

Southwest Detroit:

The Latinx Safe Haven

BY CHRISTIANA CASTILLO

Whenever I am in Southwest Detroit, my mind fills with the history my family has here. This is where my great grandparents migrated, this is where they built their own memories and spaces, this is where they felt safe. My great grandparents were among thousands of Mexicans who fled Mexico due to the *Cristiada*, a persecution of Christians, specifically Catholics, during the early 1920s. For their religious practices, the lives of my great grandparents were being threatened in Mexico. They were married secretly in Jalisco, Mexico by a Catholic priest. They then sought a place of their own, free of persecution.

For them, this place was Southwest Detroit. In the 1920s, many jobs were available in Detroit. Word traveled through other immigrants that Detroit was not as racist to Mexicans as other cities in the United States. To many immigrants, Detroit was a place filled with opportunity. So, in Southwest Detroit, the Mexican and Mexican American community was able to create a safe place, filled with their culture and traditions, free of fear.

Mexicans migrated from the states of Jalisco, Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Durango, and Michoacán and Mexican Americans migrated from southern states to Detroit. They craved to follow the American dream, and have the opportunity to make more money. My great-grandfather was able to obtain a job working on the railroads in Detroit, as did many who migrated to Detroit. The work was

hard, and the pay was minimal, but he was able to make a living for himself and his wife, Dolores. Mexican immigrants shared their experiences about the different places they fled, and word traveled that they were treated with less discrimination in the Midwest than in any other place. My grandfather helped pave the way for other Mexican immigrants, many of whom found work in the automobile companies, the sugar beet industry, steel mills, and other factories.

On the corner of Fisher Freeway and Vernor in Southwest Detroit, there is a large empty plot of land. There is a dead end at the end of the street, incredibly close to a freeway entrance. To most people, this strip of land and the dead end street are probably inconvenient, perhaps a source of confusion. This vacant lot used to be the property of Maria Dolores Fonseca and her husband, Telesforo Hernandez, my great grandparents. Shortly after they fled from Mexico, they were able to acquire two houses on Beecher

Hernandez family did not have to worry about being killed for their religious practices. They made money, and were able to help their friends and family members who were still in Mexico.

Beecher street was a place that allowed for the celebration of religion and tradition. Here Mexican Catholics did not have to hide their beliefs, but showed them with pride. My great grandparents had two daughters, Elva and Thelma, and a son, Hector. They had a garden filled with shrines to Jesus Christ and the Virgin de Guadalupe. My sister and I used to climb over their statues and water the flowers beneath their ceramic feet when we were young.

We grew up learning to take care of the Earth, and believing that if we prayed to God, Jesus, the Virgin de Guadalupe or any of the various Catholic saints, we would live blessed lives. My grandmother and grandparents loved their religion, and celebrated it everywhere they could: backyards with shrines and flowers, rosaries hanging off rear view mirrors, prayer cards and saints pinned on the interior roofs of their cars, busts of Popes, prayer candles, and posters of the Virgin de Guadalupe placed throughout their homes. When I drive, I have a sparkling blue rosary hanging off my rear view mirror that was passed down to me from my grandmother, and I was given the prayer cards from her car and pin them proudly in my car now.

My grandmother, Elva, moved into the home directly next to my great grandparents' home, and raised her six daughters by herself. Due to the strong work ethic taught to her by her parents, she was able to send all of her daughters to Catholic private schools, and was proud of the way she was able to honor her heritage and religion in this way. However, all of my aunts were not as enthusiastic about attending Catholic school because of the nuns' strictness. My mother enjoyed going to Holy Redeemer school, and to follow in her mother's footsteps, sent both

my sister and me to Catholic schools. All of my aunts have done the same for their children.

