
Local Government Reconsidered

City of Bell Scandal Revisited

Feb 19th, 12:00 AM

Building BASTA

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Garcia, Cristina, "Building BASTA" (2015). *Local Government Reconsidered*. 4.
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Building BASTA

Cristina Garcia, co-founder of BASTA and member of the California State Assembly.

Before the scandal broke there were plenty of Bell residents that felt something was really wrong with city government. The residents of Bell had no real proof. Getting information was nearly impossible, but there were signs that something was wrong. For example, how does a councilmember from a working class community, where the median income was \$30,000 a year, afford to drive around in a \$100,000 Mercedes Benz -- when his main source of income was a small corner market? Or, why did property taxes continue to increase, but services continued to decline? And, why did so many Latino teenagers get pulled over and have their cars impounded for the slightest infractions, such as expired tags or a broken tail light, and then had to pay nearly \$1,000 in fines and impound fees to get their cars back?

Several community members had tried to find out councilmembers' and top administrators' salaries, and had also asked questions about how bond money was being spent, but had failed to get any answers. Every request for public records was rejected by the city attorney. To get that information they would have to sue the city using the Public Records Act. Some residents knew that if they sued, they would likely win, but no attorneys would help file the lawsuit without a retainer of at least \$10,000. No one in Bell had that type of money lying around. Some residents had reached out to major news media outlets, including the Los Angeles Times, but no one ever wanted to follow up on the lead.

Background

I grew up in Bell Gardens, attended public schools, graduated from Bell Gardens High School in 1995, studied math at Pomona College in Claremont, and became a math teacher. I taught math for 13 years. I would only return to Bell Gardens occasionally to visit my parents. My four siblings all followed the same path.

But in January of 2009 my mother got really sick, and I was forced to move back to Bell Gardens to help out with my parents' business and oversee their health. My siblings told me to take on this responsibility because I was single and "just" a teacher. They felt I had the most flexibility. Up until that point, my plan had been to never return to the Southeastⁱ except to eat and visit with my parents on an occasional Sunday.

Unfortunately, at that time, I was under the belief that success meant leaving the Southeast and never coming back. This is a common view in my community -- one I now fight to change. Through my organizing work, I came to understand that this community had invested in me, and I had a responsibility to invest in it. I wish I had figured that out sooner.

By March 2009 my sister had gotten tired of hearing me complain about everything in Bell Gardens and challenged me to do something about it--to be a leader and make

change happen. Just like that, I decided to start requesting public records from the city of Bell Gardens, and when I couldn't get answers, I started attending council meetings. After a few council meetings I became upset over the council's behavior towards the public. They were so condescending and rude to anyone that was there with any questions, a challenge, or concern. In closing remarks they would call community members who spoke during the public comment period ignorant, obstructionist, and would embarrass them by repeating gossip about their personal lives. I kept asking myself, "How much are we paying them to belittle us at council meetings?"

I must confess, at that point I didn't yet understand the positive impact the residents of Bell Gardens had on my life and the responsibility I had to return the favor. Instead I approached it as a challenge that I could meet in a few months and then hightail it out of Bell Gardens. I'm lucky now my ignorance and pompous ways didn't derail the historic opportunity that would be waiting for me in Bell.

I landed in the City of Bell on Sep 17, 2009 at the request of a Bell resident who invited me to come and learn about their community group and see if I could help them get some public records. They heard I had gotten some records in Bell Gardens, which was adjacent to Bell, and wanted my help. I was intrigued to find others who were organizing in their community around the same issues I was.

Around this same I learned through a Los Angeles Times article my brother-in-law sent me that there was a small Lebanese community in Bell. The title of the article was "Campaigns in Bell and Cudahy Get Ugly" (March 9, 2009). It stated that candidates in Southeast Los Angeles county cities were being smeared as terrorists and have had their homes and cars vandalized. ⁱⁱ My brother-in-law's message was, "Are you sure you want to jump in?"

