

**La Plazita Institute**  
**A Conversation with Albino García Jr.**  
**Reported by: Frank de Jesus Acosta**

I first met Albino García, Jr. while he was working as a senior staff person at Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos in the mid-1990s. He was the person who took the organization's *movimiento*<sup>1</sup> values and principles (which were philosophically rooted in the cultural sovereignty of *Chicanismo*<sup>2</sup>), and built a change strategy and core curriculum for Barrios Unidos based on *La Cultura Cura*. He drew heavily on the work of Jerry Tello's framework (highlighted earlier in this volume), particularly the National Compadres Network's (NCN) *Joven Noble* (Noble Young Man) model featuring the traditions of talking circles and ceremony. I vividly remember Albino telling me about this work and its associated challenges back when he was still freshly going through much of the healing and transformation of living a sober and principled life himself—literally learning to live the philosophy.

It is a true test for the gang organizer (and an absolute requirement of the work) to look wounded and lost young brothers and sisters in the eye from a place of integrity. It is difficult but essential work in turn to challenge these young people to change their ways, based on life principles that are buried so deep inside their damaged hearts and souls they cannot even comprehend their presence within. Chicago native Albino García, Jr. understands this challenge and charge personally and profoundly, based on his longstanding leadership on the front lines of Chicano gang prevention and intervention work in and around his ancestral home state of Albuquerque, NM.<sup>3</sup> In a conversation to inform the writing of my 2007 book on the history of the Barrios Unidos movement, Albino shared the following thoughts and perspectives on the issues and his work to address them during La Plazita Institute's incipency:

The codes of the gang and streets are crystal clear. I believed we needed to set our own clear standards by getting the young people's *palabra* (word or oath) that they were going to do what it took to change destructive behaviors and to learn a new way. We wanted their *palabra* of loyalty to the values of *cultura* (culture), a commitment to try new things and work hard, to have respect for school traditions and sacred rituals, showing *ganans* (desire), personal responsibility and an obligation that transcended colors.

The youth had to understand that they had to give up something [allegiance to a counterfeit culture and destructive behaviors] to get something in return [the beautiful birthrights of their heritage and an opportunity for new life]. The only evidence we had to back up our promise of a better life, was our own personal example. It was one thing to design a curriculum; it was another to train everyone and get them on the same page. I felt staff had to know the curriculum cold and certainly had to model what they were trying to teach. We had some folks working or volunteering at Barrios (Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos, or BU) who were still walking in both worlds (the world of the streets

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish word for Movement, as in the context of a political movement.

<sup>2</sup> *Chicanismo* is street vernacular for the notion of Chicano identity, based on the culture, language, style, and comportment of 1960s-era Mexican American youth.

<sup>3</sup> While raised in Chicago, Albino's family has a longstanding history in Northern New Mexico.

from which they came and the world we were trying to create at BU). We wanted our staff and volunteers to not only teach our methods of change, but also to model our values and principles in their own behavior—in essence, to walk-the-talk.<sup>4</sup>

Teaching the philosophy and principles of *La Cultura Cura*<sup>5</sup> from a place of deep understanding and credibility, demands the instructor be a dedicated practitioner: a living, breathing example of someone who has faced his own brokenness and frailties but who has nevertheless evolved. By offering medicine that they find within themselves, buried deep inside a damaged heart and soul, the dedicated practitioner can help to create a pathway enabling still-troubled souls around them to realize their own humanity and a better way of life. Albino put it well, when he told me in one of our conversations some years ago, “in healing, we discover the sacred light within oneself, becoming able to see the sacred light in others.”

As I reflect on my conversations with Albino for this book, I recall our first meeting. He greeted me with the *barrio* handshake, at once showing a curiosity and an inquiring glare that could only come from one Homeboy sizing up another. I do not think Albino cared one bit about my then professional standing as a leading representative of The California Wellness Foundation, Barrios Unidos’ major funder at the time. Instead, he was looking into my heart and my soul; he was trying to take stock of me as a man and one of the still-relatively few Chicanos back then (it was the late 1990s) in a position to meaningfully resource our community.

