six blocks long. Tension continued to mount.

As I spoke, from the corner of my eyes I saw police officials involved in heated discussions among themselves and with Fire Department officials.

The confrontation was seconds away. We prepared for the worst.

Suddenly, for reasons I have never been able to determine, the firemen began retreating slowly... The entire crowd burst into applause.

In the eyes of many participants, this was the beginning realization of the power they possessed when united... when determined... when resolute.

We continued classes for thirty more minutes. The Coalition's goals and objectives were achieved; there was citywide and nationwide coverage. The media became more sympathetic to our cause. The little South Bronx nation had begun to roar! Most important of all, participants in this action began to realize the potential to educate, motivate, and if necessary, disrupt the establishment.

Takeover of C.U.N.Y. Chancellor's Office

In the second week of March 1975, we learned that Hostos was closing down. Nothing we had done had changed that decision. The Coalition planned another major action, at the C.U.N.Y. Board of Higher Education, located on 80th Street, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Chancellor Robert Kibbee was an architect of Hostos' closing. Previously, more than two thousand people had picketed his house and burned his figure in effigy. This time we targeted his office to achieve maximum publicity and citywide support.

We were ready to seize the Board of Higher Education. We believed that the building could be taken over by a small group, while hundreds of demonstrators would protect the invaders. Our purpose was to gain publicity, force the media to tell our story, and avoid violence and arrests. It was to be a peaceful action that involved militant tactics. Ex-Vietnam war veterans were involved in the takeover. The night before, a small group slept in apartments near 80th Street. We never told anyone the destination of our buses. We believed that the students and staff had confidence in us. They had been part of our cause for several months. Their fear and passivity had begun to disappear. Their trust created a great responsibility. We would never accept leading people into massive senseless arrests, violence or injury. We walked a very fine tightrope.

At 9:30 the next morning, thirty members, in groups of four to six, approached the five-story building from different locations. We easily overcame the security guards in an active but nonviolent manner. Each group was assigned a floor. We brought chains, and a large supply of crazy glue. We politely ordered all employees and visitors to leave the building. We quickly sealed off all entrances and applied crazy glue on the locks. One side entrance was kept intact as an exit for the employees. All cooperated with little resistance, behaving as if a fire drill was taking place. A small group of organizers arrived at the Chancellor's office. He was the first and only individual who resisted leaving. Nilsa Sanie!, one of our organizers,

sought to convince Kibbee to leave on his own. She then joined a group rolling Kibbee, as he sat on his chair, out of his office. Kibbee soon realized the futility of his protest and walked out the building. The Board of Higher Education was now ours!

Busloads of about 1500 hundred students and supporters arrived. Massive pickets were quickly formed. On the fifth floor we unfolded massive banners that said “Save Hostos Community College” and “Cutbacks on the Banks.”

The police did not arrive immediately. We had informed them we were planning a demonstration at City Hall. Our attorney Andrew Vachss was ready to negotiate.

Finally, ten to fifteen police cars and at least two groups of tactical force police arrived, apparently prepared to force the building open and arrest the invaders. But they were confused and unsure. They were afraid their actions might result in a riot in such an upscale neighborhood.

Shortly after, the main television stations, newspaper and radio reporters were at the scene. Wide-eyed neighborhood residents, the protestors, our attorney, and the media were scrutinizing the police. The street was in complete chaos. The picket lines grew louder. The police waited for their orders. The organizers shouted slogans and chants from the fifth-floor windows.

Confrontation appeared imminent. Vachss and the police were involved in heated discussions. Minutes later we received a call from our attorney. He had arranged with the police that if we “leave the premises there will be no arrests or criminal charges filed.” Everyone would be “allowed to leave peacefully.” We had avoided being charged with the crimes of trespassing, menacing, disorderly conduct, destruction of property, and other criminal acts! New York City once again heard the story of the planned execution of the first and only bilingual college in the United States.