Later that night my sister and I would discuss the article again, this time intrigued by the fact that we had grown up next to Bell in the almost identical community of Bell Gardens and this was the first time we were hearing about a Lebanese community. How did we miss that?

A year later, in April 2010, that article would lead me to seek out Ali Saleh who at the time was running for city council and was the one being smeared. The article also mentioned that most of the Lebanese in Bell were business owners. I needed to raise some money for someone who was running for higher office; I had a favor to return. I didn't have any connection to this candidate and my personal base of givers would not donate – one, they were not political and had no connection to this candidate, and two, I had just tapped them to donate to the AIDS LifeCycle.

I never back down from a challenge, and since "not possible" is not in my vocabulary, I came up with one of my "great ideas" based on that Los Angeles Times article.

In my rationale, Ali had run for office and failed, which must mean he wanted to be part of decision making, but clearly needed some help. I had access to a campaign that might

help him network for his next run. And he had access to something I needed: donors who had an interest in the geographical area this candidate was running in. Great idea, right?

After a lot of pestering, Ali finally took one of my calls and agreed to meet with me. That meeting went well, and he agreed to learn more about the candidate and eventually did help me fundraise. Later he would tell me that he kept ignoring my calls in part because I got his number from someone who he suspected was behind the terrorist hit pieces about him mentioned in the Los Angeles Times article.

Later a resident would confess to me that her son and the person Ali suspected did the piece in her home and she witnessed it. She was now ashamed she didn't stop it then. I was never able to confirm this.

The lesson here was that I would have to be more cognizant about how I reached out to people, about who I was allowing to help me make the connection, because it could make or break the interaction. This is a lesson that regularly helps me in my current role as a Member of the Assembly.

From that point on, Ali and I became inseparable in political work, driven in part by our frustration over the same issues in our communities and a dream that maybe one day we could change things in both our towns and maybe the whole Southeast. Turns out, he's just as much of an idealist as I am.

I continued to work on obtaining public records from Bell Gardens and attending council meetings. I was determined to get to the bottom of things, and as my parents still needed my help, I was not going anywhere. I also continued to meet with people in Bell. I worked on getting public records for them and helped them understand what was going on with their taxes. My background as a math teacher was very helpful.

I attended my first community meeting in Bell on Sep 17, 2009. There I met a group of frustrated individuals who had concerns about their taxes, how the council was spending their money, and they were also wondering what they could do about it.

A staffer for the Assemblyman representing the area was there on that day to present information about one of her boss' bills.

The conversation quickly turned to the high taxes and lack of information and whether or not the Assemblymember would be able to help them get information from the city.

The staffer's response is forever ingrained in my head, "That's not a state problem. It's a local problem, so we can't do anything."

It's the type of answer I never want to give, and I tell my staff is unacceptable. These types of answers are why my community feels so disenfranchised which then contributes to our low civic engagement. I remember telling her that her boss could

easily request the records for us since the city was not likely to reject him. It might be a local issue, but he had a big stick as a state legislator. My pleas fell on deaf ears.

This infuriated me. I decided that I would help them get some information, and I even volunteered to run a few meetings where I would explain what I had found. But by May 2010, I found that I could not work with this group. The people leading the group—the Bell Residents' Club (BRC)—were unorganized, motivated by goals I could not support, and their structure didn't fit with how I worked.

I started to walk away and let the group organizers know I could not support their ulterior motives, which included electing a slate of three to the council to get a majority and getting them to appoint the club's president to the city manager position. The group wanted to replace one corrupt city manager with one inexperienced one.

The BRC, which brought me into Bell, and which I chose to walk away from, would be the biggest and most constant barrier to BASTA's (the group I subsequently co-founded) success.

