Union Bank of California is honored to be the exclusive sponsor of the 40th Anniversary Justice Campaign for California Rural Legal Assistance. We are proud to support your goal in providing assistance to low-income migrant working communities of California.

In our community there are individuals who come together for a greater good. People who strive to make a difference, taking the extra step needed to create a better life for all of us. At Union Bank of California we are proud to be your neighbor. May your hard work and community spirit continue to inspire us all.

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Third Annual Téquio Celebration

On March 1, 2006 just over 600 CRLA friends and supporters took to the dance floor as two of the most popular Latin rock icons, Los Lobos and Carlos Santana, jammed on stage together for the first time in five years. This delightful impromptu performance was just one celebratory aspect of CRLA’s Third Annual Téquio event at the Los Angeles Beverly Hilton Hotel.

The word “téquio” refers to the indigenous community’s commitment to community service. Among some indigenous groups, téquio represents a rite of passage where a person is reminded to give back to his or her native village. They are required to put aside existing obligations (employment, education) for up to a year in order to return to their roots and perform this important civic duty for the community at large.

The purpose of the Téquio event is both to honor individuals that carry on this tradition of community service and to raise money and awareness about CRLA’s work with indigenous communities. In 1993, CRLA became the first legal aid project to serve the needs of the growing indigenous farmworker population by creating the Indigenous Project. Through six offices statewide, CRLA’s Indigenous Project has successfully collaborated with local indigenous community councils to provide legal assistance, community outreach and education-training sessions to thousands of indigenous farmworkers and their families each year. Today, CRLA’s Indigenous Project employs 6 indigenous outreach staff, which is more than all the combined local, state, and federal agencies in California.

This year, CRLA honored Carlos and Deborah Santana for demonstrating the spirit of téquio through their work with the Milagro Foundation. The Milagro Foundation was founded to benefit underprivileged children around the world in the areas of health, education, and the arts. Energized by the powerful words of Mr. Santana, as well as several other speakers including community worker Irma Luna, and CRLA clients, the night culminated with celebratory dancing to the music of Los Lobos, Carlos Santana, and jazz legend Herbie Hancock.

For many, this rare musical collaboration for classics like “Guajira” and “La Bamba” was the highlight of the evening.

CRLA receives $125,000 matching grant

CRLA and Union Bank of California announced a groundbreaking partnership at the 3rd Annual Téquio Celebration, a kick-off event held in Los Angeles on March 1 for CRLA’s 40th Anniversary Justice Campaign. Union Bank of California will match every donation made to CRLA during its 40th Anniversary Justice Campaign, up to $125,000. By doubling donor contributions to CRLA, Union Bank of California helps increase the number of CRLA community workers and attorneys providing direct community education, outreach, and legal services to California’s working-poor rural communities, especially farmworkers and their families.

This groundbreaking partnership continues Union Bank of California’s legacy of supporting CRLA. Fifteen years ago, before any major corporation realized the economic power of Latinos, George Ramirez, then a Union Bank of California Branch President, recognized the value in helping farmworkers in his community. “In the early 90s, CRLA turned to George because farmworkers were being robbed shortly after cashing their paychecks. They didn’t have driver’s licenses to open bank accounts, so they carried a week’s worth of wages with them,” explains Jose Padilla, CRLA Executive Director.

CRLA asked George if he could arrange to permit farmworkers to use an alternative form of identification. George agreed to open bank accounts for individuals with matricula consular cards, an identification card the Mexican consulate commonly issued to farmworkers. The strategy was a huge success. In fact, Union Bank of California, by establishing bank accounts for individuals with matricula consular cards, was one of the first institutions to make banking accessible to immigrant workers. This pioneering strategy is now practiced throughout the banking industry.
Mr. Ortiz, like many other farm workers, was lured to dairy work by the promise of year-round employment and a $1500 a month salary. He had no idea he would be forced to work day and night shifts without breaks, day after day; all for wages far below the minimum required by California law. Mr. Ortiz worked 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, for an average of $4.35 an hour, $2.40 cents an hour below the mandatory minimum wage.

Mr. Ortiz’s case is just one example of practices by California dairies to cheat workers out of the minimum wage, overtime pay, and rest and meal breaks. Last year, a Tulare County dairy paid $385,000 to settle a lawsuit CRLA, Inc. and the CRLA Foundation brought forth on behalf of dairy workers who were denied the minimum wage, overtime, and rest breaks. In February of this year, CRLA attorneys settled two other cases with Central Valley dairies on behalf of workers who were paid out of over $64,000 in wages. Mr. Ortiz sadly passed away during the lawsuit, but CRLA recovered nearly a year’s worth of wages for his wife and children. Yet many more workers continue to contact CRLA with reports of being victimized.

“This is a problem with dairies throughout the state,” said Blanca Batiustos, a CRLA attorney who has represented dairy workers in several cases. “CRLA receives many complaints from dairy workers, that they work overtime but do not receive overtime payment, that they cannot take rest breaks, and that the dairies don’t give them wage statements tracking their hours, wages, or taxes withheld.

“Dairies are California’s second largest industry with over $35 billion in economic activity every year. They spend $37 million dollars each year promoting their ‘Real California Cheese’ and ‘got milk?’ campaigns, yet their workers are among the lowest paid and most abused in the state,” explains Jose Padilla, CRLA’s executive director. “We hope that these lawsuits convince dairies that they must comply with the law and pay their workers the minimum wage and overtime.”

How can you help ensure the workers who provide our milk and cheese are paid the minimum wage? Contribute directly to the CRLA Dairy Fund (just write ‘dairy fund’ in the memo line of any支票 or credit card donation). You can also contribute on our website at crla.org.

While the California Milk Advisory Board blankets our TV screens and magazine pages with milk-mustached celebrities and happy cows, California’s dairy workers are anything but happy. During the past 18 months, CRLA has recovered more than $1 million dollars in unpaid wages, overtime pay, and penalties from dairies for workers who were forced to labor 7 days a week, 12-14 hours a day, for less than $4.35 an hour (a violation of California’s minimum wage of $6.75 an hour).

Augustine Rodriguez Ortiz was one such worker. When Mr. Ortiz missed a day of work at a Central Valley dairy to be with his wife as she gave birth, the dairy owner fired him. Like many workers, Mr. Ortiz was required to live on the dairy and provide round-the-clock care for the cows. Along with firing Mr. Ortiz, the dairy owner evicted the family from their modest home and forbade them from returning to retrieve their belongings, a violation of California law. Suddenly homeless with a newborn son, a 2-year old daughter, and his wife who had given birth, Mr. Ortiz contacted CRLA.

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