An Act of Faith in America

*Michael Seifert - Brownsville, Texas*

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I am the Catholic priest for Cameron Park, a small town on the Texas-Mexico border.

According to the 2000 Census, Cameron Park is the poorest place in the United States. Indeed at first glance, visitors think that they may have slipped across the border into Mexico—the ramshackle homes, the outhouses, the burning garbage, and the narrow roads have led folks to call us “America’s Third World.”

Those who bother to get to know us, however, discover one of the richest communities in America. For while we are economically strapped, we are infused with Latino optimism wedded to solidarity. Our shared struggles as poor people have taught us to measure others by the quality of their hopes for the future, rather than the circumstances of their birth.

When I arrived here in 1997, Cameron Park, for all of its goodness, was a place that lacked the most basic services that the rest of Americans take for granted. Not a single one of our roads was paved. There was no police, no mail, no school bus service. There were no streetlights, no sidewalks, and no parks. Our parishioners felt invisible, ignored, and left out.

When we asked the county commissioner why the roads weren’t paved, he responded, “Why bother? You people don’t care. You aren’t really Americans. You don’t even vote.”

People who labor with bent backs know better than to believe in politicians, but we do hold dear our self-respect. When this local politician challenged our identity as Americans, he unwittingly gave us the key to unlock our future: the vote. Still stinging from his rebuke, the community organized itself. We divided up into teams of two and went door to door, asking neighbors to turn out in the next election. And they did. Our voter participation rate skyrocketed. We became one of the highest voting precincts in south Texas.

The local politicians took notice—and they responded. The roads were paved. A park was built. A sheriff’s substation was opened. Streetlights were installed. An old friend noted that now, “Cameron Park looks like America.”

Well of course we look like America. We are America. While we may not speak the finest standard English or academic Spanish, we speak from our souls and with our hearts, and when we vote, we are speaking unmistakably as Americans.

Down here, a graduation from college is a moment of celebration and pride. Lately, I have discovered that same pride from those who have voted for the first time. Yesterday I received an email from a parishioner who is studying at MIT in Boston. She wrote, “Father Mike, I voted in an election for the first time in my life. I was so excited when I mailed my absentee ballot.”

A month ago, after the eight o’clock mass on Sunday morning, a woman gave me a big hug. She said, with a huge smile, “My husband was sworn in as a citizen last week. Now he can vote!”

I hugged her back, and smiled at least as largely as she. This woman and her husband understood. They were Americans—and understood the privilege and the obligation of the vote.

I believe in that privilege and obligation. And I believe in my neighbors of Cameron Park, who will go to the polls and who will by means of their vote, make an act of faith in America. Our America.

*Since writing his essay, Michael Seifert left the priesthood and the church he helped found in Cameron Park, Texas. He now works for the Rio Grande Valley Equal Voice Network, a collaboration of ten community organizations focused on effecting policy change to better the lives of local citizens.*

*Produced by John Gregory for This I Believe*

1. In your own words, what was this piece about?
2. Why was the county commissioner unresponsive to the Cameron Park community at first?
3. How did the community get the attention of the elected officials?
4. How did the lives of Cameron Park residents change as a result of voting?