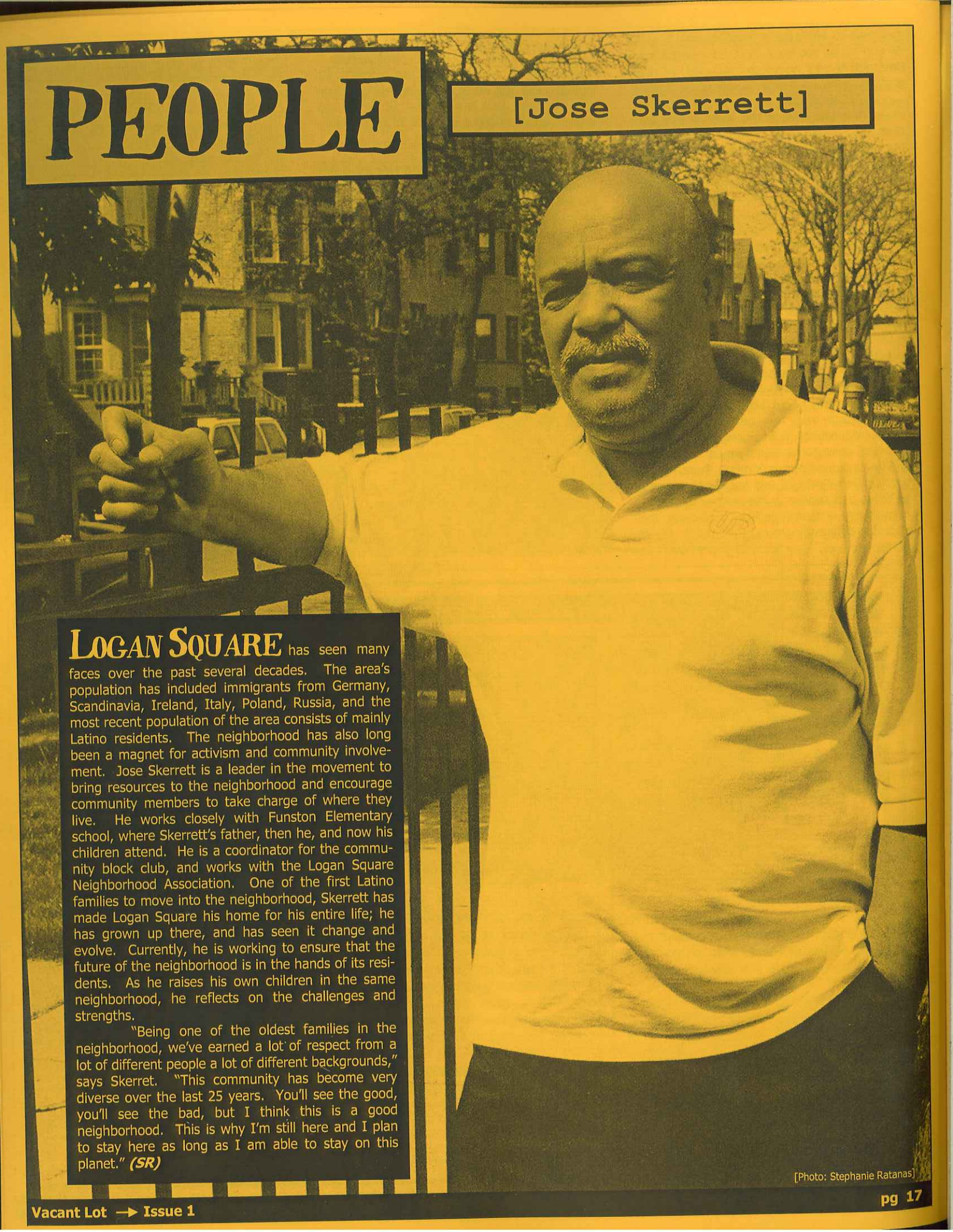


PEOPLE

[Jose Skerrett]



LOGAN SQUARE has seen many faces over the past several decades. The area's population has included immigrants from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, and the most recent population of the area consists of mainly Latino residents. The neighborhood has also long been a magnet for activism and community involvement. Jose Skerrett is a leader in the movement to bring resources to the neighborhood and encourage community members to take charge of where they live. He works closely with Funston Elementary school, where Skerrett's father, then he, and now his children attend. He is a coordinator for the community block club, and works with the Logan Square Neighborhood Association. One of the first Latino families to move into the neighborhood, Skerrett has made Logan Square his home for his entire life; he has grown up there, and has seen it change and evolve. Currently, he is working to ensure that the future of the neighborhood is in the hands of its residents. As he raises his own children in the same neighborhood, he reflects on the challenges and strengths.

