In Memoriam

Bobby Vega

By William Howlett

The San Bernardino Sun published an article, titled “Some called Bobby Vega the Spirit of San Bernardino,” after his death on February 7, 2014. Bobby Vega will always be a man celebrated as one of the few who attempted to help the disadvantaged. He dedicated a lifetime to the city of San Bernardino as a youth advocate. He built an organization that continues to provide the city with the hope and assistance that it so desperately needs.

“Bobby was this community,” said U.S. National Forest Service ranger Gabe Garcia. Garcia was truly moved by Bobby’s legacy, even saying, “His concern, passion, and vision was focused around making something for them (the youth of the city).”

The dreams of Bobby Vega live on. The young men and women who he aided, and set along the right path, are now the ones passing along his leadership to the next generation in an attempt to save the city that he loved. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Bobby,” said Rebecca Miller, who now works for the Urban Conservation Corps, “besides the vocational training and the life skills, it mostly gives you hope. We know we’ll be somebody.” Jason Ciabatti, whose story mirrors that of Rebecca Miller’s, said “Bobby took me in immediately and took me under his wing. Every young person needs to feel needed to push themselves to work harder.” What these individuals show is how deeply Bobby affected the community around him, and how his legacy will continue to live on through the lives he touched.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
The End of an Era

Violence and crime have become commonplace in the once great city of San Bernardino. Gangs, prostitution, and drugs litter the landscape, and in 2012, the city filed for bankruptcy. Similarly, the juvenile population has also been negatively impacted. Yet, there has always been a ray of hope shining like a beacon in this violence-ridden city. That beacon was a man, a community advocate, and the founder of the San Bernardino Urban Conservation Corps, Robert “Bobby” Vega. “There is always hope,” Bobby Vega would say.4

San Bernardino used to be the epitome of the American dream. Before WWII, the city was a central transit point that connected Southern California to the rest of the world. After the war, it blossomed into an “All-American City.” This is the world that Bobby Vega wanted for future generations, but this is not what he experienced. Contemporary San Bernardino is not the city that he envisioned for today’s youth. What happened to the hope that Bobby Vega spoke of?

The efforts by the city of San Bernardino to put a halt to its own downward spiral have been ineffective, at least until recently. Since the city was awarded the distinction as an “All-American City” in 1977, the lengthy, reprehensible descent achieved its apex in August 2012, when the city itself declared Chapter 9 bankruptcy. The city had been engaging in a multi-decade long crusade against unemployment, crime, and drugs. There was a steady deterioration of the working class accompanied by the rise of poverty. Urban decay and a broken political system tore apart the city’s foundations. Positioned behind Detroit as the second-poorest U.S. city in its size range, the city became the third in California to file bankruptcy as a result of the Great Recession.5

The start of these issues can be attributed to the closing of the Kaiser Steel plant in 1982. This alone resulted in the loss of over 8,800 jobs. Then in 1986, the Santa Fe Railroad Yard was permanently closed, resulting in the loss of another 4,500 jobs. As

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the city’s population continued to grow into the 1990s, the biggest blow would be the closing of Norton Air Force Base in 1995, which resulted in the loss of 12,000 jobs. An analysis performed at George Mason University revealed that 60,000 to 90,000 jobs were lost in total. The rise in the city’s poverty was accompanied by the rise of pension-fund earnings in the late-1990s. This would prove unsustainable, and would lead to the city spending the majority of its general funds on civil services. When the housing market crashed in the mid-2000s, the city of San Bernardino was left with few options but to declare bankruptcy. Bobby would sum up what the fall meant to the city’s youth very nicely by saying that “there are no more opportunities like that around here for the young people of this town to work. What are young people supposed to do? They don’t have an education and can’t afford one.”

There was an aggressive gang intervention effort, aided by Bobby himself, that helped cut the homicide rate by nearly half since the 2005 peak, and in 2011, the program was held up by the National League of Cities as a model for other cities to follow. During the final years of Bobby’s life, violent crime had steadily dropped. During the final year of his life in 2014, the city saw the passing of a new effort to control youth crime, the CalGRIP program, which was assisted by the same Urban Conservation Corps that Bobby Vega helped found. It was actions and achievements like this that made Bobby so significant to his hometown community.

Family and Community

Bobby Vega had always been a strong advocate of youth intervention, and one of the leading activists in the city of San Bernardino. The ideologies and beliefs that Bobby passed on to the

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7 “Case Study Overview: San Bernardino - George Mason University,” Center for State and Local Government Leadership (Fairfax: George Mason University, 2014).
children and young adults that he worked with were built on the foundations of family and community. Both of these beliefs were imparted upon him by his parents. Bobby Vega’s father, Robert L. Vega, was born June 8, 1931 in East Highland, California. He worked for the East Valley Transit agency starting in the mid-1960s until the late 1980s when the company was changed to Omni-Trans. He worked every day of the week and even the weekends. Both his strong work ethic and his ability to overcome adversity were things that he passed down to his son, Robert “Bobby” Vega. Striving to be a positive role model for his children, he would make every effort to raise his family and provide for them in the face of whatever adversity thrown his way.

