

Latino Young Men and Boys
Community Artist Profile
A Conversation with Freddy Gutierrez
By Frank de Jesus Acosta

Freddy Gutierrez, was born and raised in Pittsburg, California, ‘By the - End of the BART line - or Pittas,’ as the locals called it. Pittsburg was given its name because of the steel mill that was situated along the San Joaquin River that ran along the edge of town. He was raised primarily by three women, his mother Luz, and two older sisters, Indra and Karina. Freddy describes his father as “the wind,” because as he puts it, “he was in and out of the house as he pleased.” Both of his parents are working class, his father a landscaper and mother a bus driver.

Like many young men born into less than ideal community conditions, Freddy’s dreams were tempered but out there to be re-discovered. In fact, he shared about growing up thinking young men of color, like himself, eventually all went to prison. Films like “Blood In, Blood Out,” “American Me,” and “Boulevard Nights,” and the ever negative presence of the State and its agents, had left him sold on that narrative. “But when I made it to high school,” he says, “I got a sense that my life could be different.”

Freddy took his innate love for language and word play, and set out to gain mastery over the English language in school. He recounts outsmarting all of the other kids when it came to things like syntax and rhetorical/literal devices: “I loved writing stories and reading poetry. But it wasn’t until I met some older Latino/a poets through a teatro troupe that I became a part of (Teatro L.O.C.O.S. – Latinos or Chicanos or Something), that I started to write poetry with intention.” Just out of high school, Freddy wrote a bit of sketch comedy and political satire performed by L.O.C.O.S and featured at a Lunada Galeria de la Raza, located in La Mission in San Francisco. During this performance venue, he got put up on the Spoken Word scene. In his own words, “I was blown away by how folks were performing and reciting their word.” After the seminal experience of seeing renown poet Tshaka Campbell perform at a Lunada, Freddy went home and wrote two poems that completely shifted the way his poetry took form. According to Gutierrez,

“It has been through the arts that the world around me has made the most sense and that I have been able to find a place to stand in the world as well. Through the arts, writing and theatrical performance, I have been to engage the burning issues of my time, explore my own struggles, and share in solidarity with the struggles of others.”

Writer, Teacher, Artist, and Cultural Worker -- Now an accomplished writer, teaching artist, and cultural worker based in Oakland, Freddy inspires and nurtures inter-generational writers to move from the page to the stage and the street. Freddy has taught with Youth Speaks, Chapter 510, and the Oakland Public Library. He facilitates writing and performance arts spaces with men and youth who are policed, imprisoned, and marginalized by the prison-industrial complex. The journey thus far has allowed him to read and perform at cultural centers, universities, jails, and juvenile halls throughout Northern California. Currently he is co-facilitating a performance project at San Quentin

State Prison that is known as, the Artistic Ensemble. His poetry is purposeful, calling for positive male socialization, illuminating the plight faced by migrants in this country, and advocating against the criminalization of youth of color. Freddy's work has been published by Nomadic Press, Econo Textual Objects, The Acentos Review, and POOR Magazine; and most recently, was featured as LoWriter of the Week, as selected by U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera.

Reasons and Inspirations for Becoming a Writer -- We asked Freddy how he trained and prepared to become a writer and poet? Who were his role models, leading instructors, guides and champions along the way? "I read a lot of poetry that was not part of the White literary cannon," he answered, "stuff that spoke to me and people who looked and sounded like me. The work of Jimmy Santiago Baca has been crucial to my development as a writer. The gift that Jimmy has with narrative and meaning-making through metaphor is beautifully profound. I've read and re-read most of his work. June Jordan is also another master of the word that I have studied. With regard to form, what she's written about vertical rhythm really shifted my thinking about how to write the poem both for the page, as well as, the stage. I was once told that reading makes the writer, which I agree with for the most part, but it's not the only thing that makes a writer. I listen to A LOT of music, stuff that most people I grew up and am around, don't listen to; lyrics, word play, unconventional rhythm all deeply influence my diction and style. "

A Message to Young and Emerging Writers and Activists - Freddy believes that given the sad state of affairs for people of color in America, a writer of color has the duty to keep telling our story, keep sharing our account of things so as to combat the imposed narratives and distortions of "common sense," shaped by the dominant culture. He stressed that books, are like *Testimonies* in first voice, vitally important to educating and giving agency to Latino men and boys, as well as advancing authentic understanding by other key American audiences that should be concerned about our communities and their healthy development going forward. Moreover, book like Latino Young Men and Boys, *In Search of Justice, Testimonies*, are so important because they offer a wide range of possibilities for what might work to cohere our communities and challenge dominant narratives about who we are as a people. It is crucial, like Jose Montoya once said, that we must represent ourselves "in our own terms", that is, using our own tongue, our own language. We must have the agency of our own voice. This is so crucial to challenging imposed narratives about who we are and our collective situation.

Closing Thoughts, Going Forward - Freddy offered these parting thoughts on what the future hold for his artistry, writing, and advocacy: "I'm currently co-directing a performance group of about 20 men serving life-sentences, known as the Artistic Ensemble at San Quentin State Prison, and we're gearing up for a possible performance in November. So I'm focusing a bit on that. As for counsel to emerging Latino young men and boys who may be interested to follow in the path as writers and artists? They must feed their creative passion as much as possible. Go out and see galleries, performances, readings etc. Learn the fundamental elements and skills of ones' art early; it'll save a lot of time down the line. And practice, practice, practice. Also, connect with others that are a part of the local art scene or create one if there isn't one in your hood."