

The Brookings Institution

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TONANTZIN CARMONA: Hello. It is such a pleasure to be here today. My name is Tonantzin Carmona. I am a fellow at Brookings, Brookings Metro, and I am so excited to be joined today by two wonderful, wonderful guests from my hometown, Chicago. I'll actually let them introduce themselves. So, Luis, I don't know if you want to start?

LUIS GUTIERREZ: Absolutely, Tonantzin. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Luis Gutierrez. I'm the founder and CEO of Latinos Progresando.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: And Jennifer?

JENNIFER AGUILAR: Hi, Tonantzin. Thank you for having me. Jennifer Aguilar, the executive director of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce.

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TONANTZIN CARMONA: For those of you who have been following, there's actually a lot that's happening right now in Chicago and in specifically Little Village, which is why I wanted these two guests to come and talk about what they're seeing on the ground. You know, Little Village is one of Chicago's most vibrant business corridors. It's known for its resilience, its community spirit. But recently it's being met by what I call policy volatility. You know, many entrepreneurs have been navigating what they describe as the perfect storm, where it's the combo of tariffs, immigration enforcement, changes in federal policy, and uncertainty.

I would love to turn it to both of you and see, you know, what are you both seeing on the ground right now? How are these overlapping pressures showing up in the day-to-day life and businesses across the corridors?

[1:26]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: You know, Tonantzin, I think small businesses in general are the backbone of America, and especially here in Chicago are the backbone of our city. And we have to understand that a lot of these small business owners have really sunk their life savings into their businesses, and so this means everything for them. This means their house payment, this means the education of their children, that this means everything that they have considered the American Dream when you start to think about these small businesses.

And so what we're seeing right now is that these small businesses who have been successful, and in many of them were ready to expand before all of this happened, are starting to scale back. They're extremely worried about their families. They're extremely worried about keeping their doors open. They're extremely worried about protecting their customers. Some of our store owners have started to live in their stores because they can't afford to rent and they don't want their businesses to close. So it's just a really anxious and stressful time for everyone.

[2:30]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: Definitely. I have to agree with Luis. I think right away of one of our business owners that I just talked to. They own a flower shop and they're, they're seeing the effects of what you called the perfect storm: tariffs, the decrease in foot traffic because of enforcement in the neighborhood. And they basically cannot meet their rent. They cannot anymore. They were telling me a story about how the tariffs has caused them to increase the price of the flowers that they sell and the decrease in foot traffic basically doesn't have a lot of people coming in anyway. And when they do come in, they're like, now I have to pay \$50 for a dozen roses because of the tariffs.

It's just very unsustainable. And they have lost many customers and they have lost that revenue. So now they're planning and thinking of ways on how to make that money up.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: No, thank you both for sharing what you're seeing on the ground. What do you think in terms of community morale and when you think about the early months of the pandemic, Jennifer, do you see any similarities or differences in how this moment is playing out across the corridor?

[3:52]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: Yes, there definitely are similarities. I think that worry of are we going to be able to keep our doors open because of the changes in visitors. But similar to the pandemic, our businesses are very resilient and they adapt and they figure out new ways to make that money up and to and to sell their products and and to stay open.

We have seen that support from the community itself is a big part of keeping morale up. And right now the difference is that we're asking allies, those who live outside our community to come in and make up for that foot traffic, to make up for those sales that are being lost because our community is scared to come out. So we are definitely seeing that, that support from allies and support from outside organizations as well, from elected officials, is really helping.

But we're also seeing things that can't be changed because of the circumstances. During the pandemic, people couldn't gather. And right now it's it's very similar, that people are afraid to gather in our businesses, which is usually the place where people gather in our community. 26th Street was a big tourism hub for Mexicans who live in the Midwest. And they would come, get their essentials, stack up on tortillas and spices. And now they can't come because they're afraid. So we lose the main tourist drive in in the corridor and there goes the majority of the of the sales that our businesses do.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: No, that makes so much sense. And you, you know, you started to touch on this a little bit, but could you maybe share a little bit about some of these "shop local" campaigns and why they matter so much? And also, I know that you've been advising other Chambers in the city and and maybe elsewhere. If you could share a little bit about that, that would be great, because I know there's so many listeners that think about best practices, what they could be doing, either as individuals or organizations.

