

# Arte es Vida

## Case Study: The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center

“We have learned that, in order to participate fully in democratic civil life, individuals must be culturally grounded, confident of their own voices, and certain of the value of their contributions. Art and culture give us this grounding.”

—Graciela Sanchez, executive and artistic director

### **PREFACE BY ANIMATING DEMOCRACY: CULTURE, PLÁTICA AND ACTIVISM** ANDREA ASSAF

*Arte Es Vida* is an ongoing program of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. Supported by Animating Democracy from 2001 to 2003, *Arte es Vida* addresses issues of cultural equity and democracy and examines “the role of artistic and cultural expression in a society that inherits the deep wounds, economic and political disparities, and continuing practices of injustice that are the legacy of cultural domination in the United States.” It explores *cultural grounding*—the concept that a strong sense of selfhood and identity, rooted in creative expression and cultural practice, is necessary to empower marginalized communities and individuals to participate actively in public dialogue and civic life. To this end, *Arte Es Vida* programming assists local Mexicano/a and Chicano/a communities in recovering their histories, art, culture, language, stories, and traditions, with a particular focus on the contributions of *sabias* (wise women elders). In addition to creating, facilitating, and presenting art and cultural events, the Esperanza hosts *pláticas* (community dialogues) facilitated by *animadoras* (trained Esperanza staff, artists, and community members).

In telling the story of *Arte es Vida*, executive and artistic director Graciela Sanchez details four areas of activity within the larger project that reveal underlying cultural, political, and philosophical dimensions of the Esperanza’s practice. These areas are: (1) community revisioning of labor leader Emma Tenayuca; (2) the effort to preserve La Gloria Building and other cultural landmarks in Chicano/Mexicano neighborhoods; (3) conflict of values within San Antonio’s Westside community; and (4) historical conflicts between Chicanos and Mexicanos in the San Antonio. She also articulates a clear statement on the significance of culture itself as a civic issue. This preface highlights some key points of the case study, particularly those that illuminate the role of arts-based civic dialogue work in a cultural organization oriented toward civic action and activism.

#### **Cultural Grounding and the Concept of Art**

The Esperanza takes the position that, as lesbian poet-activist Audre Lorde once declared, “Art is not a luxury!” This conviction, that art and culture are fundamental to the survival and health of communities and individuals, is reflected in the title of their project, *Arte es Vida*—“art is life.”

Esperanza understands art as personally and culturally expressive activities, from cooking traditional foods, to enacting community rituals, to creating poems, performances, ceramics, or videos. They emphasize the importance of sharing and transmitting the stories and cultural practices of elders with the broader community, particularly the stories of women, whom they consider to be primary bearers of tradition and cultural memory. The Esperanza activities seek to increase leadership capacity within communities by recognizing otherwise marginalized individuals for their knowledge and contributions, and by encouraging community members to lead workshops, dialogues, organizing efforts, and projects.

The Esperanza supports the view that every person is a creative being capable of artistic expression. They emphasize the importance of community-defined cultural practice, and seek wide community involvement in all art making, performances, and events. In the following case study, Graciela Sanchez offers a critique of the artist residency model and asserts the importance of long-term, mission driven work. “Artists that work with *Arte es Vida*,” youth facilitator and artist Vicki Grise explained, “must be community based and must understand that they are not here to document our stories, but to empower a community to tell their own stories and document their own histories.”

The Esperanza challenges assumptions about who defines art and culture, and how. They assert that these definitions are deeply political and relate to power, ownership, and the control of local resources. They reject the images of Mexicano/a or Chicano/a cultures projected by the tourist industry in San Antonio—made for easy consumption, depoliticized, and taken out of historical context (or revised to re-enforce a history of patriotic Texas identity). One example from the case study is the Esperanza’s struggle to save La Gloria, a historic building that had once been an important social center for Mexicano/a and Chicano/a communities in San Antonio. Esperanza saw La Gloria as an “elder” with stories to tell—a physical remnant of a thriving cultural past, a standing witness to the loss of local history.

The Esperanza asserts the importance of transference of cultural traditions and aesthetics from one generation to the next. Their emphasis on the cultural memory of elders, however, raises questions (or perhaps challenges) of cultural hybridity, which increasing numbers of youth, and adults, face. Some consider hybridity not only a result of cultural loss but a complex experience and view of the world that, when lived with consciousness, creates its own cultural identity with progressive potential. In addition to recovering histories and cultural traditions, Esperanza uses art to help communities envision alternatives and futures. Although the *Arte es Vida* project emphasizes the contributions of elders as a source of cultural grounding for the larger community, the work of the Esperanza as a whole includes the development of youth leadership and new aesthetics, such as spoken word, video, and performance art, rooted in appreciation and knowledge of traditional Mexican cultural forms.

### **Activism and Mission-driven Work**

The Esperanza employs a philosophy of community cultural development that is grass roots, bottom-up, empowerment and action focused. Characteristic of their work is the use of art and cultural practice toward social justice. The Esperanza Center takes multiple approaches to activism, including: cultural grounding as a means of empowerment; cultural practice as a mode of community building; advocacy for the arts and culture as a civic issue (of representation, acknowledgement, equity, etc.); use of art in demonstrations and performances of resistance. One particularly interesting aspect of the Esperanza’s activism is the use of art and cultural practices to interface with public policy, in public spaces, and during governmental processes, such as hearings.

In addition, the Esperanza seeks to engage policymakers in community cultural activities, as well as advocacy projects. In some cases, the Esperanza has succeeded in building alliances and partnerships with civic leaders. A challenge the Esperanza has encountered, however, is the difficulty of engaging those with power in activities that critique established power structures. They began the *Arte es Vida* project with the goal of facilitating intergroup dialogue, including participants from opposing sides of political and economic conflicts, such as corporate leaders and environmental advocates. Instead, they discovered the long-term need for intragroup dialogue within Chicano/a and Mexicano/a communities, and rediscovered that who comes to the table still depends on (the perception of) who does the inviting.

Fundamental concepts and practices inherent in their process and approach to programming include: multi-issue organizing, drawing connections among multiple forms of oppression; responsive programming that engages communities in pressing, current issues; youth development and mentoring; and long-term work toward sustainability and systemic change. In addition to developing long-term partnerships and coalition building, Graciela Sanchez asserts in this report the importance of working with community organizers as integral to arts-based civic dialogue work.

### **Dialogue Practice and Culture**

The Esperanza sees dialogue as a means of raising consciousness, sharing knowledge, recovering history, raising appreciation for the life experiences of others, reviving cultural practices, building community, informing people of current issues, and mobilizing community members toward action. Formats used by the Esperanza Center range from large-scale public dialogues, to interpersonal dialogue on civic issues in public space, to ongoing small group community dialogues, to consensus building among coalition partners, to widespread community engagement in civic discourse. Many of these formats are art-based or incorporate various art and cultural activities to empower community voice or stimulate discussion.

Graciela Sanchez articulates cultural, theoretical, and practical elements unique to the Esperanza's dialogue practice. Instead of "dialogue," the Esperanza uses the Spanish word "plática." Plática translates most directly as "chat" or informal conversation, and connotes a comfortable and familiar tone, though the Esperanza employs intentional facilitation and dialogue techniques during these events. Sanchez emphasizes cultural values that contribute to successful dialogue, such as respect, the acceptance of emotional expression in public space, and a cultural willingness to spend long periods of time in conversation. She also offers reflections on the role of ritual, spirituality, and moral values in arts-based civic dialogue.

The Chicano/a and Mexicano/a community encounters other challenges, however, that the Esperanza addresses consciously in facilitation, such as overcoming barriers of who feels safe in public space and empowering participants to feel they have something valuable to contribute, whether or not they have formal education, are poor or working class, or are accustomed to being silenced (especially women). The issue of language is key in this context. Inadequate public education, the assumption that public speaking is for experts, language limitations (in English, Spanish, or both), and embarrassment or prejudice about the way people speak can create obstacles to participation and divisions within the Chicano/a and Mexicano/a community. Bilingualism both adds dimension and accessibility to dialogue, for some, and creates tensions or inaccessibility for others.

The report looks especially at intragroup dialogue within the context of Chicano/a and Mexicano/a communities in San Antonio. One learning from the *Arte es Vida* project is that there

are always complex layers of dialogue that occur *within* any group. Community members have multiple, overlapping identities and internal conflicts that divide them, such as internalized racism, homophobia, misogyny within the community, conflicts between recent immigrants and Chicanos/as who have been in Texas for generations. Esperanza has come to consider work of intragroup dialogue—work *within* the community—a prerequisite for effective intergroup dialogue with other communities. As Graciela Sanchez states in her report, communities need to “develop their creative skills, and to recover skills of storytelling and conversation, that are essential to mutual understanding and alliance building.”

## ARTE ES VIDA GRACIELA SANCHEZ<sup>1</sup>

The people of the Esperanza dream of a world where everyone has civil rights and economic justice, where the environment is cared for, where cultures are honored and communities are safe. The Esperanza advocates for those wounded by domination and inequality—women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating and empowering each other.

We have learned that in order to participate fully in democratic civil life, individuals must be culturally grounded, confident of their own voices, and certain of the value of their contributions. Art and culture give us this grounding. From our parents, grandparents, sisters, and brothers throughout the world, from our teachers and children, we have learned that social and political divisions cannot be bridged without accurate and respectful cultural understanding.

We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope . . . we are esperanza.

### OUR OVERALL WORK

Toward a more holistic movement for social change, the Esperanza hosts pláticas (community discussions), workshops, and conferences; facilitates activist networks, coalition work, leadership training, and technical assistance; produces and presents justice-oriented art exhibits, concerts, plays, and performances; creates opportunities for personal development, community-building, and mutual understanding among groups; and much more.<sup>2</sup> In all of our work, we seek to erase borders, build bridges, and create alliances between people, while providing a space for disenfranchised groups and individuals to express themselves fully and creatively, and to develop skills as members and creators of a just, progressive, and diverse community.

Our work is rooted in three insights, derived from our daily experiences and lifelong theorizing. The first is that long-term progressive work must address multiple forms of systemic oppression, including race, class, gender, sexuality, language, and ethnicity and must advocate for those wounded by domination and inequality—women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, the working class and poor. The second formative insight is that empowerment requires cultural grounding—in order to engage in productive social justice work, we must come to know and value ourselves, to challenge and celebrate our cultural histories and practices. The third basic insight of the Esperanza is that there can be no separation of goals and process—we must do our work with a habit of self-examination and a commitment to justice, and our process must include the development of lasting alliances among a community of shared values—a *comunidad de alma* (community of soul/heart). We have found that cultural organizing enables the formation of such a community—bound together by values of human dignity and shared learning.

*...Empowerment requires cultural grounding...*

## Multi-Issue Organizing

Since its inception, the Esperanza has organized local social, economic, and environmental justice activism through education, technical assistance, direct actions, media advocacy, marches and rallies, and political education campaigns. In order to challenge the many abuses of institutionalized power, especially power based on subordination by race, class, gender, and sexuality, our communities must learn to understand not only their own issues but also the relationship between all forms of oppression. We work to promote an integrated understanding that examines the dominant culture of violence and sees the interconnections of gender, race, and class oppression within that culture.

Overall, the Esperanza's goal is to transform the conditions of conflict among different communities in San Antonio. Our shared history is one of violence and disrespect, in which communities of color have been subjected to economic exploitation and cultural domination.

It is also a history in which women and girls, lesbians, and gay men have been subjected to extreme and routine violence.

Throughout our work, and the work of our mothers and fathers, we have come to understand the devastation that our communities have suffered through this history of violence. In particular, we have come to see the continuing harm that individuals and communities suffer through loss and devaluation of our cultural histories, traditions, and practices. We have come to see how the devaluation of our diverse cultures happens through the routine, even unconscious, practices of governmental, educational, social, and religious institutions. And we have come to understand that it is through maintenance of our cultural traditions, through careful passing on of our language and practices that our communities, our grandmothers and grandfathers, our mothers and fathers—have been able to survive.