Conveniently, Ali and I had just made a connection, and he also started to reaffirm what I was already feeling about the community group and its leaders. This made it easier for me to walk away. A few months after Ali and I connected, the media started to look at Bell-- not for scandal but for potential solutions to cash-strapped cities across the State. Bell and its neighboring city, Maywood, were considering merging their police departments to save money. This proposed partnership caught the attention of the Los Angeles Times, and before we knew it, Ruben Vives—the reporter who, along with Jeff Gottlieb, won a Pulitzer for uncovering the Bell scandal-- was fishing around and talking to multiple community members. I don't know what compelled them to go in the direction they did, but on June 24, 2010 the Los Angeles Times published a story that said that Bell council members were getting nearly \$100,000 a year for a part-time job and that Maywood, which could no longer obtain insurance because its police department was so dysfunctional, was going to merge its police department with Bells' police department to form a new joint police department. This notion of Bell's police department being disbanded led the Bell Residents Club (BRC), the group I had just walked away from, to run an ill-fated recall campaign, which was funded by the Bell Police Officers Association (POA). The recall was not successful.

By this time, Ali and I were keeping tabs on everything that was going on in Bell. Ali would attend Bell city council meetings and mostly just watch as a concerned resident. At one point, Ali even convinced me to sit down with the president of the POA to tell him the recall was being run in the wrong way and it would go nowhere. That conversation didn't really go anywhere. The POA decided they would continue on the track they were and see what happened. Sure enough, after a month they had 500 signatures, many from people who were not registered voters in Bell, and the recall never qualified because the community group never followed the rules. It looked like,

once again, the window of opportunity the media had opened was quickly closing, and this would be another scandal that led to no real change.

BASTA Is Born

However, on Thursday July 15, the Los Angeles Times finally gave us a headline Ali and I could work with, and BASTA was born. The Los Angeles Times Front Page Headline: "Is A City Manager worth \$800,000?" gave birth to BASTA and catapulted us all into a hurricane with an opportunity for change at the eye of the storm. It was up to us to make something out of the chaos. BASTA stood for "Bell Association to Stop the Abuse."

What I saw at that moment was an opportunity to really bring about much needed reform to the Southeast, and the City of Bell was the vehicle. For 18 months, I had been plugging away with little to nothing to show for it, or so I thought. But those 18 months had given me enough insight into the problems in Bell. Also, I had made friends in Bell I could work with to use the negative press coverage as a catalyst for change.

I saw in the Los Angeles Times article about Rizzo's outrageous salary an opportunity to drive change. As I said earlier, even in Bell, a month before the headline about the \$800,000 city manager salary, the Los Angeles Times ran the headline "D.A. investigating why Bell council members get nearly \$100,000 a year for a part-time job." However, these revelations had failed to ignite a protest. How were we going to make sure that this time something really happened? How were we going to convince a town full of skeptics that this time it would be different and that we could fight back?

Right away, I decided the name of our group was going to be a big part of convincing people that this time things would be different. I don't know why, I had no previous experience, all of this was new, but I just *knew* that the name was really important, which is why we chose BASTA.

BASTA means "Enough!" in Spanish, but enough is not an appropriate translation; the translation loses the emotions behind the word. This one word in Spanish means enough, but it also expresses people's frustrations and more importantly our determination to end the regime and end the disenfranchisement the whole Southeast had been living under.

BASTA has emotions that the English translation doesn't capture, which was perfect because Bell was full of people who spoke both languages but used Spanish more often to express emotions. To this day, most of us listen to music in Spanish, and use Spanish when we have heart ache or are excited. We also pray in Spanish and express our anger and fears in Spanish. Even people like me who spend most days speaking English and living in an English environment "feel" in Spanish. BASTA felt perfect.

I was aware of a window of opportunity, and I chose to take advantage of it, regardless of the fact that I had never before traveled any road like the one in front of me. The Los Angeles Times headline created a window that was taking us all into the unknown—that was the exciting and scary part. But I was there, with a name, and we all had to give it all we had because failure was not an option, and our community could no longer endure another failed attempt at reform. What I didn't know didn't matter. I knew it wasn't going to be easy but we had to find a path to success.

Twelve hours after the article came out we had a name and I found myself sprinting into the unknown. I felt the challenge was to sprint long enough to make a lasting impression, but I needed to figure out how to slow down and pace myself because the road ahead was likely to be long and arduous. My marathon training told me that if we sprint too long, we, too, would fizzle out like all the other community groups who had tried to capitalize on the latest headline making of a scandal that was rocking our community.