Bobby’s mother, Martha Ortega Vega, was a native of San Bernardino. She was born July 29, 1938, and she would grow to love the community around her, which would be a trait that she would pass down to her son. Martha in turn was also responsible for introducing Bobby to community activities and service. She also preached the power of authority, order, and respect. In her and Robert Sr.’s household, there was no talking back to adults, no arguing, and no fighting. There was a respect for rules, and an adherence to authority. Bobby was shaped by his upbringing, between the work ethic and love for family that he learned from his father, and the respect of authority and love of community he learned from his mother.

Bobby himself was born March 25, 1958, during a high-point of San Bernardino history, yet he would witness the negative transformation of the city he loved. His first community work took place in the mid-1970s, as the non-profit organization “Casa Ramona” transformed a closed school into a community center. Living across the street, Martha and her mother Mary Hernandez Ortega would volunteer on a regular basis. Mirroring his mother and grandmother’s actions, Bobby’s life revolved around helping his community and striving to create a better environment for those around him.

Bobby’s extensive history of aiding the community has encompassed instructing in youth programs at Casa Ramona, the Boys Club, Casa de San Bernardino, as well as Los Padrinos of Southern California, the founding of the Urban Conservation Corps, and in extension, the more recent youth intervention programs. It was in the youth community that Bobby had the most resounding impact. Since the 1970s, he would find himself
involved in youth programs. He had seen the difficulties of life in the community. He witnessed the violence. He was familiar with gang life. He believed he had the knowledge and the ability to make a change. Gaining experience from the many community organizations he involved himself in, he was confident in his abilities to turn the tides against youth violence in his community. Bobby said in an interview:

Growing up in the neighborhood of the Mt. Vernon area, I had many opportunities to give back to the community. I learned early and was taught by the best. I’m still doing it today, some 30 years later. I probably have worked in every, if not most of, the community based organizations in the past thirty years on the Westside of San Bernardino…Casa Ramona, The Boys Club, Los Padrinos of Southern California, Home of Neighborly Service for Jim Penman, now our (city) in 2005.10

Bobby lived his entire life on the ragged streets of San Bernardino. He did not get to experience the “All-American City” that preceded his youth. He knew the people, the culture, and the violence. He wanted something more for the next generation. “I’ve noticed that our neighborhoods have deteriorated. The problems have gotten worse. I don’t blame it all on the people that live in this community. Some of the blame has to fall on the leadership as well as our so-called community leaders.”11 Bobby spent much of his life battling youth violence. He worked for a variety of non-profit and afterschool programs that worked primarily with gang affiliated youth in the city. He has presented at many national conferences and local universities on the topics of Latino youth gangs and the need for what he called “prevention.” His work was showcased at Georgetown University, and he assisted in developing the Cultural Brokers in Gang Prevention.12

The actions and beliefs of Robert and Martha would dictate the path that their son would follow in his pursuit for community renewal. As founder of the Urban Conservation Corps, Bobby was

11 Ibid.
able to combine all these aspects of his upbringing in a way that
would truly transform the community around him. “I responded
with this. The program and a group of community people came
together to stop the senseless killing that were taking place within
our young people, in our community. That was our goal, to teach
them social skills in which they could use to go out and interact
with one another, to try to get steady jobs.”

Bobby Takes Action

In response to the structural and economic decline that
undermined the city, and left the population vulnerable, Bobby
Vega founded and organized the Urban Conservation Corps (UCC)
with the intention of improving the lives of the city’s youth who
ran the risk of being involved with street gangs or who were
troubled by other social ills. “I’ve always had jobs that pay me to
do what I love to do – keeping kids on the right track and away
from organized gangs, teaching them how to go get jobs, teaching
them life skills and showing them recreational opportunities in
other places.” He dedicated his whole life to enriching the lives
of the younger generations, helping them to become productive
and more accountable members of the community. He wanted to
return the city to its roots, and he sought to do it by harnessing the
power of the city’s youth.

The Urban Conservation Corps’ mission is to take young
adults and provide them with conservation projects in the San
Bernardino National Forest in an attempt to get them off the streets
and out of trouble. “This is a place for second chances, third
chances,” he said. “If we said it was gang intervention, no one
would want anything to do with us, so we say we’re the
conservation corps. And that means they get to be outside – in a
place that’s theirs – and they learn a skill that can take them
someplace.”