Our general strategy, then, is twofold. First, we assist community members in recovering their histories and cultural traditions and in understanding the practices of domination that continue to injure individuals and undermine our communities. Second, we work to empower

communities and community members to envision alternative choices for themselves and their communities, and to develop cultural practices that can resist and replace the cultures of violence and consumption that we inherit.

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A critical element in culturally grounding our communities centers on acknowledging our women elders, Nuestras Sabias, recognizing that: 1) mainstream culture has never honored or valued their work and, consequently, most people of color do not know or remember these great

mujeres; 2) these sabias were/are amazing pioneers and heroines in San Antonio political and cultural life; 3) these women's lives and history illuminate the racist and sexist history of our world; and 4) their strength, intelligence, and ultimate survival are valuable insights for everyone. During the Animating Democracy project of Arte es Vida, we worked with many sabias, including Emma Nelly Garcia, Lydia Mendoza, and Rita Vidaurri. We also highlighted the life of Emma Tenayuca, after her death, in An Altar for Emma, and the cultural memory of an historic building, La Gloria. Many other women elders have also participated in telling their stories or guiding discussions or workshops.<sup>3</sup>

We came to Animating Democracy with this orientation. As we have worked with Animating Democracy, we have become more conscious of and reflective about the methodologies of arts-based civic dialogue. In this report, we review some of the insights, approaches, questions, and tentative plans we have developed.

## ARTE ES VIDA:

### GOALS, CIVIC ISSUES, ARTS/HUMANITIES, AND DIALOGIC COMPONENTS

Our proposed civic goal was “to examine the role of artistic and cultural expression in a society that inherits the deep wounds, economic and political disparities, and continuing practices of injustice that are the legacy of cultural domination in the United States.” Although this remains our overall concern, through working with the arts-based civic dialogue frame, we have come to examine more closely the particular points of conflict in which we have worked, seeking to illuminate the cultural aspects and conflicts underlying particular disputes.

Among the particular conflicts we have worked on are four that we will describe in detail in this report. These are: (1) conflicts in our community’s view and understanding of labor leader Emma Tenayuca; (2) controversy over the demolition of cultural landmarks in Chicano/Mexicano neighborhoods; (3) a conflict of values within San Antonio’s Westside Chicano community; and (4) historical conflicts between Chicanos and Mexicanos in San Antonio: MujerArtes’ project of sympathy and support for families of the victims of Juárez murders. Consistent throughout our work on these conflicts has been our focus on the importance of cultural grounding and on the need for participants to develop their creative skills, and to recover skills of storytelling and conversation that are essential to mutual understanding and alliance building.

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### Conflicts in Our Community’s View and Understanding of Labor Leader Emma Tenayuca

During the 1930s–1940s, labor activist Emma Tenayuca played a major leadership role in organizing low-paid Chicano/Mexicano workers in San Antonio and South Texas. Affectionately known as “La Pasionaria de Texas,” she was a brave and passionate leader of Mexican workers in Depression-era Texas. Beginning at the age of 17, she helped to organize local chapters of the Ladies’ Garment Workers Union and led a strike by Mexican women workers at the Finck Cigar factory. She led protests against the beatings of immigrants by the Border Patrol and fought for equal rights for all citizen and noncitizen workers, for a minimum wage, and for the right to strike.

In 1938, Emma Tenayuca led the largest strike of workers in the history of San Antonio. Pecan workers in San Antonio, most of whom were Chicana/Mexicana women, earned five cents a day, working in overpacked work spaces, with dangerous shelling tools and toxic dust. In late 1937, the pecan companies lowered the daily wage to 3 cents a day. Emma Tenayuca led 12,000 of the Mexican women pecan shellers out on strike on January 31, 1938. The strike lasted for several months, despite violent attacks by San Antonio Police and private guards. Over a thousand striking workers were arrested and jailed, including Emma Tenayuca. Union meeting places were ransacked and many strikers were beaten.

In 1939, Emma Tenayuca was scheduled to speak at a Communist Party meeting at the Municipal Auditorium in San Antonio. As she began speaking, approximately 5,000 white men stormed into the auditorium, throwing rocks and bricks. Many attendants were injured. Although Emma

Tenayuca escaped safely, she was targeted by numerous acts of violence and was unable to find work in San Antonio. Emma Tenayuca died in San Antonio on July 23, 1999.

Sadly, even as Emma Tenayuca came to be recognized nationally as a Chicana leader, the Chicana/o/Mexicana/o community in San Antonio has been hesitant to embrace her, for various reasons. White leaders in San Antonio have been outspoken in denouncing Emma Tenayuca and clear in their disapproval of any show of support for her in the Latino community. Like the history of Chicano/Mexicano resistance in general, the history of labor organizing, including Emma Tenayuca and the strike by 12,000 pecan shellers, has been erased from public memory. Schools do not teach the history, and Emma Tenayuca has been treated as a source of shame or scandal, as a shadowy Communist who is somehow un-American, even within the Chicano/Mexicano community. This erasure has been particularly hurtful for women because Chicana leaders have been demonized repeatedly in San Antonio.

The Esperanza sought to encourage discussion of these conflicting ideas about Emma Tenayuca and the history of Chicano/Mexicano labor organizing by focusing an issue of our news journal, *La Voz de Esperanza*, on Emma Tenayuca and the pecan strike and by producing the play *An Altar for Emma*, by Beva Sánchez Padilla, in November 2000. *An Altar for Emma* explores the erasure of Emma Tenayuca and illuminates her vision and work for social justice. Multi-generational cast members were drawn from the community, and the role of Emma Tenayuca was played by Chicana activists (Maria Berriozabal, Norma Cantu, Josie Mendez Negrete, and Graciela Sanchez) with a different woman in the role each night of the performance run. Musician Juan Tejeda composed an original *corrido* on Emma Tenayuca for the play (*corridos* form part of an oral tradition in Mexican culture of documenting histories, especially of heroes, famous people, and important events). Cristal Riojas directed an original movement piece to the *corrido*. The play included audience participation, including a segment in which audience members join a picket line as active participants. The production also involved recovery of photographs of the strike and Municipal Auditorium assault, tapes of interviews with Emma Tenayuca, and video of the Emma Tenayuca funeral.

As part of the outreach accompanying production of the play, we invited Tenayuca family members, community activists who had known and participated with Tenayuca in labor organizing, public school teachers and administrators, and other community leaders. Each showing played to a standing-room-only crowd. And as word spread about the production, we set up an overflow room with simultaneous video screening. Over 1,500 people saw the production, and thousands more read about it in *La Voz* and the *San Antonio Express-News*.

After each showing, there was a *plática* with cast and audience members. Since these performances occurred prior to the facilitation training of staff, these discussions followed the Esperanza model where a performer or staff person invites the community to stay and

participate in a community conversation regarding the performance and the issues raised by it. Beva Sánchez Padilla, the author/director, and the three-member cast facilitated the *pláticas*

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by sitting informally on the stage or walking among the audience. Some members of the audience asked questions of Beva or the cast members, but most reflected on what they knew or had experienced about the time and events represented in the play.

Some of the *Altar for Emma pláticas* went on for hours. The facilitators encouraged an informal, kitchen table atmosphere. They expressed genuine, heartfelt interest in learning from audience members, and this encouraged people to speak. There was a feeling that we were all very lucky to be in this space, hearing the stories of those who could remember those times. The older people responded eagerly, sharing memories both happy and sad. Because each person's story



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was recognized and valued, people felt appreciated. Each evening was different, yet every audience included some people whom we knew had interesting stories to tell, so each evening the facilitators addressed the audience with the desire to hear their stories.

Community members shared their memories of the labor struggles and the effect those efforts have had on their families and communities. A former pecan sheller brought the tools used to shell pecans and demonstrated the process of breaking and removing the pecan from the shell. She talked about cuts to her hands and arms and the exhaustion that came from breathing pecan dust. Another pecan sheller strike participant recalled how the strikers began every morning by singing traditional Mexican songs. Neighbors of Emma Tenayuca came to share memories and the fear that seized the community after the Municipal Auditorium assaults.

Perhaps the most influential contribution to resolving the issues that had led to the erasure of this history within our own communities came from members of the Tenayuca family. The family had been torn apart. (Because Emma was a member of the Communist Party in San Antonio, she was denounced and demonized by the media, local businessmen, and politicians, and shadowed by the FBI. Add to this the fact that she was also young, and a woman of Mexican descent, and the hatred for this organizer in the 1930s was overwhelming.) Many family members saw each other at the Esperanza performance for the first time since the Municipal Auditorium assault over sixty years ago. Younger family members met for the first time. A cousin of Emma Tenayuca told about how Emma would sneak in by the dark of night to see her mother and to share whatever food she had. Family members told of the shame that they had experienced knowing that they were related to Emma Tenayuca, who was denounced by teachers, priests, and city leaders. People cried to recall their pain and to hear that of others.

As part of the theater production, we hung an exhibit of 6 (3 x 4 ft.) photographs of the pecan shellers' strike and an altar installation at the Esperanza. On May Day 2001, as part of the International Workers' Day Celebration, we created a mobile exhibit at the Plaza de las Islas in downtown San Antonio. Among our goals in the May Day event was to encourage active exchange in the city's public spaces. In the traditional way, one of our sabias, Emma Nellie, and several performance artists

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moved around in this small community park, which is one of the oldest parks in the city. We provided aguas frescas (flavored water) so that community members could drink and enjoy themselves in the park while listening to songs and engaging in the performances and conversation.

The enthusiasm Emma Nellie had for this work was infectious. Emma Nellie was a trovadora (a community singer) in the 1950s and 60s. She now lives in public housing for the elderly, near the Esperanza, and came to us one day when she saw our sign, saying she needed hope. We asked her to sing and to teach some of the songs she knows to young people, and she responded with incredible energy and joy. Although people in the public plaza on May Day were at first hesitant (as it is usually expected that people pay a fee for a song), some soon began to sing along with her and to share songs of their own.

In addition, community members performed teatro around issues of workers' rights. Performance artist María Elena Gaitán and other *animadoras/os*

*Community members performed teatro around issues of workers' rights.*

(“animators” or facilitators)<sup>4</sup> engaged individuals and small groups of people in conversation about their own experiences as immigrants and workers. The performers created actos about the hotel/tourist industry and sweatshop/maquila labor.

One of the community actors laid a piece of white linoleum on the floor and handed markers to gente passing by. The actor was mute, voiceless. She gestured to others to write a message on the linoleum. One young woman, a hotel worker, was in the plaza with her daughter on her day off. She wrote, “Living wage for me and my children.” She and her daughter stayed in the plaza for over an hour talking to animadoras about the hierarchy in the chain of workers, about the lack of benefits and health care, and about hiring practices. Another man showed us and others the needles of cactus embedded in his hands, narrating the story of how he crossed the border only days earlier. Others spoke directly about the unions in the 1930s and the pecan shellers’ strike.

Though there were facilitators on hand, the most exciting part of May Day in the park was the conversation that happened amongst community members as they viewed the images and performances, shared memories, made connections, and claimed their own creativity. The plaza

in its traditional design is meant to be a meeting place for people, a place to take families, to meet lovers, to join friends, and even though many gather in the plaza during lunchtime, something has changed the traditional intention of the plaza structure. Many of these changes have occurred over time as business people have worked with city officials to limit the use of parks, especially if these activities were perceived as impeding their businesses. In time, street vendors, such as the Chili Queens, musicians, and artists were kicked out of all parks and streets in the downtown area.