BASTA's success came from taking advantage of its window of opportunity, specifically tying together 5 elements:

- Community Activism
- Funding
- Media
- Political Alliances
- Flexibility

COMMUNITY ACTIVISM

BASTA didn't start from scratch. It simply pulled lots of pieces together. Before the Los Angeles Times broke the story, a number of activists were already working to expose the corruption in Bell. Among the efforts was a Bell Facebook page that counted more than 500 residents as friends. Bell Facebook friends shared information and facts about city officials' activities. Another group, the Bell Residents Club, worked to bring attention to the city's outrageous tax levels. And members of Bell's neighborhood watch programs were appalled at the possibility of the city eliminating its police department. Some of these activists had already started to find each other and had started to work together. Their specific goals were different, but they all agreed the Rizzo regime needed to end. As I mentioned earlier they had even started a recall process—but it was so ripe with errors it would be disqualified--that revolved around saving the police department and stopping high taxes.

With a name in hand, Ali and I sat down and came up with a list of potential people we had seen in action. We also asked the Police Officer's Association President to provide us with some names. Then I just started cold calling people on the list and told them I represented BASTA. After that round of calls and from our previous knowledge of the

landscape of Bell, Ali and I decided to contact Dale Walker and Denisse Rodarte, the two young Bell residents who ran the Facebook page. Forty-eight hours after the story broke, I met with Denisse and Dale at the Starbucks in Bell Gardens-- to this day my political "office"-- and recruited them to be a part of BASTA. This was a Saturday.

I created the following plan, to be executed in 48 hours, before our first rally on Monday, and only four days after the Los Angeles Times ran the article:

- Launch a website, Facebook, and Twitter account for BASTA so it looked like a legitimate organization to help convince people that this time it would be different and BASTA had the potential to bring about change.
- Make sure everyone in Bell saw the Los Angeles Times article so they too would be outraged.
- Organize a rally to get people out so we could collect their contact information for a data base of residents.
- Do a flyer with the article and a call to action, a rally.
- Get flyer printed, at least one copy for every household in Bell.
- Get flyer delivered to every household.
- Get press release out to get BASTA's name in the media and invite reporters to the rally.
- Buy tape for flyer run, and supplies for rally, make some posters.

So, that Saturday I convinced a friend to design a flyer with the Los Angeles Times Rizzo story which I translated so it was in Spanish as well as English. Ali convinced a friend to help get a website launched by the end of the weekend while Denisse and Dale got our Facebook and Twitter page going. Later that day, the flyer would be done with the content for the rally and the Los Angeles Times article.

At the same time I was working with Ali's contact to get the website done, I called my friend Laura and asked her if she could ask her husband to help us with the printing of the flyer. Laura had grown up in South Gate and had seen scandal consume her home town. She also wanted to see something come of the Los Angeles Times' article. Laura convinced her husband Gabe to help, who then convinced his boss to open their print shop to run copies of the flyer for us and of course donate them. Gabe and Laura sat in that shop for 6 hours and printed 15,000 double sided color copies of our first flyer. I called another friend to help me write a press release, translated it, and sent it to a bunch of media outlets. I tasked Dale and Denisse with finding volunteers to drop off the flyers.

3am flyer runs

This gave birth to our 3am flyer runs. With 15,000 flyers printed, a website almost done, press release on its way, Facebook and Twitter up and running, we needed a way to get information to everyone in a cheap and effective way. I figured at 3am we could wander

the city streets quickly and with no disturbance, so we could maximize whatever number of volunteers we had to drop off flyers. I convinced myself and the group that if someone woke up to a flyer taped to his or her door or driver's side window, it would trigger their curiosity. Plus, I figured that once they saw it on everyone else's doors and windows, their curiosity would be triggered enough to learn about BASTA.

