*José A. Quiñonez*

# Making the Invisible Visible
## A Strategy for Inclusion

*Innovations Case Narrative:*
Mission Asset Fund

I was 20 years old when I realized that my mother had died because we were poor. She passed away when I was nine, too young to understand the complex and dangerous nature of life in poverty. At that time, I had to muster everything inside of me just to survive the avalanche of sorrow and change in our family life.

It was only as an adult that I came to terms with my painful childhood. I see it now as the source of the deep empathy I have for people who suffer and struggle in the world. That is why I've dedicated my life to working against poverty, and it is how I became the founding CEO of Mission Asset Fund (MAF), a nonprofit organization that strives to create a fair financial marketplace for hardworking families.

When I joined MAF in 2007, the organization was a nonprofit start-up with plans to help low-income immigrants in San Francisco's Mission District. Eight years later, MAF is nationally recognized for developing Lending Circles, a social loan program based on people coming together to lend and borrow money. With cutting-edge technology, we transformed this invisible practice into a force for good. Program participants are freeing themselves from the grasp of predatory lenders by opening bank accounts, building credit histories, paying down high-cost debt, and increasing their savings. They are investing in businesses, buying homes, and saving for a better future.

Lending Circles brings to light what's already good in people's lives. And within that light, participants are forging a sure path into the financial mainstream, unlocking their true economic potential every step of the way. The program's success is serving as a model in the fight against poverty, demonstrating new and effective ways of helping low-income people without belittling them in the process. This is the behind-the-scenes story of how we made this happen.

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## MY STORY BEGINS IN MEXICO

I was born in Durango, Mexico, in 1971, the fifth of six kids. My dad was a successful and respected cattle rancher in a very small town two hours north of the state capital. I was two when he was brutally assassinated, leaving my mom to raise the six of us by herself, including one child who suffered from severe epilepsy.

Soon after my father's death, we moved to the state capital. Growing up there, we all did whatever we could to help the family survive. I helped my older brother sell newspapers on the busy streets near bus depots. We also went door-to-door selling gorditas, cornmeal pockets stuffed with beans and cheese, and bath sponges we wove together by hand from agave fibers. Sometimes I sang on buses while my younger brother collected change from passengers. As a nine-year-old, the work did not seem unusual. It was what we did to help put food on the table and keep our family together.

By all accounts we were poor, but I don't remember feeling poor. My mom's deep faith and devotion ensured that we were rich spiritually. She was loving, attentive, and caring, always quick to smile. Every day, she made sure that we went to school with clean clothes and brushed hair. Then, in March 1980, she died of lymphoma after suffering for many months, bearing excruciating pain without proper treatment or care.

Shortly after my mother's death, relatives brought my siblings and me to the United States to live with them. We joined another family that was already en route to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in the dark of night. The journey was fast. We took a bus from Durango to Tijuana to cross on the 4th of July, as the national holiday ensured that fewer border patrol agents would be on duty. When we arrived in San Jose, we were quickly separated from one another, each of us living with a family we barely knew.

We had no time to grieve, much less to process what had happened, before we found ourselves living in a new country, undocumented and afraid. The fear of getting caught and deported permeated our lives for years. We were told to make ourselves invisible, never to speak up or bring too much attention to ourselves. In school we kept quiet and never spoke about our situation. We never reached out for help.

Fortunately, in 1983, when my older sister turned 18, she courageously kept our mother's wish that the family stay together. Now an adult, she rented a small basement apartment and brought us together to live as a family once more. A few years later, when I was 15, President Reagan granted undocumented immigrants amnesty through the Immigration Reform and Control Act. This law lifted the dark shadow hanging over our lives and opened a world of opportunity and future possibilities.

## FINDING MY PATH IN LIFE

I was about to graduate from high school when I watched a PBS documentary one evening about the international aid organization, Doctors Without Borders. I was drawn to these doctors, who leave their practices for a period of time to help people throughout the world by providing them with free medical care. At that moment, I decided I wanted to do the same. I wanted to become a doctor, too. In 1989, I enrolled at the University of California at Davis as a physiology major, thinking that would prepare me well for medical school.