[6:10]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: Yes. Like I mentioned, a big part of our our shift and our focus during this time was to find a new market for visitors, to reach out to new types of tourists. So we thought about it that way and we created lists of our businesses, restaurants. We did one for sweets, and one for liquor stores and groceries. And these are really good tools to share on social media. They have actually gone viral. We've seen them being shared throughout. Right now we we have a lot of events in the community of allies bringing in a group of of people to do tours. So we make sure we hand those out as well.

We're sharing them on our newsletters. And anyone that reaches out basically to us for recommendations, we send them. So it's a really great tool to have. And we are also sharing those tips with other Chambers who have reached out to see what we were doing not only when it comes to marketing and to helping businesses bring in more visitors, but also when it comes to being prepared for enforcement. Know, Know your Rights trainings, what are the best practices? How do we communicate with our business owners? And those are the things that we're sharing.

And strategies that have worked well for us, whether it be at what time does a workshop usually get more attendees, than in the morning or at night? what trainings are they more interested in. And those are the tips that we've been sharing. And, it's been, it's been great to see other Chambers recreate the list of the businesses in their areas. And and we've been seeing a a lot of social media content, too, from creators and influencers that are really being intentional about highlighting our our small businesses.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: Thank you so much for sharing that, especially in these, like, truly challenging times, it is also incredibly inspiring to see how people are coming together to support their neighbors. Which, you know, brings me to Luis. Latinos Progresando has moved very quickly in this moment too. You've launched a Corridor Resilience Fund to try to get dollars out the door. I'm curious if you can just walk us through how that even came together, why, what gaps you were trying to fill, and what you foresee as maybe some potential outcomes of this work?

[8:45]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: Absolutely. So a couple things. I think, you know, Latinos Progresando has had a history of standing up and deploying funds in this way. Most recently during COVID, we worked with our small businesses to support them with some funding. We've also launched something called the Accelerator Fund, where we've been able to help nonprofits across the city build their capacity with small grants. And so this is an extension of some of that work.

Last year in 2024, we launched a report called "Fuerza Mexicana" with some of our partners. And one of the focuses of that report was economic development. And so something that came out of that report was that there is a brown belt in the city of Chicago. There are 15 majority Mexican neighborhoods across the city. All of those neighborhoods have commercial corridors. All of those neighborhoods have small businesses that pay taxes and support the city.

And so through that work, we reached out to a couple of our partners, particularly partners on the Northwest side, Onward Neighborhood House, partners on the Southwest side, the Greater Southwest Development Corporation, and talked about what are some of the needs that our small businesses had.

Some of these things we learned through COVID, and so we wanted to make sure that we started to raise money for a fund because we know that as Jennifer and her brilliant idea of marketing the shop local campaigns, it's great and there are a lot of people not just in our neighborhood, from outside neighborhoods that are coming in using those lists to shop, which is absolutely excellent, but we also know that there's going to be a gap. Because even with those folks coming in, you don't know what's happening on our corridors on a given day. And so people are still very frightened. And so this fund is really important to help some of the small businesses continue to stay open.

And so working with all the partners across the city, we thought it was really important to launch this fund and we're happy to have launched it. We're getting ready to, we're gearing up now to submit ... to start deploying some of those funds at the end of the month.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: That's so great and such a a fantastic example of the way that a local nonprofit can step in. Do you have any general thoughts about how nonprofits in general, not just your organization, obviously, but nonprofits in general can respond in this moment?

[11:06]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: Absolutely. Well, one thing I'll say is even with our fund, and this is one of the things you talked about this, the the similarities and the differences between COVID and what we see now. You know, there were, there was a lot more support during COVID. And I think right now one of the big things that we're looking for is, yes, we we do want people to come out and shop on our corridors, but we also need people to stand up and start to bring resources into our organizations and resources into our neighborhoods. These things were happening during COVID and they proved to be successful.