I had never done anything like this before. Bell was less than two square miles; I had 15,000 flyers. Denisse convinced six cousins and her brothers to help us. Dale convinced his friend; Ali and I joined them. By 6am the sun was up, and our flyers were almost everywhere in the city. We taped them onto people's door knobs, driver's windows, or the inside of their gate where the handle to open the gate was -- spots we knew people would have to touch and remove them to go about their daily business. I figured this way we would have a better chance of people reading it. Otherwise, it would just stay there for days on end until the elements would take it down and the street sweepers would collect it. From that point forward, we would do flyer runs at least once a week on Saturday nights, so people staying up till 3 am or people waking up Sunday morning would find them. The flyers, which had the BASTA logo on them always gave a short update and encouraged residents to attend some sort of call to action (rally, meeting, signature gathering).

If you're wondering about our safety, maybe we weren't always safe, but we did tell the Bell Police we would be out there so they didn't think we were vandalizing and asked them to keep an eye out for us. We also walked in pairs. I will admit, a few times we were all afraid, but nothing ever happened. The logic was that we were walking the same community we grew up in and knew how to navigate our town and our neighborhoods.

That Sunday evening, before our first rally, we did some more work on the website. Denisse, Dale and I talked about the possibilities for change and I warned them it could get ugly. We reaffirmed our commitment to whatever was ahead. We were committed and convinced this was our opportunity to take back Bell. Luckily they were just as idealistic as Ali and I.

Monday we all went to work, and at 5pm Denisse, Dale, Ali, and I showed up outside City Hall where a crowd of about 700 had gathered. Denisse brought the same cousins and siblings that showed up at the flyer run to help out. Everyone's job but mine and Denisse's was to walk around with a notepad and collect people's contact information. Denisse would man the table, answer questions, and invite people to a meeting to learn more so we could become a collective voice.

I would manage media and answer questions, lead the crowd in chanting for the council's resignation, and encourage them to come to BASTA's next meeting later that week. We got about 500 names and addresses for our database, and the residents of Bell were introduced to BASTA. A number of residents quickly volunteered to be active

members and help fight for change. It was only four days since the Los Angeles Times broke the city manager story. We were exhausted, excited, and running on adrenaline, but BASTA was on the map.

FUNDING

BASTA members quickly realized that without funding, nothing would get accomplished. Flyers to let people know about a rally cost a couple hundred dollars. Poster supplies run another hundred dollars. American flags which symbolize basic Constitutional rights-- add another hundred dollars. The list goes on and the price tag keeps going up. I could only call in so many favors.

I knew a recall was an expensive process which can easily act as a deterrent for grassroots organizers, especially at the beginning of their efforts. Even when local citizens are rolling up their sleeves to do the work, a recall can easily cost \$10,000. Expenses include newspaper publication of a notice of intent--a mandatory step in the recall process-- and printing the required petitions needed to follow through.

The Bell Police Officers' Association (POA), the small union with about 20 members that I mentioned earlier, had interests in supporting BASTA. Their jobs were at stake and they had membership dues. The community began demanding a recall, and we felt we had to deliver. I knew we needed money to run a successful recall of the city council.

As a means of getting around the cost hurdle, the Bell Police Officers Association and BASTA became partners. While each group held different grievances, their overarching goal was the same. Both clearly identified the need to end the Rizzo regime. Later BASTA would constantly get attacked as a puppet of the Bell POA, but really we were partners in need of each other for a common goal, ending the Rizzo regime.

MEDIA

Media was another crucial tool in Bell citizens' success. A real turning point occurred when the Los Angeles Times began its coverage on the city of Maywood's decision to outsource its government to Bell. A number of Bell activists were coming together speaking to various Los Angeles Times reporters who began nosing around.

While activists had been talking to reporters previously, the energy was different now. Maybe it was because the Los Angeles Times sent Ruben Vives, a young reporter with nothing to lose and a lot to prove. Whatever it was, residents caught his attention, prompting Vives to keep digging around about the council's salaries and eventually the issue of Rizzo's salary.

