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# Process and Privilege: When it Comes to Renaming Streets, Not All Petitioners are Treated Equally

Cynthia Carmina Gómez  
*Portland State University, gomezcc@pdx.edu*

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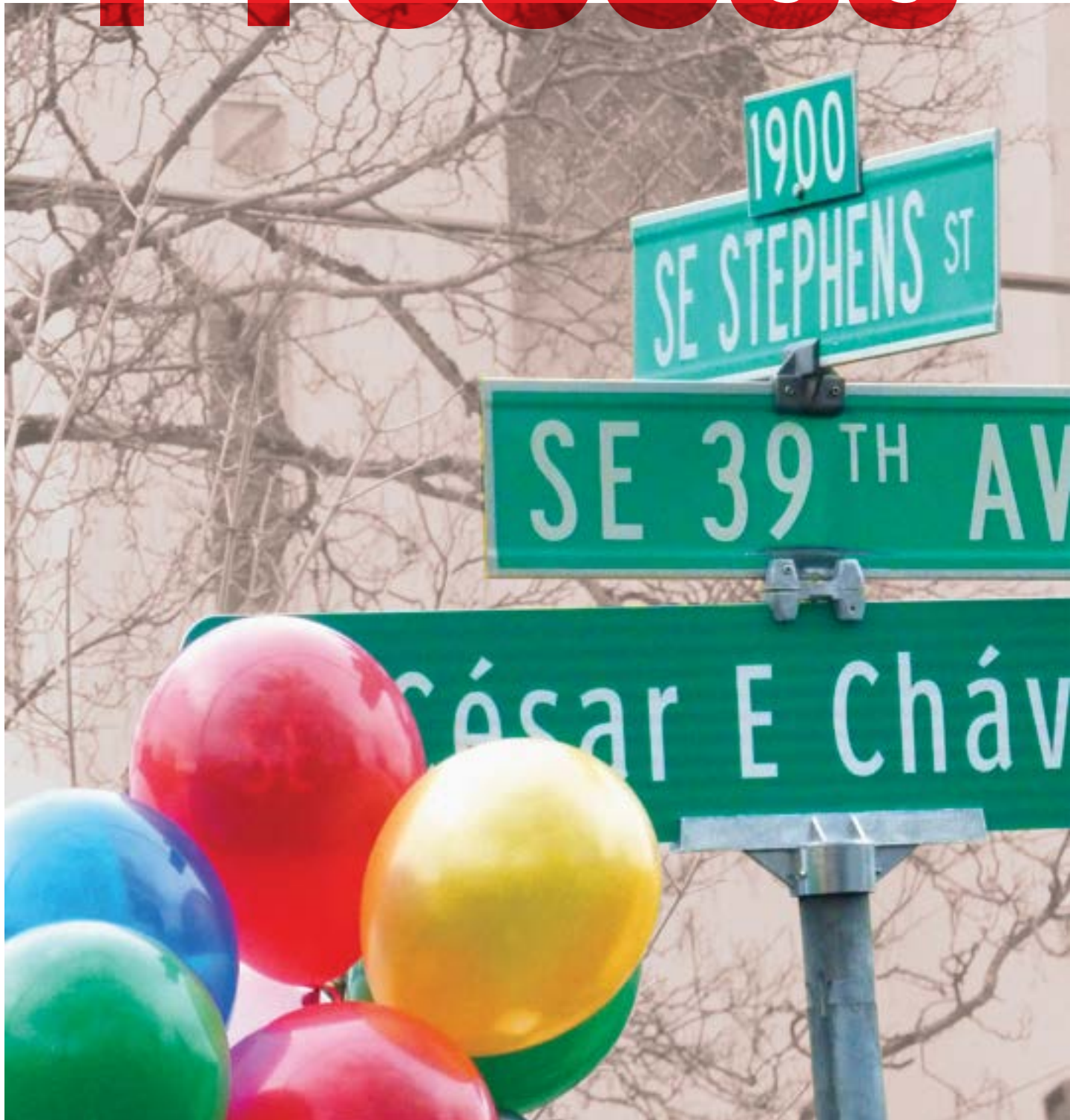
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# Process



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When it comes to renaming streets, not all petitioners are treated equally.

**STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY CYNTHIA CARMINA GÓMEZ**



ON A RAINY AFTERNOON IN JANUARY 2010, I DROVE to my old neighborhood in Southeast Portland to attend the César Chávez Boulevard sign unveiling ceremony at Central Christian Church. The event marked the culmination of the effort to rename a major street after the civil rights champion. After saying hello to a few friends, I sat alone in a pew toward the back of the mostly empty space. Light reflected off of the words César E. Chávez Blvd. on the large street sign placed under the dais. I was expecting busloads of school-aged children and families to be there, but few were in attendance. City officials, supporters of the street renaming, and members of the opposition remarked on the long-drawn-out battle and their emotions in the wake of the renaming process. I followed the group outside, where the subdued atmosphere continued. Organizers removed a gold sheet, unveiling the new sign. I snapped a picture and left to escape the cold.

I learned about Chávez, one of the greatest leaders in US Latino history, several years prior to the renaming. It was while enrolled in a Chicano/Latino Studies course at Portland State University that I first learned about the navy veteran and civil rights activist who was born in my hometown of Yuma, Arizona. His work as a labor leader, alongside Dolores Huerta, centered on nonviolent means to raise awareness of farmworkers' labor conditions; this work earned him national recognition, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously. Attending the sign's unveiling was a part of my effort to pay tribute to the movement to recognize the contributions of Latinos—including my own—to the Pacific Northwest.

"STREET NAMES MATTER," SAYS NANCY HAQUE, CO-EXECUTIVE director of Basic Rights Oregon. "They can make us feel welcome, or definitely not welcome." The first renaming of a Portland city street after a person of color happened in 1989, when leaders of the African American community successfully changed the name of one of the biggest arterial streets in the city from Union Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Citizens for Union Avenue gathered more than thirty-seven thousand signatures against the renaming. The group also garnered support from the white supremacist Nationalist Movement, and some people still remember when Klansmen marched down Union Avenue in protest. Prior to the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard renaming effort, there was no precedent for changing street names. In response, on June 4, 1989, the City of Portland introduced Ordinance No. 161897, Renaming City Streets.

# Privilege

After the creation of the code, two city council-initiated renaming efforts failed to adhere to the code's guidelines but moved ahead regardless. In 1996, the major waterfront thoroughfare called Front Avenue was renamed Naito Parkway. The change took place only a few months after the Japanese entrepreneur and local leader William Sumio Naito passed away, despite the requirement that the person for whom the street is named be deceased for at least five years. Then, on October 25, 2006, Portland Boulevard was changed to Rosa Parks Way. The change, coinciding with the one-year anniversary of the civil rights leader's death, was fast-tracked by City Commissioner Dan Saltzman. Stating, "It's the right location and it's the right time," he convinced city council to waive sections of the city code.

In July and August of 2007, members of the newly formed Chávez Committee met with city officials to present their plan to rename Interstate Avenue, a major thoroughway in North Portland. They based their decision on the location of the street in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood with a solid working-class population, characteristics in line with Chávez's reputation as a social reformer and a staunch advocate for worker rights. If they followed the process, they were told, the street would be renamed. The Chávez Committee was familiar with Portland's history of renaming streets, but members were clear that they were not looking to take any shortcuts, as had happened with both Naito Parkway and Rosa Parks Way. In September of that year, Mayor Tom Potter's resolution to change Interstate Avenue's name to César E. Chávez Boulevard passed unanimously in city hall, launching a six-week public comment period and the collection of signatures in support of the resolution. City hall staffers were ready to assist the Chávez Committee in navigating the complex city code, and the committee optimistically began the process.

Marta Güembes, cochair of the Chávez Committee and honorary consul of Guatemala, described to me her willingness to lead the effort: "I was excited to take part in what I saw as a very important effort that would raise up the great diversity of Portland. I thought at the time it would be very embraced by the community and was excited to come together with fellow committee members to share in this vision." But for Güembes, it was more than a symbolic gesture. "The reason I decided to involve myself was more than simply renaming a street," she says. "For me, it was an opportunity for us to recognize the fact Latinos are present in Oregon, that we are not going anywhere, and to have a street to identify with. It is a way to be seen and a positive step for the city and the state to recognize a great civil rights leader."

Chávez's impact in Oregon dates back to 1971, when the Oregon Legislature passed an anti-farmworker bill. Governor Tom McCall was given a week to either veto or approve the bill. César Chávez organized a campaign against it. Lawyers for the United Farm Workers union announced that if McCall signed the bill, "Oregon would be the Mississippi of the Northwest." Chávez called for a boycott of Oregon's lumber products. Organizers threatened to "put a picket line up around your state and stop people from coming in." Vigils were held at the capitol

building in Salem, and when Chávez arrived to denounce the bill, he drew a crowd of more than five thousand people. Telegrams and phone calls flooded the governor's office. The governor vetoed the bill.