My plans to become a doctor quickly fell apart during my first few months at UC Davis. I didn't do so well in science classes; chemistry and physiology were excruciatingly boring to me. Instead, I found a new way to help, through my passion for social justice. I became a student activist and was elected leader of MEChA, a prominent Latino student organization. I led numerous demonstrations and participated in a six-day hunger strike to demand the establishment of a cross-cultural center on campus. I excelled as a student organizer and realized that I could use those talents for good. I didn't need to become a doctor to work for Doctors Without Borders but could instead run the organization, or other nonprofits like it, and still achieve my true goal of helping people.

After college, I spent a few years working in San Francisco's Mission District, organizing against Proposition 187, the infamous anti-immigrant proposal that would have turned teachers into ICE agents. Sadly, California voters approved the proposition, which was later struck down by the courts as unconstitutional.

Feeling devastated by the loss, I realized that I needed more than just passion to make a difference in the world. I went to graduate school to prepare myself for the long struggle for social justice. In 1996, I moved to New Jersey to attend graduate school at Princeton, where I received a master's in public affairs. I then moved to Washington D.C., to work for a member of Congress, and for various national advocacy organizations. I did that for six years before moving back to California with my wife, Jennifer Brooks. We settled in the Bay Area, where I spent a couple of years working at large national nonprofit organizations focused on creating asset-building opportunities for low-income people. That's where I was in 2007, when I heard about a job as head of Mission Asset Fund, a new nonprofit organization starting up in San Francisco.

The description of the executive director position ran four pages. When I first read it, my instinct was that I would probably get this job, but that I would be the second executive director, hired after the first one failed to meet the unrealistic expectations outlined in the description. Lots of friends and colleagues encouraged me to apply because it was such an obvious fit. The organization wanted to focus on issues of economic opportunity, work I was already engaged in. It was planning to help low-income immigrants in the Mission District, a community I already knew well. I also knew some of the people on the board, including the chair, and was confident that we had a common vision. It felt like the stars were aligning for me with this job. It felt right.

Pregnant with our first child, my wife was concerned about the long hours it would require to run a start-up organization. She also saw the professional value of staying with a known and respected national organization rather than working for a neighborhood-based one. I shared her concerns, but I also saw something different. In MAF I saw a unique opportunity that was worth the risk because of the unusual circumstances surrounding its creation and its potential to have an impact. The Levi Strauss Foundation and a group of community leaders had founded MAF in response to the sale of the last Levi Strauss denim factory in San Francisco. Using a million-dollar investment funded by that sale, the foundation and community members established MAF to help Mission District residents improve their financial security.

One million dollars was a significant sum, and I knew I could do something meaningful with it that would have a lasting, positive impact in the community. I also felt strongly that a local organization with strategic and successful models could have national impact. It just had to prove successful and effective in changing people's lives, which is not as simple as it sounds, nor common.

During my years working for a congressman in Washington, D.C., I met with advocacy groups daily that wanted us to sign this letter or cosponsor that bill. They would hand me data and reports and give me lots of talking points about how their idea or program could change the world. I would ask them to demonstrate where their work had been successful on the ground, because I knew the best way to get the congressman to support an issue was to give him a concrete example of success. But such examples hardly ever materialized. I realized then that having the right policy analysis, particularly on issues pertaining to low-income communities, was not enough for legislative victories. We needed strong, successful programs that could serve as models to inform public policies.

In MAF I saw an opportunity to create such a model. We could develop local programs with an eye toward elevating viable and successful strategies and insights nationally. We could share lessons learned and influence policy debates on how to help poor people. As a national policy advocate herself, that argument ultimately won over my wife. In September 2007 I accepted the job as MAF's founding CEO, three months before our daughter Amelia was born.

## GOING BEYOND THE MISSION

I actually considered quitting soon after I was hired. My vision for MAF clashed with what the board had developed in their initial plan. The board had spent several years working with consultants to develop an implementation plan that the executive director would follow to get MAF off the ground.

