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## Benjamin Ahmad

Benjamin Ahmad was employed at an oil company in San Francisco when he found his life work. Immersed in a culture that defined itself in terms of cultivating material worldwide, the 23-year-old junior engineer had a sense that something was missing. He saw that something on his bus rides through San Francisco's Fillmore district—a social dynamism, a vibrant energy, a spirit, in the communities he passed through every day. It was a realization that led Ahmad to hand in his resignation to Standard Oil and change his college major at San Francisco State from engineering to psychology.

That same inspiration has guided him in his work for the last 30 years as a social entrepreneur creating new possibilities with diverse communities. A rehabilitation counselor by day and community organizer around the clock, Ahmad sees his work in East Palo Alto as an outgrowth of his counseling profession; both involve understanding assets and working constructively toward self-empowerment. After joining with others in a successful effort to turn East Palo Alto into a municipality in 1983, Ahmad became an influential leader within the city, serving as chairman of the Human Services Commission, the Bayshore Employment Agency board, the East Palo Alto Planning Commission, and the East Palo Alto Senior Center. In those roles, he has helped establish positive interagency partnerships and completed a redevelopment plan that includes a recreation center and low-income housing development.

Seeing faith as central to human and community development, Ahmad has also served as an imam and infuses his work with a spiritual framework and spiritual terminology. "I try to establish a means by which a common spiritual quality connects people. The common aspect of spirit is the air we breathe. Every culture may have a unique way of expressing it, but every culture has a spirit," he says.

Viewing East Palo Alto as "sacred ground," Ahmad's vision for community revitalization includes increasing people's ability to appreciate and sustain their humanity and their core values without getting wrapped up in politics that sabotage that humanity and those values. "When you're working with an individual, there's a clear understanding of the issues and challenges," he said. "When you're

working with a community, there are diverse opinions and either clarity or confusion. My focus is the total community.”

Ahmad has been a Wildflowers fellow since 2002.

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### Larry Moody

Larry Moody is known as an “inviter.” Through his energetic nature and focus on possibilities, he opens doors and invites people into places they didn’t know were available to them. But the youth program director had experienced some opportunities closing to him before he discovered that calling. After a personal crisis interrupted his successful career in the hotel industry, the recession hit, and he found that he couldn’t get a job driving a shuttle bus, let alone return to his job managing guest services.

“I saw it as God closing those doors,” Moody recalled. “My calling is very clear. I’m to be involved in the development of youth.” He discovered this almost accidentally one day when he went to a Peninsula gym, and started playing ball with a boy and his father. The gym manager immediately noticed that Moody, an ex-college athlete, was not just good at sports, he had a natural flair for engaging young people. That encounter offered him entrée to a job with the city’s Midnight Basketball program. Within a year, he was running that program and urging the city to start another, Twilight Basketball, that would go beyond intervention to prevention.

From that point on, Moody has started and run a series of youth development programs. His smile and easygoing personality enhance his “inviter” role. It’s not unusual to find “Uncle Larry” driving a group of kids to a ball game or to Stanford University for a walk around the campus. “I like to energize youth to dream and consider possibilities,” he says. As recreation coordinator for the city of East Palo Alto, he expanded programs, built bridges with area sports teams, and led some area teams to national competitions. In his current position, as program director for a local church, he runs programs for entire families, such as Parents Night Out, and a mentorship program for grandparents who are raising their grandkids.

His role as “inviter” may have evolved out of his hospitality industry career and his background in athletics, but Moody is

taking it in another direction, by studying to become a minister. When he recalls his parents' activism in the civil rights movement, Moody realizes he is carrying out their legacy in a unique way. "God has brought me back to a place where I can appreciate what it is to give," he said. "I have tremendous anticipation for East Palo Alto and how it's going to end up."

Moody has been a Wildflowers fellow since 2002.

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## Luis Avelar



"We cannot close our eyes if we are not getting what we need," says Luis Avelar, who has spent the last 30 years keeping his eyes open on behalf of East Palo Alto's Spanish-speaking community. Whether police brutality, quality education, affordable housing, or community safety, Avelar has been at the table representing the Hispanic community on almost every issue they have confronted. In his calm demeanor, many in the Hispanic community find both the wisdom and the resolve that are needed to tackle intractable difficulties.

Avelar was called on as a community representative early on in his life in California. It was back in 1974, when he was living in an apartment building filled with friends and relatives from his native Zacatecas. The police would regularly raid the building looking for illegal immigrants to deport. After one particularly brutal incident, Avelar was chosen as the group's spokesperson in a lawsuit against the authorities. Because of his involvement with an immigrant rights organization in San Jose, he had both connections to the legal community and the respect of his community. The ultimately successful lawsuit became his entrée into community leadership. "I learned that we all have rights, and that's what has motivated me to keep striving," he said.

