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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

Innovators

Some of our hemisphere's emerging leaders in politics, business, civil society, and the arts.

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New York City Council Member Carlos Menchaca is working with his immigrant constituents on community projects. Photo and homepage photos: William Alatraste.

Politics Innovator: Carlos Menchaca

BY

Kate Brick

In the weeks following Hurricane Sandy in fall 2012, neighborhoods along the waterfront of Brooklyn, New York, were unrecognizable. Homes and local businesses were destroyed, power was out, and community members grew frustrated at the government's slow response. Carlos Menchaca, who was working as an aide for then-City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, shared their frustration. "I saw a government that wasn't ready for this crisis, and that's what I wanted to change," he says.

One year later, the 34-year-old openly gay native of El Paso, Texas, is putting his ideas into action as the first Mexican-American elected to the New York City Council. Menchaca's seemingly overnight transition from LGBT and HIV/AIDS liaison for Christine Quinn to council member came as a shock to many in the New York political machine. But not to the residents of Red Hook, Sunset Park and the other South Brooklyn neighborhoods that elected him. In a district that is 49.6 percent foreign-born and where nearly half the residents earn \$35,000 a year or less, community members see Menchaca as one of them. The son of Mexican immigrants, he spent his childhood in public housing, lived on food stamps and, like many of his constituents, didn't speak English for the first years of his life.

But most importantly, it was Menchaca's hands-on presence and promise of bringing decision-making authority to his community that accounted for his political success. As he relayed the needs of hurricane-stricken Brooklyn neighborhoods to the relevant agencies, community members began to view him as a trusted ally who was championing their cause while the rest of the government ignored them. During his campaign, Menchaca's strongest supporters were undocumented immigrant mothers—many of whom encouraged their citizen children to register to vote. The community-driven campaign raised \$40,000 in two weeks, with an average individual donation of \$100.

Menchaca's goal of giving residents more political power has been the hallmark of his short time in office. He has joined nine veteran council members as the only freshman council member to launch participatory budgeting in his district, allocating \$2 million from his discretionary funds for community-

selected projects. Following several neighborhood assemblies to discuss project proposals, nearly 3,000 residents voted in April 2014 on how to spend the money—more than in any other district with participatory budgeting. In what was the first time many residents had voted, they decided to dedicate more than half the funds to public school improvement projects.

In June 2014, Menchaca co-sponsored legislation introducing a municipal ID for all New Yorkers, regardless of immigration status. Signed into law by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio in July, the program will be the largest of its kind in the country, offering immigrants access to critical city services that require some form of identification.

Menchaca wants to engage his district in less traditional ways as well. Influenced by his dual bachelor's degree in politics and performing arts and social justice from the University of San Francisco, he hopes to involve community members in the Theatre of the Oppressed, which uses interactive theater to promote discussion between actors and the audience about social and political change. Through its annual Legislative Theatre Festival in New York, the theater engages people typically excluded from the political process—including immigrants, the homeless and prisoners—in acting out challenges they face for an audience that includes local legislators. Menchaca attended this year and wants to bring the model to District 38 so that his constituents can “legislate through theater” as well.

For Menchaca, this is only the beginning of engaging his constituents in the work of government. “It's their government now,” he says.

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Arts Innovator: Matika Wilbur

BY

Mari Hayman

Matika Wilbur left a budding career as a Seattle photographer two years ago to embark on an American road trip unlike any other. Her destination: the diverse lands and communities of the now

566 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States. “I was 28 years old and had a fabulous gallery and a great apartment,” she explains of her life-altering decision. “But do a Google search of ‘Native American’ and what do you find?”

Image after archaic, stereotypical, racist, or over-sexualized image propelled Wilbur’s one-woman project to redefine perceptions of Indigenous peoples through photography. Her cross-country odyssey, called Project 562 (the number of recognized tribes when she began her project), has already garnered national attention—and not just because of the remarkable images she has captured. Using her savings and donations, sleeping on sofas, and relying on the generosity of her hosts, Wilbur immersed herself in the lives and traditions of Native Americans, with the aim of portraying them the way that they would portray themselves.

