

# CHANGE AGENT

**Jesus “Chuy” Garcia** on urban populism, running for mayor and the trip that took him from Mexico to the steps of City Hall

AS TOLD TO PAUL ENGLEMAN

**L**ast summer, I began my second term as a Cook County Board commissioner for the 7th District. It’s largely a working-class district that begins near UIC on the north and ends at Marquette Road on the south. I represent close to 300,000 people, including detainees at Cook County Jail, new urban types in University Village and working-class folks on the Southwest Side.

The board has a role in public health, the justice system and running the nation’s largest forest preserve district. I chair committees on criminal justice and economic development. I’m also floor leader for County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. One of my responsibilities is to check where the votes are and, when needed, help line up votes. We’ve made a series of gains since [Preckwinkle’s] administration took over four years ago. We’ve modernized the county, and brought in transparency and accountability.

I’m grateful for the opportunities given to me, for the hard work of my parents and for the good people who urged me to engage in public service. That calling has taken me on a wonderful journey that has included being a community organizer, paralegal, housing advocate and political activist seeking to empower disempowered communities. I’ve been involved in building multiracial and multiethnic coalitions across Chicago neighborhoods, and I’ve focused on becoming a progressive agent of change.

I’ve also been active in nonprofits, and founded the social services organization, Enlace, in Chicago’s Little Village community. I’m involved in the philanthropic sector as a board member and chair of the Woods Fund of Chicago. For me, organizing has become a vocation. I thrive on it. It’s what makes me want to get up early in the morning. It’s what makes me stay up late. It’s the legacy I hope to leave behind.

I agreed to enter the mayoral race last fall because I didn’t see a candidate who could go to any part of the city and bring people together across racial and economic lines. Campaigning



Evan Sears

can take a toll on you and your family. Fortunately for me, I had my family in my corner. That’s why I had the confidence to do it.

I wanted to have a debate about the future of Chicago, about who’s doing well and who’s not. The violence in the city continues to have a negative effect on the quality of life, especially for those in poor and working-class neighborhoods. I think my run for mayor forced Mayor Rahm Emanuel to become more humane and a better listener.

I feel a lot of pride in what took place. We connected with young people in a way that never happened before. We got a lot of young people involved in politics for the first time. We re-established a progressive, multiracial, multiethnic coalition for




"We connected with young people in a way that never happened before," says Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, '98 LAS, MUPP '02, of last year's Chicago mayoral race. "We got a lot of young people involved in politics for the first time."

the 21st century in Chicago. There's potential for a renaissance in Chicago over the next few decades, but our civic leaders need to be bolder and more inclusive—especially regarding the participation of women. If more women were in positions of power and influence, I have no doubt Chicago would be a better city.

In 1998, after serving two terms in the Illinois Senate, I re-enrolled at UIC and finished my bachelor's degree in political science. Not being able to state on my résumé that I was a college graduate ate at me for years. Then, I immediately went into the UIC graduate program and got my master's degree in urban planning. My mother was there to witness my graduation. I dressed up; I wore a cap and gown. It was one of my proudest

moments. UIC enabled me to get a college education and provided me with a great context to understand Chicago.

I arrived in Chicago during February 50 years ago. When I stepped out of the station wagon that also transported my mother and three siblings, I was in a strange, cold, foreign land. I never imagined I'd learn to speak English, be embraced by the City of the Big Shoulders, be elected to the city council, become the first Mexican American state senator in Illinois—and run for mayor. Only in America and only in Chicago could something like that happen. 

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