

# The Young Lords: Origin Stories

The Young Lords began in the late 1960s not as an organization rooted in self-determination, but as a street crew in the segregated, working class, and economically challenged city of Chicago run by the political machine headed by Mayor Richard J. Daley. Protection, not political activism, was the original driving force of the Young Lords, as informal groups often bonded along class and/or ethnic lines for safety in the streets. Their president, José “Cha-Cha” Jiménez, became politicized during the summer of 1968 while in jail, reading books about Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party.

Jiménez explained, “When I got out, I wanted to change my life, I wanted to build a movement. At first I thought of leaving the Young Lords, but then I decided: No, it’s better just to stay with the Young Lords and try to work and teach some of them. That’s how we became political.”

In early 1969, the Young Lords joined the Original Rainbow Coalition, a revolutionary alliance formed in Chicago in early 1969 and spearheaded by Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party. The alliance connected one of the largest Black Panther chapters in the country with militant organizations in other outcast communities of the city. Witnessing the harsh realities of poverty, police terror, and displacement, the Young Lords embraced the Panther’s politics of working-class solidarity and community service.

Denise Oliver-Velez, member of the Young Lords in New York reminisces, “So there was this article about this group of Puerto Ricans in Chicago – the Young Lords. A decision was made by some of the guys to hop in a car and drive to Chicago and go and meet Cha-Cha. And when they got back from Chicago, they were very excited. They had met Cha-Cha, they were very impressed with him, and they had made an agreement to start an East Coast branch of the Young Lords Organization. Of course, we didn’t have any money, no office, but we liberally borrow the facilities of [SUNY] Old Westbury. We liberated Xerox paper and office chairs, and started to have meetings. The guys would go into the city; and, by that time, they had hooked up with members of some other youth organizations, and that formed the core of what became the Young Lords. Pretty soon it was impossible for me to continue my education because becoming a member of the Young Lords was a full-time job. Before I knew it, I had left school. All of us had abandoned school. The excitement was on the streets!”