People continue to claim their space within the plaza. The elders on one corner feed the pigeons. The workers on another side eat their lunch. The mothers sit by the raspa stand. But when we brought the elements of music, performance, free aguas frescas, and plática, people began talking to each other. These elements that were once a part of the plaza scene were brought back, and this allowed people to exchange words, songs, and memories in much

the same way they were accustomed to doing in the past.<sup>5</sup> Because the Esperanza paid to rent the plaza for a few hours, the park police did not interfere with these exchanges. Consequently, the Mexican immigrant shared his story of illegal border crossing with the hotel worker, who learned about unions and union organizing from the elders. People resting in a corner sang with one another. Total strangers exchanged many stories of the pecan shellers, not just women who they had heard or read about, but their family members, moms, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters who were sent to jail, called communist, lost their jobs, and/or marched in the largest marches ever held in San Antonio. Over 150 people viewed the exhibit that day and many more joined other activities while in the plaza.

### THE CHILI QUEENS OF SAN ANTONIO

A National Public Radio show, *Kitchen Sisters*, came to the Esperanza in January 2004 to interview Isabel and Graciela Sanchez for a segment dealing with Chili Queens of San Antonio. The Chili Queens were a group of Mexican women of San Antonio who had *puestos* or *fondas* (kitchen stalls with tables and chairs) in downtown San Antonio during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were so popular that white restaurant owners organized to shut down the Chili Queens in the 1920s, claiming that these women were spreading disease by selling their food. The Chili Queens were made nationally famous when San Antonio sent a group of them to the Worlds Fair of 1890.

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The recovery projects begun by *An Altar for Emma* have continued. Various community members have worked to recover and retell the history of the labor struggles of the Chicano/Mexicano community and of the leadership of Emma Tenayuca, Manuela Solis Sager, and others through film, video, murals, and photo archives.

### **Controversy over the Demolition of Cultural Landmarks in Chicano/Mexicano Neighborhoods**

La Gloria was a building in the near Westside<sup>6</sup> of San Antonio. Built on April 4, 1928, it served as a gas station, grocery store, and important gathering center for Chicanos/Mexicanos. During the depression, owner Matilde Elizondo converted the rooftop to a dance-floor and La Gloria became the focus for generations of young Westsiders.

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In late 2001, the city announced its decision not to protect La Gloria as a historical landmark and to issue a permit for its destruction. The current owner planned to replace La Gloria with an auto parts store. The controversy spurred by this announcement touched thousands of people. The Chicano community itself was divided as the City Council Representative supported the demolition in the name of economic development, and other community leaders denounced the city's callous disregard for the cultural heritage of the Chicano community.

The Esperanza helped to organize community members in support of the historic preservation of La Gloria and other culturally significant landmarks in the near Westside. Volunteer lawyers from the Esperanza and other community groups filed a court action that resulted in an injunction against the planned demolition. This gave the community almost a month in which to try to reverse the city's decision. The Esperanza worked quickly to engage community members in public discussion of the history and cultural significance of La Gloria. We recovered video of original footage of the building and rooftop dance floor from the 1930s. We organized public discussions focused on La Gloria, the original footage, and the memories shared by elders. We invited community members to envision possible uses for the building that would allow its preservation.

In the original footage, community members were able to see La Gloria in its heyday. By seeing Mexicanas/os dancing the Charleston, dressed in clothing of that era, younger generations acquired a vigorous image of their grandparents and great-grandparents. We showed the video wherever we could so that people would remember or learn of the significance of the building. When we marched through the streets demonstrating against the demolition, we made sure to screen the video at the end of the march in a much traveled intersection so that anyone driving or walking past would be able to see the images of this building and its connection to the Westside community. We also screened the video outside City Hall (after being denied access to City Hall Chambers during the Citizens to Be Heard section) and during a hearing in front of a state judge who heard the case to save La Gloria (March 2002).

Throughout, we encouraged the community to recover the deeper significance associated with La Gloria and to express these deeper thoughts through images, music, and poetry. Community members went door to door speaking to their neighbors, hearing their memories of La Gloria and the depression days. Another group created a short video with poetry and visual narration about the tearing down of La Gloria. Still others used the video as a backdrop for a performance piece that was performed at a Youth Action conference opening (April 5, 2002).

This performance, presented by a cast that included three generations of community members, was a creative and collective expression of memory and loss. To create the piece, we invited

discussion with young activists on how to introduce the Esperanza to 200+ youth from throughout the country who were participating in the conference. The Esperanza had to rethink itself and consider how to include community in its introduction. We wanted to make sure young and old would speak. We wanted to perform, not just speak. But our time was limited to 15 minutes. We invited three elders in their late 70s and 80s to dance with us, as well as help us collect music of the depression days. Youth in school and drop-outs, as well, performed with us. Young and old danced together while images of La Gloria served as a backdrop. Straight and gay couples emerged. Vicki Grise read from a poem she created the day La Gloria came down. Finally, a poem was created by the spontaneous responses participants had to questions we posed to them. Through this performance, community members worked to produce an image of ourselves as connected to our history, sharing joy and pain in the struggle to maintain our cultures. (To read Vicki Grise's poem, *On the eve of a new year, 2003*, [click here](#)).

During the public dialogues on the demolition of La Gloria, participants articulated the importance of history, culture, and community responsibility. Cruz Piña Sellars said, "Hubo una persona que empezó así, como nosotros, a revivir el barrio . . ." When asked why historical sites need to be saved, Sra. Sellars replied, "Si no tenemos historia, madre, que hacemos?" Guadalupe Segura described La Gloria as "una cancha para bailar como en Mexico." She lamented the plans for demolition and explored the possibilities that such a sturdy structure had for the neighborhood. "Se podría exponer arte de nuestra gente." She explained: "Arte es todo lo que somos nosotros. Si no tenemos eso, no tenemos nada. Esa, pasado, cultura, arte, leyenda, devociones y todo lo que hacemos nosotros, los Mexicanos, se uniera en este punto clave para la juventud."

[Translation: Señora Sellars: "It takes only one person, like us, to begin the process of reviving a barrio. . . . If we don't have our history, mother, what can we do?"  
Guadalupe Segura: "A dance floor like in Mexico. . . . The art of our people could be exhibited. . . . Art is all we are. If we don't have this, we have nothing. This, the past, culture, art, legend, devotion, and all that we make, as Mexicans, could unite us at this key time for our youth."]

History, culture, art, legends, and politics were, and are, all part of La Gloria, and it was one of few buildings remaining from the 1920s, '30s, '40s, and '50s when the dance salóns (social clubs, radio clubs, patios etc.) reflected the changes occurring within the city of San Antonio and, indeed, the world. One man recalled, "I grew up in este barrio. Mi papá jugaba pelota, beisbol, across the street. Bonito stadium. I went overseas to Vietnam, Alemania. Lo tumbaron. It broke my heart. Estamos perdiendo mucha, mucha history—duele pa' nosotros que went through it." He went on to name various buildings with historical significance for Chicanos that have been knocked down. Like other community participants, he noted the disparity in restoration of historical sites in the city.

[Translation: "I grew up in this neighborhood. My father played ball, baseball, across the street. Pretty stadium. I went overseas to Vietnam, Germany. They tore it down. It broke my heart. We are losing much, much of our history—it hurts those of us who went through it."]

Sadly, and despite an outpouring of concern from thousands of community members, La Gloria was demolished early in the morning following Easter Sunday, April 1, 2002.

Saving La Gloria was not a project that the Esperanza had planned. However, because the Esperanza is connected to a community, and because the issues surrounding the demolition of La Gloria (cultural grounding, history of our community, Westside community development, racist policies against the Mexican/Chicano community, economic development at the expense of preservation of culturally significant buildings in our community), are integral to our vision, the Esperanza placed saving La Gloria at the top of our list of cultural organizing work that we had to do. Within a four-week period, the Esperanza worked with local community organizations and individuals including West Side residents, artists, activists, conservation activists, architects, and lawyers. The only goal everyone agreed to was saving La Gloria. But many had different reasons for the same goal. Some wanted to save La Gloria because they had once danced on the rooftop, or bought food when it was a market during the 1920s. La Gloria was their history. Others wanted to save it for its future potential use as a cultural arts space, a grocery store, or a museum.

The Esperanza supported community organizing by helping to facilitate meetings amongst community. We also taught these skills to each other. Too often, when groups organize around a specific issue, they do not take the time or have the skills to define specific parameters of how to run a meeting, make decisions, speak within these meetings, etc. Most do not discuss the power dynamics that play out in dialogues or meetings. Consequently, discussions and decisions are dominated by men, while women, youth, and other groups who tend to be less assertive are silenced or disregarded.

*Most importantly, we helped participants to see that this crisis was connected to a larger context and that these discussions would have to continue beyond this critical moment.*

We were able to help community members become conscious of who was participating and to make deliberate efforts to allow everyone to speak. We helped the group achieve consensus decision-making. And most importantly, we helped participants to see that this crisis was connected to a larger context and that these discussions would have to continue beyond this critical moment.

Public policy cannot be transformed over a short period of time. The Westside community did not have more than a month to try to resolve a major problem. Although we spent hundreds of hours working and strategizing to save La Gloria, there were other forces working against us to demolish the building. Yet, the public dialogues surrounding the conflict over La Gloria resulted in lasting changes. Perhaps most importantly, the predominantly white and middle-class conservation/historical preservation community came to understand the commitment of many in the Chicana/o community to preservation of culturally significant landmarks.

Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of this shift was the public statement by Ann McGlone, director of the Office of Historic Preservation for the City of San Antonio, who spoke of her own recognition that Chicano neighborhoods had been largely ignored by the City preservation agencies and that this disparate treatment was racially motivated. Through these conversations, concerned members of both the white and Chicano communities came to a shared understanding of the history of cultural domination and the need for racial justice in the work of historic preservation, as in other areas of community life.

Ann McGlone explained further that one of her own assumptions since the 1970s had been that the Chicano community did not care about historic preservation. This assumption was based in part on the actions of, and conversations with, some Chicano organizations that have pushed for new buildings rather than preservation. Because of the dialogues about La Gloria, Ms. McGlone is now actively working with the Esperanza and other Chicano organizations and individuals, and

together we have been able to stop the demolition of other historic buildings in the Westside, including three homes on Guadalupe Street, during the fall of 2003 and January 2004.

The Esperanza's work on historic preservation continues. In the two years since La Gloria was torn down, numerous community members have become interested in having various buildings in the near Westside designated as cultural landmarks. We have helped community members to organize testimony to give to the Historic Preservation office regarding specific buildings. We are now in conversation with Councilperson Patti Radle, the Historic Preservation office, and several community groups<sup>7</sup> to develop a more holistic community development plan that incorporates a deeper and more complex vision of the community based on people's history, culture, and values. The Esperanza has helped to develop a strong coalition of community groups willing to carry on this work, acknowledging that we all don't come with the same understanding and values of community development, but that we will dialogue and better understand the complexities of our community. Decisions will be made collectively rather than from any one group, individual, or city agency. At the core of these discussions will be conversations centered on Chicano Westside history, the effects of classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and ageism in our community, and how the effects of cultural genocide help to create divisions amongst groups.

The experience of organizing against the demolition of La Gloria, and the joining together images of cultural history and community solidarity, has transformed public discussion and decision-making regarding Westside community development. Already the discussions are broader, more holistic and culturally based, and public policy has placed the voice of community at the center of its decision-making process. We continue to promote dialogue among community members, economic development and housing agencies, and public officials to solve conflicts between perceptions of economic growth and the importance of maintaining our cultural history. We have centered key dialogues on values of our community, beginning with trust. We acknowledge that our work will and must take time to build the trust amongst groups, in order for our work to move forward honestly and for the good of the entire community.

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### **A Conflict of Values Within San Antonio's Westside Chicano Community**

The near Westside is an area of approximately 4 square miles. Much of this area was part of the original township of San Antonio chartered in 1837. Under the Jim Crow legal regime, this was the area designated for Mexicans and Blacks. In the 1940s, the first public housing in the nation, the Alazán-Apache Courts, was built in this area. By the 1950s, the near Westside had become the most densely populated and poorest area in the city. Census tract 1105, where the Esperanza's Arte Es Vida Project is located, has been ranked as the 11th poorest neighborhood in the U.S. based on per capita income, with 58.13% of the population living below the poverty line in 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000). The area continues to be predominantly Chicano, with the 2000 census reporting over 91% Hispanic.