They're not happening on that scale right now. And so I think organizations need to start advocating for more resources from philanthropy, corporations, and from our government. Our fund, for example, is not going to be able to cover the amount of money that our small businesses need. We really need government and corporations to step up and start to fund some of these initiatives. So that's number one.

I think another thing Jennifer talked about, which I completely agree with, is information. You know, information is changing by the day here when it comes to what we're going through. And there is so much information out there right now that what's happening is people are calling Jennifer, people are calling me, our organizations, and asking what of this information is true? I know somebody put this out, I need you to walk me through it. My business, for example, is a restaurant and part of my space is public and part of my space is private. How do I handle that? And so I think being able to be there and answer those types of questions for the small business owners is extremely important.

And the last thing I'll say to that is, you know, our nonprofits are also small businesses and we employ a lot of people. And one of the things that we're talking to our partners about is both getting our employees, our volunteers, our interns to shop local. But also using your money on your corridors. If you need to buy something from a hardware store, well guess what? There's a local hardware store on the corridor that you can be going to. If you are going to be for the holidays throwing a holiday party for your organization, there are tons of restaurants on our corridors that you can choose from.

So how do nonprofit organizations start to look at the money that they're spending and really start focusing it on the small businesses?

TONANTZIN CARMONA: So one thing that stands out to me right now is how, with both of your efforts, there is a reliance on trust between business owners, local leaders, institutions. How have those relationships helped you respond quickly? And what does true collaboration look like when crises hits? Or what would you say if our baseline is this is where we're at in this response, what would collaboration look like if we did even more in this moment?

[14:09]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: I think trust is definitely the most important part of the work that we're doing, especially with this delicate situation. We have to take care of each other. We have to take care of the vulnerable population in our community. And the relationships, that's a big part of the work that we do. That's what the Chamber does, is we have those relationships with our business owners. They know that that we're there to support them.

And we've started programming in the past years to improve those relationships. We have a free membership program to encourage businesses to join us, and to really experience what it's like to be with the Chamber, and being a member and the benefits of membership. And I think during this time, we're seeing those benefits and our businesses are seeing those benefits of being in community, of being connected, of having that support.

Right now we have a person that their full-time job is to be out there stopping by every single business, checking in on them, having conversations. Most of the data that we have is stories. It's just stories that the businesses share with us, their concerns, and that's where we get the ideas for what workshops that we need to do, what trainings do we need to do.

We were one of the first organizations on the corridor to do a Know Your Rights training for businesses. And we did it before the Trump administration even took office, because we knew that that was coming and we got that from a, that idea from a business owner who was like, you know, I foresee things are gonna get bad. It would be good if before things get there we are already doing trainings so that businesses can feel a little bit more prepared, because a lot of them were already bracing for it. They, but we never imagined how bad it was really going to be.

And that's why we have done multiple types of training. Basic know your rights, but also getting into the audits, right, of paperwork. Then we've also done what is your plan? What's your action plan? And that's one of the most popular ones right now because people are seeing that it's a reality that agents can show up to your business and you need to have a point person assigned. Everybody -- it's like a fire drill --they need to know what to do. Because during those stressful moments, people forget and they panic. So it's very important to have a plan.

So that trust that we have built has proved very helpful because our workshops, our trainings are always at capacity. They're always packed, and we're adding new ones constantly because people trust us enough to come, receive that information from us.

[17:02]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: Yeah, I'll add to that. I think, you know, Jennifer's absolutely right, and we have been able to build such a trust in our community. Latinos Progresando in 2010, we launched through our collaborative, the Marshall Square Resource Network, a community plan that really looked at working with families, local nonprofits, and schools, and local businesses. And part of what we do is exactly what Jennifer described, is we sit down and we listen to people. And then we take their advice and we go out and do what it is, or we execute on what the things are that they think are necessary for the things that they're going through at the moment.

This is a process that is going out throughout all of our communities. And I think we're we're really blessed in taking this approach because this really gets to the heart of what people need, and it allows us to provide those folks with those types of resources.

