

Interview with Angelica Cabande
Executive Director, South of Market Community Action Network (SOMCAN)

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MW: Introduction: This interview is between **Megan Wilson (MW)**, artist and writer, and **Angelica Cabande (AC)**, Executive Director, South of Market Community Action Network (SOMCAN).

MW: Thank you for meeting with me today Angelica. I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me for this article about SOMCAN and the organizing happening in SoMa.

Can you start by giving some history on SOMCAN and the role it plays in the neighborhood - what are the programs that are most important to the work you do and that provide the greatest impact.

AC: SOMCAN was established in 2000 after the first dotcom era in San Francisco because the community thought there needed to be an organization that focused on building the leadership for residents and community members to address the gentrification and displacement issues that were happening in the South of Market and also for the community to be able to respond to development and be a part of the discussion and community planning on the development of the South of Market.

We're a multiracial, multigenerational organization with a membership base, meaning we have Latino and Filipino members that educate, organize, and mobilize around issues of housing, jobs, displacement, and pedestrian safety. We work with residents to address comprehensive neighborhood issues of what is needed for families to live, work, and thrive in the South of Market. SOMCAN has also combined our direct services with our community organizing because we understand that in order for our families to organize, we also need to help support their basic needs, including child care, finding jobs, finding housing. We balance these direct services with our leadership development component for our youth and their parents, most who are immigrants.

MW: So, really serving the whole family.

AC: Yes, the whole family. We work with multi-generations to identify and address the needs of the whole family to ensure their wellbeing in the South of Market. Our membership has also expanded to the Tenderloin and the Mission.

MW: So, about how many families or individuals do you serve annually?

AC: For our direct service, we serve anywhere from 350 to 450 a year and we have about 200 members.

MW: That's really great! Over the past 10 years how has the economy, development, new residents, and corporations moving into SoMa affected the families that you serve?

AC: Definitely it is changing not only the characteristic but also the culture of the neighborhood. For example, a lot of the jobs that are being brought in from biotech to the tech industry, a lot of our families are not able to get access to those jobs. If they do, it's more entry-level jobs but not the higher permanent jobs. So, there are a lot of barriers with them getting access to those jobs and the City is also not thinking about what other kind of jobs they could actually provide for residents. It does not always have to be the new innovative jobs, rather, what would it take to really keep working class residents in San Francisco? On top of that, a lot of our youth are not able to access this new tech industry, this new 'social, innovative industry.' So, therefore it has been challenging to have them access those areas and we are the neighborhood that has the highest percentage of the tech industry in the city. Last year we did a count and there are 40+ companies in the South of Market alone that are either startups or big companies like Twitter. So, it has been challenging that we are not able to access those jobs even though the point of bringing them in is to provide San Franciscans with jobs.

On top of that, the director of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, Maria Su has stated that there are not a lot of kids in District 6 and that there has been a decline from the 2000 census track because of the changing demographics due to the kind of housing that has been built in the South of Market, which is majority high-

end condominiums. Therefore, our population of children is declining but their needs are not declining, they are still the same, if anything higher. So, there is a perception that the City doesn't need to fund our neighborhood because of the changing census numbers. It's really problematic because at the same time we still have a lot of newcomers and immigrants that are coming into the community who really need support. We have existing immigrants that still need the same level of support, or even more help because of the evictions, and because of the increased cost of living in San Francisco. So, it is really challenging because we're seeing what is being referred to as 'the tale of two cities' in San Francisco right now, but we have been feeling that in the South of Market for a long time. You have the high-end condominium residents, who are making \$80,000 and higher and then you have the very lowest income families and youth living in this very densely populated neighborhood.

MW: So, have these changes affected funding for SOMCAN? How does SOMCAN support itself? Are there areas of your programming that are receiving more funding than others? Have you had to revise your programming either based on the changes to the neighborhood or based on the funding priorities of your supporters?