We decided to accept the proposal. We would leave the building to a standing ovation no less than the one Roberto Clemente received when he played in New York. The media rushed to speak with the escaping invaders, whose interviews began to tell New York the Hostos story.

Takeover of Hostos Community College

The Hostos administration continued to play both sides of the fence. Strong rumors persisted that President de León was more interested in becoming President of Bronx Community College than he was motivated to keep Hostos alive.

The moment called for some drastic measures. Soon after the Board of Higher Education takeover, we decided to occupy the actual college. Our plan was to hold regular classes, but completely lock out the administration. As organizers, we hoped that seizing the institution would enable us to utilize phones, copy machines, and other resources to further our campaign, seek maximum support, and command daily media coverage. It was our expectation to pressure Mayor Beame and the Board of Higher Education.

The takeover was initiated early in the morning on March 24, 1976. Among the key leaders were students Efraín Quintana, Félix Vega, Pena and Mario Serrano (all ex-prisoners), Nilsa Saniel, Amos Torres and Victor Vázquez (both Vietnam veterans) and community leaders such as Vicente “Panama” Alba, Evelina López Antonetty, head of United Bronx Parents, and Father John Luce (from St. Ann’s Church) and many others. Once again we used long chains and locks to limit entrance only to the front doors of the school. Security was placed in front of these doors. The President’s office was immediately occupied, and later became a daycare center for students with children.

Many of the student organizations participated, including the FUSP, the Black Student Union, some members of the student government, the Organization of Dominican Students (led by now president of the Dominican Parade, Nelson Peña), the Organization of Latin American Students, and, later, a group formed during the takeover—Women United for Struggle.

The most active student group was Puente Unidad Latina, the ex-prisoners group. All these groups were represented in the Coordinating Committee, along with community and political groups such as United Bronx Parents, Aspira, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and the People’s Park. Among the individuals very supportive of the protest was Assembly member from the Bronx Seymour Posner, who as a young man had fathered a child with a Puerto Rican woman. He was deeply sympathetic to all progressive Puerto Rican causes. Along with Posner, many elected politicians visited us. We treated them with caution. We knew it was their tendency to seek publicity while doing very little for our cause.

It was Posner who broke this barrier for politicians. He volunteered to help in any way, including cooking and cleaning. Posner was a public relations assistant for the 1964 march on Washington led by Martin Luther King, Jr. He had important ties to the media and used them to connect us to many sympathetic ears. Posner was the equivalent of a socialist Buddy Hackett. He always kept you laughing, but his humanistic progressive side always steered him in the direction of important social causes.

The first few days were focused on maintaining control of the college. President de León set up headquarters elsewhere. He was hesitant to order arrests, fearing community backlash. During the first week, we received citywide support from many organizations, politicians, and a large cohort of community activists. Hostos became the symbol for rebellion on a citywide basis.

Movie producers, entertainers, and artists came by frequently to support our cause. Each night we held rallies, teachings, and film and cultural presentations. This helped to educate all new visitors, while keeping our troops motivated and inspired. I, and numerous other activists, slept in the college for the entire twenty days. We slept on the floor with our regular clothes, perhaps using a jacket for pillow. I still remember Alexis Colón, then militant leader of the FUSP and now a big time real estate salesman. He slept every night in the room next to me wearing a new pair of silk pajamas.

The school issue remained on the front page of Latino papers. Each week we gained more media allies and expanded coverage. We organized events outside the school. One of the most successful events included more than five hundred children of all ages and colors who shouted: “Save Hostos—We too want to go to college.” They encircled the school. They held a protest with their own speakers, the youngest being three years old, and the oldest sixteen. To this day, almost twenty-five years later, I still meet these activists, now grown up, who remember their participation in the struggle to save Hostos. These types of creative actions were key to keeping support growing for our campaign.