"Being one of the oldest families in the neighborhood, we've earned a lot of respect from a lot of different people a lot of different backgrounds," says Skerrett. "This community has become very diverse over the last 25 years. You'll see the good, you'll see the bad, but I think this is a good neighborhood. This is why I'm still here and I plan to stay here as long as I am able to stay on this planet." (SR)

[Photo: Stephanie Ratanas]

Vacant Lot Magazine: Talk a little bit about your involvement specifically with community, not necessarily now, but throughout the time you've been here. You said that you liked the community and that's why you wanted to get involved, but is there any time in your life when you began that crusade?

Jose Skerrett: My crusade with the community started back around 1970. Some of the buildings here [in Logan Square], the landlords were treating the people rough. I mean raising their rents on a weekly basis where they couldn't afford it. And I got involved with... what at the time was called the Urban Promise Center on Division Street. They were in favor of low [income] housing and they came up and started the fight, and I kind of just joined in and stayed there. And I enjoy it. If I can fight to help anybody get a better home and make a better life for themselves then I'll try to do it as best as I can, regardless of their ethnic background. I don't look at that, I look at the whole person.

VLM: Where do you see the state of Logan Square right now, as far as how it's gotten to where it is? Where do you see the future and what is its place in the larger area of Chicago?

JS: I think that the Logan Square [Neighborhood] Association (LSNA) is going to expand within the next five years. I mean it's not just the Logan Square area alone. I think they're going to go outside the boundaries of Logan Square and do the same thing they do in

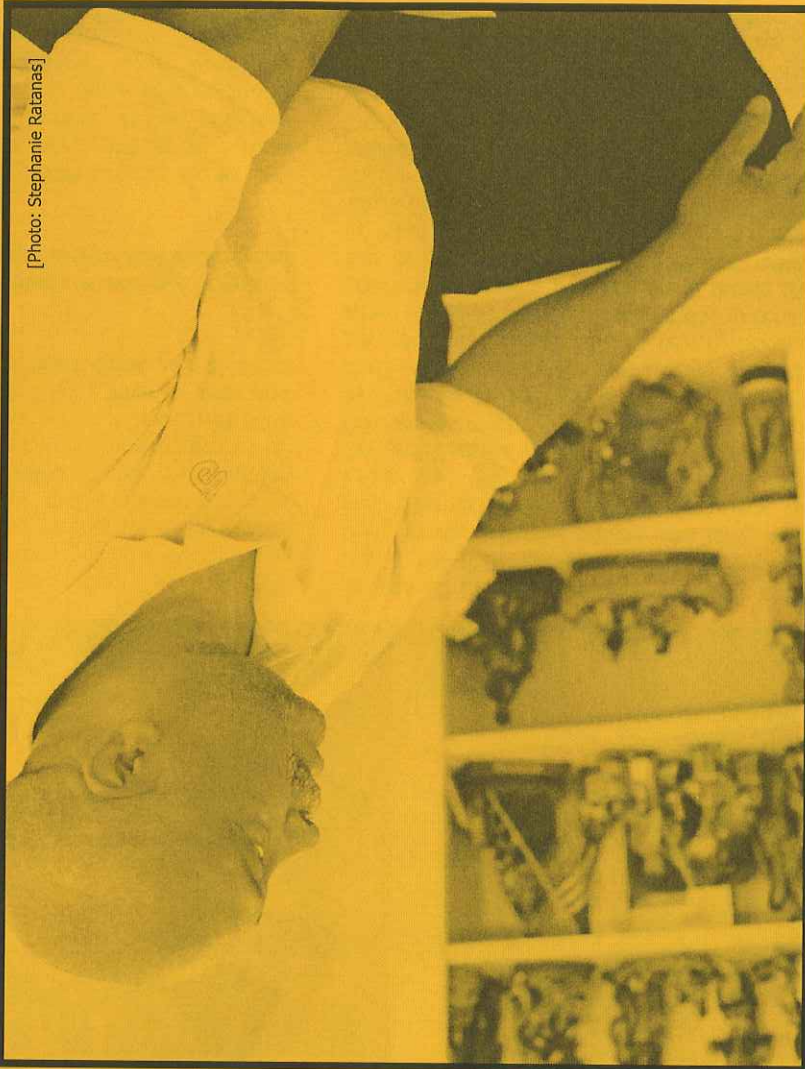
Logan Square, and they do a hell of a job. I mean they're fighting to get some of these vacant lots filled with properties for people to come back into the community, live in affordable housing, have decent community centers where the children can go and play without fear of drive-bys, free clinics for young ladies and men who need help. In the next five years they're going to go outside of the Logan Square area. And I'll try to be part of that.

