

# **67 Sueños: Inspiring a Movement for Undocumented Voices to be Heard**

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## **Abstract**

This essay documents the work of 67 Sueños, a youth-led collective based in Oakland, California. The group is committed to bringing to light the stories of the 67 percent of undocumented youth and young adults who would not qualify for the DREAM Act and who are in many ways left out of the dominant narrative around immigration reform. The author examines the use of cultural storytelling, through video testimonio and murals, as an important source of healing and movement building. Through their process of reflection, art and action, 67 Sueños provides a powerful lesson on who has the right to be heard and a reminder that all youth have dreams worth pursuing. The author pays special tribute to 67 Sueños by including the voices of its members throughout the essay

## **Introduction**

In 2010, seven youth from Oakland, California, along with mentor and immigration activist Pablo Paredes came together to create a space for the sixty-seven percent of undocumented youth and families that are missing from the current discussion and activism around immigration reform. In order to honor these unheard voices and aspirations, the group named themselves “67 Sueños.” As one youth member states, “To me the most important thing of 67 Sueños has been to lift the voices of those that are unheard in the immigration debate, we try to hear the unheard stories, specifically those of youth, because many times we are ignored” (J.Garcia, personal communication, August 15, 2012). For the past two years, 67 Sueños has become a powerful tool of youth driven social agency, creating a movement of empowerment and leadership for undocumented youth to speak out and examine how political actions continue to polarize Latinos at both ends of the spectrum. Although facilitated by mentor and activist Pablo Paredes, it is important to note that most of the project has been created and developed by the youth. 67 Sueños joins a larger youth movement aimed at challenging current immigration laws and pushing for immigration reform based on dignity and human rights.

Driven to provide space for healing as well as to create movement for change, the youth have identified four key areas in which to focus their collective work: 1) Cultural Storytelling, 2) Healing, 3) Advocacy for Human Rights Justice, and 4) Impacting the Immigrant Rights Movement through Advocacy and Organizing. In this essay, I will describe these four areas while providing voice to those at the core of the organization: the youth and Pablo Paredes.

## **Cultural Storytelling**

Undocumented immigrants have no way to tell you what they have experienced, or why, or who they are, or what they think. They are by the very nature of their experience, invisible. Most of us pass them by-some of us might say a prayer for them, some of us wish they would return to their countries of origin. But nobody asks them what they think. Nobody stops and simply asks (Urrea, 2008, p. 5).

67 Sueños uses video as a tool to bring to light these hidden stories in the hopes of impacting public discourse and attitudes, politics of immigration reform, and finally policy. They gather every week to listen, share, process and capture personal narratives on film. Paredes shared that the group hopes to “... tell our own stories through video interviews, stories of migrant youth who are not 4.0 students or hardened ‘criminals.’

These videos will be the vehicle by which we inject the realities and perspectives of the missing 67 percent into the immigrant's rights movement and the national dialogue."

Through the use of video, many of the youth and others in their community are able to share their story of what life has been like living as undocumented individuals. Originally the goal was to gather 67 videos of undocumented youth. The interest and outpouring of support has surpassed the standard they had set. In all 67 Sueños was able to document the experiences of 67 individuals and have been able to present these stories at various venues, with audiences across California and by using social media outlets.

Many of the youth members were brought to the United States as young children. Although the choice to migrate was made for them, they are clear about not accepting the current dominant narrative that blames and vilifies their parents for bringing them here. According to the youth, their parents are the heroes that fight relentlessly for their survival. In an effort to change the dominant negative discourse about their lives' and that of their families, they use their personal stories captured through video to provide a counter narrative. Their video stories explore the daily fear of deportation, the painful consequences of shattered families due to forced immigration, separation, and the economic and emotional crisis this reality has had on their spirit and wellbeing. One youth member spoke on this collective pain in an interview, "When I speak I want people to feel the pain that I go through, see the reality of what we all have to struggle with and we need to raise our voices to speak."

