

# If Not Now, When?

STORY AND PHOTO BY NANCY BEA MILLER

I am sitting in the office of Peter Bloom, C'05, director and co-founder of Juntos, a social service agency that supports the Mexican immigrant community in Philadelphia. Juntos is on the first floor and basement of a row house in South Philadelphia. It has that neutral-office look — fluorescent lights, pale gray wallpaper and industrial-grade carpet — overlaid with the bright colors of Mexico. A postcard taped to a computer reads, “There are no illegal people.”

Bloom’s phone has been ringing all morning. Over the weekend, a local cheesesteak shop posted a sign telling customers, “This is America: When Ordering Speak ENGLISH.” In a month of tension over President Bush’s immigration bill, this small provocation in the window of a neighborhood eatery has become national news. Everyone in the press, it seems, wants a statement from Bloom.

The phone rings. It’s clear the reporter wants to speak with him right now, so I pantomime that I can come back another time. Bloom smiles, shakes his head and arranges an interview for later. He ends the call, but the phone rings again. This time, he switches to Spanish for a call from a Juntos client. “Excuse me just one more moment,” he tells me. “I have to take this, but it won’t be long.” I nod and he sprints from the office, still speaking in the Mexican Spanish that has become his second tongue.

I wondered why he didn’t cancel our interview when the crisis broke. Later, I realized that, although he is only 24, Bloom has a mature conception of the big picture. “There is *always* some new crisis coming up,” he laughs. “There is no point in putting something off that you might not be able to do later.” He is speaking about our interview, but I think the remark sums up his philosophy of life.

Bloom is the son of late Penn medical-school professor Bernard Bloom, Gr’75, and a lifelong resident of Philadelphia. He came to Penn in 2000, declaring a major in urban studies, but after a few semesters he became restless. “The quality of the education at Penn is really amazing,” he recounts, “but it began to bother me that we were learning it solely in the abstract, as an intellectual challenge.”

He began asking family and friends how he might gain more hands-on experience. A Catholic church in the city was offering English classes to parishioners newly arrived from Mexico. There were more people eager to learn the new language than there were volunteers to teach it. He took a course in teaching English as a foreign language and went right to work at the church, fitting in his teaching around his Penn schedule.

Says Bloom, “The urban studies program talks about different themes like gentrification, revitalization, labor-market shifts, et cetera, et cetera — all things we

read about in books. Volunteering, I actually got to meet and understand people who were part of these processes and hear about it from their point of view.”

Disturbed by how few resources there were for this invisible but rapidly growing population, Bloom decided to take a leave from full-time study and see what he could do to help. His high-school friend Adam Ureneck, also stricken with practical idealism, took a leave from college as well. The two young men plunged into the world of grant writing and fund raising, learning Spanish and finding out about the Philadelphia Mexican community as they went along.

There was little information about the city’s Mexican community besides the “ridiculously low” 2000 census number of 6,200. According to Bloom, the population is actually somewhere around 25,000 with a majority (80 percent) living in South Philly. “As it turns out,” he notes, “we learned so much about the Mexican community that Penn now invites me to speak to faculty, alumni, grad students and undergrads about it.”

Bloom and Ureneck were lucky and brash enough to land some grants almost immediately. “We had a kick-ass proposal to serve this totally underserved community,” Bloom recalls. “There was no way they could say no, but we just kept hoping they didn’t ask how old we were.” They were 19.



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the culture gap of America and Mexico, Juntos recently worked with the Philadelphia Museum of Art to sponsor a parent and children’s art day in conjunction with a recent exhibit on Latin American art.

Taking courses part time and getting credit for his real-life studies, Bloom finished his degree only slightly later than his classmates, receiving the Martin Luther King Jr. Urban Studies Program Award for Commitment to Social Justice in the City.

Our interview at an end, my eye catches on the carved masks, drawings, paper flowers and other brightly colored decorations on the office walls. They are gifts from the people whom Juntos has served and remind me of the milagros one might see in a Latin American church. Milagros are medallions or charms pinned to altar cloths or nailed to the wall, offerings to a saint that ask for help or give thanks for prayers answered. The word translates as “miracle.” I joke with Bloom that he will need a much bigger space to hold all these modern-day milagros. “You know what?” he laughs. “We are working on that right now!” Then he excuses himself to answer the ringing phone. ■

*Nancy Bea Miller, C’85, is a painter, photographer and (part-time) writer. Her work can be seen at [www.nancybeamiller.com](http://www.nancybeamiller.com).*

From the start, they had one major goal: Do not set up a conduit for pouring in outside help but work to make the community self-reliant. They named the agency Juntos, which means “united” or “together.”

With a shoestring budget, they offered more English classes and began a partnership with Women Organized Against Rape, helping to open a satellite office that supported immigrant women and shared space with Juntos. With the help of Women’s Way and other grants, they leased the row house Juntos currently occupies.

With a home base, Juntos moved to serve even more needs. The people of Juntos, which includes Latinos and non-Latinos, help the community organize political-awareness events and encourage them to understand the legal system. Juntos now sponsors computer literacy classes on donated computers. Since many clients bring children, there is a play area outside the classroom. The group also has programs to help Mexican-born parents figure out how to make sure their American-born children get a decent education and appropriate services. To build bridges across