I would like to think he came to determine that I came from a place of *cultura*<sup>6</sup> and *espíritu*.<sup>7</sup> It bodes well that he still trusts me (as a scribe of our community’s history and contemporary reality in America) to tell authentic stories for our people, and to share the work of La Plazita on the public record. Albino is by heart a story teller in his own right and a holy man (a Sundancer and Ceremonial Chief of Apache and Chichimeca heritage). For the purposes of this publication, I asked him the same three research questions that were posed to Jerry Tello, whose leading work with the National Compadres Network (NCN) is also featured in this volume. When I previewed the foundational questions that were intended to drive our interview, he laughed disarmingly and said they were a bit heady and compound. Nevertheless, he agreed to just start talking, sharing stories, and reflecting upon his work with the hope that his replies would meet my investigation’s purposes. Following is what resulted from our exchange.

### ***Conversation:***

#### **“Why must American society better understand and respond to the social and economic disparities faced by Latino men and boys?”**

Albino began his response to my initial question by posing a rhetorical question of his own to ‘American society’ at large. “If we, as a collective people truly believe in the basic tenets of equity, justice, freedom, and pluralism (*E Pluribus Unum*),”<sup>8</sup> he queried, “then, how can we stand by idly when nearly one quarter of our people are living in such disparity?” His profundity

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<sup>4</sup> Author interview of Albino García, Jr., 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *La Cultura Cura* is Spanish for the English phrase “culture is the cure.” It is a foundational concept of the growing field of U.S.-based Latino restorative justice advocates and practitioners.

<sup>6</sup> *Cultura* is the Spanish word for culture.

<sup>7</sup> *Espíritu* is the Spanish word for spirit.

<sup>8</sup> Latin for the democratic concept: “Out of Many, One.”

and precision in response was not unexpected, but it was provocative and unusually powerful. This is the essence of what it takes to be an authentic leader of a people or a movement—clarity of purpose and voice; and Albino García, Jr. is such a leader.

It is important for every individual of integrity to acknowledge the objective truth. Despite the values our nation professes to the world, the daily reality of life for most Chicanos, Latinos, Native people, African Americans, and other people of color living in the “United States,” has very seldom reflected the full benefit of these ideals. Albino believes it is important for mainstream White America to understand what this does to us as people of color. Latinos of Native descent fundamentally value equity and justice as part of our ancestral cultural heritage. The daily expression of these cultural values is important to our well-being just as they are to people from any other culture. What those involved in the *La Cultura Cura* movement are doing is healing the human and communal damage that generations of oppression and disparity have done while reawakening, teaching, and living more progressive human and social virtues. This is important not only for the survival and benefit of our people, but also for the well-being of *all* people.

As we delve into our interview exchange on the reasons why America must act to better address the needs of Latino and other men and boys of color, Albino shares a story. It concerns a Chicano and Native 18-year old young man who only recently came to La Plazita Institute (LPI), located in Albuquerque, New Mexico to seek redemption and support. Albino warns me: “This isn’t a pretty story with a happy ending.” Nevertheless, he went on to say, “what the story reflected, is the brokenness, anger, desperation and nihilism we encounter too much in our *barrios*<sup>9</sup> and reservations here in New Mexico, and throughout the U.S.”

As the story went, the young man came to LPI as the result of the organization’s community-wide restorative justice work in and around Albuquerque. Owing in large part to LPI’s effective advocacy in the community and the work of allied groups, where non-serious offenses are involved, young at-risk Latinos like the one in question are now increasingly being referred directly to leading community-based support centers, like LPI, instead of being incarcerated in juvenile corrections facilities (as was the local practice for many decades).

The youth in question was a beneficiary of this important reform in process and punishment. Because his infractions were relatively few and minor, he was accordingly assigned by the juvenile court to participate in LPI’s healing and developmental probation program. Like any other young person or adult that comes to the Institute for service or restoration, the young man received care, instruction, counseling, and service learning opportunities in a supportive environment. But, despite showing general improvement, the young LPI newcomer kept falling into troubling behavior, expressing deeply rooted anger, and continuing to be involved with the negative influences in his neighborhood.