Aside from videos, murals have become another form of cultural story-telling. One of the largest projects the group worked on was a hundred foot long mural in San Francisco. Local artists, 67 Sueños youth, and community members collectively created the mural that stands as a source of power for the undocumented community. Painted across the mural are the words "No Human Being is Illegal." More recently, in August of 2012, the youth painted a forty foot long mural that visually represents the struggles of Latinas access to healthcare, entitled "Mujer mariposa, libre y poderosa." Along with the main theme of women and healthcare, the mural documents the experiences of several current youth members. For example, Yoxeli Romero is depicted as a little girl being carried by a mujer mariposa (woman with butterfly wings) to the United States. Romero shared, "I migrated...so the butterfly represents all of that." The powerful visual reminder of her migration story, along with the others, captured in the mural highlights the role of women, community, and hope in creating a life with opportunity.

Paredes poignantly sums up the power behind cultural storytelling in the following way:

There is a personal connection for all of our youth to the immigration debate and migrant justice movement. Youth in the group have had family members deported and held in detention centers. Many of our youth have vivid memories of their traumatic migration story. We have members who have faced deportation or the threat of deportation personally and of course all of my youth have faced various forms of discrimination due to theirs or a family member's migration status. All these experiences make the work we do at 67 Sueños a form of healing

## Healing

Storytelling in the forms described above provide the youth of 67 Sueños and their families a liberating space to share their testimonio of struggle. Their hope is to create a healing space that begins with the permission to tell the story of who they are. "Once you tell your story you take power over it" shares Paredes. No longer do they have to hide in the shadows. "False hope would have us believe in individualized notions of success and suffering, but audacious hope demands that we reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside one another, sharing in the victims pain" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 190). In order for youth to heal, they must be heard, they must be mentored and they must have a solid place to trust and share their emotions around the daily traumas that they live with silently. According to Paredes:

A way to come to terms with the trauma that these youth have experienced is to take charge of their narrative and what it is used for. This storytelling and advocacy process is deeply empowering.

I have watched all the youth in 67 Sueños embark on a journey where feelings of shame and inadequacy slowly give way to a sense of empowerment and dignity. To quote Bayard Rustin, “When an individual is protesting society’s refusal to acknowledge his dignity as a human being, his very act of protest confers dignity on him.” I clearly see this dynamic in the youth at 67 Sueños. They go from rarely acknowledging their status publicly and seeing it as a liability, a shameful fact, a dangerous weakness to a space where it is this piece of their identity that makes them an authority on immigration issues. They suddenly become powerful and gain rather than risk access into a space based on what was once perceived as a liability. You see the transformation when they go to their first March. Suddenly the same person that tip toed around their status when we first met is screaming “we are people we are not Illegal” or Undocumented ! Unafraid!”

The strong collective the group provides offers a natural and safe space to heal. In their healing, the youth are driven to touch the lives of others by turning trauma into human rights advocacy and organizing. Carlos Madrilga, a youth activist of 67 Sueños reflected on the impact of the project on his life, “La cultura es grande, we come from a beautiful struggle and it’s beautiful because cada dia estamos luchando for something better. It has helped me and made me more mature and understand where we are coming from.” Paredes also discusses the power of transforming trauma into collective strength:

I believe they are inspired by their experiences and the possibility of transforming their trauma into a source of strength. Also I hear my youth speak of the second family they have at 67 Sueños. This is no trite expression among our youth since many have lost portions if not most of their families through migration or deportation. So I think they crave that lost sense of family and community. All of our youth have mentioned and many we’ve interviewed talk about the connection to family and community they remember back home and how here in the states things are more segregated and alienated. Here in the US everyone goes into their apartment or home and keeps to themselves. At 67 Sueños we do a ton of “work” including organizing actions, editing video, creating art, organizing workshops... but we also take a great deal of time building a strong community. We spend 2 to 3 hours a week eating together, preparing the food together, and having a healing ceremony where we burn copal as our ancestors once did. We share our traumas and our success, we laugh we cry and check in often. These are the things I see and hear that are motivating to do more.