VLM: What's important to you?

JS: The family structure is very important. To me that is very important because if you don't have some kind of structure for your family, then you cannot have a structure for, or give instructions to, anybody else. You have to start at your own home, clean up your own act before trying to clean somebody else's act up. And to me, the family is the most important thing there is. Your brothers, your sisters, your mom, your dad, those are the ones that give you the character as to who you are, and you have to pass that on to your children, so that they can pass it on to theirs. I went into the military when I was young, when I came home from Vietnam I was 21. And at the time, people were spitting in my face and calling me baby killer and everything else, but I overcame that because my father stood by me. And he told me many times: Don't worry about it. It'll pass. My father was a very strong figure in my life, he wasn't just my father, he was my friend. Someone I could go and talk to without feeling rejection or criticism, he was always on a positive side.

VLM: You had eight siblings, what was your childhood like here in Logan Square? What was it like growing up here?

JS: It was fun because we always had our sibling rivalry, but we would always be together, we'd take our bikes and we'd ride down to the park, to Lincoln Park to Humboldt Park. It wasn't as bad as it is today back



[Photo: Stephanie Ratanas]

then because the gangs were non-existent, I mean there were adult gangs, which is different from the adolescent gangs, but they didn't mess around with the children so it was safe in that sense. I used to have a friend who lived on a farm and I loved to ride up to his house on the weekends and have breakfast with him, and help him with the chores and keep myself busy. Help the neighborhood, cut grass, I used to cut grass on the weekends and make a few bucks for myself and help the family out financially that way.

VLM: Do you see the same kinds of experiences as you're raising your kids in the same neighborhood? How does that translate?

JS: I try to instill in my children that it is important for them to be respectful of other people, to respect their opinions, if someone doesn't know something, it doesn't make them any less smarter than they are, just means that they need a little bit more help. And to respect and to realize that you're living in a community where your father grew up and is well known there, and you know, your actions reflect on me. So there fore they are kind of cautious, they're very friendly, and very outgoing with everybody. They play with all the children in the neighborhood. And they respect each other. That's what I try to instill in them—to do the same things that their father did.

Those are my pride and joy all four of my children, and that's part of the reason I'm in this fight, I'm it for the long haul for them. Because I know, sooner or later, I'm going to have to lay down my arms,

and they're going to have to pick up where I left off.

VLM: What do you think are some of the most important issues for Logan Square? Not necessarily housing, but what do you think Logan Square needs to maintain?

JS: We need to maintain the elderly of the community, and by that I mean give elderly their respect, give them a place where they can still hang their hat and call it home and not try to force them out with all these high rents. There are more people who have been here longer than me, give them the respect, give them their space and let them live out the rest of their lives in the neighborhood that they've lived in for so long. And lets help them keep their homes.

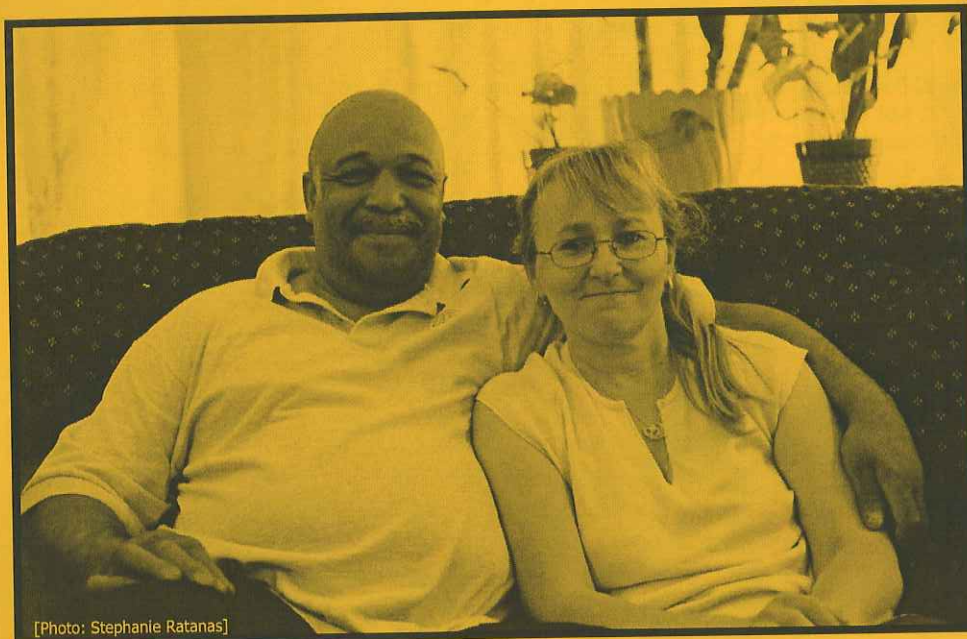
VLM: Do you feel that other families around you or that you've been in contact with for a long time have the same experiences in Logan Squire?