An elder at LPI, who knew the youth’s family and has an ear to the community beat, pulled the young man aside. Out of concern, the Elder asked the youth how he was doing, mentioning certain rumors others had been broadcasting about the young man getting back into the things that had initially produced his troubles with the law. The youth’s response was volatile and immediate. He responded with unreasonable anger and even the threat of retaliatory violence. After receiving counsel from several LPI staff and volunteer healers, the youngster eventually

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<sup>9</sup> *Barrios* is the Spanish word for neighborhoods.

ended up in Albino's office. The meeting was difficult, but it went well enough and, with great hope, the young man was returned to the program.

But the story did not end there. Though the troubled youth seemed to move forward with this life, something else was going on behind the scenes. Coming from a very poor home, the young man had surreptitiously taken to illegally selling marijuana, in order to make ends meet and help financially at home. His parents and family were unaware; and the extent of the problem was masked during the ensuing months, even as the young man delved ever more deeply into illicit, illegal activity that clearly violated his court ordered probation. Unfortunately, the worst finally caught up with the young offender, and the moment that every community worker and advocate dreads came to be.

Late one night Albino received a call from the young man's crying mother saying that the police were looking for her son as a suspect in a violent attack on another individual. It turned out, the young man had been cornered by a local gang leader and, in fear for his life, put a hatchet in the neck of his attacker. Presently, the young man who perpetrated the crime is in custody. Fortunately, the person who he injured survived the attack, though not without severe lasting wounds. LPI continues to provide support to the mother, as well as counseling to the offending youth, who turned himself into authorities. Advocates are standing by the youngster, fighting for his freedom under a plea of self-defense. He faces a long stretch of prison time if he is found guilty. The case is still pending.

Perhaps in order to avoid facing our own pain and discomfort about cases like this one, many in America, including even those close to our communities and their issues, romanticize the prospects of redeeming and restoring young men like the one just featured in Albino's story. But real life is not so tidy and kind. Working with at-risk young people produces constant back and forth successes and challenges. The pathway to peace is rarely an even and immediate one for these youth and teens. There are no excuses for their propensity to struggle and fail along their pursuit of the path; but there are valid explanations given the cultures of poverty, crime, and violence these young Americans have inherited through no real fault of their own. Working with these young people, accordingly, requires an unusually healthy dose of love and patience, tolerance and grace.

As Albino García sees it, "regardless of how far our young people fall, we must keep working to heal and guide them, to offer the medicine that will lead them to their authentic culture and sacred self. We need to bring them back into the circle of family and community." The assumption underlying much mainstream institutional response to Latino and Native youth is that they are so far detached from what is good and right, they are not worthy. But for those of us who know and love these children and young ones, who know their innate sacredness and potential, this is an unacceptable injustice and a failure of the entire society. When proper nurturing, rooted in love, touches these young people where their traditional identity and culture reside, a beautifully remarkable blossoming of humanity occurs.

Albino points out that many of the recognized elders and emerging leaders of the *La Cultura Cura* and related movements (e.g., those focused on supporting and advancing community peace, restorative justice, immigrants' rights, and men and boys of color), had to be transformed themselves owing to their own issues and demons. In fact, many of the foremost leaders in this space, like Albino, are themselves recovered (or recovering) addicts, former gang members, ex-offenders, and/or at-risk, disaffected youth. They are living examples of the power of *La Cultura*

*Cura*, working to create the path to support a growing inter-generational cross-cultural army of leaders, multi-disciplinary practitioners, teachers, healers, counselors, and grassroots activists—all in service to the cause of community building and peace.

**The “best practice models” profiled in the book series are all self-identified as “culturally-based,” and rooted in what they call, “La Cultura Cura.” What is the Evidence that these so called “La Cultura Cura” best practice strategies actually work?<sup>10</sup>**

As our conversation continues, Albino reminds me that he is only one of many elders and pioneers whose work has helped to shape the *La Cultura Cura* movement. He readily acknowledges both his mentors and his contemporaries in the field, such as Jerry Tello, Nane Alejandrez, Luis Rodríguez, Magdaleno Rose Avila, and Henry Domínguez among others. All of these leaders, guided by the values and principles of *La Cultura Cura*, have made fundamental contributions to furthering the knowledge base beyond what Latino activists have traditionally been taught through our grassroots organizing, movement building, youth advocacy, and community institutional development efforts. The journey for these pioneers has not been easy, working for change in a chauvinistic social environment that still largely considers Latinos to be an inferior sub-culture.