The police maintained communication with us, but kept a distance. The Coalition always made sure that the police understood they were not our enemies. Our only goal: the salvation of Hostos Community College. Some police officers were very supportive, while others anxiously waited for the orders to take back the school.

After about nine days, an injunction was issued naming myself and other leaders, along with numerous individuals named John and Jane Doe. The preliminary injunction ordered us to leave the premises and refrain from any actions preventing the

administration from operating the school. The occupants received the court order, but decided to ignore it, while recognizing the possible consequences.

President de León was in a quandary. He was afraid of ordering the arrests of so many staff, students, and community residents, especially since these people had become heroes and heroines in the eyes of many concerned New Yorkers. de León expected the takeover to ease out; then he would be able to oust the few remaining resisters. Instead, the takeover took on a life of its own, grew larger every day, and became a symbol of defiance for all New Yorkers fighting the status quo.

As the days passed, we received more and more positive publicity, support grew, and classes continued as normally as possible under the circumstances. Finally, on April 11th, de León ordered the arrests of the protestors. The police met with us to explain their orders and inform us that we had twenty-four hours to leave the building. We informed them that we would vacate all those who were not going to be arrested. We made them understand that some of us would stay and face the consequences. Both parties agreed that the arrests should take place after 9 p.m., for the sake of innocent students who were simply attending class. As organizers, we made our only request: namely, that, when arrested, we all be chained together, or at least in small groups. The police agreed.

On April 12th we vacated the building, with the exception of forty people, including myself, who decided to face arrest. About 9 p.m. over one thousand protestors picketed the school, including students, staff, religious leaders of the Episcopal Church such as Bishop Paul Moore, community leaders, and groups and activists from all over the city. President de León arrived for the first time in weeks. The crowd booed him, a few spit at him, and others threw objects. The police immediately protected him, but the anger he encountered would harm his educational career.

The police cut the chains off the entrance doors and immediately began to arrest us. There was no resistance.