JS: There's a few that I've known for about 10 years and they want to sell their property, they want to get out, they no longer feel safe here. I say, 'why are you leaving? You've been here for so long. You've never been hurt or harmed before, why now do you want to change?' They say have fear of the gangs, you know most of them have grandchildren and I can understand that. The grandchildren are coming up in age and that's the recruiting time for the gang bangers. They start recruiting children roughly around the age of 11 or 12, both male and female. And I guess those are some of the fears of some of the people here. I say

gang bangers who really don't care. If I'm doing something and my children are in the front yard my wife is out there watching them, or if my wife is busy...then I'm out there with my children. They are never left alone, we always know where they're at, and make sure the house that they are in is a good house and a safe house.

VLM: The current generation of youth has often been dubbed the "Me" generation, or self absorbed, how do you instill in them a consciousness and concern for their community?

JS: You go to people who are just strictly "me" per say, and say: 'Hey, you're not the only one in the community, there's other people around you, open yourself up, let yourself be known,



[Photo: Stephanie Ratanas]

it depends on how you brought up your children, and how they brought up their children. If they see that their parents weren't involved in gangs, then it's up to the parents to make sure their kids stay out of gangs. My daughter is 12, and she has not been approached by any of the gang members yet, and if she ever does and I find out about it, they have to come and see me first—and I don't think any of them want any part of me.

VLM: That is obviously a delicate issue, in what kids of ways do you think that can be combated?

JS: Well, give your children something to do—don't give them idle time, don't let them hang out in streets or on corners. If they play they play out in front of their home where you can watch and supervise them. Never leave your children unsupervised anywhere. Whether they're at the school playground, or they're in the backyard or in your neighbor's yard, always make sure there is an adult out there with them watching them. And this is where I think you combat the recruiting, the drive-bys where children are innocent and get shot by these

let yourself be respected and help out.' If you see a neighbor struggling, with cutting the lawn, maybe an older person who can't really push the machine that well, 'Hey neighbor, can I help you? Give you a hand?' Let them know that just because you're young, it doesn't mean that you don't care. Show them that you care, by stepping in and giving them a hand, and don't expect nothing in return. And that's the key, don't expect nothing in return, because when you start waiting for something in return, you're just showing that you are a selfish person. I help people and I don't expect nothing in return. Nor do I want nothing in return. What I want is, what I did for them, for them to do it for someone else and start the ball rolling, and get them going and get everyone involved in the community. This way everyone is going to be helping each other out. [This] was taught to me by my father. I'm very proud. I miss him, he is no longer with us, but his teaching, his philosophy of upbringing us, working two jobs and still finding time to spend with his children, was phenomenal...and this is what I'm instilling in my children. [VLM]

LOGAN SQUARE RESOURCES

Logan Square Neighborhood Association

2840 N Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, IL 60618
Phone: (773) 384-4370
<http://www.lsna.net/>

Alliance of Local Service Organizations (ALSO)

3403 West Armitage Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60647
Phone: (773) 235-5705
<http://www.also-chicago.org>

Logan Square Boys & Girls Club

3228 W Palmer Street
Chicago, IL 60647
Phone: (773) 342-8800
<http://www.bgcc.org/>

McCormick Tribune YMCA

1834 N Lawndale
Chicago, IL 60647
Phone: (773) 235-2525
<http://www.mctriby.org/>

Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail

c/o Center for Neighborhood Technology
2125 W North Avenue
Chicago, IL 60647
Phone: (773) 295-2362
<http://www.bloomingdaletrail.org/>

Bickerdike Redevelopment Corporation

2550 W. North Avenue
Chicago, IL 60647
Phone: (773) 278-5669
<http://www.bickerdike.org/>

Logan Square Cooperative

3934 West George Street
Chicago, IL 60618
<http://chicagocoop.net/blog/>
http://www.chicagocoop.net/wiki/Logan_Square_Cooperative

Most delicious tacos and giant chimichangas ever, 24 hours a day: Puebla Restaurant

2658 N Milwaukee Ave
Chicago, IL 60647
Phone: (773) 227-5499

[For a more comprehensive listing of resources and websites, please visit the LSNA website:
<http://www.lsna.net/directory.aspx>]