MAF was founded to benefit residents of the Mission District, so it made sense that the board defined the geographic boundaries of the neighborhood in the initial plan. I was concerned, however, by the narrow definition of a service area. The problems facing a low-income family on 13th Street aren't any different from those facing a low-income family on 12th Street, but because of the plan's explicit street-by-street boundaries, one family would be eligible for our programs while the other would be turned away. That felt wrong to me. The narrow geographic focus meant that MAF could never look beyond the Mission to help families across the bay or throughout California, much less the country. The plan also envisioned MAF as an organization that would pilot programs and then, once proven effective, pass them on to other organizations to implement in the Mission.

I was alarmed by these geographic and programmatic limitations. They would have crippled MAF's potential, limiting its role and providing few prospects for long-term financial sustainability. I spent the first 18 months pushing back. My relationship with the board was pretty contentious during this period, but I was determined to persevere. I wanted MAF to be much more than just a neighborhood convener or program incubator. I knew that if we could create a successful model that actually improved people's financial lives in the Mission we could quickly have an impact on national policy discussions.

The board and I eventually resolved our differences. We agreed to continue to focus on Mission residents who lived, worked, or had previously lived in the neighborhood. We also agreed to work with organizations outside the Mission and even beyond San Francisco, as long as that work was fully funded. In time, the board agreed to remove geographic limitations and focus instead on providing services to low-income immigrant families living in the financial shadows.

Coming to an agreement was a slow process facilitated greatly by our early success, which demonstrated that working beyond the Mission really meant that we could have a long future of serving families living there.

## BUILDING ON WHAT'S GOOD

In Spanish we say, "*cada quien tiene un don*." Every person has a "don"—a gift, an inherent value by virtue of our human existence. I believe this to my core, and I made sure it was part of MAF's DNA from the outset. This value guides everything we do, and it's the reason why we so soundly reject the "deficit-based" view that permeates policies and programs for low-income people.

An implicit assumption underlying many nonprofit programs is that low-income people are poor because they are somehow unsophisticated or otherwise deficient, lazy, or just doing everything wrong. Financial literacy programs, for example, assume that poor people are financially illiterate, that they don't have money-management skills, and that they aren't sophisticated enough to understand our financial system. We rejected these assumptions because they rob people of both agency and dignity. Surely everyone needs to learn how to manage their finances, just as everyone could benefit from honest financial advice, but financial education is not the issue. Moreover the presumption that poor people are ignorant and just waiting for a financial lesson plan to save them is wrong.

Rather than base our programs on such negative stereotypes, we engaged Mission families to help us understand their financial lives better. We did so with an open, inquisitive mindset. We had honest conversations and conducted indepth participatory research projects that gave us deeper insights into their complicated financial lives. These projects were fundamental to developing MAF's programs. It is how we learned to meet people where they were and to build on what is good in their lives—the creative ways they make, borrow, save, and even manage money. By showing them respect and acknowledging the enormous barriers they struggle to overcome, we were able to gain their trust quickly. And in the world of finance, trust is everything.

## FORMALIZING THE INFORMAL

We spent most of our first year of operation surveying the community to determine which services already existed and where there were unmet needs. One crucial fact we learned was that 44 percent of households in the Mission District were invisible to the credit bureaus — these families did not have credit histories or scores. As a result they were left without access to low-cost, mainstream credit that forced many to turn to fringe financial services like payday lenders, which trap people in a cycle of high-cost debt. Indeed, a credit report is like the passport to the financial mainstream; without one, consumers are denied at every checkpoint.

As an alternative, many turn to the time-honored tradition of coming together to lend and borrow money among themselves. Known as *tandas* in Mexico, *susus* in Africa, *lun-hui* in China, and *paluwagan* in the Philippines – and by many other names throughout the world–this informal borrowing practice helps people meet immediate needs. It's a perfect example of a strength-based model in which poor people leverage their assets – both financial and social capital—to improve their situation. But tandas are invisible to financial institutions, and thus they do not count in people's formal financial lives.

