



# **We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords**

*Mickey Melendez*

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The Young Lords were one of the most provocative and controversial organizations to arise during the tumult of the late 1960s. Inspired by the wave of protest movements sweeping the country, and the world, as well as organizations like the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, and the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords became the most respected and powerful voice of Puerto Rican empowerment in the country.

In 1968 Miguel "Mickey" Melendez was a college student, developing pride in his unique cultural identity as Cuban and Puerto Rican, while growing increasingly aware of the lack of quality health care, education, and housing—not to mention respect—his people endured for the sake of the American Dream. He was not alone. Bringing together other like-minded Latino student activists, like Juan Gonzalez, Felipe Luciano, David Perez, and Pablo "Yoruba" Guzman, Melendez helped to form the central committee of what would become the New York branch of the Young Lords.

Over the course of the next three years, the Young Lords were a force to be reckoned with. From their storefront offices in East Harlem, they defiantly took back the streets of El Barrio. In addition to running clothing drives, day-care centers, and free breakfast and health programs, the Young Lords became known for their bold radical actions, like the takeovers of the First People's Church and Lincoln Hospital. Front-page news, they forced the city to take notice of their demands for social and political justice and make drastic policy changes.

Melendez was part of it all, and describes the idealism, anger, and vitality of the Lords with the unsparing eye of an insider. For the first time, he reveals the extent of the clandestine military branch of the organization and his role coordinating and arming the underground.

The fall of the Young Lords was as swift and as public as their rise. Fractured by internal ideological differences and plagued by infiltrators, the Young Lords imploded in 1972. The underground was disbanded and for many, like Melendez, the group they had dedicated their lives to vanished—but not its mission. Many former Young Lords continue to fight for Latino rights, including Melendez, who in 1977 led a takeover of the Statue of Liberty to dramatize the plight of Puerto Rican nationalists languishing in prison and continues to fight for peace in Vieques.

Although they were active for only a brief period of time, the legacy of the Young Lords—their urban guerilla, media-savvy tactics, as well as their message of popular power and liberation, civil rights, and ethnic equity—is lasting. *We Took the Streets* is one man's passionate and inspiring story of the Puerto Rican struggle for equality, civil rights, and independence.

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