The March to the Courthouse

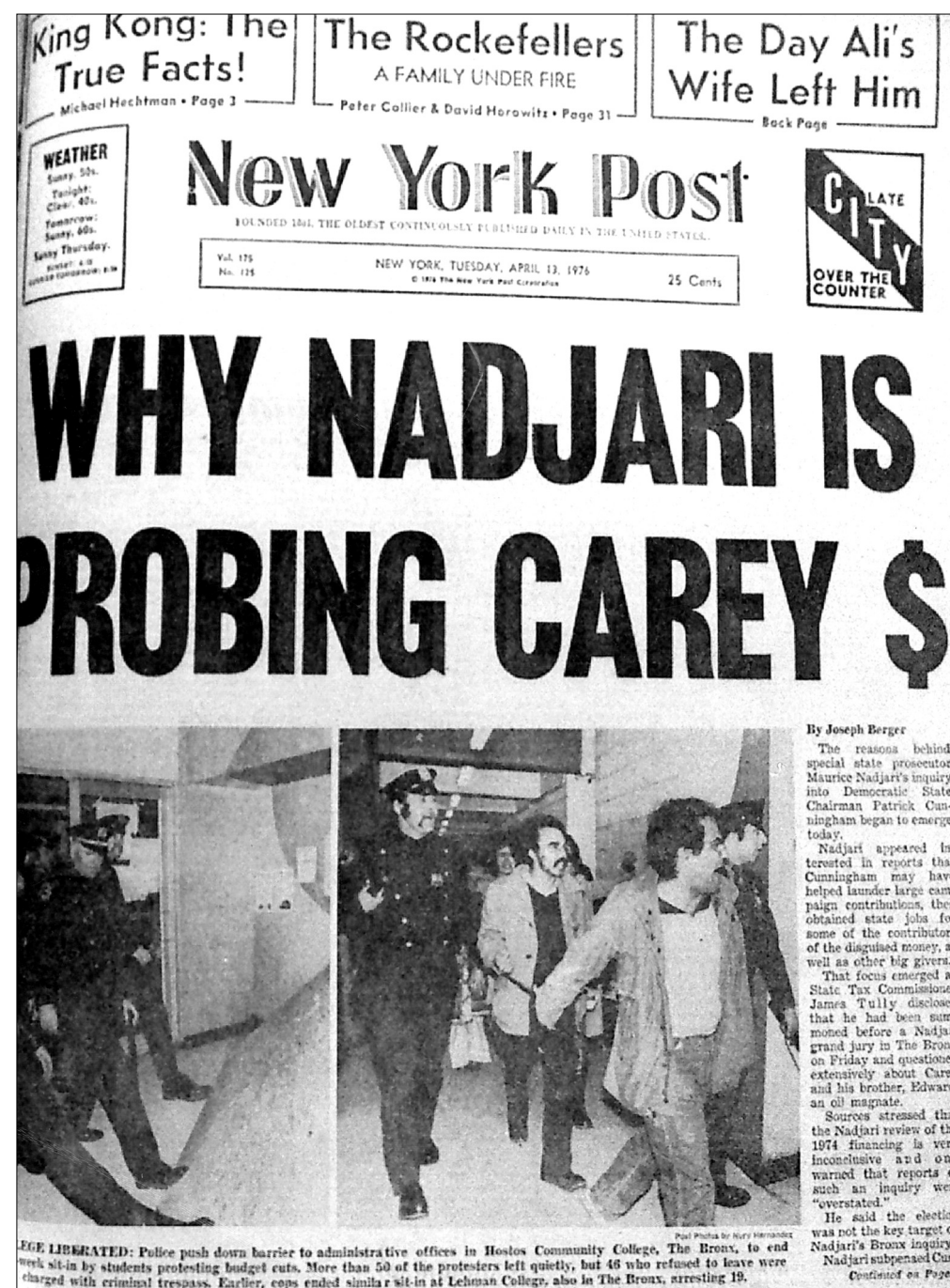
We were marched out of the building in chains. The crowd erupted in support and in protest. Hundreds of police kept the crowd at bay. We were placed in police vans to be taken to the old Gothic Courthouse building on 161st Street and Third Avenue.

It was now 11 p.m. As we drove away, hundreds of protestors took to the streets and began an energetic, explosive march to the Courthouse. The South Bronx had never seen a protest of this magnitude. The noise level could only be compared to a Yankee Stadium World Series victory.

Forty of us were booked, processed, fingerprinted. At 2 a.m. we were released on our own recognizance and given the same return date. The crowd gave the exhausted organizers of this twenty-day occupation a hero's welcome. The takeover became the longest in the history of the city university system, perhaps the longest in the history of New York politics. The Community Coalition to Save Hostos took over the school on March 24, 1976, and held it until April 13, 1976. It was one of the most incredible experiences I have ever had as an organizer. I remember returning to my apartment excited, sleepy, and tired because there had been no time to rest. I fell asleep with a chuckle, recalling what is now my fondest memory, Evelina López Antonetty complaining after my arrest that the emergency notice had her quickly adjusting her girdle to prepare for the demonstration battlefields.

I spent the next day with my parents, nervously hoping that they would not buy the *New York Post*. On the front page of the paper, there was a picture of Vicente

“Panama” Alba and myself, in chains, being escorted to the police van. My mother understood most everything, but seeing her Harvard Law School son arrested would perhaps have been too much for her. Shortly after the takeover, on March 30th, a bill to save Hostos Community College (Bill 11855 A) was introduced in the New York State Assembly by Louis Nine, José Serrano, Armando Montano, and Angelo del Toro, and in the Senate by senators Robert Garcia, and Efraín González. The Act was “to amend the education law, mandating that the Board of Higher Education in the city of New York—maintain a bilingual college providing career programs and courses in health studies and technology.”



Photograph of the cover of the New York Post for April 13, 1976. From the personal collection of the author. Reprinted, by permission, from Ramón J. Jiménez.