In 2007, Latinos in Oregon made up more than 11 percent of the total state population. Portland, the seat of Multnomah County, was mostly white and slow-growing in 2000. From 2000 to 2007, however, there was a 49 percent increase in the number of Latino residents, from 49,607 to 73,385 people. Since 2000, Oregon's total Latino population has grown 72 percent. The American Community Survey of 2010-14 counted 473,729 Latinos living in Oregon. The state's Latino student population is likely to be 42 percent of the overall student population by 2030 and the outright majority sometime between 2030 and 2040.

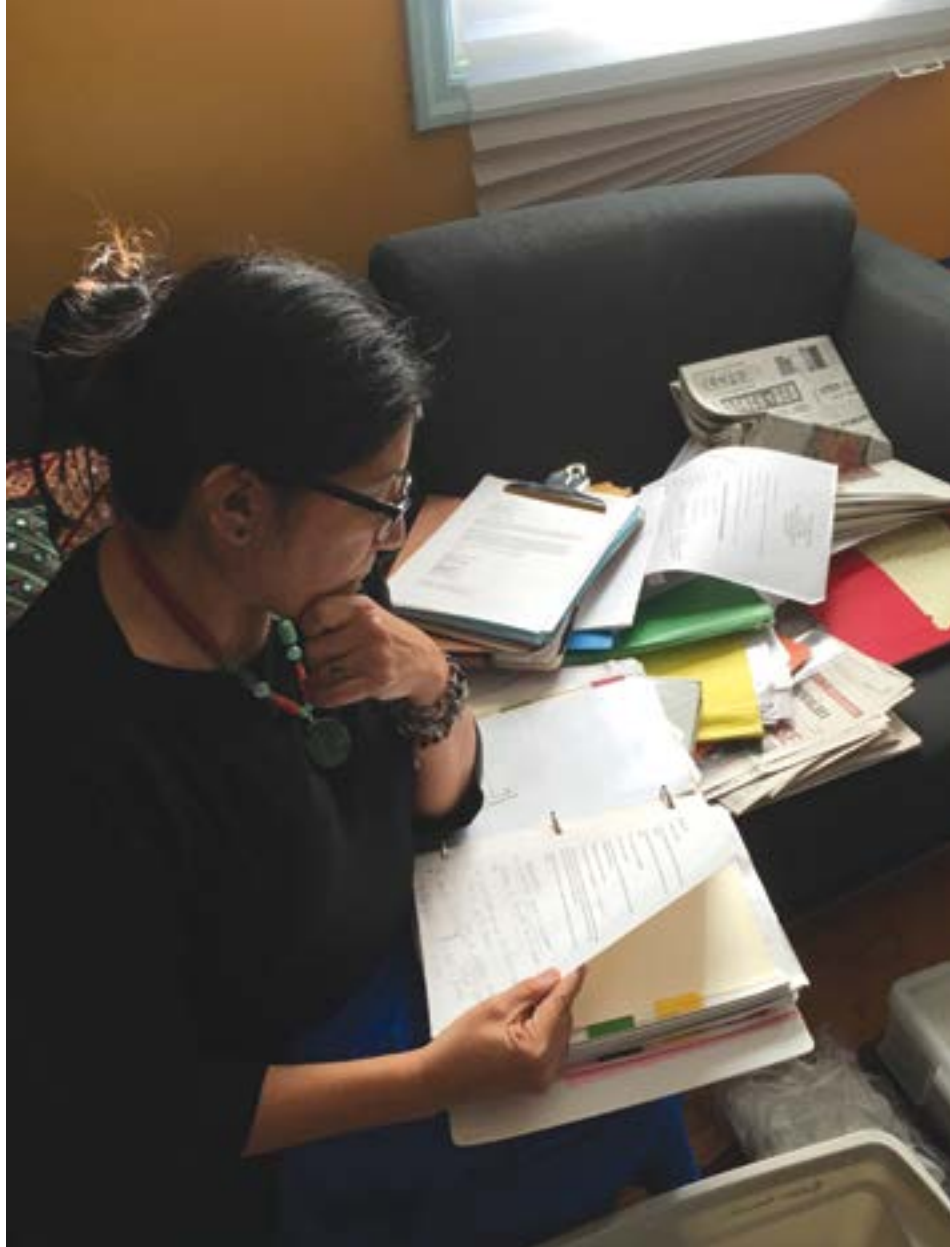
ONE OF THE STEPS IN THE RENAMING PROCESS WAS TO present the resolution at public meetings held in neighborhoods that would be affected. The Chávez Committee was eager to give community members the opportunity to learn about the honoree and make an informed decision. On Tuesday, September 18, 2007, they had one of their first opportunities, at the Overlook Neighborhood Association's general meeting.