My grandmother's home and backyard are sacred spaces to me. After moving next door to her parents to help take care of them, my grandmother was able to acquire an empty lot of land next to her home, where she planted flowers, peppers, cilantro, tomatoes, and other staples. When I was young, I helped her harvest and take care of her garden. She was the person who taught me to always water plants close to their roots, so they can grow and spread. We would make homemade salsa and tortillas in her kitchen. Right behind her garden was a meat packing plant. Strange scents of meat and fresh vegetables used to fill the air. You could always hear the humming of bees and the sounds of cars zooming on the freeway. In my grandmother's backyard, I learned how to carry on Mexican traditions. If a bee ever stung me, I filled the sting with dirt, which is what my great-grandparents claimed they did back in Mexico. To me, my grandmother's garden was an urban paradise. An ice cream man with bells jingling in his hands would come down her street offering Mexican popsicles. If we did not want ice cream, my grandmother was always willing to walk with us to *La Gloria* bakery for Mexican treats.

I know that the intersection of Fisher Freeway and Vernor does not seem sacred to most Detroiters. The land is desolate, marked by patchy grass, litter, and a billboard. The meat packing plant is now a pickle canning plant. My grandmother and the other owners of the homes on the Beecher Street block sold their property to the The River Tunnel Partnership, a Canadian company that operates out of Mississauga, Ontario. The company intended to expand the Michigan Central Railway Tunnel that had not been used for many years. This company was then bought out by The Continental Rail Gateway, and nothing has been done with the land. Though my family does not

live on Beecher Street, my extended family still lives throughout Southwest.

I grew up hearing the sounds of church bells at St. Anne's Church in Southwest Detroit. Out of all the churches I have ever gone to, it is the church that feels most sacred to me. Almost every Christmas Eve, my family would attend mass for the Christmas novena. After that we would pick up Mexican sweets at *La Gloria* bakery. This is a tradition that my family has till this day. St. Anne's was built by the French, however, it is now a hub and community space for Latinx Catholics. My great uncle served as radio host for the St. Anne's radio show. My aunts and mother grew up giving tours of St. Anne's Church. The Church stands on St. Anne Street between Howard Street and W. Lafayette Blvd. Here they offer bilingual (Spanish and English) mass services. Most Holy Trinity Church on Porter Street in Southwest has also welcomed Mexicans since they first started migrating to Detroit. In the early 1920s, the Mexican and Puerto Rican community in Southwest instituted Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. In the 1930s and 1940s, many religious groups were created in the community such as: *Los Caballeros de Cristo* (Knights of Christ), *Las Guadalupanas*, *Las Hijas de Mexico* (The Daughters of Mexico), and *Los Cursillistas*, a Christian Movement organization.

Southwest Detroit is a place of resistance. Mexican music and folkloric dance opportunities are plentiful. Mariachi bands can be found practicing in parking lots in the evenings. Young children practice folkloric dances to perform for religious and cultural holidays. The *supermercados* that exist, like E&L, Honey Bee, and *La Colmena*, allow for the foods and traditions of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to be easily accessible. As the Latinx/Hispanic population has grown in Southwest, so has the number of Latinx-owned stores. There are now over 1,000 small businesses

owned by Latinxs, including bakeries, bars, and restaurants. Many of the small businesses extend outside the Mexicantown area.

Southwest Detroit is still a place a refuge. Freedom House exists here, a safe space for asylum seekers behind St. Anne's Church. There is a sizeable Yemeni and Syrian population in Southwest currently. People of different backgrounds are still looking to Southwest as a place of safety. Southwest is even more diverse now. It is still predominantly Latinx, but there is an African American community, the hipsters, and many people from Middle Eastern countries now seeking refuge there.

Throughout Southwest Detroit there are community and personal gardens. Native American Health Services exists in Southwest, and so does their gardening program, Sacred Roots, which focuses on planting native plants, herbs, and vegetables. *Jardin de los Santos* exists as a community garden and hub for others in the Southwest community to get their own gardens started. At the entrance of the garden is a large painting with The Virgin De Guadalupe.

Pride for "mother" countries are alive in southwest, through shrines, places of worship, gardens, music, gatherings, and the people. Resiliency is carried throughout. It is a home for immigrants, a haven for all, and an always ever-growing melting pot that exists because of that. The space of Southwest Detroit is rich in cultural history, and it is expanding due to amounts of people besides Latinx that find refuge.

"They tried to bury us, but they forgot we are seeds"
—Mexican Proverb

Christiana Castillo