This area, traditionally isolated by an expanse of railroad tracks, was subjected to massive destruction in the 1970s in the name of "urban renewal." The razing of neighborhoods caused the dislocation of large numbers of people and the separation of families, leading to isolation,

increased crime, and loss of community identity. Today, the city is encouraging middle-class, upwardly-mobile people to take over areas where poor and working-class families still make their homes. Although both the displaced and the newcomers are predominantly Latino, the shift in class represents an important shift in community values. Sadly, many second- and third-generation Mexican-Americans who are moving back to the area in which their parents or grandparents were raised have internalized the “Anglo” population’s disrespect for Mexican-American culture and community. Many have embraced the individualistic values and practices of the dominant culture.

**Preserve community elders’ lessons: La Casa de Cuentos meetings**

The Esperanza has sought to address these conflicts through long-term dialogue among community members. One of the persistent complaints we have heard from community residents is that the near Westside has been periodically studied and “assisted” by numerous state and local agencies, who typically conduct one or two community meetings at the beginning of their projects and then never return to include community in developing the details of their programs. Hearing these concerns, we reaffirmed our commitment to long-term, community participation.

We have conducted monthly meetings at the Esperanza’s Westside Casa de Cuentos (April 2002 to present). The design of these meetings has been to focus on elders in the community, encouraging them to share their knowledge of the community history and values. At some meetings we have asked participants to recall their interactions with neighbors, to tell of family illnesses or losses. In others, participants were invited to describe games that they played as children or to recall their memories of school. The meetings have attracted people of all ages to hear the stories and learn the lessons and the values taught by our elders.

In addition to community elders, participants in our youth program, Artescuela, and our women’s cooperative, MujerArtes, attend all *Arte es Vida* meetings, which ensures intergenerational dialogue at each gathering. At Casa de Cuentos, we have used different strategies to promote dialogue, including story circles, sharing pictures, and cooking together. Our vision of dialogue in these meetings honors and acknowledges the importance of our individual experiences (outside of titles, degrees, etc.) and offers a space to see our interconnectedness so that we can better understand our struggles as systematic forms of

***One common theme in these conversations has been the idea of Buena Gente—good people.***

oppression and not as individual failures/successes. Types of questions raised in these pláticas have included: *What role do the arts play in people’s lives? How have ethnic/racial communities been affected by pressure to assimilate into the mainstream U.S. culture? How did/do our cultural traditions survive? What does it mean for people to lose their mother language and traditions, and how does it affect people’s sense of self?*

One common theme in these conversations has been the idea of Buena Gente—good people. In Mexican culture there is a distinction between *bien educado* and *instrucción*. To be *bien educado* means that you have learned to be/live well with others, to be generous, respectful, and considerate of those around you. *Instrucción*, in contrast, refers to public or private schooling. One becomes *bien educado* through interaction with one’s family and community elders. And to be *bien educado* is valued far more than mere *instrucción*. To be *bien educado* is to be *buena gente*.

Another theme focused on what we began to call *actos de corazón* (acts/actions from the heart). This term refers to the

***Another theme focused on what we began to call actos de corazón (acts/actions from the heart).***

move from the values of Buena Gente to actions for community that *Arte es Vida* participants repeatedly emphasized. People can claim to believe in concepts of generosity, sharing, compassion, caring, humility, respect and the like, but to live these values, to be buena gente, one must actively work to assist others, to serve community. One must commit to *Actos de Corazón*, Acts from the Heart. This work is lifelong, a matter of lasting commitment.

Various community activities have grown out of the Casa de Cuentos dialogues. Youth of Artescuela who have participated in the pláticas talked about their interest in learning to make altars and to cook traditional foods associated with some important celebrations. Because it is the Esperanza's interest to have people recognize that we are all artists, that we are all creative, we have asked community members to think of themselves as possible workshop leaders, as teachers of cultural practices and traditions. Some of these activities have included cultural projects focusing on *el Día de los Muertos* and the *Posadas de Navidad*.

### **Deepen the learning of community traditions: *Día de Los Muertos* project**

In some areas of Mexico, there are nine days of celebration of *Día de los Muertos*; in the U.S., most of those celebrations have focused on November 1 and 2. Because of the strange complexity of cultural genocide and exploitation, many people in our communities have been taught that *Día de los Muertos* is a form of devil-worship, on the one hand, and on the other, an attraction for the tourist industry, a performance created by artists who may or may not be Chicano or Mexicano. The Esperanza was initially engaged in these celebrations, but stepped away after it became too commercialized. Recently, because of our dialogues at the Casa de Cuentos, community members wanted to participate in some element of *Día de los Muertos*. The Esperanza was also interested in developing more in-depth knowledge and history of this tradition.

In some of the gatherings before *Día de los Muertos*, community members learned about and composed *Calaveras*—stylized satirical poems dedicated to living people addressed as if they were dead. The subjects can be political figures, friends, or family members who are living. This tradition of popular poetry has been all but lost in San Antonio, and the Esperanza *Arte es Vida*

*Last year, for the first time, our daily newspaper, the San Antonio Express News, invited its readership to write Calaveras.*

dialogues have played a pivotal role in reviving the practice. As part of our pláticas on the cultural history of this tradition,<sup>8</sup> community participants wrote *Calaveras* that were read and then published in *La Voz de Esperanza*. Last year, for the first time, our daily newspaper, the *San Antonio Express News*, invited its readership to write *Calaveras*.

On the day before *Día de los Muertos* in 2002, a 70-year-old *sabia*, Señora Inez Valdez, conducted a workshop on traditional foods made for the celebration. Doña Valdez has had no formal education and has worked all of her life as a cleaning woman. This workshop was the first time she was publicly acknowledged for her creative abilities and culinary skills. The workshop spurred dialogue about traditional Mexican cooking and gave Doña Valdez a sense that she could support the work in community beyond cleaning offices or houses.

In the weeks preceding *Día de los Muertos*, community members created altars at the Casa de Cuentos. These included traditional family altars and altars to important community members. Youth of Artescuela also created altars dedicated to their ancestors, as well as movie stars and other personalities that they honored. The women of the Esperanza's Westside ceramics colectivo, *MujerArtes*, also participated and created a communal altar. One family created an altar for their ancestor, Adela Navarro, and shared her story as a Mexicana who worked in the



early twentieth century to preserve the original campo santo (cemetery) of the Mexican community, San Fernando Number 1.

On November 2, 2002, about 50 community participants (ages 9–80) revived the traditional practice of cleaning the graves in the community cemetery. San Fernando No. 1 is still an active cemetery, just two blocks from Casa de Cuentos, but because it is an older cemetery, there are few visitors. Many people in the neighborhood, especially some young people, had never visited their family’s gravesites and have not experienced the complex relationship between the living and the dead that is celebrated in Mexican culture.

Community members walked in a procession to the cemetery, cleaned the gravesites of family members and others, and decorated the entrance to the cemetery. As part of the festivities, we hired a trio to serenade both the living and the dead. One community member read a story she had written about *Día de los Muertos* in Mexico, and this inspired dialogue about the meaning of the celebration to the Chicano/Mexicano community.

### **Revive community values: Posadas de Navidad project**

Another project inspired by the community dialogues was the revival of the *Posadas de Navidad*. In the 1930s and ’40s, Christmas was a time of much community interaction and activity, and the Guadalupe Catholic Church paid a principal role in promoting these cultural activities. At the center were the *Posadas*, a reenactment of the holy family’s search for shelter in Bethlehem. The *Posadas* involves processions of people, led usually by children dressed as Mary and Joseph, walking from house to house, singing and playing instruments. At each house, the travelers request shelter and are denied it in song. Finally, they are admitted to a home, and all participants enter to enjoy the warmth and generosity of this welcoming family.

One of the reasons that community participants chose to revive the *Posadas* is that it is a celebration that emphasizes the values of generosity, community interaction, and shared artistic expression that have come to be the focus of our community discussions. We have come to see the harm caused by isolation and consumerism. Older people long for social interactions, and young people relish the excitement of piñatas, fireworks, and rousing music and dance. *Posadas* involves everyone—old, young, and in-between—in community enactments and song.

In preparation for the *Posadas*, the Esperanza worked in partnership with Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and its members, City Council Representative Patti Radle and her staff, MujerArtes, and the San Jacinto Elderly Housing Community—organizations that are located within a single city block yet have not worked together before. For the elders of our Arte es Vida project, the importance of maintaining this tradition was critical. They were willing to design and develop their own posada. Women from MujerArtes, like Sra. Lujan commented, “Ya era tiempo que hicieran algo que a mi me gustara.” (“Finally, you’re doing something I like.”)

We at the Esperanza wanted to make sure we spoke to our neighbors to find out if: 1) anyone else was already organizing the *Posadas*; and 2) how to expand partnerships so that all neighborhood participants felt included. We were told that indeed the *Posadas* is performed for the Guadalupe Church. We made contact with the organizer and offered our idea of participating and bringing other community members to the posada as well. We offered the Esperanza’s MujerArtes studio and called the City councilperson to see if she and her staff would participate, since their Westside office is next door. The fact that the Guadalupe Church agreed to participate with the Esperanza was tremendous, as the Esperanza is known for its pro-choice, pro-LGBT and out queer programming. For the Guadalupe Church to actively work with the Esperanza and promote the event to its constituency was a first.

At Casa de Cuentos, the Esperanza is continuing to offer opportunities for people to gather—elders, youth, women, men, gay, straight, Chicanas/os, Mexicanos/as, brown, black, and white. As people tell each other of their experiences, of their sorrows and their mothers' dreams, of lessons learned long ago and just yesterday—as community members gather to share stories, values and insights—they will create and recreate the Westside community of San Antonio. (For more information about other West Side efforts, [click here](#)).

### **Conflicts Between Chicanos and Mexicanos in San Antonio**

In 1994, the Esperanza created MujerArtes as a long-term educational project in the Westside of San Antonio. Participants are poor and working-class Chicana and Mexicana women. Local and Mexican women artists—including Veronica Castillo, of the well-known Alfonso Castillo family of Puebla, Mexico—were invited to teach classes in hand-built ceramic art. Part of our understanding is that women tend to be the members of the family who carry culture and pass it down. We wanted to encourage their desires to be creative but also to offer them the opportunity to learn about their histories and traditions so that they could share that knowledge with their families and communities. In addition to artistic skills, participants learn and share their stories, working to piece together the history of their communities as Latinas, women, and working-class immigrants, and/or colonized people. Central to the design of MujerArtes is a communal or cooperative allocation of authority and resources.

Over the years, the MujerArtes cooperativa has been challenged by conflicts between Chicanas—women born or raised in the U.S.—and Mexicanas—women raised in Mexico. These conflicts have arisen between the participants and in their work with Mexican women artists. This lack of understanding between Chicanas and Mexicanas is not limited to the experiences of the women of MujerArtes. It is complex and difficult to explain briefly. Some factors that lead to divisions amongst Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os include: the U.S./Mexican history and the economic relationships created out of this history; the racist policies of the U.S. towards Mexico and its citizens; the racist policies of the U.S. towards people of color living in the United States; the effect of internalized racism among Chicanas/Mexicanas living in the U.S; the lack of understanding of this history by Mexicanos and Chicanos; class and educational differences

*It is both difficult and important for Chicanas to see the similarities and differences between their lives and the lives of Mexican women.*

between Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os; and the inability of both communities to visit each other and experience each other's worlds.

It is both difficult and important for Chicanas to see the similarities and differences between their lives and the lives of Mexican women. There are many dimensions to the divisions.