### **Advocacy for Human Rights Justice**

The current movement of student led activism for immigration reform is raising consciousness around abusive human rights violations of the undocumented, forced separation of families and inequitable educational opportunities that Latinas/os are challenged with. New dialogues are also emerging that provide opportunities to share the stories that many have kept in silence due to their immigration status.

Undocumented youth are tired of the vast inequities and limited opportunities afforded to them because of their citizenship status. We fight for the right to education for all, the right to have a job that helps our families get out of poverty, the right to live without fear of incarceration and deportation, the right to keep families together” (Suarez, 2010).

67 Sueños youth activists are committed to shining light on the inequities and human rights violations that many are challenged with every day as a result of living undocumented. The group feels that it is imperative that immigrant advocacy include narrating the chronic human rights violations that undocumented families experience and witness daily. The movement towards accountability of these violations must be questioned and responded to. 67 Sueños youth member, Carlos Madrigal states:

Human rights should be addressed by getting the community together, making sure that you teach everybody, making sure the message gets out, making sure that gente keep pushing to want more, that they never stop, never give up. Mienteras que tengamos mas es major” (C. Madrigal, personal communication, August 11, 2012).

While often the emphasis of human rights advocacy is based on work with other populations outside the United States. Paredes shared the work they are doing to recognize the human rights that each individual should be afforded in this country:

Our main mantra is that No Human Being Is Illegal. We did not originate this statement but we try to be true to it in all of our efforts. We advocate for the human and civil rights of all migrant people. We don't like to suggest one is more “deserving than another”. In fact we believe that it is almost more important to lift the voices and struggles of the most affected within the migrant community. We think a movement is only as strong as its ability to stand with those who are most impacted.

The examples are endless and heart wrenching. Quality Health care which includes mental health and primary care which should be a right not a privilege is simply out of reach for many migrant people. Victimization and vulnerability is another issue to highlight. Undocumented people are targets because they lack equal protection under the law. We have students who were victims of violence and the fear of deportation outweighs the fear of violence and abuse.

The right to a quality education is so clearly out of reach for so many migrant youth. These youth get the shell of public education without key support structures. When people know you are vulnerable to threats of deportation you become a target. Many of the youth have stories of people in their own community taking advantage of them. Their parents are abused at work where pay is withheld, workload is increased and they do not have spaces for advocacy. Threats to call “la Migra” are part of our youth's lives. (Paredes, Personal Communication, April 20, 2012).

In the face of all that is happening, youth are no longer staying silent. They are coming to the forefront to take action. The determination of the youth leading 67 Sueños is evident in their energy and enthusiasm to impact change.

### **Impacting Immigrant Rights Movement through Advocacy and Organizing**

“Direct actions led by undocumented youth and youth of color are the only reasons that politicians have even discussed immigration reform and the DREAM act. Throughout history, youth have been at the forefront of revolutionary social transformations and our time is no exception. Undocumented youth and youth of color are at the forefront of hope we can truly believe in” (Alcaez Ochoa, 2011).

The youth of 67 Sueños see their work of capturing the hopes and dreams of the undocumented community as pivotal in countering the dominant narrative around immigrant rights. The work of 67 Sueños argues that as a country we can no longer limit access to citizenship. The road for youth must be made wider to include thousands of others to find their way down the path to citizenship opportunities. The group firmly believes that all youth, regardless of citizenship status should have access to economic rights, educational rights, and finally the right to life of dignity.

The expectation that only the educated or those that meet conservative standards are “worthy” of a path to citizenship, leaves many out of the dialogue and strips their hopes for a future that will allow them a path to citizenship regardless of educational status. Duncan Andrade (2009) highlights the pervasive inequity in our educational system when he writes about his three tenants of hope in education as he acknowledges how students are left waiting for an opportunity for their future to improve. This hope is what many undocumented students live for that often never manifests itself:

“When we are unwilling to confront these harsh realities of social inequality with our pedagogy to cultivate their “control of destiny” all we have to offer youth is hope deferred. This often comes when we ask our students to set their sights on some temporary distant (and highly unlikely) future wellbeing” (p. 185).