The key with the media is persistence: residents kept up efforts to get their story into news headlines. Once the media was hooked, BASTA came to life, and we became diligent about writing press releases and always accommodated interview requests from all media outlets, at whatever time necessary. Our goal was simple: keep the media

around as long as possible to help us reach the residents and spread our message that included information about meetings and calls to action. We wrote about 30 press releases in three months and had about as many rallies and BASTA community meetings in that time.

Part of BASTA's media success was that we appointed a single, knowledgeable spokesperson. This ensured a consistent message and helped the media identify a reliable information source. Besides making life easier for reporters, it helps journalists look good. This is especially true for television reporters who often have only a few minutes to pull together a story. Originally everyone was in front of the media. Then, one day, early on, a reporter from the local channel 11 pulled me aside and said something like, "I'm going to give you a tip because I like what you are all doing. Pick one media person that knows what they are talking about because otherwise the media will start to portray you as angry and ignorant, and we'll start to leave because that story has been told over and over in this community. You need to control the message."

So we called a smaller BASTA meeting -- no flyer run for it -- just calls to anyone we knew, and asked them to call anyone they knew; whoever showed up would be given a voice and a vote. Our group was still very fluid. Up to now the work was done by Ali, Denisse, Dale, Denisse's family, and me, but we knew that couldn't last and needed to grow. This would be a good exercise to help us get there. About 40 people showed up to the El Hussein center (a meeting place for the Lebanese community). There we discussed BASTA and where it was going. I shared the reporter's recommendation and pushed for us to take his advice; he clearly knew more about the media than we did. That day I was nominated and almost unanimously chosen to become the spokesperson for BASTA. The ground rules were set: no one would speak to the media but me. If the media called, then they would call me. If the media wanted to speak to someone other than me, they would still have to go through me, and once I knew what they were looking for and their angle, I would help identify a resident and give them some talking points.

Everyone in BASTA respected this role at all times. The few votes I didn't get left BASTA and did their own thing -- at times talking to media, hosting their own meetings, rallies, and eventually focus their efforts on attacks against BASTA. While BASTA was busy working on moving the recall forward, getting state legislation passed to get property owners some money back, calling for an audit, fighting against receivership, basically doing the work the media showed the rest of the world, the Bell Residents Club (BRC) was working to get BASTA out of Bell. It was hard to stay focused, and sometimes it feels like a miracle we did, but more on that later.

POLITICAL ALLIANCES

BASTA recruited political friends. Bell doesn't exist in a vacuum and people like Rizzo had political alliances who played along with their cheaters' game. In order for BASTA to

be successful, the community was going to need political allies to counterbalance the Rizzo network.

Starting out, political allies are hard to come by. But political power isn't about being picky, it's about getting a network going. The network provides access to more avenues of communication to residents. This is critical as the community is often unaware of the political landscape and how it can impede or help their cause.

Simply stated, BASTA's success was based on its willingness to take advantage of all its opportunities. As various elements were already in play, BASTA took the initiative to bring them together, give them focus, and then run with it.

FLEXIBILITY

The last, and arguably the most important element of BASTA's success, has been flexibility. At first BASTA was nothing more than an abstraction that centered around the simple idea of good governance. But as the media continued to dig, and the community continued to share stories, the overall goal of better governance began to take shape with specific steps. Over nine months, BASTA's smaller goals shifted. Thus flexibility has been the last and most important element in this equation.

In nine months BASTA accomplished a lot, which led to the following:

- Eight ex-council members and administrators were indicted and stood trial.
- 16,000 signatures were collected in 20 days to force a recall of 4 council members. Others resigned or decided not to seek reelection.
- Four council members were recalled by 95% of the voters.
- An audit of Bell's finances by John Chiang, the state controller, whose findings were devastating.
- City manager Robert Rizzo, the assistant city manager Angela Spaccia, and police chief Randy Adams were forced to resign.
- The election of an entirely new city council of reformers.
- The tripling of voter participation.
- The registration of 1400 new voters.

Most importantly, people got informed, educated, and during the height of the scandal, hundreds attended council and BASTA meetings.