Güembes had spent the day posting literature and collecting signatures. In the afternoon, she picked up her children, then young adults, to talk about the plan for the evening. "I wanted my children to see the civic process and to learn," she says. The gathering was being held at Kaiser Town Hall, located on North Interstate Avenue. Güembes found her fellow committee members and waited for their agenda item to be called while her children situated themselves in the back of the room. By the start of the proceedings, neighbors had packed the meeting hall.

After the Chávez Committee presented, the meeting was opened for public comment. Many shared their resentment over the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Rosa Parks Way renamings, saying that those changes caught them off guard. Business owners claimed that the changes to stationery, business cards, and other materials would be expensive, and that patrons would be confused. As is common in the hundreds of street-renaming processes throughout the United States, many people suggested the city rename a park or a building instead of a street. Still others shared that Chávez had nothing to do with their neighborhood. They took a "not in my backyard" approach to the issue. "You cannot have the avenue," one elderly woman told the Chávez committee. "It's Interstate, and always will be."

As the meeting progressed, the Chávez Committee and their supporters were increasingly interrupted, verbally shut down, and attacked. Unable to finish in a peaceful manner, the members of the Chávez Committee decided to leave. The packed room allowed passage only through the center aisle. As they walked out, the hate emanating from the crowd was palpable. Güembes's daughter remembers being called "beaner." One man pointed a finger in Güembes's face and snarled, "You fucking bitch." Others yelled, "Go back to Mexico!" and used the word "Mexican" in a pejorative manner. "It felt like I was





**“For me, it was an opportunity for us to recognize the fact Latinos are present in Oregon, that we are not going anywhere.”**

Previous page:  
The unveiling of  
César E. Chávez  
Boulevard in  
February 2010

Above: Marta  
Güembes,  
cochair of  
the Chávez  
Committee,  
looks through  
documents  
from the effort  
to rename  
North Interstate  
Avenue.

going to be physically attacked,” Güembes recalled. “It was the beginning of feeling unsafe.” A firefighter in the audience, recognizing the difficulty they were in, approached Güembes and her children to apologize on behalf of his neighbors and offered to escort them to her vehicle. The family drove home in shock. After the gathering, Güembes’s children no longer wanted to participate in any efforts related to community organizing or activism and were filled with fear, anger, and dismay.

Not only were public meetings hostile, but the resolution also solicited hundreds of comments at city hall, many riddled with hate speech, fighting words, and racist rants. There were very racist things said and done,” said Commissioner Erik Sten. “The types of things that were said and done on my voice mail, in my e-mail, in community meetings were atrocious and the worst thing I have seen in my eleven years serving on the city council, and I suspect they pale in comparison to what was said to some of the organizers privately.” Commissioner Randy Leonard called the renaming process the “largest racial showdown since 1968.” One objector named Karen wrote, “Dear Mayor:

I am HIGHLY opposed to changing the name of Interstate Avenue. We’ve already changed Union Avenue to MLK, Portland to Rosa Parks, Front Avenue to Naito Parkway. Chávez is popular in the Latino community, but what about the rest of us? Are we going to rename another major street, say Powell, after Saddam Hussein? After all, he has a huge following too.” Others wanted to stall and draw out the process. Mary, another resident, wrote, “Please slow down. Ask the people of our city ‘How shall we honor César Chávez?’ LISTEN. PLEASE. We all wish to be heard. Give more time to consider what is so important to so many. Expedience is NOT the solution. Careful consideration is. Please try.”

Güembes lived only blocks from Interstate Avenue and personally faced much of the overtly racist behavior hurled at the committee

# “Some of the sentiment back then toward the Latinos in this community pushing for this change feels similar to some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric we hear nationally today.”

and their supporters. When she was collecting signatures at an Arbor Lodge Park community event in North Portland, a white man became so enraged at being asked to sign the petition that he threatened to go home, get his gun, and shoot Güembes. Shaken, she reported the threat to a police officer, who responded by suggesting the attacker was harmless: “Look at him. He’s not dangerous. C’mon, Marta.” Recalling the incident, Güembes says, “Afterward, I had to be more careful. It was a very unsettling time in my life. I was very disliked. By my neighbors. By people in the community. I even considered getting protection.”