The youth of 67 Sueños highlight these social inequities as they share their own narrative based on their intense hope and dispelling the notion that only certain stories are worthy of being heard. As Zimmerman (2011) points out “these narratives reveal that the vision for social change of the undocumented youth extends beyond legalization to a broader agenda that includes social and economic justice for immigrant worker and then families” (p. 17). As the youth rally to make a visible difference in the immigrant’s rights movement, their advocacy and organizing are the main platform by which they contribute to both the local and national movement.

They organize local marches and have supported continuous efforts for larger immigration political change. Some of the recent work of the group includes supporting steel workers in Berkeley and campaigning against the construction of increased immigration detention facilities around the United States. 67 Sueños are being heard. In the following quote, Paredes shares the group’s approach, and in particular the visions of the youth that have made their energy come alive:

In terms of the methods we believe deeply in the power of storytelling and arts based advocacy. Too often activism is seen only as a legislative campaign. However the struggles for equality of the past have demonstrated that before a Civil Rights Act can pass we need black intellectual voices like MLK Jr. to become household names. The process of changing the culture of a society always precedes any meaningful political shift. MLK Jr.’s I have a dream speech was more important than anything written up for the congress to pursue during the Civil Rights era. This theory is well articulated by Jeff Chang. He argues, “Cultural change is often the dress-rehearsal for political change. Or put in another way, political change is the final manifestation of cultural shifts that have already occurred.”

So we have aimed our energy at cultural and narrative based work. Our interviews become Facebook posts, twitter feeds, and shorts that we play in community spaces and so forth. It’s about engaging America in an intimate discussion about migrant people and their real lives, struggles, successes and challenges. We also believe firmly that change comes from the people not the politicians. We think that statement will become real when enough people agree to fight for it. So we engage young people in the fight. There have been over 160 anti-immigrant bills passed across the country in the last couple of years touching nearly every state and contributing to 1,000,000 plus deportations.

For greater impact and reform to be made around immigration, it is critical for advocacy and organizing to begin at the grassroots level locally within communities. When there is a space for voice to be heard in communities then voices are amplified in one common struggle around the nation.

### **Moving the 67 Struggle Forward**

The work of the youth and the impact they are having cannot be ignored. When we look locally at the Bay Area, the voice of 67 Sueños is being heard nationally and is at the forefront of immigrant youth advocacy and activism. Paredes shared some of the most significant pieces of their work at both the local and national level:

Two areas where we feel that we have really had an impact are in the DREAM Movement nationally and the local migrant justice movement. In both places we feel that we have played a part in expanding the debate. Our critique has been accepted and internalized by many groups doing the work locally and nationally. We have heard from folks involved in the NIYA National Immigrant Youth Alliance. IYJL in Chicago a similar migrant youth group has reached out to work with us and we see a broader critique

in their work since our first dialogues in October of 2010. Major DREAM movement artists like Julio Salgado and Yosimar Reyes have collaborated with us and lifted our perspective. So, we feel we have had an impact on the migrant youth movement locally and nationally and hope to keep building together.

It is an honor to witness the work of 67 Sueños. Their story is a testimony of the unified spirit of struggle. The group represents the voices of all of those who have marched before that brought about historic reform, their blood running through the veins of the next generation. They represent the idea that fear will no longer paralyze and that change is imperative and cannot be ignored. The youth of 67 Sueños have risen up to create space for the undocumented to be heard, to heal and to impact change. Their work creates a space where silence will no longer be an option. Clearly what they are doing is necessary and for the youth and their community, it has been a powerful force. We must use their movement as a model to create space for stories to be shared within each of our communities. Even as political attitudes or opportunities change and shift, the push for narratives to be told is critical. Human rights violations in the undocumented community and anti-immigrant sentiments can no longer take center stage. The youth of 67 Sueños have provided tools for those working with undocumented youth and families to empower the lives' of these families. They have specifically shown how advocacy and organizing can impact a broader agenda for immigration reform. Through them, a new movement has formed and hope is alive for many youth around our country as their voice is finally being heard.

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