The Ugly

The partnership with the police department came at a big cost. When the Bell POA decided to work with BASTA, it was forced to walk away from the Bell Residents Club. The Bell POA and I tried to bring them into BASTA, but with me at the helm. This did not go well with the president and vice president of the Bell Residents Club (BRC). They quickly decided they would be an alternative group with a mission to get rid of the corrupt council and also get rid of the police department. At one point we discussed the possibility of letting them be co-leaders of BASTA because it would spare a lot of fights but I felt I could work through the fights, but I could not work with their leaders. I took a risk and it is a risk that paid off in many ways, but also hurt the community in many ways.

Many outside of Bell came to see the conflict in terms of BASTA versus the council and city manager. Unseen was the infighting between BASTA and BRC, which was every bit as challenging. It almost feels like a miracle we were able to ignore that fight for power long enough to get things done.

I think my role for a long time was like the traffic control person at the airport, guiding everyone in BASTA through the turbulence in order to get us to the day's goal, reminding them that the real fight was with the council and administrators and not with the BRC, their fellow residents.

The BRC tried to discredit and destabilize BASTA by engaging in a smear campaign against BASTA and its leaders. Whatever BASTA wanted, the BRC wanted something different. The BRC even tried their hands at a second recall at the same time BASTA was working on their own recall effort. While their recall effort was well funded, it was once again not run properly, so it did not go anywhere.

A wealthy Republican activist from Glendale came to Bell and offered BASTA \$25,000 at a meeting with the condition that the leadership of BASTA change to the leadership of the BRC and that the effort also took on a partisan effort. It was his desire to make the case that the council was corrupt because they were Democrats and it was time for Republicans to take over. Although we desperately needed the money, we didn't take the money, so that money was instead used to fund the second recall by the opposing group – which again failed to qualify.

Often times, the opposing group would bait BASTA members into fights which prompted us to create a code of conduct and ground rules for respect. In between all the work and organizing against the council and the administrators, we had to make sure the code of conduct was being respected. Here, my teaching skills came in handy. At all our

meetings the code of conduct (which was printed on agendas) would be reviewed. We even made flyers that said BASTA con Respeto (BASTA with respect) to remind people and passed them out at rallies. Then we trained folks to be hall monitors and help implement the rules. Saying it was challenging is an understatement.

There was a smear campaign accusing us of being paid crazy amounts of money and that we were doing this for our own personal benefit, in order to get the city manager's job or to get fat contracts, or to misappropriate money.

All of a sudden, we, and I in particular, were accused of being just as guilty as Rizzo and company. This was ironic, given everything I knew and the fact that more often than not I had used my personal money to pay for supplies, food, even our office rent. Donations were not flying in as everyone had expected. On occasion we would respond, but for the most part we were very disciplined at ignoring it all as much as possible. It's a miracle we focused on one battle and were not engulfed by the second battle that was personal. Learning to be emotionally detached or at least give that appearance was hard at times, but, really, there was so much substantive work to be done that we mostly focused on that.

Initially their efforts had an adverse effect on BASTA. They had convinced our County Supervisor and our Assemblymember to work against us. At one point we had run both out of Bell, which only encouraged them to continue to work against us using their political networks. We saw our Assemblymember telling the League of Cities to walk away from us instead of advising us on what types of items would help our city move forward. Our County Supervisor was pushing the other group's agenda, including putting the city in receivership and eventually campaigning against one candidate who was never involved with BASTA. Even the League of Women Voters worked against us when they were supposed to help us get candidates and residents to candidate forums.

Muslims under attack

Then there was fear mongering about the Muslim community, often focused on Ali, who is a Muslim. The El Hussein center was getting threats from all over the place and the leaders were afraid enough that they asked us to find a different spot to meet. The threats were not from community members. We thought it was the photographs and video taken by the media that was bringing negative attention to the El Hussein Center. We decided to allow the press in, but told them they couldn't take pictures.