As we were initially designing MAF's programs, I found myself thinking back to my time at Princeton, where I learned about informal economies, the economic activity that goes on outside the regulated system. It happens all over the world, people selling stuff in the streets, out of their homes, in little markets. One of my professors, Alejandro Portes, taught us that activities in the informal economy can be similar to what occurs in the formal economy, such as selling bottles of water, the difference being that activities in the formal markets are regulated and activities in informal markets are not. He explained that activities in informal economies are not inherently criminal or illegal, they simply lack regulatory structures that acknowledge their activities.

This distinction resonated with me. My siblings and I had spent years working in the informal economy in order to survive. After arriving in the U.S., we worked at the local flea market in San Jose because it was the only place where we could earn cash. My first job in this country was helping a man sell used stuff. It was honest, decent work. We worked as hard as anyone else, but our jobs were informal, without legal protections or security. Such is the case with tanda participants. They borrow money from each other and then make regular, on-time payments just as other borrowers do when they make payments to banks or credit card companies. The activity is the same. The difference is that payments in tandas are not recorded or reported to credit bureaus like payments on formal loans.

The informal nature of tandas reminded me of the work of Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, who argued that unreported, unrecorded economic activity significantly hinders people who lack formal ownership of their property. His basic argument related to real estate. In the developing world, lots of poor people have property, often because they were born in the same house as their parents, but many of them may not have title to their property. Without that piece of paper proving that the asset belongs to them, it is difficult for them to participate in the formal economy, which could otherwise open up new opportunities. For example, without proof of ownership they can't use their property as collateral for a loan to start a business. They can't bequeath their home to their children. They can't even sell it. Their asset is essentially invisible.

I quickly saw parallels with tandas. The transactions of people who participate in informal lending groups aren't recognized or recorded, but that doesn't mean they are insignificant or inconsequential in people's financial lives. If anything, tandas are arguably more important because participants don't have other ways to access capital. Moreover, people go to great lengths to make their payments because of the social relationships involved. I wanted that importance to be validated, to be recognized by mainstream financial institutions.

Putting together Portes' work on informal economies with de Soto's idea of formalizing assets was the magical moment; they provided me with the theoretical framework to create Lending Circles. My idea was to simply create a financial product based on what people were already doing in tandas. The only difference was that we would require participants to sign promissory notes that banks and credit bureaus could recognize. I saw promissory notes like the property titles de Soto talked about; they were the official documents that made invisible financial activity visible. MAF, as the loan servicer, could then record and report payment activity to credit bureaus to help people build credit histories and improve their credit scores, which in turn would open up a world of possibilities for them. Lending Circles participants—who lived in the financial shadows, unbanked and credit invisible—could now have real access to affordable financial products and services to help them realize their true economic potential.

## LAUNCHING LENDING CIRCLES

In the fall of 2008, with the Lending Circles concept firmly in place, Daniela Salas, MAF's COO, led the team to pilot the program. We started the program with four people, each contributing $50 per month for a $200 social loan. The first lending circle was called "Los Guerreros", which had three family members participating and one local journalist who wanted to document the process. The program rapidly grew from there. By the end of 2015 we had formed 1,079 lending circles with 5,149 members, and a total loan volume of $4,896,902. Most impressive is the fact that Lending Circles performed with a default rate of 0.7 percent, significantly lower than the industry standard of 10+ percent.

Scaling Lending Circles was not easy by any means. It took a significant amount of time and focused effort to make it happen. We went through a lot of iterations of the program to get it right. The trust we had with clients in the Mission District greatly facilitated the process of fine-tuning the program in real time. We tested different aspects of the program locally before replicating it in other communities; the application form, eligibility requirements, and even how to provide financial education were all program elements we tinkered with locally.

Getting the technology right was critical. Since there was no off-the-shelf software suitable to manage Lending Circles, we had to create it ourselves. From the outset, we knew we could not afford to manage the program using antiquated and costly loan servicing techniques. The staffing resources needed to process paper applications or open envelopes containing payments or even count cash would have significantly limited our ability to scale the program. So we deliberately invested in technology that could facilitate our vision for scale. We built our own, which was an online loan-management platform, based on Salesforce technology that provides infinitely scalable and secured solutions.