Rally at The Emergency Financial Control Board

The semester was almost over. We needed more action. We joined thousands of students, community residents, and Hostos staff in a march from 116th Street and Lexington Avenue, the heart of El Barrio (East Harlem) to 56th Street and 6th Avenue, the central offices of the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB). Close to ten thousand people, the majority of them Puerto Ricans, participated in this historic march, carrying pictures of the members of the EFCB with their corporate affiliations. The march, which included within its ranks people protesting all the cutbacks, was a resounding success; it was one of the largest Puerto Rican-led marches in the history of New York City politics. More than fifty people carried a city-block long Puerto Rican flag.

The Second Hostos Occupation

The pressure on Beame, Kibbee, and the EFCB became overwhelming. One week after the march, we occupied the college a second time, an action that lasted three days. Through sheer creativity, combined with *un poquito de suerte*, we were able to avoid arrests, despite the pending charges and the existing permanent injunction.

About 9 p.m. on the third night, Amos Torres, one of the original organizers, looked out the window. Two hundred tactical police, all wearing helmets, brandishing nightsticks, apparently were ready to invade the building. This time we had received no warnings or communications from the police. It was only quick, creative thinking that prevented disaster. As the police began cutting the chains, we quickly dispersed into three classrooms and chose volunteer professors to initiate lectures. The occupants sat in chairs at full attention. The police entered each classroom to face no resistance, violence, or protest taking place. Instead of arresting us, the police ordered us “out of the building.” Once again, we had escaped arrests and confrontation with the law.

Towards the end of April, there was one final takeover, but it lasted only one day. By this time many of the organizers were exhausted, having sacrificed their families, jobs, and grades to keep their school open. It was in late April or early May when the news finally arrived, after all the protests, lobbying, petitions, demonstrations, takeovers, and publicity: the decision “to close Hostos Community College has been reversed.” The New York State legislature approved Bill 11855 A. The college would be kept open. Suddenly, additional state monies were appropriated.

We had won! We experienced explosive moods and feelings! The South Bronx had finally won a major battle! Mothers who had never won... Students who had never won finally joining together! *Una victoria* was theirs! As an organizer I compared it to the popular Puerto Rican story about Urayoán, a Taíno *cacique* who lived during the initial Spanish invasion. The Taíno in Puerto Rico initially believed the Spaniards were immortal gods. It was Urayoán who ordered a Spaniard drowned. It was Urayoán who discovered the Spaniards were not gods and could be defeated. It was the Community Coalition to Save Hostos, with much help and assistance from members of the Save Hostos Committee, that along with the community was successful in reversing the decision to close Hostos and discovering that the powerful Mayor... City Council... and the EFCB were not gods and could be defeated.

This was one of the many lessons learned from the successful campaign. Organizers also understood the importance of working with people through a slow process of learning, realizing that it takes time for people to understand that they can beat City Hall. Organizers displayed maturity and wisdom in dealing with the

police and avoiding arrests. The campaign in fact produced leaders who for the last twenty-five years have been organizing in the poor neighborhoods of New York City.

The price for all organizers was costly. Although the criminal charges against the forty arrested were later dismissed, President de León eliminated my entire department (Behavioral Sciences), resulting in the layoff of many of the young professors, including myself, who had been instrumental in the campaign. My Whitney Fellowship had ended, and it took me a long time to find employment. Some of the students suffered bad grades and mounting financial problems. Yet everyone agrees the battle was worth the wounds.

Two years after this incredible community/student battle to preserve Hostos I remember walking down 149th Street and Third Avenue and seeing plastered all over the lampposts, deserted buildings, and telephone poles, a political poster bearing a picture of Abraham Beame, with the legend “He made the tough decisions.” He sure made one tough one in the South Bronx. We made it tough, and WE WON with the people’s collective wisdom, experience, leadership, and support!