And I don't know if it's just Chicago, maybe we're just blessed, but we have leaders like Jennifer and others throughout the city that really get that concept, understand that concept, and share. I think you spoke about this earlier, Jennifer. You know, people pick up the phone, they call you. You are, you're always willing to say, this is how I did it, and willing to help. I try to do the same, and I, and I think partners across the city that we work with also have that spirit. And so because of those things, you know, this also gives me hope that we are going to get through this together.

But there's just something in all of this, there's just something really special happening in our communities and you're seeing people coming together, listening to each other and supporting each other, which I think is, it's a beautiful thing, you know, despite everything that you see that's going on.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: Oh, absolutely. Thank you. And I I want to stay on that thread of, like, hope because when I think about this, you know, I'm from Little Village. We're all, we're all from Little Village. And it is a community that has inspired my life's work. I mean, just turn to your neighbors. These are some of the most resilient people that I know, hardworking, but they also are inspiring in that they navigate uncertainty. And it's actually what has pushed me in my own life to navigate uncertainty.

Now my focus has been on Latino entrepreneurs, how they're keeping our local economies going, and they keep them alive through so many challenges. When you think about what keeps this community going, what gives you hope right now? What do you think gives them hope? What what else could we be doing to make sure that we keep that hope alive?

[19:41]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: I think the youth, it sounds overused, right? But I think we're one of the youngest communities in the city, and our young people are showing exceptional strength and empathy. And seeing them and how they're reacting to these situations is the hope that keeps people going. There was a school walkout a couple weeks ago, and our businesses made sure that they were available to be safe spaces in case anything happened. A lot of the businesses signed up to provide lunch or provide snacks for the students. And I think that that is one of the biggest things.

And and also that the reason why a lot of business owners started their business was to pursue that American Dream. And despite everything that's going on that dream still lives, that hope, right? that that they're going to provide more for their families, more opportunities, that they're going to become and create generational wealth. I think that that's what what keeps the hope going?

[20:53]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: I think that's absolutely correct. But I'll also say that if you have an opportunity as I've had to sit down with parent leaders, we have a group parent leaders that we work here with with at Latinos Progresando that represent four of the different schools in our area. And, you know, when you sit down with them and you talk to them both about what they're going through, how they're overcoming that, and and, you know, again, it isn't about the fact that they don't know what to do. It's about resources.

And so having these conversations with them, you know, I I just leave inspired every single time I sit down with them and talk to them. So I have so much respect for the mothers and the fathers that are in our communities that are going to work and doing what they have to do for their families. And every opportunity that I get to sit down with them and have a conversation about how they're handling the situation, I feel

truly inspired and truly blessed, and I continue to want to do as much as I can to help as many people as possible. It, it's, it's just amazing what what they're going through and what they're doing right now.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: You know, in this moment if you had to, you know, share one thought, one resource, one idea for our listeners is please feel free to share it.

[22:14]

JENNIFER AGUILAR: I think it would just be to encourage everybody, no matter where you are, to support our small business community. Immigrant small businesses need all the support right now and always. And I think it's important for us to be intentional, like Luis mentioned, in how we spend our money, whether you be an individual or an organization, it is always great to support our our small businesses.

[22:42]

LUIS GUTIERREZ: I'll just add that, you know, if you look at the small businesses in the City of Chicago and how much they've provided for the city, it's not about skill or want or anything else. It's about resources. And so, if you are in a position to support small businesses, please do so. If you're in a position to support the organizations that work directly with these small businesses, please do so. And if you are in a position to advocate, right now is the time that we all need you to stand up and to advocate. This is the moment. So please, take that opportunity to do one of those things. Thank you.

TONANTZIN CARMONA: Absolutely. And I, I'll just add to that, this is definitely a moment to support and if for nothing else other than obviously it's the right thing to do, but it's also really important for our local and our national prosperity. You know, Latino entrepreneurs are immense contributors to our economy, and it's something that we must continue to pay attention to. So I'll leave it with that. I am just so grateful for both of you, for your time, for sharing your your thoughts and your perspective, but also for everything that you're doing in Little Village and for the City of Chicago broadly.

So thank you.