With the right tools on hand, we were ready to grow. By 2011 we started replicating Lending Circles in other communities. We formed partnerships with four Bay Area nonprofits—the SF LGBT Center, the Chinese Newcomers Center, the Fremont Family Resource Center, and CEO Women. Each of these organizations served a distinct population: the gay and lesbian community in San Francisco, Chinese immigrants, and Afghani and other low-income refugee women in the East Bay. Together they established 14 new lending circles similar to those we'd facilitated with Latino immigrants in the Mission. The program rapidly scaled from there. As of 2015, we had 53 nonprofit partners providing Lending Circles in 18 different states.

As we replicated the program initially, we brought in a team of researchers from San Francisco State University's Cesar Chavez Institute (CCI) to evaluate Lending Circles.[1] It was a risky move; the program could have failed for a hundred different reasons, and the evaluators would have documented the failure. So when CCI released its findings from a rigorous two-year evaluation, we were thrilled. The report showed that, on average, program participants' credit scores increased 168 points. Clients who started without a credit score averaged a score of 600 after completing a Lending Circle. Within ten months, 69 percent of participants who were credit invisible—without credit histories or scores—successfully established a credit score. In contrast, only 13 percent of the control group achieved this result on their own.

In addition to strengthened credit histories, researchers also documented improved financial management by Lending Circle participants, many of whom were using their interest-free social loan to refinance high-cost debt, including credit cards, payday loans, and other installment debts. In sharp contrast, mem-

| | Control Group | | Treatment Group | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All | With scores at pretest | All | With scores at pretest |
| **Credit Scores** | | | | |
| Pre-test | 456 | 684 | 435 | 614 |
| Post-test | 497 | 668 | 603 | 633 |
| Change | **41** | **-16** | **168** | **19** |
| **Lines of Credit** | | | | |
| Pre-test | 8 | 8 | 6 | 9 |
| Post-test | 9 | 9 | 9 | 11 |
| Change | **1** | **1** | **3** | **2** |
| **Outstanding Debt** | | | | |
| Pre-test | $9,360 | $9,491 | $9,237 | $12,855 |
| Post-test | $12,271 | $12,263 | $8,186 | $10,372 |
| Change | **$2,911** | **$2,772** | **-$1,051** | **-$2,483** |
| *# of obs.* | *138* | *92* | *209* | *148* |

**Table 1.** Changes in credit report elements (mean values)

bers in the control group did not have this opportunity to refinance and got further into debt. Lending Circle participants with a credit history *reduced* their debt by $2,483, while members in the control group with a credit history *increased* their debt by $2,772.

## PUSHING FOR POLICY CHANGE

The evaluation reports, in my view, removed all doubt about our work. Immediately after publication, I received a call from the office of California state senator Lou Correa, then chair of the state's senate banking committee. The senator had learned of our success with Lending Circles and wanted to see the program expanded throughout California. He invited me to speak at a senate banking hearing in November 2013. During the hearing, I spoke about the evaluation and our desire to expand the work beyond San Francisco. The senator asked what he could do to help make that happen. I replied that we needed the state to exempt MAF from regulations that impeded our ability to partner with other nonprofit organizations. Asking for exempt status from state regulations was a tall order for sure, but the reality was that we needed room to innovate new strategies for tackling old problems. Our early track record of success indicated the vast social good we could provide with the state's support.

**Hierarchy of Financial Needs**

The CCI report showed that we were helping clients build credit and reduce debt, thereby opening them to opportunities in the financial marketplace. But did we help them improve their financial lives overall? Did they achieve financial security?

The evaluation did not answer these questions, in large part because we did not have a clear definition of financial security, much less a model for how to measure it. Typically, income or credit scores are considered proxies for a person's financial status, but these common metrics are inadequate for assessing a person's full financial life. Knowing a person's income alone does not say much about his or her expenses, debts, or net worth, especially when their income is so volatile. Although credit scores are excellent at predicting the probability that a borrower will repay a debt, they tell us little about a borrower's ability to repay. What will it take for a borrower to repay that loan? Will that borrower need a second loan to pay off the first? If so, do they have the ability to repay that second loan?