Chicanas typically do not have a strong sense of themselves and their abilities. The Chicanas of MujerArtes are working-class and poor. The majority of them do not have a high school diploma, and if they do, the schools that they have attended have not been very good, so their mastery of basic knowledge is also limited. Throughout their lives, most Chicanas have had to suffer from racist policies in schools, work, and society in general which has penalized Chicana/o and Mexicana/o communities for speaking in Spanish. One participant at the Casa de Cuentos pláticas recalled having her mouth “washed with Joy” for speaking Spanish at school, and many have similar stories. People have learned to survive these racist assaults by: 1) not speaking Spanish; 2) not teaching their children Spanish so they will not be targeted; and/or 3) making fun of others who speak Spanish.

Additionally, the public schools have not given bilingual students adequate instruction in either English or Spanish. During the '70s, bilingual education classes were developed to teach students

to transfer from Spanish to English, rather than maintaining Spanish and learning English in addition. In the process, many students did not learn either language very well. Most feel shame in their limited mastery of both languages.

Exposure to racism in the United States has deeply injured many Chicana/o and Mexicana/o people. We have been taught to view our dark skin and indigenous features as ugly and our cultural traditions as silly or archaic. Mexicanas/os, on the other hand, tend not to be aware of these issues and to be frustrated with Chicanas/os, considering them weak or indecisive.

Many Chicanos/as cling to their status as U.S. citizens and work hard to distinguish themselves from immigrants, adopting an anti-immigrant stance. Chicana/o children make fun of Mexicano/a children's accents, calling them "mojados" or "wetbacks" and other derogatory names. At the same time, many middle-class and upper-class Mexicanos/as come to San Antonio to shop in the lavish North Star Mall, where Chicanos/as usually go only to work or to look, seldom to buy. In interactions at the mall, wealthy Mexicanas/os often treat Chicanas/os as servants, expecting them to attend to their every wish. Mexicanas/os criticize Chicanas/os for their uncultured or nonfluent Spanish, or their ignorance of Mexican culture. Similarly, many of the Mexican artists who come in contact with Chicanos come from middle-class backgrounds and are better educated than the working-class or poor Chicanos they meet in San Antonio.

Even Chicanos/as who are well-rooted in Mexican culture are looked down on by many Mexicans because many Chicano families in San Antonio come from the northern states of Mexico (e.g., Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Chihuahua) and the norteño culture (flour tortillas, norteño music, ranching, rural life) is looked down on by Mexicanos from the coastal or interior Mexican states. When Chicanas/os visit Mexico, we are made fun of and called "Pochos" and "Gringos" by Mexicanos. Most Mexicanos don't know what a Chicano is and think that we, or our families,

*To encourage dialogue around these conflicts, the Esperanza has offered workshops with local Chicana activists and historians so that Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os can explore their differences.*

rejected Mexico. In fact, many of us never left Mexico but became U.S. citizens in 1848 after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe when the U.S. took Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California from Mexico.

To encourage dialogue around these conflicts, the Esperanza has offered workshops with local Chicana activists and historians so that Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os can explore their differences. In 2001–2002, as part of the Casa de

Cuentos dialogues, members of MujerArtes began sharing stories and images of growing up in San Antonio and in Mexico. They then expressed these memories in relief tiles that have been exhibited at the Casa de Cuentos as part of the *Arte es Vida* dialogues. The women have created over sixty different images and have inspired others to tell their stories of their childhoods in San Antonio or elsewhere in South Texas and Mexico. In addition, we have brought Mexican women artists for long-term work with the women of MujerArtes.

## THE WOMEN OF JUAREZ

Between 1993 and 2003, in the city of Juarez, more than 450 women have disappeared and 284 women have been found murdered. The majority of the homicides began with kidnappings that were not investigated when reported. Later the missing women were found dead in vacant lots throughout the city. In addition, the victims all have the same physical appearance: they are thin, dark-skinned and have long, dark hair.

Many of the murdered women traveled to Juarez from interior states of Mexico to work in the US- or other foreign-owned maquiladoras (factories) located in Juarez, on the international border. The maquiladora owners profit off the thousands of young women who come to Juarez in hopes of finding work. At the factories, they are subjected to low wages, demeaning working conditions, and ruthless sexual harassment.

According to Amnesty International, authorities have unjustifiably delayed their investigations, failed to follow up with witnesses, provided incorrect information to families, and falsified evidence. Observers conclude that the police either are involved in the murders or are actively protecting the perpetrators.

At first, authorities publicly blamed the murder victims, accusing them of dressing provocatively or being out too late at night (maquila workers are routinely left to wait for buses on unlit roadways and to walk for miles from bus stops to their homes). More recently, authorities have blamed the families of the victims, claiming that the families had not properly supervised their daughters and that the families were attempting to benefit from international attention on the murders.

demonstration, many for the first time in their lives. Participants researched names of women who were murdered, and created banners, signs, and other creative art pieces for the demonstration and march. Women dressed in black performed a street theater piece created specifically for this gathering.

In the spring of 2003, the MujerArtes cooperativa undertook a project to raise money to support families of the victims of the Juárez murders. MujerArtes created an altar to the victims, consisting of 26 pieces of ceramic art depicting aspects of the Juárez tragedies. In a stunning clay

## MujerArtes Project of Sympathy and Support for Families of the Victims of Juárez Murders

As part of the Animating Democracy project, the Esperanza presented the film *Señorita Extraviada* by Lourdes Portillo in June of 2002. The women of MujerArtes viewed the film and participated in pláticas about the tragic murders of young Mexican women in Juárez, depicted in the film. The plática was led by Lourdes Portillo; Elvia Arriola, law professor and director of the Center for Women on the Border; and Patricia Castillo, director of PEACE Initiative, a local organization addressing domestic violence. It was designed for all women to share a few ideas about the film, looking at their own work or personal experience to situate the conversation. The Chicanas were particularly moved to learn that the victims were poor, brown women like themselves and their daughters. The community, however, stayed for another two hours of very impassioned sharing of information and analysis which led to further community discussion.<sup>10</sup>

The Esperanza youth activists participated in POV's Youth View Talk Backs. They interviewed themselves and other youth who viewed film and sent these interviews to POV in New York. The comments of one young Chicana woman at the Esperanza was added to the opening segment of the national screening of *Señorita Extraviada*.

This experience led the women to learn more about the Juárez murders. Community members took the responsibility to organize more film screenings throughout the city that the Esperanza facilitated. Another group of community activists wanted to organize a demonstration/march/ public performance and a visit to the Mexican Consulate in San Antonio. The Esperanza helped facilitate and headquarter this, which coincided with a national day of action on the Juárez murders, in July 2002. Latino gay men and lesbians, anti-domestic violence activists, anti-globalization activists, teachers, social workers, and others were moved to organize a local to the global

assemblage of tribute and grief, mutilated women are strewn amidst ten sequences of rural domestic life, dinner-like and shoe-shaped plates, nichos, plaques, mosaics, politicized crucifixes, and a majestic centerpiece: an árbol de la muerte (tree of death) entitled *Maquilando Mujeres/Piecing Women*.

*MujerArtes created an altar to the victims, consisting of 26 pieces of ceramic art depicting aspects of the Juárez tragedies.*

“I knew of the story,” said Rosie Zertuche, a MujerArtes member who created a trio of faceless women shrouded in Siqueiros-like grief. Zertuche, a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, wanted to create something so memorable that people would be moved to find the killers. “See the dove with a heart in its beak?” she said. “It could happen to us.”

Veronica Castillo describes the project:

Decidimos hacer un altar en conmemoración de las mujeres de Juárez. La idea era crear un pieza principal estilo ‘árbol de la vida’ que le queríamos llamar ‘árbol de la muerte,’ acompañada por varias otras piezas complementando el árbol con escenas hechas por las mujeres de la cooperativa.

. . . Del video [*Señorita Extraviada*] sacamos algunas imágenes representativas de las víctimas, como los zapatos, las batas de las maquilas, los autobuses misteriosos, y las caras cínicas de la policía y de los sospechosos. Las lágrimas de las madres es lo que más nos calaba en el corazón, porque todas nosotras de MujerArtes. Somos madres y sabemos el dolor que puede llegar a sentir una madre al perder a su criatura.

. . . Espero que este altar nos ayude a recordar a las vidas inocentes que han sido arrebatadas de nuestro vientre familiar, y sobre todo que comunique el apoyo que la cooperativa de MujerArtes y el Centro Esperanza le queremos dar a las familias de las víctimas. Con respeto y dignidad.

[Translation: We decided to do an altar in commemoration of the women of Juárez. The idea was to create a central piece in the style of a ‘tree of life’ that we wanted to call a ‘tree of death,’ accompanied by several other pieces complementing the tree with scenes done by the women of the cooperative.

. . . From the video [*Señorita Extraviada*] we pulled some images of the victims, such as the shoes, the clothes of the women workers, the buses, and the cynical faces of the police and the suspects. The tears of the mothers touched our hearts, because all of us of MujerArtes, we are mothers and we know the pain that a mother can feel on having lost a child.

. . . I hope that this altar will help us to remember the innocent lives that have been taken from our womb, and overall to communicate the support that the co-operative of MujerArtes and the Esperanza has for the families of the victims. With respect and dignity.]

In June 2003, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, a professor of Chicano Studies at UCLA who had just completed a book about the Juárez murders, led a writing workshop for the women of MujerArtes. She asked the mujeres to think about the names of the victims in Juárez. She asked them to describe memories associated with the names, and to identify colors, sounds, and smells they associate with the names and with the murders. Participants described “olor a sudor de miedo”; “aire que se oye muy lejano”; “fuerte de piedra”; “el olor de un hombre que no se ha bañado.”

*From the video [*Señorita Extraviada*] we pulled some images of the victims, such as the shoes, the clothes of the women workers, the buses, and the cynical faces of the police and the suspects.*

[Translations: The odor of sweat caused by fear; a breath that is heard very distantly; the strength of stone; the smell of a man who has not bathed.]

The MujerArtes participants told their memories and their reactions. They cried for the women of Juárez and for their own loved ones. The women later used these stories to create text to accompany the altar exhibit. Throughout the month-long showing in San Antonio, community continued to visit the powerful altar. In all, almost a thousand people personally viewed the altar, and many thousands more heard or read about it. Alicia Gaspar de Alba invited the women to participate in a conference at UCLA in October 2003.

Outreach for the altar exhibit included Spanish-language radio, television, and print media. Over 400 people attended the opening, about half of whom stayed for a panel presentation and plática. The panel consisted of Benita Monarrez, whose daughter Laura, a 17-year-old student, was found murdered in 2001; Verónica Castillo, lead artist on the project; Cecilia Ballí, a journalist who has written on the Juárez murders; and Alicia Gaspar de Alba. A 20-minute video of the writing workshop was also screened.

*Over 400 people attended the opening, about half of whom stayed for a panel presentation and plática.*

The presentations were moving. Benita Monarrez spoke courageously of the horror that she and her family experienced—searching endlessly for Laura in the days after her disappearance; pleading hopelessly to police to do something to find and save Laura; finding Laura’s dismembered body scattered in a vacant lot where three other murder victims had been found.

Yet the plática was disappointing in many ways. Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba and journalist Cecilia Ballí seemed to disagree on the significance of some of the evidence that had come to light, yet they avoided any discussion of these differences. Perhaps they did not want to risk upsetting Señora Monarrez or perhaps they did not think that further discussion of these issues would be of interest to the audience. In either case, a question or comment from the audience could have widened the discussion, making it more comfortable for all. The audience included several people who were from Juárez and knew the community and others who had worked in maquiladoras and could speak about those experiences, yet those people did not speak. Although the panelists invited questions or comments from the audience, only a few people spoke, and their comments were hesitant and deferential. The discussion never moved from the panel to the audience as we hoped it would.