AC: Oh definitely, because you know due to the economic downturn, a lot of organizations are not getting the same support or not even getting the support at all. A lot of funders are looking for more city or nationwide collaboration and impact. They are looking more to overall city funding where there are hard numbers that they want to see right away in a fiscal year. And, organizing does not happen like that. It takes time and a lot of energy. It's a long investment, not a short-term investment. Therefore, a lot of the funding that SOMCAN was able to access is no longer available because of the shift of priorities, which is not including organizing. At the same time, City funding is limited. You can't actually do advocacy work, yet they want you to address an issue or fix it, but they don't want you to advocate to City Hall about how to better improve or address the root causes of problems. So, it's really challenging in terms of how do we really balance direct services with organizing.

MW: So, you feel like it's more of a Band-Aid approach where, you'll be supported for family resource services, but not for your organizing efforts for change.

AC: That's correct.

MW: To change the core reasons why those families need those services.

AC: Exactly. So, it's an ongoing cycle of letting poverty continue without really finding ways to fix it. It stays a cycle of poverty.

MW: How have the new tech corporations that have moved into the neighborhood reached out to SOMCAN and the community?

AC: We actually heard that Twitter doesn't feel comfortable collaborating with South of Market groups because SOMCAN challenged the impact they would have on the neighborhood by moving into the Mid-Market in 2011. So, there's not a real opening with us in terms of how can they better themselves or be a good neighbor. Twitter also picks and chooses who they want to collaborate with and how to use it for their own promotion.

MW: It's more like a PR situation?

AC: Yes. It's really PR.

MW: I know they have reached out to Oasis for Girls and that probably looks good because it's helping young women.

AC: And United Playaz. They even brought the United Playaz youth to their building and showed them the rooftop, which is great, but let's also address the real problems, the fact that they are a billion dollar company and then at the same time they are not providing support to San Francisco by paying their taxes. And this is a big deal because at the same time companies like Twitter are getting tax breaks the City is in a budget deficit.

One of the campaigns that SOMCAN is engaged in is pedestrian safety because there is so much traffic in the South of Market as the entrance to five different

freeways. So, there is traffic congestion, our district has the highest pedestrian fatalities and in order for us to actually fix some of the pedestrian safety improvements, we need funding from the SFMTA and they're unable to allocate a lot of money to these safety issues because they don't have the money. Yet at the same time that Twitter is getting their own private buses, they're not paying their taxes. So, they're not only using public dollars for their own benefits, they're also getting away with not having to contribute back to our City. So, definitely, that's a problem regardless of them having good relationships with some organizations.

MW: Right. It's like a caste system. Even though they've only been here a few years, they came in with an entitled attitude of 'we should be able to get whatever we want.'

AC: Yeah. It's like when the downtown folks wanted to change the downtown area to be more touristy with high-end housing similar to Manhattan, to me that's how the tech industry is - that they change the community to their benefit and expect everybody to accept how they want the City to serve them, and it doesn't work like that because there needs to actually be real dialogue. When they were getting the payroll tax, there was no community dialogue on what that was going to look like and what the impact would be. The community actually had to fight to create the community benefits agreements and the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC), which is still getting tokenized because the City is not pushing for a better community benefits agreement. At the same time Twitter and other tech companies are making demands, the City isn't utilizing the CAC and really listening to the community's needs. So, definitely there is a small bubble of fortune that not everybody is getting access to.

MW: And they're not willing to share, even though they claim to be a 'sharing economy.'

AC: They're not, even though they say they are.

MW: Are you aware of the 5M Project? If so, how did you learn about it and how was it perceived by the existing community that's here?

AC: Yes, we learned about the 5M Project last year when they started outreaching to us about what they would like to do with the area around the Chronicle. Basically, they wanted 'innovative arts and culture.'

MW: Buzzwords.

AC: Yeah.

MW: And was this when 5M was partnering with Intersection or did they reach out to you before that?

AC: Oh this was during their work with Intersection. Intersection had already moved into the building and they even hired some community ambassadors, or something like that, to reach out to the community, but at the same time I felt like if they were going to hire people as community ambassadors, you would think they would hire people from the neighborhood.

MW: And they didn't hire people from the neighborhood?

AC: No, not in my opinion. We met different folks and one person, I forget her name, she is a Filipina woman, they actually hired her to reach out to the community, but you know other than that, there were numerous people that they hired, but she was at least the closest (laughter).