The opposition also targeted city officials and their staff. Carmen Rubio, now executive director of the nonprofit Latino Network, worked as the director of community engagement in city hall during the renaming effort. During a public meeting, a woman accused Rubio of bias and attempted to pry city materials away from her, forcing them to engage in a tugging match. “She was physically preventing me from doing my job,” Rubio says. Local media highlighted these exchanges and gave “more attention to the conflict instead of the story of a community wanting to be recognized. Our community’s experience gaining support around this name change was very different from other street renamings,” Rubio says.

Despite the resistance they faced and the stress it caused, the Chávez Committee continued to present their proposal at community meetings and collect signatures. As pressure mounted, a few of the city commissioners (all of whom were white men) suggested the committee seek to rename a building or a park instead. Some members of the Chávez Committee were open to alternatives, but Güembes was not. Ultimately, they refused to settle. “No compromise. That is what set people off. I wouldn’t change anything,” Güembes says. The more resistance Güembes encountered, the more committed she felt. Marty Davis, in the bimonthly publication *Just Out*, wrote, “I note with irony the role played by Marta Güembes, the very strong-willed woman who appears to be the power behind the committee to rename. Many women, such as myself, spend our lives bemoaning the

lack of strong women leaders and role models, and then when one appears we want her to bend and compromise.”

While Mayor Potter was steadfast in his support of the renaming, the other commissioners were swayed by the opposition. “The dynamics were off,” Rubio says. “On city council, the more united, the better.” Not wanting to fall out of favor with working-class North Portland residents, Commissioners Sam Adams and Randy Leonard proposed to form a new committee to look for an alternative to Interstate, then withdrew their support for the resolution and backed out of agreements made earlier that year. “The most difficult experience I had with the renaming of a Portland street in honor of César Chávez came from my fellow city commissioners,” former Mayor Potter says. On October 25, 2007, Potter walked out of a council discussion on the matter in frustration. “I was disgusted the city council members had broken their commitment to the Latino community.” The council fell into dysfunction.

Businesses on Interstate Avenue threatened legal action if the naming went through. There was talk of a proposition to introduce a ballot initiative to counter any decision by city hall to rename Interstate. The commissioners, shaken by the xenophobia displayed by the public, stated their concern that a street-renaming ballot initiative would turn into an immigration debate. On November 14, Commissioners Erik Sten and Dan Saltzman pulled their support. They offered to rename Fourth Avenue instead, pointing to the roadway’s prominent downtown location, abutting city buildings and Portland State, the state’s biggest public university. Sten went so far as to produce business cards with a Chávez Boulevard address for city hall. He later apologized for the act. But the commissioners were desperate. No one wanted to vote “no” on the resolution.

On November 15, 2007, city commissioners made their decision to rename Interstate in what is called an up-or-down vote. The move, pushed by Mayor Potter, meant commissioners had to listen to public testimony and vote on the same day, as opposed to voting on a different day when they would have distance from stakeholders. Before each commissioner voted, they gave their position on the matter. Ultimately, the council voted 3–2 against renaming Interstate Avenue and voted 4–1 in favor of renaming Fourth Avenue, with Mayor Potter voting against.

Members of the Asian and Pacific Islander community, together with the Latinx community, rallied against the plan to rename Fourth Avenue because of the historical significance of Chinatown, which occupied multiple city blocks along Fourth Avenue. “The Chinese American community was irate that the council would rename a street to honor César Chávez that ran through the heart of Chinatown,” Potter says. And Güembes says, “We didn’t want Fourth Ave. That was not our proposal. It was insulting, them making decisions for us.” Less than a week later, city commissioners backtracked and voted unanimously to reverse their decision to rename Fourth Avenue. After months of labor, the Chávez Committee were denied their street and left feeling rattled, undermined, and marginalized in their effort to be recognized.

AFTER THE VOTES, THERE WAS A LULL IN ORGANIZING because of disagreements in the community. A box of materials documenting the struggle to rename Interstate Avenue sat in Güembes’s home, including a stack of petitions with more than two thousand signatures on them in support of the Interstate

renaming; they had never been submitted to city council. At Güembes's urging, the committee reconvened, and in August 2008, the committee petitioned city hall to rename Broadway, Grand, or 39th Avenue. City leaders insisted the Chávez Committee follow the city's street renaming code, the first time all of the guidelines laid out in the code were officially enforced. With every step, opposition mounted as businesses and residents readied for a fight to preserve their street names. When 39th Avenue was deemed to be the only viable option due to its "lack of historical significance," the renaming process recommenced.