It was no outsider’s journey. A member of both the Swinomish and Tulalip tribal communities in Washington State, Wilbur had spent time on the Swinomish reservation teaching photography to kids, and she observed that telling their own stories visually empowered her students. One of her inspirations was psychologist Stephanie Fryberg, another Tulalip tribal member who, in a 2008 study, examined the damaging effect of mass-media imagery of Native Americans—ranging from the use of Indian mascots for U.S. sports teams to movies like *Pocahontas*—on Native American children’s self-esteem. “What if we could change and reshape this narrative, and what if we could do it on a national level?” Wilbur recalled thinking. “Would we have so many [Native American] teen suicides?”

The activists, scholars, dancers, teachers, ranchers, fishermen, children, and elders featured in Wilbur’s portraits illustrate her vision. They appear in a mix of traditional clothing and ordinary streetwear, standing out in color before natural backgrounds rendered in black-and-white. Wilbur is serious about making Native peoples’ own voices and stories part of her work. Project 562’s blog features not only Wilbur’s photography, but short video interviews with the people she meets, such as Doreen Duncan, the mother of world champion hoop dancers Talon and Sky Duncan of the Apache, Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa peoples, and Quechan tribal leaders who were peacefully protesting a wind farm in Southern California. The goal of Project 562, she says, is to “create a platform for people to represent themselves the way they feel is appropriate, on a very sovereign, independent level.”

View a slideshow of Matika Wilbur's photos from Project 562.



Darkfeather, Bibiana and Eckos Ancheta (Tulalip), 2014. Inkjet print, 16x20 inches.
Photo: Matika Wilbur



Thanks to two successful Kickstarter campaigns—the first of which raised \$35,428, and the second a whopping \$213,461—and other generous donations, Wilbur has already visited more than 220 tribal lands across the country and expects to complete the project next year, relying on social media and her growing tribal network to find new contacts across the country. Meanwhile, the buzz for the project keeps growing. Portraits from Project 562 were on display at the Tacoma Art Museum in Washington State May through October 2014, and Wilbur has already participated in two TED-x talks to discuss Project 562 with her growing audience, who can also track her travels through the blog on her website, www.project562.com.

When she completes the project, Wilbur will have been the first photographer to shoot all of America's Indigenous communities. But the real rewards, she explains, are the connections she has made on her extraordinary journey. "I meet the most amazing people, and they wrap their arms around me, and they believe in the idea," she says.

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Business Innovator: Diego Saez-Gil

Sitting in a dingy Internet café in a strange city and paying in 15-minute increments to use a computer is no traveler's idea of fun. After backpacking through 23 European countries, Argentine-born Diego Saez-Gil knew there had to be a better alternative. The advent of smartphones inspired him to invent one: an app that could replace websites as the go-to-source for travelers looking for accommodations

as well as new friends on the road.

Saez-Gil, who has an MBA from the *Universitat Ramon Llull* in Barcelona, Spain, pooled his savings with Chris Piazza, an American, and Alex Torrenegra, a Colombian, to develop a mobile app that was launched in 2011 under the name InBed.me, later changed to WeHostels. The app, available free from Apple and Google, is designed for student travelers and young professionals who are looking for affordable, last-minute accommodations anywhere in the world. The first such “social” hotel booking app available on mobile platforms, it has since grown to 300,000 users in over 80 different countries.

Saez-Gil, now 32, admits that it was a learn-as-you-go experience. “One of the things that you learn as a startup is that a lot of assumptions you made at the beginning are wrong,” he says. “At the end of the day, success will come from adapting.”

That flexibility paid off as the company revised its initial social-networking strategy. It hired two new developers—Lucas Lain, 32, from Argentina, and Juanda Zapata, 31, from Colombia—and secured seed funding from Start-Up Chile, NXTP Labs in Argentina and other venture capital organizations from around the world. After first trying to attract Americans and Europeans looking for accommodations in Latin America, but discovering that many hostels in the region were not online, Saez-Gil and his colleagues realized that their biggest market was American, Canadian and British travelers visiting Europe and the United States, not Latin America.

Recognizing WeHostels’ potential to expand services to young travelers, StudentUniverse—the largest online travel agency for students and youth—acquired the nascent company in 2013 and hired Saez-Gil as vice president. His hard-earned success, however, also left him determined to help other developers avoid the mistakes he made.