The Lebanese and Latino Community in Bell had lived side by side since the 70's, but they never interacted. There was little understanding and some mistrust about each other's cultures, but the reality is that their history, work ethic, and beliefs were similar. We were all in the US chasing the American dream, living lives with dual identities; here long enough to no longer be part of our home countries but not yet fully assimilated into the US. Their values revolved around family, food, and hard work.

But none of that was obvious to people who had been neighbors for decades. Instead the focus was on the differences and the hyper awareness that 9/11 brought us. Ali was accused of being tied to terrorist groups, selling drugs, laundering money, being a womanizer...Often times he just wanted to quit because the lies were so ugly and personal. His neighbors who he was fighting for were saying such bad things about him. Ironically, he had the means to leave Bell and could afford Bell's high taxes, but was fighting for his community of mostly Latinos who did not have the financial security he had. He was under attack for his culture and religion. And the attacks were not just about Ali-- they were against all the Lebanese in Bell. Even more ironically, the only meeting spot that was always available and big enough to hold hundreds of people and free was the El Hussein Community center, which was run by Bell's Lebanese community. The leaders of the Lebanese community wanted to help, but felt they were under attack, and at one point they debated whether or not we could keep using the center. I remember Ali bringing it to my attention and me pushing back.

No, we needed the space. People needed to get over it and start talking to each other. This arrangement of the Latino and Lebanese communities living together in Bell-- but separate-- seemed nuts to me. The center was perfect for our meetings. It was a big rectangle with little on the walls, a bunch a lawn chairs organized in rows, could fit hundreds, and had a speaker with a microphone and it was free! I don't know what Ali did, but we were allowed by the Elders to continue to use the center. At the same time, some BASTA members who were Latinos were pushing back asking to move the meetings someplace else because "they didn't feel comfortable" in the center. When asked as to what was making them uncomfortable, they couldn't tell me. If they did, they would focus on negative Arab stereotypes. My answer was simple: find me a place that's just as big, just as accessible, and just as affordable. They never found such a place. Instead everyone learned to be respectful of the center, ask questions of each other, and, by working side by side, some of the hesitation about each other's cultures started to melt away. I won't pretend it was perfect or that we broke down giant barriers, but we definitely moved in the right direction.

It was clear that those with institutional power were doing all they could to destroy BASTA and help the BRC. Groups within and outside Bell were trying to use cultural difference to divide BASTA. But because we were disciplined and did not respond, and because "no or not possible" was never an option, we remained united and effective.

From the beginning, BASTA was able to set reasonable goals and achieve them. I felt that we needed to make sure we were strategic in our goals and that there was a clear path to success. In other words, we managed expectations and had attainable deliverables. One of BASTA's strengths was its ability to make the complex world of local government and politics accessible to Bell's residents. Despite all the madness and ugly rumors, people kept coming to our meetings because we provided accurate information and we were able to answer their specific questions.

Conclusion

As you can see, this is the story of a group of residents that decided to take their destiny into their hands, rolled up their sleeves, and refused to give up. The list of accomplishments is amazing, but what's most amazing is that we did it when many thought this community didn't stand a chance.

Bell is a working class community, with one of the highest unemployment rates in LA County (double the national rate) and about half of the residents are immigrants. Bell residents are doing what many across America struggle to do: no matter their social standing, learning how to navigate the political system and force real reform.

In closing, these are some of the elements that were in place in Bell that BASTA pulled together. But each situation is unique. The art of successful community organizing is figuring out what is out there and how to pull it all together.

The windows of opportunities don't always come around. And while these windows do often exist, sometimes they need to be created. Windows tend to close quickly, however, and taking advantage of an open one is an opportunity to make lasting and meaningful change. The bottom line is that once these windows are open, it's important to act fast and fearlessly.

ⁱThe Southeast area of Los Angeles counties generally refers to the cities of Artesia, Bell, Bell Gardens, Bellflower, Cerritos, Commerce, Compton, Cudahy, Downey, Hawaiian Gardens, Huntington Park, La Habra Heights, La Mirada, Lakewood, and Lynwood.

ⁱⁱ See <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/05/local/me-southeast5>