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Lewis Hine Documentary Fellowship

Bi-monthly Report

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Villa Victoria: An Introduction

The South End, Boston. The late afternoon light casts the rows of 19<sup>th</sup>-century brick townhomes in rusty relief. The wrought iron railings surrounding stoops and gardens have been meticulously restored, or at least left to tastefully deteriorate within historically-accurate boundaries. Labradors and bulldogs walk handsomely leashed in the green of Blackstone Square. On Tremont, the main commercial thoroughfare, locals sit at outdoor tables enjoying a slice of cheese pizza from The Upper Crust or walk by toting boxes of chocolate-frosted South End Buttery cupcakes. As you cross Tremont Street, however, the street names foreshadow a demographic shift—Pembroke Street is renamed Aguadilla, Brookline turns to San Juan, and Ivanhoe becomes Boriken. Here, the traffic dies away, and the houses become markedly more modern and humble, though quite attractive in their own way. Each unit has a red brick base, a garden plot sprouting bean plants, flowers or other bushes, and upper-stories painted in soft pastels of cream, yellow, and terra cotta. Unlike the straight boulevards of the surrounding neighborhood, the streets here loop into themselves like a four-leaf clover, with the wide, brick-paved Plaza Betances opening to the North. On a warm day, the plaza buzzes with the whir of the laundromat, the rumble of dominos being sorted on folding tables, and the lilting Español of *telenovelas* that stream from the *televisor* in the community center. Residents on their way home from work or Medina’s Market walk beneath a gold-lettered arch proclaiming “No nos mudaremos de la Parcela 19.” *We will not be moved from Parcel 19.*

This is Villa Victoria, literally translated as Victory Village, the home of Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA), a nonprofit community-building organization with a rich history. In the late 1960s, the South End had fallen into disrepair after decades of neglect. Targeted as a “problem area” by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the blocks of Parcel 19 were slated to be cleared of residents, bulldozed and rebuilt as part of the area’s “urban renewal”. Refusing to be moved from their homes, a group of primarily Puerto Rican tenants, along with local priests and other activists, formed Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA). IBA developed and proposed an alternative redevelopment plan that would create rather than destroy affordable housing. After impressing the BRA with both its tenacity and its comprehensive design, IBA won the right to develop Parcel 19 as an affordable housing community designed collaboratively by a local architect and the future residents. Villa Victoria now provides 435 units of affordable housing for 1,100

residents in the South End, a much-needed service in a neighborhood where the average two-bedroom apartment now rents for \$2,800 per month.

Though the Plaza Betances is the result of a historic victory in public housing, one has only to talk with residents there to learn that a more difficult history also belongs to Villa Victoria. The elderly men in the community center describe their earlier struggles as immigrants from Puerto Rico, describing the difficulty of finding jobs when anti-Latino sentiments were more open and far more common. Many of the younger men who frequent the plaza are unemployed, having been laid off from construction or contracting positions. The economic depression has hit the predominantly Latino population particularly hard, and eighty percent of the residents of the Vill' currently live below the poverty line. Seventy percent of the households are headed by single mothers, and many teenage girls are already mothers of one or two. Violence between groups of young men from neighboring public housing complexes is common (Cathedral, Castle Square, Lenox, Mandela and Tent City are all within a few square miles), though thankfully not as frequent as it once was. In the 90s, during a particularly violent period in Boston, O'Day playground on the south side of Villa Victoria was the site of heavy drug trafficking and frequent shootings. After O'Day Park was renovated a couple of years ago, the only reminder of that period that remains is Peace Rock, a small memorial for a teenage boy who was killed there in a drive-by-shooting.

Statistics simplify what Villa Victoria really is: a vibrant and complex community. Within these several blocks, there are police officers and ex-convicts, nurses and patients, community organizers and teachers, newborns and great-grandmothers. On any given day in the plaza, Paco and Otilio will sit at the chess tables recounting with pride their struggles and triumphs in making a living in Boston; Juan will lure the roaming flock of pigeons with chunks of hot dog buns; Barbara, the manager of the El Batey Technology Center (and proudly called 'The Unofficial Mayor of Villa Victoria') looks out through the vertical blinds of her office onto the arched walkways of the plaza, while the children of Esquelita Boriken, IBA's bilingual preschool, walk by in a boisterous chain of hand-holding.