So, in addition to running the WeHostels business unit at StudentUniverse and driving the company’s mobile strategy, Saez-Gil has taken on a mentorship role for other travel startups in Latin America. One company, Viajala.com—a Medellín-based startup that aggregates different search engine results for flights and hotels in Latin America—is already thriving. Saez-Gil says his first piece of advice to budding entrepreneurs is to seek out mentors who can advise them about finance and development, which he says would have helped his own company in its early stages. But he says the field is now even more promising than when he began.

“In general, there are many more opportunities for entrepreneurs around the world to build global products,” Saez-Gil says. “Before, you had to be in Silicon Valley. Now, with the web and mobile [technology], you can build an app from anywhere in the world.”

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Civic Innovator: Alessandra Orofino

BY

[**Rebecca Bintrim**](#)

Alessandra Orofino's globetrotting career as a student and human rights advocate has always flirted with political activism. The 25-year-old Rio de Janeiro native has lived in Montreal, Paris, New Delhi, and New York. But when she returned to Rio in 2008 to work as a field researcher on gender-based violence, she realized that the most exciting prospects for political change were in her home city—anticipating by several years the citizen-led protests that would later sweep Brazil.

Today, Orofino and her friend Miguel Lago, 26, are at the forefront of a growing effort to increase local civic engagement in politics. Their organization, *Meu Rio* (My Rio), which they co-founded in 2011, has enabled thousands of ordinary citizens to become community activists (or *agitadores*) for causes that they care about—from the decriminalization of *baile funk* dance parties in Rio's favelas to tracking city buses by GPS to improve transportation services.

Meu Rio's model is influenced in part by Orofino's experience working for the New York City-based nonprofit Purpose—whose mission is to use technology to improve economic and social inclusion. Members of *Meu Rio* create personal online profiles to network, start grassroots campaigns and recruit volunteers to support them. Meanwhile, *Meu Rio*'s staff of 15 steps in to provide publicity and manpower—coordinating local volunteers and reaching out to the press and public policy specialists.

Unlike most NGOs in Brazil, *Meu Rio* gets no government or political party funding—and the resulting independence has added legitimacy to its political campaigns, which have ranged from improving public access to city services to promoting gender equality and animal rights. The organization relies almost entirely on donations from private individuals, who give anywhere from \$4 to \$150 monthly through *Meu Rio*'s online *Faça Acontecer* (Make It Happen) funding campaign.

Like its youthful founders, most of the 140,000 registered members of *Meu Rio* are between 18 and 29 years old. “We need more young people who are interested in politics and really want to shape the way our democracies evolve,” Orofino says. “Otherwise, in 10, 20 years from now, we’re going to look back at the city and say well, it changed, but not really in the way that we wanted it to change.”

Orofino cites *Meu Rio*'s campaign to create a centralized system for recording, tracking and investigating cases of missing people in Rio de Janeiro as one of her proudest achievements. The campaign was sparked by a mother and *agitadora*, Jovita Belfort, whose 20-year-old daughter disappeared over a decade ago. In spite of its high homicide rate (24 homicides per 100,000 people in 2012), Rio lacked a streamlined system for identifying missing persons, and Belfort was forced to check the city's shelters and morgues weekly for the past 10 years. She still has not found her daughter.

“Her biggest fear was, ‘My daughter is going to be found and I won’t know,’” recalls Orofino. After six months of campaigning through *Meu Rio* with online and offline events, calls with the chief of police, fundraising, and city-to-city meetings where Rio officials could learn from successful programs in other cities—such as Belo Horizonte—Rio's police officers presented a plan and budget to implement a missing persons system that was approved in April.

The *Meu Rio* initiative recently received two institutional grants—a grant from the Omidyar Network, an investment firm established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, and a \$1 million *reais* (\$437,800) Google Impact Award—to expand its model to 20 more Brazilian cities. The new initiative is called *Minhas Cidades* (My Cities). In São Paulo, where the organization has just set down new roots, there

are already over 10,000 registered members.

Meu Rio's model is attracting interest from other Brazilian cities, and Orofino hopes the concept of online grassroots campaigns will spread even further. "I think that the challenge of our time, as people who live under democratic regimes, is [to ensure] that democracies remain a vibrant and viable model," she says. "If we don't build upon what we have, we lose it."

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