In representing his community in church coalitions and countless community boards, Avelar crosses cultural boundaries to work with African Americans and other minority groups. Since becoming involved in the 1970s, he has seen dramatic improvements in community security as well as improvements in other areas. As a board member of Peninsula Interfaith Action, he also has been part of successful efforts to secure more funding for low-income housing. And he counts reformers' recent takeover of the local school board as one of his community's greatest successes. "It felt as though we had changed a part of the world," he noted.

The school board victory illustrates Avelar's wisdom: Seeing the pitfall of making himself indispensable, he sees a major part of his mission as cultivating the next generation of

leaders to take his community farther and deepen their connections with the broader East Palo Alto community. "We need to concern ourselves with having more representation in politics. The representatives from our city and county will decide our future. When I invite someone to join a cause, I try to do it without self-interest, only for the good of everybody." In a testament to his sincerity, he is rarely turned down.

Avelar became a Wildflowers fellow in 2003.

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## Marcelino Lopez

When he came to California 36 years ago, Marcelino Lopez carried a common dream of immigrants to this country: a good education and brighter future for his children. Never expecting a struggle, he was astonished to find out after settling his family in East Palo Alto that the schools were actually impeding his kids' education. That discovery cost him dearly, first in dollars, and then in time. First, Lopez sent his three eldest children to private school, not an easy achievement on his salary as a greens keeper at Stanford University. Years later, when he sent one of his younger children to a new program at the public school, he was shocked to learn that conditions had not improved, and that dropout rates were over 60 percent in the majority Hispanic district. "It's a crime," said Lopez. "It's everybody's fault, not only the district."

At the time, he had no intention of holding office. But his experience as a frustrated parent and commitment to change led him on a journey that eventually won him a school board seat in a campaign to end mismanagement and reform the district. Lopez and the other new board members voted to forgo their stipends until the district returned to financial health. The school board seat was the culmination of years of service on the school's English Language Advisory Committee and leadership of a Padres Unidos advocacy group, where Lopez emerged as an advocate to the school for Hispanic families and a frequent spokesman for the community in meetings with legislators and media interviews.

After earning the trust of the Hispanic community, Lopez also saw the need to build ties with African American and Pacific Islander parents in the diverse community. "I'm not only for Hispanics," he said. "I'm for the kids." As a board member of groups including Peninsula Interfaith Action and One East Palo Alto, he broadened his involvement beyond the school district and the Hispanic population to building a healthier community.

Lopez's work makes him more optimistic about the legacy he had hoped to leave for his children: "We all know that there are a lot of problems in our community, but we always think maybe someone else will take care of

them or they will go away. The need is enormous, not only for my kids, but for the whole community. My best reward is that the kids get a good education and have a better future."

Lopez became a Wildflowers fellow in 2003.

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## Pedro Robles

Pedro Robles personifies grassroots leadership. Part of a younger generation of community organizers arising in East Palo Alto, his strength comes from his community ties and cultural values, and his growth has been in understanding other communities in his adopted homeland. But along the way, the frustrations he experienced led him to realize the need for community leaders to defend the rights of Hispanic immigrants. He frequently cites his efforts to learn English at a local school where it was the teachers, not the students, who regularly skipped class.

On one occasion when the class didn't happen and Robles had extra time on his hands, he happened upon a community organizing meeting at a nearby church. The group was known as the Base Committee, and when Robles heard about its mission to fight for better housing, education, and police protection for the local community, he became hooked. He also became involved in another organization, the Committee for Immigrant Rights, and busied himself organizing car washes and garage sales, and anything the group could do to expand its activities.

His disappointment with the local school district is one of the key factors motivating Robles. "When I was a child, I wanted to study to help others. That was my dream. My parents put me in school, but after 2 or 3 months a year, they pulled me out to help on the farm. That's how we survive in Mexico. I thought that in this country, there wasn't any corruption," he said.

With three children in the local schools, Robles observed that the school district did not seem to take their education seriously. "I realized we needed a change," he said. He was part of a successful campaign to replace the school board with reform-minded candidates who are working to end mismanagement in the school district.

Robles also serves on the board of One East Palo Alto, a group that is bringing Palo Alto's diverse populations together to revitalize and strengthen the community. In all that he does, he infuses his projects with traditional values from his Mexican background. "I think about the youth and elderly a lot," he said. "A child has to be cared for, and when he reaches old age he has to be

cared for. In this country, parents aren't important. We need to teach our new generation to care for our elderly."

Robles became a Wildflowers fellow in 2003.

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