IBA's work spans all of these generations and histories, and takes a holistic approach to community empowerment by providing support throughout the entire life cycle of its residents. The bilingual preschool provides daycare at a sliding scale for working parents; after-school programs offer arts and technology education to students in elementary through high school; a teen center offers a safe space for youth during the evenings and weekends; evening programs provide GED tutoring, job readiness training, and college courses from a satellite of Bunker Hill Community College; and regular health screenings and blood sugar tests are offered to the elderly, who have an affordable housing complex

of their own. Since the residents of Villa Victoria often stay for generations, the work that IBA does with the children and youth impacts not only the present generation but the future of the community. Through affordable housing, job readiness, and education, IBA works to empower each generation to control own future.

## Projects in Progress

As previous Hine Fellows can attest from their own placements, the first few months have been an opportunity for me not only to get to know the different programs that IBA provides, but also to build the relationships that will be the basis of future work. For the first few months, I have been paired with the Cacique Youth Programs, working with director Julio Cesar-Roman to develop a photography workshop as part of the fall-winter programming. The Cacique Youth Programs includes the Peer Leaders program, which pays youth ages 14-18 an hourly wage to take workshops in college preparedness, health, visual arts, and Latin percussion, as well as the Youth Advocate Program, which opens the teen center during evening and weekend hours to all youth in the community. Every Monday, from 4-6 pm, I teach film and digital photography to thirteen youth in the Peer Leaders program. Through a linkage established with the Northeastern University darkroom, we will be completing an initial pinhole camera project, and processing paper negatives in the university darkroom. For the youths' final project, I am working with the Massachusetts College of Art to supply equipment to turn the Cacique teen center into a temporary portrait studio where each youth can take large-format instant-film portraits of members of the community.

Since the Cacique workshop cycle did not begin until October, the first month was spent learning about the Cacique program, sitting in on extensive planning meetings, and canvassing the neighborhood with youth workers to distribute flyers about the program. Additionally, I spent a week sorting through nearly 40 boxes of materials on the founding and history of IBA in the archives at Northeastern University, which provided me with primary documentation of the legal and personal struggles that went into the development, construction, and maintenance of Villa Victoria. I have also visited the archives of the South End Historical Society and the Boston Redevelopment Authority and taken photographs of documents that record the historical shifts that the neighborhood underwent in the 1960s and 70s. Recently, I have also begun shadowing a different department at IBA for one or two days per week, so that I can gain a more holistic understanding of the scope of IBA's programming; thus far, I have worked with the Community Empowerment Program and Esquelita Boriken, and am slated to work with Vanessa Calderon, the Director of IBA, in the administrative offices next week.

In addition to teaching and shadowing, I have received approval from Julio Cesar-Roman to begin a series of photographic and audio portraits of the youth in the Cacique programs that will be shown at the End of Cycle Celebration in January. I will be working with Liisa and Alex to develop a template for these portraits, which are partially inspired by Dawoud Bey's Class Picture project, a series of direct and incisive portraits of high school students (<http://www.mam.org/bey/>). I see this body of work as part of a larger portrait of Villa Victoria and the South End, though the scope and scale of the larger project has yet to be determined. There are so many issues that affect all of the youths' lives—underperforming public schools, youth violence, teen pregnancy, single motherhood, gang warfare, drugs, unemployment—that I am trying to figure out how best to create a project that touches upon these complexities. I am working now on building relationships with the youth, attending workshops, and taking digital pictures of Youth Program events to replace images from several years ago that fill the walls of the teen center.

On the side, I have begun taking large-format portraits of the residents who frequent the Plaza Betances, as well as images of Villa Victoria and the South End. Though shadowing departments at IBA is giving me a sense of the breadth of their programming, it has been the time that I spend with the residents themselves that has given me the best understanding of the challenges faced by the community. Every day, I walk through the Plaza Betances on my way to IBA's offices and say *Hola* to Paco in the Community Center, *¿Como estás?* to Otilio doing his laundry, and check in on the day's events with Barbara in the Technology Center. It is through this simple ritual that I learn about the bingo night coming up, that a long-time resident has just passed away, or that a new granddaughter that has just been born.