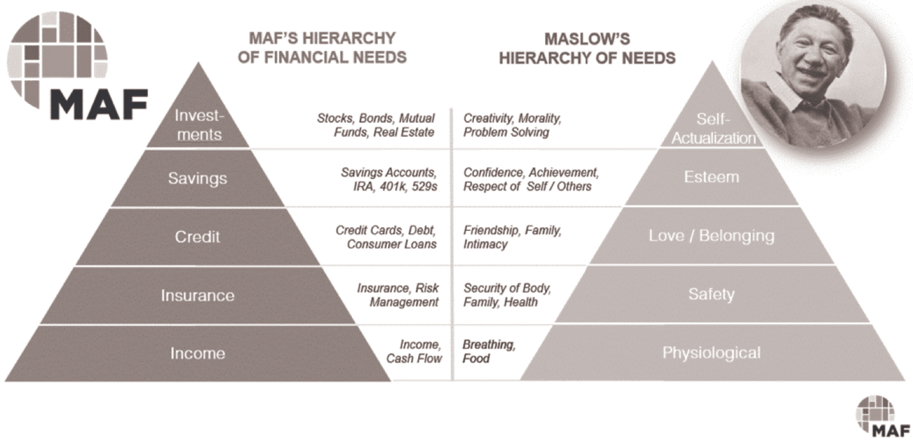
Frankly, we did not have a framework for understanding the complexities of people's formal financial lives, much less what they do informally. So, the question remained, how could we tell if we were improving our clients' financial security? For answers, we turned to Abraham Maslow.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains what people need to realize their true potential. In his seminal 1943 work, Maslow organized human need into five levels, ordered from the most basic (health and well-being) to the most complex (self-actualization), with each level facilitating the satisfaction of the subsequent, higher-order need.[1]

Using the same logic, MAF developed the "Hierarchy of Financial Needs" (HFN) to explain what people need to realize their true economic potential.[2] The HFN identifies financial parallels to physiological needs (income), safety (insurance), love and belonging (credit), esteem (savings), and self-actualization (investments). It's a simple model that clarifies what people need to do to realize their true economic potential. For most Americans, financial security starts with a job. People need income to pay for expenses and balance their budgets. They also need to insure against shocks; they need to leverage credit to acquire assets; they need to save for a rainy day; and they need to invest for future returns.

**Income:** The most basic financial need is income to cover basic living expenses, such as food, housing, and utilities. Income can take many forms, from wages

After several months of working intensively with Senator Correa's office, we introduced Senate Bill 896, which gave qualified nonprofit organizations an exemption to the California Lenders License Law. Through various committee hearings and many letters of support, we shared MAF's strategies for helping low-income families improve their financial lives; Lending Circles was the concrete




and dividends to government benefits or even transfers from family or friends. Income is the foundation of financial security.

**Insurance:** To protect earnings, people must insure against unforeseen events that create setbacks. This requires taking stock of assets, including cash, belongings, and health, and securing against loss, theft, damage, and illness.

**Credit:** To acquire assets such as a car, home, or education otherwise unattainable through income alone, people need credit. This requires individuals to have credit histories and credit scores to access, and leverage, low-cost capital.

**Savings:** When individuals save, they put away resources for specific goals. The ability to save demonstrates discipline and engenders confidence, a sense of achievement, and respect for oneself and others.

**Investments:** The pinnacle of the HFN is when people realize the dynamism of their economic potential. This is the stage where people can invest in ventures that carry risk as well as the potential for return. It represents a turning point because people have investments to generate income, rather than relying solely on earned wages.

1. Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review,* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-96. Available at http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm.