Bobby knew that the opportunities for work in the
city were lacking, and many of them did not have an education or
could not afford one, so he helped develop a program to correct
these issues:

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
We convinced them also to come work for us and that together we could stop the violence in our neighborhoods. In an exchange deal, they could work for a minimum paying job painting over graffiti and doing weed abatement in our town. They also had to enroll in school to get their G.E.D.s, if they were not already in school. It sure did work! It sure did stop the gang violence in our neighborhoods.¹⁶

Bobby Vega standing outside of the facilities of the Urban Conservation Corps, 2014.¹⁷

The pinnacle of Bobby’s efforts, the UCC, was also an attempt to reduce gang membership and gang violence throughout the area. The Urban Conservation Corps is in agreement with the state of California to attempt just that through the CALGRIP program (California Gang Reduction, Intervention and Prevention), which provides adolescents and young men and women with life-skill training, as well as pay for their work, if they attend school.¹⁸ According to Mayor Pat Morris, Bobby had grown

⁶ Ibíd.
the nonprofit from its fragile beginnings to a well-funded program that is a statewide model of “how to go from gang membership to community membership as a fully responsible, tax-paying adult.”

Twice-a-week participants of the CalGRIP program get a chance to expand their horizons by attending life skills classes offered by Catholic Charities and by receiving work experience through the Urban Conservation Corps. “Community partnerships like CalGRIP have a huge impact on the community,” said Catholic Charities CEO Ken F. Sawa. He would also say, “For every youth who participates in this program the neighborhood is lifted up. The neighborhood will now have kids moving in a positive direction: going after high school diplomas, securing new employment, and enrolling in higher education programs. Their focus is shifted toward productive achievements.”

The issue of youth gang violence is still a significant topic today. According to 2013 statistics, the city is the sixteenth most dangerous city in the United States, and of the 4,000 known gang members in the city, 15% of these individuals are between the ages of 16 and 21. A multitude of factors influence the situation – lack of employment, poverty, low levels of education, and above average dropout rates. In early 2010, the San Bernardino Unified School District was labeled as the district in California with the highest percentage of schools in the “Bottom 5% School List.”

The Urban Conservation Corps challenges all of these issues. Since the founding of the UCC in 2007, the number of homicides in the city was reduced from a high of 58. In the years 2010 and 2011, the UCC served over 100 youth between the ages of 17 and 21, including 52 individuals on probation. Since 2008, the juvenile felony arrest rate in San Bernardino County has steadily decreased, as seen in the figure below. According to the 2014 CalGRIP Grant Proposal, one of the most successful CIPP (Crime Intervention Partnership Program) partnerships in deterring

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21 “Proposal to the OJJDP,” 2013 Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program (City of San Bernardino).
high-risk youth from gangs has been with the Urban Youth Conservation Corps.\textsuperscript{23}

Figure 1: Percentage of Juvenile Felony Arrests in San Bernardino County per 1,000 youth ages 10-17.\textsuperscript{24}

There is significant proof that Bobby Vega and the Urban Conservation Corp’s attempts to provide San Bernardino’s youth with the means to break the cycle of juvenile crime, which have been shown to be fairly successful. According to the California Sentencing Institute, the number of juveniles held in state youth correctional facilities was reduced from 22 per 1,000 cases in 2009, to just seven per 1,000 cases in 2013.\textsuperscript{25}

The city of San Bernardino still has a long way to go to recover the prominence that it once had. Bobby Vega spent his whole life trying to make things better for his community in the face of adversity. He dedicated his whole life to enriching the lives of the younger generations, helping them to become productive and more accountable members of the community. He wanted to return the city to its roots, and he sought to do it by harnessing the power of the city’s youth. He made significant strides in certain aspects, but he still had a lot planned before his untimely passing.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, “Juvenile Felony Arrest Rate,” Kidsdata.org., n.d.
\textsuperscript{25} “All Counties » San Bernardino County,” A Project of the Center For Juvenile and Criminal Justice, California Sentencing Institute, 2016, accessed Apr. 29, 2016.
He was truly a strong role model and one of the foundations of the city of San Bernardino. His dreams will live on. His hope has been passed on to people like Rebecca Miller and Jason Ciabatti, whom will carry his dreams into the future.
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Bibliography


“Proposal to the OJJDP.” Community-Based Violence Prevention Demonstration Program. 2013.


Author Bio

William Howlett is a father of two who graduated from California State University, San Bernardino in June 2014 with a Bachelor of Arts in history. During his undergraduate studies at CSUSB, William was awarded the honor of Dean’s List twice and Dean’s Honors List twice. He is currently pursuing his Master’s degree in social sciences and globalization at CSUSB, and is working on publishing his thesis on the subject of Chinese hacker culture. William plans on pursuing his Ph.D. in history or sociology, continuing his research on cyber-warfare and hacktivism in China, with the goal of eventually becoming a university professor.