MW: Right. I think that was Irene Duller, who I'd worked with during the exhibition "Broadside Attractions." She was part of the PR team.

AC: Yeah and then the community is split, right? Definitely, we want to be open-minded and we want to work with the new wave of people coming into the community and providing and creating new ideas in the neighborhood. However, this is a big project that's not only impacting a small corner of Fifth and Mission, it's actually taking over 3-4 lots, changing and building thousands of square feet of condos and office space and bringing in all of these new companies into the community. So again, they want to be at the center of arts and technology and culture, but we are already seeing that

the youth and families are not able to access the existing jobs that the tech companies are supposed to be putting out there. How do we see that this is going to contribute anything positive to the existing community? On top of that, there are also the displacement issues that are happening because of gentrification in general, because there is different private housing that is for low-income residents in the alleyways, there is also the Mint Mall apartments where businesses and residents reside, which is also a very historic area for the Filipino community which is why SOMCAN started - because the Mint Mall landlord wanted to evict all of the small businesses to make room for the tech industry to rent to a higher price. So, that happened in the 90s and we're seeing the results of that now. We're going to see that more and more with this project that doesn't really have community input in there. They have done different community meetings but at the same time those community meetings are also supposed to be a dialogue, but it turned into information about the 5M Project, so it was a little bit confusing on what participants are supposed to look at or how, they're supposed to provide input.

MW: So, you feel like the community isn't leading that discussion. You feel like you're being lead in that discussion?

AC: Right and we're being told how this project is going to benefit our community but yet we're still not seeing that and we haven't even talked about the impacts, not only the displacement and gentrification impacts, but also the traffic impacts and open space. There are many things that need to be looked at to make sure that there is really good community planning when you're developing a project like this. And so far we haven't felt that the community has been included in that process.

MW: Have they been through the environmental impact review process yet?

AC: They started last year and some of our residents went to talk about the issues of traffic and congestion. The Tempest Bar also came out to talk about how the construction is going to impact their small business because there are going to be buildings that will be demolished, but also just the construction itself around their business. Other neighbors talked about how this might displace them depending on

the kind of housing they're building and if any of it will be low- mid-income rental housing. I'm hearing they hope to finalize a draft by the end of the year.

MW: So, they have not been approved yet?

AC: No, they have not been approved yet. Thankfully.

MW: I understand that PolicyLink had been brought on by 5M to work on the project and to help develop equitable standards with the community. Did you feel like that was helpful? What are your thoughts on that process?

AC: I think that would have been helpful. I just met with PolicyLink once to talk about how they wanted to proceed with convening the community and making sure that the 5M project will not gentrify the community and if anything will contribute to it, but we only had one meeting and after that we learned that PolicyLink was dropped from the collaboration. Therefore, it makes us wonder what happened and why, I thought PolicyLink would really help to make sure that this can be a pilot program for other projects in different cities and states to really incorporate arts, culture, and making sure the existing community is benefiting from all of these new innovative things that are happening around them, but it never flourished to anything. Which is really unfortunate because we felt that could be a starting point of dialogue.

5M has their own perspective of how they would like to do things, but again it needs to have real dialogue, a broader dialogue with the community and we might not always agree on things but let's find a point where we could agree to some things, but we haven't gotten there yet.

MW: So, are you currently working with 5M?

AC: No, not right now. What we are hearing is that 5M wants more of a consolidated response to what the community really wants, but you can't just easily come up with what the community wants because not only do you have to talk with the nonprofits and key stakeholders, but you also have to bring it back to what is really impacted,

which is the residents - adults, youth, and families. So, all that needs to be processed and that has not happened yet.

MW: Right, and also taking into account the SRO residents.

AC: Right.

MW: It seems like that they're not really being factored in ...

AC: No.

MW: As well as the folks who are don't necessarily have homes ...

AC: Yes. So, definitely there are different sectors that we need to break down the community into, including immigrants and people of color, and when you're working with immigrants you also have to provide time and energy to do translation and really make sure that they're understanding what they're hearing and none of those things have been fleshed out or talked about or even agreed to by Forest City.