2 Jose A. Quinonez, "Latinos in the Financial Shadows," *What It's Worth: Strengthening the Financial Future of Families, Communities, and the Nation*. Washington DC: SF Federal Reserve and CFED, December, 2015: 261-270 Available at http://www.strongfinancialfuture.org/essays/latinos-in-the-financial-shadows/.

example of success that contributed greatly to our legislative victory. SB 896 was introduced in January 2014 and made its way through the state legislature without any opposition—not a single "no" vote! Governor Brown signed SB 896 into law on August 15, 2014, making California the first state in the country to recognize Lending Circles and credit-building as a force for good.

Without a doubt, the evaluation report and new law in California were incredible milestones for MAF.

In March 2012, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), a federal agency established in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis to protect consumers from abusive practices by financial institutions, issued a call for applications to become a member of the newly created consumer advisory board. Although encouraged by the establishment of the advisory board, I did not plan to apply, assuming that the agency was looking for D.C.-based policy wonks. Tara Robinson, MAF's CDO, pushed me to apply. I told her I didn't want to waste my time on the application, but that if she didn't mind she could apply on my behalf. So she did. After a series of phone interviews in the coming months, I was in the pool of finalists to join the board.

While attending a leadership retreat at the Aspen Institute in August of that year, I had a phone call from Richard Cordray, director of the CFPB. As I'd hoped, he asked me to join the consumer advisory board, but he also asked me to serve as the board's inaugural chair. I was stunned. I spent the remainder of my time in Aspen in a daze. Of course I accepted. Never mind that I didn't know what would be required in terms of responsibilities or expectations. But I was certain this appointment would place MAF squarely in the national spotlight. In that moment I saw the vision to elevate a local model to national policy realm materialize.

As the inaugural chair of the advisory board, I spent a lot of time working with CFPB staff to ensure that the board was properly structured. I also advanced the concept of credit-building as a force for good, joining a growing chorus of advocates calling for the bureau to pay more attention to issues of credit. I made several presentations about Lending Circles to the advisory board and CFPB staff, highlighting the structural barriers in credit markets and the incredible impact credit-building was having on our clients' financial lives.

In May 2015, the CFPB released "Credit Invisibles," a report that identified 46 million American adults as invisible to the three main credit reporting agencies because they don't have credit records or their histories are too short or stale to generate a credit score.[2] The report officially recognizes the financial challenges people have when they are invisible and locked out of mainstream credit markets. This is a first step in a long journey to elevate credit-building as a force for good.

## MOVING FORWARD

MAF has come a long way, and while there is still a long road ahead, I am proud of the fact that we broke with convention to challenge the thinking of what is possible in the fight against poverty. We set out to demonstrate that there is a different path forward, a different way to work with low-income families without diminishing them.

The success of Lending Circles is rooted in what's good in people's lives, in their relationships and time-honored traditions of relying on each other. We're lifting up that nugget of gold to demonstrate its true value and potential to radically change the way we think about solutions to the problems people face in poverty. We're also showing how nonprofits can use the tools of finance for social good, how technology can facilitate a network approach to scale, and how to enact strength-based policies to impact people's lives.

Looking back at my personal journey—living my life in poverty and in fear of deportation—I am reminded that there is no way I could have done so much with my life and career if it weren't for President Reagan's action that brought immigrants into the light of day. With a simple stroke of a pen, he made millions of invisible people, like me, visible and able to live up to our true potential. America is better for it.

Immigration reform today could again unleash the human and economic potential of millions of people. We are diminished as a country every day that we allow whole generations of immigrants to extinguish their dreams and to live below their potential solely because of their status. Millions of hardworking people living in the shadows are eager and ready to be seen, to be welcomed into the mainstream so they can give their all and contribute fully to America's promise.

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[1] Belinda Reyes et al., "Building Credit for the Underbanked: Social Lending as a Tool for Credit Improvement." San Francisco, CA: César E. Chávez Institute, 2013. Available at http://cci.sfsu.edu/lendingcircles.

[2] Kenneth Brevoort, Philipp Grimm, and Michelle Kamara, "Data Point: Credit Invisibles." Washington, DC: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, May 2015. Available at http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201505_cfpb_data-point-credit-invisibles.pdf.