

Cultural Arte for Social Change

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It has been said many times, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement was as much a cultural revolution and renaissance as a political one. As the pan-Latino population in America has grown in diversity and national origin, so has the body of cultural arte and creative expression. Community leaders and people from all walks of life began reaching back to their ancestral roots and cultural traditions, recalibrating their human compass to inform their history and place in the modern world. Poetry, literature, ceremony, danza, music and the broad expressions of cultural arts were rediscovered as the indispensable reservoir of historical exposition, political agency, heritage, learning, ingenuity, healing, revelation, health and wholeness for individuals, families and communities.

Building on the traditions and historical precedent of the Chicano Movement set by such cultural icons as Corky Gonzales, Lalo Guerrero, Guillermo Gomez Pena, Ester Hernandez, Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino, Malaquias and Jose Montoya of the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF), contemporary inter-generational community activists are embracing the broad realm of cultural arts as a vehicle for building community, education, political agency, and promoting social change.

There are a few cutting-edge organizations that have built their work on the “La Cultura Cura” (Culture Cures) model to inform all aspects of their strategies and practices when working with male Latino youth. To complete the goals of our “Community Voices” education project, Arte Publico Press partnered with the Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, Homies Unidos, Inside Out Writers, National Latino Fatherhood and Family Institute (NLFFI), Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore, Office of Restorative Justice, Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries, La Plazita Institute, and Gathering for Justice to reach poets, writers, artists, and leading community practitioners who have firsthand experience dealing with the disparities of the juvenile and criminal justice system in America.

Nane Alejandrez, national leader in the community peace movement and founder of Barrios Unidos, points to the centrality of cultura and the arts in their theory of change. It is especially important in our restorative justice advocacy and leadership work within the juvenile detention system and adult prisons:

“The arts in their various forms remain for Barrios Unidos today a potent means of expressing cultura, communicating experience, developing political awareness, underscoring themes of evolving identity and promoting popular education. Art, poetry, music, dance and creative writing have provided Barrios Unidos and its adherents a way to share experiences and ideas that have been historically denied to Chicanos through mainstream media and education. Barrios Unidos art exhibits at various gatherings have consistently brought together styles and expressions from the streets, prisons and religious institutions reflecting various Latino or indigenous traditions, Mexican muralist influences, Chicano and African iconography, tattoo art and other creative genres. The central place of the arts in BU’s work has included featuring a broad range of performance, writing, folkloric

and film arts traditions as well, including Aztec danza, folklórico, break and hip-hop, as well as poetry and creative writing, craft making, and other expressive mediums such as film documentary and photojournalism. Convinced about culture's essential role in organizing and education work that seeks to bridge inter-generational, communal and inter-cultural divides, BU founders have historically drawn deeply on artistic expression to promote peace work among community youth." (The History of Barrios Unidos, Healing Community Violence, Arte Publico Press, University of Houston, 2007).