MW: What role have you seen the arts have in the context of the new development in the neighborhood ... successes, challenges, and failures?

AC: I think there are definitely challenges and the need for improvements. I remember SOMCAN being approached by Intersection to do some videos with our youth and when we talked to them about how the project could really benefit the youth, it became "oh we already have a curriculum, we just need your youth to sign off so we could stipend them." There was no room for real collaboration. It was more of 'we're reaching out to you to get to your youth,' and that's not how the community works and I do not think that is a true collaboration with the community. Definitely, the arts can be of benefit to our neighborhood because we're a society of arts, we need culture and we need arts to express those things, but it needs to be in a way where it's culturally competent and it needs to be in a way where it's actually being understanding and respectful where people are at versus you have a certain way

that you want the community to be a part of your project and that's it. There was no room for working together.

MW: Right. It needs to be with the community – especially if you're not from the community.

AC: Right and that's why we asked them what their end goal for the video was and their response was that they just wanted to teach the youth how to make videos, the different mechanics of it, and things like that. We said 'that's great, but we would like to have our objectives as well and also participate in the direction of the project,' which was that the youth wanted to document and talk about their community - what they love and hate about it, from their perspective. However, that wasn't what Intersection wanted. They wanted to use their curriculum that they didn't want to change or add anything to. Therefore, we didn't see it as a true collaboration. They just wanted our youth to participate for their own PR and we weren't having that because to us it's already bad enough that there is a lot of tokenizing of people of color and immigrants. We are not going to participate in that kind of project.

MW: This experience is very much in line with one of the stories I'm profiling for this article that involved a very well-known and highly regarded Latina artist – one of the co-founders of the Mujeres Muralistas, who was hired to work with Intersection for the Arts and Oasis For Girls and both she and the youth ended up used in a very disturbing way, that's really called into question, for me, the underlying motives of the 5M project and its impact on the community.

What impact do you perceive the development having on the neighborhood and the constituencies that SOMCAN works with?

AC: Like I said, when you bring in a new wave of residents and you don't have the infrastructure to support this growth, the impact is negative. Like South of Market really only has two parks and one park that took a decade to be built by Bessie Carmichael, those are really important, and the pedestrian safety issues, but we're already seeing these new waves of residents negatively impacting the community. For example, a few years ago, some of our Filipino youth were playing on the street and someone called the police on them to say that there were kids hanging out in the

neighborhood who didn't live there. So a cop actually came down and harassed the youth and they had to show the cop that yes, they did actually live there in the affordable housing. So we are seeing discrimination and harassment as additional problems to the new residents moving in. This is very much like what we know about the shooting of Alex Nieto in Bernal Heights. We're also seeing a lot of homeless people being criminalized and harassed. One of the other things that Twitter got was more foot traffic around their building. So that their employees are not bothered by the homeless people and other ...

MW: When you say foot traffic, you mean more police foot traffic?

AC: Yeah, that's another public resource they took. In order to have more police foot traffic, you need more funding for that to add on additional sites. So, that was another thing that Twitter got from the city. And these are just a few examples in the community that tend to be overlooked when it comes to the impact of growth on our existing communities.

We're also seeing a decline in the African American population, Latinos, and even the Filipinos, a lot of them, have left San Francisco and we're going to see a lot more people leave, people of color, working class families leaving San Francisco because the changes are not benefiting them and the housing that's being built is not being built for or by them. San Francisco is no longer a family friendly city. So, all those are the impacts that we're seeing, and not just from the 5M development but all of the development that's happening in SoMa, Bayview and other parts of the city.

MW: Do you have any thoughts on how you think the City has handled this new development - the influx of residents, the displacement, etc. What changes do you think if any, need to be made in City governance and policy to address the impact these courses of action are having especially on low-income communities of color?