Audience members may have been afraid of upsetting or offending Señora Monarrez as well, or they may have been shocked by the horror of the crimes and the power of the altar that was on view downstairs. In addition, the audience may have been intimidated by the eloquence of the panelists and hesitant to express their own views to these experts who they did not know personally. For all of these reasons, we believe that discussion would have been better with a facilitator who knew the community and individual audience members. A community-based facilitator could have elicited comments from specific audience members who the facilitator

knew had information or analysis to share. The facilitator could have reduced audience members’ intimidation by modeling a question or comment herself and by inviting comments addressed to a more “practical level” of analysis.

As we reflected on the event, we recognized that we should not have expected the panelists, none of whom were familiar with San

*In the disappointment of that plática, we saw clearly the need for community-based organizers to be part of facilitated discussion.*

Antonio or well known to our audiences, to have been able to facilitate the discussion in this way. In the disappointment of that plática, we saw clearly the need for community-based organizers to be part of facilitated discussion.

The MujerArtes altar was exhibited for a month in San Antonio and then traveled to Los Angeles where all the works were made available for auction at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. As part of this project, women of MujerArtes traveled to the conference, visiting various women's activist and artist-based community groups along the way. The first stop, and probably the most emotionally charged, was a visit to Juárez. We traveled past the maquiladoras, stopped and walked in the killing fields where bodies had been found, and met with mothers of disappeared and murdered women and girls. This experience was profoundly moving for both the women of MujerArtes and the women of Juárez, and lasting friendships have developed.

Additionally, MujerArtes visited indigenous communities like the Pueblo of New Mexico, the Navajo in Arizona, and the Hopi of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Mesa in Arizona. Here, the indigenous communities saw these Chicana women as indigenous people too. They asked the MujerArtes women what tribe they were from. The women responded, "We're from the Westside tribe."

Not having traveled much in their lives and not having ever exchanged with other indigenous women, MujerArtes participants met other women potters who looked like them, but who had different cultures and languages. They were excited to see the value of these indigenous artists. We met with sabia/elder Pablita Velarde, an 85-year-old elder who spent two hours telling Pueblo stories and her personal story. At the end, MujerArtes gave Pablita some artwork, and

*In the understanding of being Buena Gente, they recognized the need to support the women of Juárez, as well as women in their own community and collective.*

she exchanged with them some of her work that was now in postcards. The MujerArtes women continued this practice with the other indigenous people.

Although MujerArtes received no compensation for the Altar to the Women of Juárez, these impoverished women contributed all of the proceeds from the sale (over \$5,000) of their work to the mothers of the disappeared and murdered women. In the

understanding of being Buena Gente, they recognized the need to support the women of Juárez, as well as women in their own community and collective. Through this sustained dialogue, the women of MujerArtes have come to value themselves and their culture in new ways, and to seek a closer connection with their Mexican and Native sisters.

### **Dialogic Training and Methodology**

Throughout the Animating Democracy project, we experimented with different styles of dialogue facilitation. This section discusses some of our training, reflections, and tentative conclusions.

#### **Teach the facilitators: New Bridges training with Luz Guerra and Hugh Vasquez**

At the beginning of the Animating Democracy *Arte es Vida* project, Luz Guerra was hired to train animadoras/os. We hired Luz Guerra because she is a very experienced facilitator and trainer of facilitators, having worked almost a decade for the American Friends Service Committee, providing training and workshops on unlearning racism and other oppressions. In addition, because Luz Guerra is a Latina, a Puertorriqueña from New York, a community organizer and activist trainer, she brings a culturally appropriate perspective. Finally, throughout our history of attending conferences, workshops, and trainings, she is one of the few facilitators we've found

who has broad experience with anti-oppression training (anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-classism, anti-homophobia, etc.) and felt her work was most closely related to the vision and work of the Esperanza.

All artists, advisory group members, partners, and individuals interested in learning skills to become facilitators in the *Arte es Vida* project were required to attend a training session with Luz Guerra. In January 2001, the Esperanza hosted a four-day intensive “train the trainers” workshop, conducted by Luz Guerra and Hugh Vasquez. Hugh Vasquez is a nationally-acclaimed anti-oppression trainer, cofounder of TODOS: Sherover-Simms Alliance Building Institute in Oakland, California, and cofounder of New Bridges (see sidebar), a multicultural youth program focused on eliminating racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ageism.

In the fall of 2001, Guerra trained approximately 35 additional people in smaller groups. These trainees included new Esperanza staff, board members, and buena gente (members of the Esperanza community who are committed our work and to social justice) who were not able to attend the January workshop. Guerra also worked closely with youth leader Vicki Grise to train her as an animadora. Following this initial training, pláticas at *Arte es Vida* events were organized by a variety of animadoras drawn from the Esperanza staff and buena gente. As we experimented with the New Bridges approach, we found that it did not work very well for audiences/groups drawn to the Esperanza events. Through formal and informal surveys,<sup>11</sup> we know that audiences at the Esperanza typically include 70 percent to 90 percent people of color and more than 50 percent women. Significant portions of our audiences are Spanish-dominant (meaning that they speak Spanish at home or work and that they feel most comfortable conversing in Spanish). A majority is or was raised poor or working class.

For numerous reasons, many of the people in our audiences do not feel comfortable speaking in a public gathering. They have been told they do not speak clearly or do not speak English or Spanish well. They hear others speak, and may feel they are not as smart or not as knowledgeable. They are afraid they will not be understood; that they will speak for too long; or they will say the wrong word. This hesitation or uncertainty is especially evident in women.

*...Many members of the audience resisted participating in dyads or small groups because they feared they would miss interesting stories told by other participants.*

The audience/participants in *Arte es Vida* events have included some people who can speak easily in public and many more who are hesitant to speak. Working with groups of this sort, we focus on ensuring full participation. We have found the initial “rule-setting” phase of the New Bridges approach conveyed the unintended message that people should not speak unless they can talk in a particular way, and frequently people did not understand what the rules required. The effect was that many people remained silent and those who spoke seemed hesitant and self-conscious. We also found that many members of the audience resisted participating in dyads or small groups because they feared they would miss interesting stories told by other participants.

Early on we realized that we would have to modify the New Bridges approach to encourage meaningful discussion in *Arte es Vida* events. There were, however, some very important skills we learned in the training process which we continue to practice.

As we learned and experimented with the New Bridges approach, we also reviewed our experiences with successful and unsuccessful pláticas in the past. We focused especially on the very successful pláticas that followed *An Altar for Emma* performances. Reflecting on those and other pláticas, we realized that several elements contributed to their success:



- 1) The audience included people who we knew would have important things to say. For example, we had identified and specifically invited family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers of Emma Tenayuca, people whom we knew she had affected deeply, to attend the performances.
- 2) Because of this, the facilitators approached the audience with deep respect and interest. We all wanted to learn from those in the audience who had known Emma Tenayuca, and the facilitators expressed that sincere interest.
- 3) The performances were preceded by several articles in the Esperanza news journal, *La Voz*. Community members learned many details of Emma Tenayuca’s life and work from these articles, and they learned of the persistent controversy regarding her membership in the Communist Party. So many people in the audience came with a knowledge base and an interest in learning more.
- 4) The play itself included significant audience participation, including a move downstairs, an invitation to sing, and some members joining the cast in a protest march. These physical and musical activities brought audience members into interaction with each other and into a more active frame of mind.
- 5) There were several animadoras, with no one person taking on a “teacher” or “director” role. Beva Sánchez Padilla, the author/director, and the three-member cast facilitated the pláticas by sitting informally on the stage or walking among the audience. Because the cast had just performed, they appeared to the audience as familiar. The too-frequent sense that animadoras are smarter, better educated, more articulate, etc. seemed not to arise. The animadoras familiarity and informality contributed to the atmosphere of nonjudgmental discussion.

*The animadoras familiarity and informality contributed to the atmosphere of nonjudgmental discussion.*

We found that the best pláticas happened when the animadoras/os have and are willing to express a genuine eagerness to hear the stories and comments of the audience. It seemed that this attitude was essential to encouraging honest community engagement. We also found that it is very important for the animadoras/os to be sure that diverse voices are heard. Animadoras at the Esperanza are asked to watch for domination (by men, by white people) or self-censoring (by elders, by Spanish-dominant people) and to intervene when that happens. Animadoras have said: “We have been hearing mainly from men. I will ask that women speak and that the men wait for a while,” or “We have been hearing mainly from teachers. I ask that others speak and that the teachers wait for a while,” and the like.

## NEW BRIDGES APPROACH TO DIALOGUE FACILITATION

In this model, the facilitator attempts to create an atmosphere where everyone can express their thoughts and feelings, and can listen to and learn from other participants. The facilitator often will begin by suggesting (or asking the group to suggest) some “rules of safety” to which all participants can agree. These usually include: Listen to each other with respect; Speak for yourself, not for others (use “I” statements); and Do not question or argue against someone else’s statements of experience or emotion (do not “cross-talk”: respond directly to another speaker).

During the ensuing discussion, the facilitator ensures broad participation by having those who wish to speak silently raise their hands until the facilitator signals to them that she or he has put them on a “speaker list.” In addition, the facilitator watches to make sure that the discussion is not dominated by those who are most used to speaking, including men, whites, class-privileged, etc. When this happens, the facilitator may encourage others to speak by asking if they would like to add anything to the discussion.

The New Bridges model also makes frequent use of the “dyad” or “triad” in which two or three people speak and listen to each other or small group discussions in which each person is asked to speak in turn. These devices are used because some people find it easier to express themselves to a small group rather than speaking in a group. Dyads usually last for a short time, perhaps 2 minutes or so; small groups last for 10 to 20 minutes.

To encourage discussion following a film, performance, or other presentation, the New Bridges facilitator may ask questions about specific aspects of the presentation, but the facilitator will also allow periods of silence to allow participants to reflect. If someone speaks to an issue that the facilitator thinks is important or fruitful, she may ask the speaker to say more or go deeper with their comment.

Towards the end of a discussion, the facilitator will direct discussion towards the questions of individual or group actions – “What is your/our next step on this issue? What will you take home from this discussion?”

### ***Preserve the stories of community: story circle training with John O’Neal***

In May 2001, we were able to bring John O’Neal to the Esperanza to teach a one-day workshop on the practice of Story Circles. In this method, as many people know, participants speak to a particular issue drawing on their memories as provoked by the topic, or by the stories or comments of other participants. Most of the people who were interested in facilitating *Arte es Vida* discussions attended at least parts of this workshop, and participants demonstrated the techniques to a larger group of *buena gente* (the Esperanza audience and community members) at an evening event. The training initiated a new series of discussions about different techniques of facilitation and the significance of storytelling.

We have found that the story circle is an effective technique that we have used in a slightly modified form in several of our smaller (15 to 25 people) pláticas. We have modified the technique to allow people to speak without time limitation, and we have kept the group together in one circle. The reason for these changes is that we found that the time limit (in the training with John O’Neal, speakers were limited to three or four minutes) was culturally inappropriate among predominantly Chicano groups, where stories are usually long and complex. We found that the time limits had to be long to accommodate that storytelling style, and even when we set long times, speakers would repeatedly check themselves. It seemed that even long time limits conveyed the message that the group really did not want to hear very much or did not have time to hear much, and so people were hesitant to take up even a modest time allotment.

***We have modified the technique to allow people to speak without time limitation, and we have kept the group together in one circle.***

We decided not to break up into smaller circles because again we found that people just did not like the feeling that they were missing what was being said in the other groups. We are so hungry to hear each other—we don't want to miss anything!

John O'Neal's training also inspired reflection about the role of storytelling in the *Arte es Vida* project and in other work of the Esperanza community. We have come to understand that storytelling has many functions for our communities. It is a way of conveying knowledge, history, and information about ourselves and our pasts that is not recorded in any place. Consistent with this function, we find ourselves and our communities anxious to hear and record and preserve the stories of our elders. We know that we are losing our histories, that this is a part of the cultural genocide which has so devastated our communities.