The Chávez Committee again diligently followed the code to change the seven-mile stretch of road in honor of the labor leader. By this time, Commissioner Adams had become Mayor Adams. Mayor Adams hired a consultant to help the committee to "ensure the process was successful," a move that would ultimately cost the city \$35,000. Additional steps were added to the process, including instructions to the Office of Neighborhood Involvement to facilitate public meetings.

Residents and business owners in the predominantly white Hollywood and Laurelhurst neighborhoods, through which 39th Avenue passed, were mostly against the renaming. Although the opposition was characterized by committee members as "subdued and appropriate" compared to that of the Interstate Avenue opposition, racially charged sentiments continued to be expressed. On April 22, 2009, an opponent wrote, "Marta Güembes isn't even of Mexican Heritage, but this is the best public figure she could come up with to honor Latinos. Hey Marta, how about Emiliano Zapata? He was a Mexican who loved and fought for his country, but he would not have approved of Mexicans sneaking into the US."

(It is worth noting that the Hollywood and Laurelhurst neighborhoods along 39th Avenue were among those included in a 1919 Realty Board of Portland Code of Ethics provision that, at the time, forbade realtors and bankers from selling or giving loans to anyone who was not of the "White or Caucasian race.")

The Chávez Committee successfully collected the required signatures, but the opposition sought to discount supporters by asking the city to confirm the validity and citizenship status of their signatures. Mayor Adams, in an apparent effort to ensure that as many petitioners as possible were counted, asked the city auditor to run the "rejected names through the water/sewer database." Two weeks before the vote, city council heard testimony from more than a hundred individuals, both proponents of and opponents to the name change. Despite divided public opinion, on July 8, 2009, city commissioners voted 5–0 to change the name of 39th Avenue to César E. Chávez Boulevard. The Chávez Committee now had their street, but not the one they had wanted, and at a great cost.

"Some of the sentiment back then toward the Latinos in this community pushing for this change feels similar to some of the anti-immigrant rhetoric we hear nationally today," Carmen Rubio says. "For many communities of color pushing for change, sudden calls from the dominant culture to ensure they adhere to 'process' can feel like a proxy for discrimination or bias against

our communities." Güembes also continues to feel the effects: "I experienced daily overt acts of racism. The pain does not go away. There would be nothing different if this were to happen today." Still, she feels she did the right thing and would willingly do it all over again.

In June 2018, Portland City Council voted unanimously to rename a thirteen-block stretch of SW Stark Street, from Naito Parkway to Burnside, after Harvey Milk, one of the nation's first openly gay elected officials; Milk was from San Francisco. Notable local leaders, including former Governor Barbara Roberts, worked with Commissioner Saltzman to navigate the process. The Milk renaming was fast-tracked by city officials in order to coincide with Pride Month.

Güembes was made aware of the Milk renaming after it was a done deal and feels indignant about the expedited process. "For me, it is clear and simple," she says. "It is because of racism. We are talking about equality here. Why were there differences in the process?" She points to sections of the code that state renaming only portions of a street is not allowed. SE Stark Street's name was left unchanged; only the southwest section of Stark, located in the downtown gay business district coined the "Pink Triangle," now goes by Harvey Milk Street.

The César Chávez Leadership Conference began in 1990, and it remains a popular annual gathering for secondary students in Oregon. Participants attend workshops, visit a college/career exhibitor fair, and listen to distinguished keynote speakers. Dolores Huerta, the civil rights leader who worked with Chávez and coined the call to action "Sí, se puede," speaks at the conference regularly. By March 2018, attendance had swelled to more than two thousand people. With the passing of House Bill 2845 in 2017, Oregon became the only state to require an ethnic studies curriculum for K–12 students. Whether that curriculum will include the story of the struggle to rename a Portland city street after a Mexican American civil rights leader remains to be seen.

**O.Hm.**

Cynthia Carmina Gómez was born in Camp 52, Arizona, a small migrant community beyond the outskirts of Phoenix, and raised in Yuma on the US–Mexico border. Today she is executive director of the Cultural Resource Centers, affiliate faculty, and a candidate in the MFA Creative Writing Nonfiction program at Portland State University. She worked for over ten years in Portland's Latino nonprofit sector.