AC: Definitely, I feel the City and its departments are contributing to the gentrification versus finding ways to address it. For example, there is this notion from the Planning Department that you need to build more market rate housing in order to have more affordable housing, yet we've found through the housing dashboard that that's

actually not true. Almost 200% of what's built in San Francisco is market rate housing but only 30% - 50% of the City's housing element for affordable housing has been built since 2006. So, we're seeing that there is inequality in equitable development around the city and I believe that it needs to start with not only the Mayor, but the City department directors, like the Planning Department. They can't continue thinking by having more market rate housing that that's going to fulfill the affordable housing crisis in San Francisco because it's not about just building new affordable housing - you also have to sustain and preserve the rent controlled housing. On top of that, I think more and more we're straying away from what is community planning and that becomes more about who benefits. We have to really ask the question of who are we building for and how is that going to balance what's existing. A lot of the time when we challenge and criticize these developments, we're seen as being against growth or against change or against community improvements, however, that's actually not true. What we're challenging is how the City planners are considering the existing communities and how are they incorporating the needs of low-income people of color and immigrants into community planning. Community planning needs to take a comprehensive approach to the neighborhood and not just what's needed in each block. So much of these new developments are not being planned to look at the community holistically.

MW: So, what do you see as solutions and what have you observed to be most effective strategies in making changes?

AC: Well, for SOMCAN, due to SoMa having the highest level of development in any part of the city, one of the things we're actually trying to get passed right now is the Housing Balance Policy. It's not the silver bullet of stopping development, but it's one of the ways to actually make sure there are tools for challenging the Planning Department and Planning Commission on how they're actually approving market rate development into our neighborhood. So basically the policy would mandate that the Planning Department backup why they are approving developments in SoMa if the affordable housing stock is not adequately provided in comparison to market rate housing. On top of that, we are also revising our SoMa Youth, Family, and Senior Zone, based on the Children's Zone in Harlem, New York to not only address the needs of youth, children, families, and seniors, but also to change the perception that

SoMa is not a family neighborhood, that there are no families here. So, those are some of the things we're currently working on and advocating for to make sure that all of these changes will benefit our community especially the low-income working class and immigrant community.

MW: Do you have any other thoughts that haven't been covered or anything that you feel hasn't been said?

AC: I think definitely there are ways to bring in the arts without gentrifying that could not only highlight the issues happening in the community, but also help celebrate what we already have. But we need real dialogue and real contribution from both sides to make sure that happens. Instead right now what we're seeing is newer folks coming in who have their own ideas of what the community should look like, but they're not really listening to what we're already doing as a community or asking how they could contribute to the work we're already doing. And this means understanding the class backgrounds and who has privilege and who does not and a lot of people don't want to talk about that.

MW: Yeah, it's very true. Something that was interesting that Bernadette (Sy of the Filipino American Development Association) brought up about one of Intersection's 5M art projects that was supposed to be about immigration, was that the community members they were inviting to participate didn't understand the actual context, they just lined up to have their picture taken because they thought 'oh this is cool I'm having my picture taken to be included on this wall.' It's like what you were talking about with the curriculum that's already been developed, but isn't being driven by the community participants.

AC: Right. It's the same idea that really gentrified the Fillmore, where the folks that were living there already had a culture and already had ideas of how to enrich their culture ... but that wasn't honored. They were never really listened to and partnered with. I think that's also a question for the Arts Commission - who and what are they funding? We have all these small nonprofit arts organization that are already being challenged with keeping their doors open and how to keep their space, a lot of them

are being overpriced and displaced by the high rents and what's going to happen to those arts organization that have been really working with the community, right?

MW: Yeah. And then these new folks come into the neighborhood with the mindset that 'oh we're going to bring the community together.'

AC: Exactly. What makes them think we're not already working together, what makes them think that we're not trying to solve problems in our own community? You know, it's like they have a superhero attitude that they'll come in and solve it for us, without really knowing anything about the community.

MW: That's really funny, I used that exact analogy in my first draft of this article – the idea that these new companies believe they're superheroes, as though the issues are really simple and that they can be fixed through 'urban prototyping' (laughter).

AC: Right, as though we aren't educated and we don't know what we're doing. It's really unfortunate and also very disrespectful to have that view of the community.

MW: Yeah, it is very disrespectful. Well I don't want to keep you longer. I know it's getting late. Thank you so much for talking with me today, I really appreciate it.

AC: Thank you.

(END OF INTERVIEW)