*A second function of storytelling is to create a bond between people and to enlarge the world that we see as individuals and together with others.*

A second function of storytelling is to create a bond between people and to enlarge the world that we see as individuals and together with others. This is an experiential, spiritual, intellectual, and political dimension of storytelling that our work with *Arte es Vida* has brought into focus for us. Because we are anxious to do what we can to recover and preserve our histories and because we ourselves have grown up with the storytelling of our elders, our families, and our friends, we have not been as aware of the power and value of the simple experience of hearing stories, of hearing bits of memory that others carry. The simple experience is a powerful experience in solidarity.

Paula Gunn Allen describes the power of storytelling among indigenous communities: "My mother told me stories all the time, though I often did not recognize them as that . . . And in all of those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me. In this way she taught me the meaning of the words she said, that all life is a circle and everything has a place within it. That's what she said and what she showed me in the things she did and the way she lives."<sup>12</sup>

Yolanda Broyles-González describes the storytelling practice of Lydia Mendoza, a beloved Chicana musician whose singing career spanned over 60 years, from the 1920s to the 1980s: "[M]ost of her narrative does not describe glory but instead offers guidance and encouragement for overcoming multiple obstacles. She aims to provide inspiration, counsel, and guidance, ultimately empowering women like herself (perhaps others, as well). This is the typical trajectory of the cultural practices known collectively as *consejo* (genres of counsel giving and talking), which have always been deeply valued in the Americas."<sup>13</sup>

*The training in animadora techniques...encouraged Esperanza staff and community to reflect upon, develop, and refine our work as facilitators, as cultural programmers, and as political organizers.*

This recognition has clarified for us the reason why we seek moments, opportunities, *pláticas* in which people are invited to tell stories, are reminded of memories, are lovingly, respectfully being heard and hearing others. This is a powerful political experience that is an important part of grassroots organizing as we at the Esperanza want to do it.

The training in animadora techniques made possible by the Animating Democracy Initiative encouraged Esperanza staff and community to reflect upon, develop, and refine our work as facilitators, as cultural programmers, and as political organizers. This was a very valuable part of the project.

**Bring techniques of spiritual grounding to dialogue: María Berriozábal**

María Antonietta Berriozábal is a widely respected community leader and former city council member. Señora Berriozábal has contributed to our skills in the facilitation of dialogue by teaching us the role of ceremony and spiritual awareness in respectful exchange and mutual understanding. Through her actions, her stories, her ceremonies, performed at political and cultural events, she has taught us to remember two things as foundational to any action. First, we must recognize that the struggle for justice is much larger and longer than any one of our lives. María Berriozábal speaks of a 200-year clock to be placed at the Esperanza so that we can all remember that we will experience only a few minutes out of the long struggle for justice, and that we will not live to see the consequences of our actions.

Second, and simultaneously, María Berriozábal teaches us to see each human being as important and vulnerable. The spiritual dimension is inherently inclusive—it is a way of treating each other and a way of situating our work within a larger context that has little to do with institutionalized religious practice. It is nondenominational and nonjudgmental. It is simply the habit of remembering both the strength of our shared commitment to justice and the precious fragility of each one of us. Through this grounding, we have learned techniques of active and passive listening that are crucial to long-term community dialogue.

*The spiritual dimension is inherently inclusive—it is a way of treating each other and a way of situating our work within a larger context...*

Finally, and to us most importantly, we have carefully observed conversations and storytelling within our communities and our families. We have learned how people are welcomed, put at ease, listened to, and respected. We have seen how conflicts are resolved, how appropriate and inappropriate behaviors are identified, for children and for adults. We come to these studies with an assumption that these practices, which are guided and practiced particularly by women, are based on wisdom that has been passed down for generations and is constantly reinvented. As Chicana historian Antonia Castañeda explains: “Threaded within, between, underneath, around, inside, and outside of sanctioned colonial, national, and transnational histories, historia/story remembers and recodes the borderlands, bearing witness to the living past, the present, and the future, belying officialdom’s visible and invisible technologies of power to silence, deny, and obliterate.”<sup>14</sup> We hope that the practices we learn will enrich our work in the facilitation of arts-based civic dialogue, while honoring and empowering our communities.

**LESSONS LEARNED**

**Principles, Practices, and Philosophical Underpinnings of Arts-Based Civic Dialogue Work**

Through our work on the Animating Democracy project, we have come to a clearer understanding of the capacity for artistic expression to illuminate conflicts, promote dialogue, and enrich civic engagement within communities that have been wounded by colonialism and cultural genocide. We also have developed our knowledge of various models for dialogic facilitation and our skills in enacting these various forms. We have learned from our successes, our frustrations, and our failures; and we have gained insight from comparing our experiences with those of other groups in this project.

First, we have found it necessary to expand the art/humanities component to feature community members rather than individual artists or groups of artists. Second, we have learned that significant art-based civic dialogue must be long-term. Third, these models need to be expanded to include community organizers as an integral part of the art-based civic dialogue project. And,

fourth, arts-based civic dialogue can and should include performance and other artistic expression in the places of formal governmental and corporate decision-making, as a part of democratic participation, protest, and resistance.

***Expand the art/humanities component to feature community members rather than individual artists or groups of artists***

We have come to believe that the focus on an individual artist, or group of artists, which characterizes some versions of art-based civic dialogue, is not useful for work in communities of color. This focus tends to reinforce the idea that artists are people of special ability and genius and that non-artists lack these qualities. Every day, dominant culture sends the message to poor and working-class people of color that they are not smart, not creative, not talented. Work that presents artists in this way simply reinforces this hurtful message.

*... The focus on an individual artist, or group of artists, which characterizes some versions of art-based civic dialogue, is not useful for work in communities of color.*

We have been disappointed at how often even artists of color and those with poor or working-class backgrounds are vested in this “special person” view of artistic expression. This view of the artist is historically and culturally limited—a phenomena of fairly recent European culture—yet it seems to inform artists’ understanding of themselves throughout the U.S. In contrast, indigenous Mexican cultures see all people as creative, as visionaries, and as bridge builders, as do many non-European cultures.

In our work with Animating Democracy, we experimented with artist-focused work, yet we repeatedly found that individual artists could not enable artistic expression by community members beyond a superficial level. The artist that we had initially employed for this project is a very talented, socially engaged, Chicana performance artist from Los Angeles. Unfortunately, this artist found it difficult to connect with Chicanas/os in San Antonio and was often impatient with the lack of “political sophistication” among community participants at the Esperanza events. We had similar experiences with other individual artists who initially read the grant and agreed to work with us with community, but who ultimately had specific needs and criteria that didn’t allow them to go out into community venues as we had hoped, or who were not willing to work with anybody but self-proclaimed artists.

We were lucky to have one artist, Veronica Castillo, who is the rare exception. The artist, a Mexicana, was eager to teach the skills, history and traditions that her family had taught her. At first she was frustrated by how little Chicanas knew of Mexican culture and by what she perceived to be a lack of confidence or maturity in the Chicana women she worked with in San Antonio. Yet after perceiving the tensions and differences, Veronica worked hard to understand the cultural and political experiences of Chicanas/Mexicanas in the United States and to support the women with whom she worked. Unfortunately, Veronica had to end her commitments to MujerArtes after seven years, in December 2003, in order to commit herself to community work in her home of Puebla, Mexico.

After several frustrating experiences, we decided to consciously expand the art and humanities component in our projects. We went to community members to discover traditional and contemporary artistic practices. The result was one of the best parts of our Animating Democracy project. We enabled people to share their passion for song, for dance, for performance, for installation artwork, for clothes-making, drawing, painting, cooking, poetry, and story writing.

We also found that a crucial part of cultural grounding and community empowerment is developing ways for community members to imagine that they have choices in their lives, to envision alternative ways of responding to the limitations imposed upon them, and to act on these alternatives. We have found that engaging in a variety of actions, informed by reflection, analysis, and evaluation, encourages people to think more broadly and to allow ourselves to imagine alternatives. Coupled with this is the need to question authority, not to accept all that is said and done by people with power—this is the legacy of generations of control by priests, military forces, and patrones. Some ways that community members gained these skills were through actively participating in defining project goals and strategies, developing new ways to reach community, addressing city council and other policymakers, and learning new skills of public discussion and organizing.

### **Significant art-based civic dialogue must be long-term**

We have found that the capacity of art and arts-based civic dialogue to illuminate conflicts, promote dialogue, and enrich civic engagement comes from its potential to help people understand the perspective of those with whom they disagree. In addition, shared artistic experience and dialogue may allow participants to recognize that the “other side” is motivated by values that both sides recognize and to some extent share. This much may result from a short-term project. Yet, in our experience, such results are temporary, at best, and at worst reinforce the belief of poor and working-class communities that outside “experts” merely use their communities for their own interests.

*...Once communities are able to see, they must empower themselves to act.*

We believe that to make a lasting and meaningful contribution, art and cultural groups must work with community for long-term periods. We must do the hard work of learning to see the manifold issues of domination that continue to reduce human

lives. Five hundred years of cultural genocide requires the long-term work that allows people to see themselves, their histories, language, traditions, and values. And once communities are able to see, they must empower themselves to act.

On an even deeper level, the problem with short-term work is that it does not reach the spiritual aspects of community solidarity or the deep long-term wounds in community life. Despite the good feelings, short-term projects inevitably leave the hard issues unresolved. Participants then feel used or abused by the experience. The result is further distrust and unwillingness to participate in civic life.

In order to engage actively in civic life, one must trust one’s community and allies. This is particularly true for poor and working-class women of color, who must continue to fight for their voice, right, and dignity despite repeated failure, harsh retaliation, soul-murdering betrayal, and the recognition that they, as individuals, likely will not enjoy the results of their work. Without long-term support, it doesn’t make sense to “dialogue” with council member(s) when they retaliate against you. Without committed help, it doesn’t make sense to organize, to create, to work for alternatives, to “vote,” when your efforts are blocked by those with the power to silence, ignore, or refuse you.

*...The problem with short-term work is that it does not reach the spiritual aspects of community solidarity or the deep long-term wounds in community life.*

We expected that after eight months, we would be able to dialogue with communities on oppositional sides—people like the tourist industry, business owners, etc., but we have spent most of our efforts in the

*We are left with a critical question in respect to civic dialogue/stakeholders— What is the place of civic dialogue between oppositional sides in a colonial context?*

cultural grounding of our own communities. The work of cultural grounding within our own communities brings up so many issues. The history of colonization in our communities is so entrenched that we have much work to do with and among ourselves. We need to forge new values, new bridges among our communities, new ways to respect our differences, new ways to cultivate understanding. We need to analyze and understand the multitude of issues that divide us and to both recover and create ways to grow within ourselves and within our communities. We are left with a critical question in respect to civic dialogue/stakeholders—What happens when there is no “coming together” of interests? What is the place of civic dialogue between oppositional sides in a colonial context?

In our work with MujerArtes and the larger Esperanza community, we have found that long-term cultural organizing can create the deeper spiritual solidity and trust that is necessary to enable community members to engage in active civic life. Shared artistic and cultural work, together with long-term dialogue and focused community action can create a community of trust, a *comunidad de alma*. This must be, for us, the goal of arts-based civic dialogue.

***Community organizers should be an integral part of art-based civic dialogue***

We have found that the involvement of a community organizer with long-term ties to the community is crucial to the success of *Arte es Vida* pláticas. The community organizer is crucial to doing successful outreach and to identifying people in the community who might be interested in participating in pláticas. Because of historic class and racial segregation in San Antonio, poor and working-class people, particularly people of color, have been taught to know that they do not “belong” in theaters, galleries, or other spaces in which dominant art is presented. (They also feel they don’t belong in schools, libraries, and other community spaces that are supposed to be for the community). Moreover, many people of color experience a deep sense of isolation and alienation that prevent them from participating in events and activities that are nominally “open to all.” To draw alienated communities to the table, there must be someone who is known and trusted by the community, and that person has to work hard before and during the event/project to connect people and to draw them into conversation.

