

Teco Celebrates 50 Years of empowering Community bilingual Journalism

Published in El Tecolote

August 27, 2020

<http://eltecolote.org/content/en/teco-celebrates-50-years-of-empowering-community-bilingual-journalism/>

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San Francisco in the 1970s was a time of student strikes on college and high school campuses, as well as neighborhood organizations in the Mission District banding together to form a coalition that could effectively challenge City Hall against social, political and economic injustices.

“The times dictated that people needed to be involved and help their community,” said Juan Gonzales, Founder of El Tecolote. It was at this time that the Mission District’s community bilingual Latino newspaper, El Tecolote, was born.

This year marks the paper’s 50th anniversary and a look at its history shows the power of neighborhood journalism. El Tecolote is the longest running bilingual Spanish/English newspaper in California and has received numerous awards from The Society for Professional Journalists and the San Francisco Press Club, amongst others. Its continued success began with its solid foundation in challenging social injustices.

In 1969, Gonzales was a student at San Francisco State University and a reporter for the school newspaper, The Phoenix. He was assigned small projects despite his strong experience in the field. Determined to do something more, he wrote a five-part series about a convention that led to the formation of the Mission Coalition Organization. His work ran in the school newspaper and his research established connections with activists in the Mission District. That same semester, as Gonzales was nearing graduation, a student strike resulted in the formation of La Raza Studies at SFSU. Faculty asked Gonzales to develop and teach a Journalism course within the program. Through these experiences, Gonzales identified a need for a neighborhood newspaper in the Mission District.

“Historically when we look at mainstream newspapers in San Francisco and across the nation, stories are not consistently written about these [Latino] communities, unless it’s something tragic, something crime involved. But there are more stories happening in the neighborhood than just that. Those stories get lost,” said Gonzales.

He proposed the idea to his students and to a few people who had worked with La Nueva Misión, which had recently folded. Those who were interested met weekly to plan.

Eva Martinez, a former board member of El Tecolote’s umbrella nonprofit organization Acción Latina, recalls the group developing core principles—first, it had to be bilingual to meet everyone’s needs; second, it would not accept revenue from any corporation that

harmed the community; and third, opportunity would be open to anyone who wanted to learn journalism.

“Our greatest legacy is that we have been able to hold on to those principles,” said Martinez.

Gonzales recalls hours of discussion as the team tried to find a name that would be welcoming. They rejected militant names that would not be well received by some people. As they brainstormed, names of animals started to come up, and when “el tecolote,” (the Nahuatl word for “owl”), was floated, people said, “Ah, yeah. El Tecolote. I like that. The protector of the community,” recalled Gonzales. “I think the name helped ease us into the community.”

On August 24, 1970, the first edition of El Tecolote was distributed. It featured a letter from El Tecolote with an opening declaration that read: “My name may sound strange and funny to some of you. It may also look peculiar. Even my mere presence, surprisingly enough, may threaten some of you as well. But, I exist because you exist and because others have forgotten us.”

Initial production costs were raised through a talent show, a fundraiser that earned \$350 in profit.

“That allowed us to print four issues,” recalled Gonzales.

In the early days, the paper was nomadic. Gonzales and Martinez describe working out of kitchens and garages, changing locations based on availability.

Hilda Ayala, one of the first translators, who still translates today, describes getting in her car to go to houses of writers, picking up the articles in English, and returning them translated to Spanish.

From the start, the newspaper broke stories that created change.

In 1974, El Tecolote researched 911 calls and found it took an average of 4 additional minutes for operators to help Spanish-speaking callers. El Tecolote’s coverage of this issue resulted in changes to 911 operations. In 1977, the paper investigated services at San Francisco General Hospital and showed there were not enough medical translators to meet demand. The coverage resulted in trained medical translators.

Even in fundraising, El Tecolote raises money in a way that serves the community. Acción Latina runs Encuentro del Canto Popular, an annual concert that is both a fundraiser and a celebration of Latin American music. A relationship with Army Street Bingo was later established that continues to produce unrestricted revenue (due to the pandemic, the bingo hall is currently closed).

In the spirit of service, a complete archive of El Tecolote has been formed. The archive is “an on the ground snapshot of what was going on in the Mission...from 1970 on,” Martinez

said. "Newspapers like this serve a very important role of documenting history in a community. That's something that main-stream newspapers cannot do."

Alexis Terrazas, current editor-in-chief of El Tecolote, echoes the role of the paper as an important record. "If you look at things we cover, and some of the things the more mainstream papers cover, it's very different," he said. "It's important for that work to be documented."

Neighborhood newspapers do serve communities in ways that other publications cannot, but despite their important role, they often fold. But, how has El Tecolote stayed strong for half a century?

"It's basically community power," Terrazas said, likening it to a complex machine that runs efficiently if everyone does their part.

Ayala also attributes the longevity of the newspaper to the community. "I hate to give you a cliché, but there is a lot of love involved here," Ayala said. "I love Teco. I love the people who work for Teco. I love the stories that Teco follows. When my mother came to the United States, she started translating. My daughter and son also worked for Teco. And now, I have a granddaughter, who also works for Teco. This is the kind of commitment that people who work for El Teco feel. This is our family. We have an obligation to give back to our community."

Gonzales adds that the paper is successful because talented people dedicated their time and abilities to the newspaper while getting their start in the industry. People have gone on to work for the San Francisco Chronicle, the San Francisco Examiner, the L.A. Times, the Sacramento Bee, the San Diego Union, the Modesto Bee, and more.

Martinez also notes that poet Juan Felipe Herrera often contributed to the literary supplement in El Tecolote. Herrera would later be appointed by President Barack Obama as the United States Poet Laureate, serving in the position from 2015-2017.

Gonzales continues to be, in his words, the Ambassador of El Tecolote, and in Ayala's words, the heart of the newspaper. He is admired by many for his ability to inspire people to work hard for the best of reasons.

Gonzales, in turn, is "so appreciative to the army of volunteers who have contributed. There must have been 400 to 500 volunteers over the years. Without that we would not be having this conversation today about achieving a milestone in community journalism. I'm so proud to be a part of that, and so grateful."

And as Martinez points out, "there still is a deep need for a local, on the ground newspaper that covers issues that are important not only to Latino's, but to progressive people, to people who care about these issues."