*We have seen over and over again that powerful groups are not willing to engage in dialogue that may question their actions and focus attention on the effects of those actions on community life.*

We have seen over and over again that powerful groups are not willing to engage in dialogue that may question their actions and focus attention on the effects of those actions on community life. Even long-term community organizers often cannot successfully bring powerful groups to the table. This was our experience in the La Gloria project when the actual decision makers—city council members, the building owner, and auto shop investors—made deals behind closed doors and kept the community away behind police lines. For our efforts in asking for dialogue, the Esperanza was penalized with a reduction in city neighborhood arts funding.

Interestingly, powerful groups in San Antonio were unwilling to participate even in *An Altar for Emma*, which focused on historical events that occurred over sixty years ago. Although we were able to get some coverage from the *Express-News*, San Antonio’s only English language daily newspaper, the television and radio stations did not cover it. When asked about Emma Tenayuca by students who had attended the performances, many teachers refused to discuss the history, because they had been taught that Emma Tenayuca was a communist and were unwilling to learn more.

Our observation is that who comes to the table to participate in dialogues usually depends on who calls or presents the opportunity for dialogue, and this in turn determines the tenor of the conversation. In San Antonio, the European-centered museums or middle-class arts organizations do program exhibits and programs on Latin-American art, for example, but the exhibits (often traveling shows) disclaim any connection between the poor and working class Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os that are a majority of the population in San Antonio and the people of Latin America whose struggles are portrayed in art. San Antonians are constructed by these shows as happily postcultural, enjoying the riches of many cultures without actually identifying with any. Needless to say, this does not empower our communities or animate democratic participation.

In San Antonio, we have had some success bringing powerful individuals into sustained conversation. Ann McGlone (director of Historic Preservation for the City of San Antonio), for example, responded to an invitation to meet with community about La Gloria. She eagerly

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participated and has continued to engage with communities on issues of historic preservation. More often, however, our invitations are met with hostility or indifference.

We think that the resistance is a result of the very deep and rigid divisions within San Antonio and the dependence of San Antonio on the tourist industry. Against that background,

powerful people have succeeded in avoiding public conversation about the injustice of a low-wage, racially segregated, and gender-segmented economy. Ambitious Chicano leaders are taught to avoid controversy because it will weaken San Antonio's image as a fun, harmonious, Mexico-without-the-bad-water tourist destination. Because we have challenged this approach for seventeen years, the Esperanza has the reputation as a place where honest discussion will be encouraged and the illusion of comfortable harmony is not long maintained.

This has been our experience with the Cultural Alliance of San Antonio (CASA, an organization of executive directors of cultural organizations), which is led by white men and women who are executive directors of mainstream arts organizations. The CASA leadership never agreed to participate in *Arte es Vida* project dialogues. These leaders repeatedly ignore questions raised by community-based people of color regarding the role that CASA is playing, as they define a cultural plan for San Antonio. The leadership has refused to discuss issues of cultural rights and racial equity in formulating the plan. Instead, they have joined eagerly with city and business leaders who are working to expand the "cultural tourism" industry in which commercialized versions of Chicano/Mexicano culture are marketed in the name of cultural diversity.

Finally, we have found that a community organizer can create partnerships with other community-based organizations and individuals even if the most powerful groups refuse to participate. In the *Arte es Vida* projects, for example, the dialogue has been enriched by the participation of Centro Cultural Aztlan, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, and other community-based organizations. We found that other organizations were excited about partnering with the Esperanza in culturally-based projects. Yet, most folks don't have the time or resources to take on a major role. The Esperanza has acknowledged its leadership position and did most of the work of organizing and managing projects such as *Día de los Muertos*, *Las Posadas de Navidad*, and the Save La Gloria campaign. However, the participation of partnering groups has contributed to the success of these projects.



**Arts-based civic dialogue can and should include performance and other artistic expressions in the places of formal governmental and corporate decision-making.**

We have found and we continue to learn that there is no separation between cultural performance, civil dialogue, and political protest. Part of the work of community empowerment involves our learning to see our struggle within larger contexts and to see how decisions made by government and corporate officers profoundly affect the conditions of daily life. And so to change the conditions of our lives we must address and effect governmental and corporate decision-making. One of the many insights that María Berriozábal has shared with us is the way in which our physical space, the urban area called San Antonio, has been shaped by very specific decisions made by the city council. She has taken hundreds of the Esperanza participants on an economic tour of San Antonio. In rented buses or vans, Señora Berriozábal takes us to the Southside, Westside, Eastside, and Northside to show us how decisions have been made to place a hospital here, a university there, a stadium over there, a coal-burning electric generator over there. And her lesson, learned from ten years as a city council member, is that these decisions are dictated by “the 17 white men”— a sloganlike description referring to the small number of building contractors, developers, cement sellers, wealthy businessmen, and news media outlet owners who exercise political and economic power in San Antonio.

*... We continue to learn that there is no separation between cultural performance, civil dialogue, and political protest.*

So as part of the *Arte es Vida* project, community members have organized a citizens referendum against the multinational corporation Temple-Inland’s plan to develop a PGA golf resort and surrounding affluent suburb on one of the most sensitive parts of the recharge zone over the Edwards Aquifer, the city’s only source of water. We have participated in a federal lawsuit challenging the city’s refusal to honor the anti-Temple-Inland referendum.

We have presented testimony to city council, have met with individual city officials, have shown video in a state court lawsuit challenging the denial of historic preservation status to La Gloria. Because people think visually as well as verbally, because stories (like parables) enable people to ponder a complex truth in ways that lineal speech does not, we often find it effective to use multimedia, multigenre means to inform community and challenge oppressive and exploitative government and corporate actions.

Among various actions designed to inspire public discussion on the Temple-Inland/PGA golf development, the Esperanza organized communities (targeting people of color) to speak at city council and at public hearings and gatherings throughout the city. Based on the work of cultural grounding, it was our goal to speak from our place of knowledge, history, culture, and truth. Presentations included performances by the Artescuela youth program, song, poetry, dichos, cuentos, and videos. In a “citizens to be heard” session of city council on October 24, 2002, three actors from the Esperanza performed a piece about corporate domination. The actors walked to the podium with cloth gags, which they struggled to remove as the performance progressed.

During March and April of 2003, as the Esperanza organized community to save La Gloria, we showed the recovered video of rooftop dancing at La Gloria to a public meeting of city council and in a state court hearing on a motion for temporary injunction filed by volunteer lawyers working with the Esperanza. In every public action, the Esperanza participants have considered ways to reach not only the minds but also the hearts and memories of those with whom we interact. Artistic programming can often connect people at this more complex level.

In *Legislative Theater* (NY: Routledge 1998), Augusto Boal, founder of the international movement Theater of the Oppressed and disciple of Paulo Freire, discusses the use of community-based theater in promoting dialogue about public issues

both outside and inside the formal institutions of government. The *Arte es Vida* project came to this practice because community people wanted to find a way to reach decision-makers, to have them stop and think, to have them listen to the complex lessons of community life.

*...Community people wanted to find a way to reach decision-makers, to have them stop and think, to have them listen to the complex lessons of community life.*

**Graciela Sanchez** is cofounder and director of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. A dedicated activist/cultural worker, Graciela Sanchez has worked throughout her lifetime to eliminate racism, sexism, homophobia, and class elitism. As director of the Esperanza, Graciela does everything from programming, proofreading the monthly news magazine, *La Voz*, grantwriting, consulting with other grassroots groups, and major donor and capital campaign development, as well as cleaning toilets and mopping floors. Prior to the Esperanza, Graciela worked with the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project and the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund. She was then selected to study film and video at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Television in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba. She began organizing in the queer community on the state and local levels in 1985 and was a founding board member of the San Antonio Lesbian Gay assembly, the San Antonio Lesbian/Gay Media Project, and ELLAS, a state and local Latina lesbian organization. In 1992, she was given the prestigious Stonewall Award, a yearly acknowledgement honoring achievement in the national Lesbian/Gay community. She has also received several community awards from various community groups including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hispanic Research Center at the University of Texas/San Antonio, The LULAC Woman of the Year Award, and the Human Rights Campaign Fund Activist Award.

**Andrea Assaf** is program associate for Animating Democracy, and was Animating Democracy's liaison to the *Arte es Vida* project. She is a performer, poet, educator, and activist. She has a master's in performance studies and a bachelor's in acting, both from NYU. With a training background in theater, she is currently a solo artist creating original multidisciplinary work. She has taught Meisner Technique, creative writing, ESL, and facilitates text and movement workshops for people of all ages. Her community arts experience ranges from intergenerational work with Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, to creating original collaborative performances within the Filipino/a/American community in NYC, to street theater with youth in East Harlem, to performance-based conservation education with young adults in Tanzania, East Africa. Her theory interests include postcolonial studies, critical pedagogy, and cross-cultural performance. She is a member of The Writers Roundtable and Alternate ROOTS, where she is an active part of the Resources for Social Change workgroup. She speaks Kiswahili and Spanish.

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<sup>1</sup> Graciela Sanchez is the executive and artistic director of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. This report also includes excerpts from the Esperanza's Interim Report to Animating Democracy, written by Graciela Sanchez and then staff member, Vicki Grise.

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<sup>2</sup> The Esperanza has been hosting pláticas, or community dialogues, since 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Emma Nelly Garcia (May Day, 2001), Lydia Mendoza (Homenaje a Lydia Mendoza, May 2001 and at the Casa de Cuentos), Rita Vidaurri (Homenaje a Lydia Mendoza and Casa de Cuentos, May 2004). *An Altar for Emma* (November 2000, May, 2001 and Casa de Cuentos) and La Gloria (2002 to present). Other participating sabias have included Maria Berriozabal (2001 to present), Doña Panchita (2000 to present), Doña Inez (November 2002 to present).

<sup>4</sup> Prior to the course of her work with the Esperanza, dialogue trainer Luz Guerra suggested the term “animadora” rather than facilitator. She explained that this term is used frequently in Latin America, in community organizing efforts in El Salvador and it fit more closely with our goals and cultural context.

<sup>5</sup> One man eating lunch in the plaza greeted us by saying, “I’m glad you’re back.” When asked what he meant he said, “I’m glad you’re back, that you came back to sing, to perform, like in the old days,” making a direct connection between us and the tradition of the carpas and musicians that played in the open air markets in the thirties and forties.

<sup>6</sup> The near Westside is a predominantly Chicano area of San Antonio. See section A4 for further description.

<sup>7</sup> These groups include Centro Cultural Aztlan, National Association of Latino Arts and Culture, Avenida Guadalupe, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, Urban 15, San Anto, and Guadalupe.

<sup>8</sup> *La Voz* editor Gloria Ramirez, community elder Enrique Sanchez, professor Josie Mendez Negrete, and artist-in-residence Veronica Castillo helped facilitate several community dialogues/workshops during the last three years to teach the cultural history of Calaveras.

<sup>9</sup> “Mojado” or “wetback” is the slang term for a person who crosses the border illegally, from Mexico into the U.S.; a derogatory name for an undocumented worker or immigrant, especially from Mexico.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the filmmaker was not interested in participating in a dialogue, and only stayed for a few questions.

<sup>11</sup> We did not survey every *Arte es Vida* event. The description in the text is drawn from the several formal and informal surveys we have conducted over the years. This is one element that we will strive to achieve in the next phase of our *Arte es Vida* project.

<sup>12</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Tradition* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 46.

<sup>13</sup> Yolanda Broyles-González, *Lydia Mendoza’s Life in Music: La historia de Lydia Mendoza* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2001), 201.

<sup>14</sup> Antonia Castañeda, Introduction: *Gender on the Borderlands*, *Frontiers*, vol. 24, nos. 2 & 3, 2004, xii.