As Albino recounts it to me, for most of the past thirty years since his and others’ work in the field commenced, the *cultura* medicine these leaders employed in schools, correctional systems, health and social service systems, churches, and community settings were not fully recognized or given legitimacy. In effect, they advanced the field’s substance and legitimacy not because of any institutional backing or support, but, rather, owing to their own perseverance in the face of significant institutional resistance. “When we all started,” Albino explains, “we didn’t have a construct or model that organized the language, translated the concepts, or established a framework of working principles; we were building a body of new knowledge as we worked...

Many of the earlier practitioners of *La Cultura Cura* worked together and with field leaders like Jerry Tello to translate our *cultura* into understandable language, concepts, and a comprehensive framework that could be used intra-culturally and cross-culturally to transform lives, systems, and policies. We wanted to create equitable, just, and life affirming communities for boys and men of color, and all people.”

As reported here in the previous chapter, Jerry Tello of the National Compadres Network (NCN) has spent the last forty years developing, teaching, testing, applying, learning, innovating, and concretizing the *La Cultura Cura* model. Tello’s seminal *Joven Noble* curriculum served as a guide post in the field for operationalizing the model’s philosophy, values, principles, and practices into an accessible and applicable body of knowledge. The subsequent, allied work of pioneering groups such as Barrios Unidos and La Plazita, founded by “alumni” of the NCN

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<sup>10</sup> Following this article is a collection of La Plazita Institute background materials that represent the organization’s body of work rooted in the *La Cultura Cura* framework. Albino chose to focus his interviews for this publication on the restorative justice work of La Plazita as the prism from which to understand the core values and principles that guide all of its comprehensive strategies, practices, programs.

model, have laid the foundation for what is now increasingly accepted best practice and “evidence-based work” in the men and boys of color field.

Indeed NCN created among the nation’s first model frameworks for transforming at-risk Latino and Native American individuals, families, communities, and systems. In recent years, this work has been widely recognized as evidence-based; and has been shown to produce unusually effective outcomes that are difficult to match via other approaches to youth development and restoration. La Plazita has adapted this philosophy and framework to its local community in New Mexico.

A quick snapshot shows that La Plazita serves Albuquerque’s most vulnerable youth and adult populations, and their families. Participants are primarily of Latino, Chicano, and Native American heritage. Many have been previously incarcerated and/or gang involved, and the vast majority come from families with multi-generational legacies of poverty, gang involvement, and addiction. LPI is recognized throughout the state of New Mexico for reducing violence, addiction, incarceration and recidivism amongst the most overrepresented youth and adults in detention, including those considered high-risk.

One of the reasons for the persistence of these problems in Latino communities in and around Albuquerque, Albino tells me, is that too many of the people served by LPI fall through the cracks of conventional social services institutions. Typically, he observes, social services agencies operate in silos that are disconnected from the whole of who these young people are as human beings. Too often, they treat the individual in isolation from his culture, community, and clan. LPI serves entire families and kinship circles with culturally-based supports that facilitate both collective healing and development of the individual’s core identity and well-being.

A more underlying reason why the problems LPI treats persist is related to racial segregation and poverty. The primary communities served by LPI are located in South Valley (a locality situated in the Southwest quadrant of Bernalillo County), which is overwhelmingly Latino.<sup>11</sup> As we continue our exchange, Albino informs me that South Valley has long been a regional center of Latino community suffering and hardship. Many South Valley residents are of extremely low socio-economic status with all the attendant disparity-related risk factors that typically follow that designation.

Above all, local residents experience poor health, inadequate education, and irregular, low-paid employment. Over two-thirds of South Valley’s children thus live in households with incomes below the Federal Poverty Level. Fully 25 percent of the overall South Valley population presently lives in poverty.<sup>12</sup> Three local water sources had to be closed by federal regulators in the 1980s owing to high toxicity levels; yet, still today, the area remains on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s [Superfund](#) site list with on-going remedial actions to contain, capture and reduce concentrations of the contaminant plume within the local ground water.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, alternatives to gangs, drugs, and crime are few and far between where local Latino youth are concerned. As a result, positive spaces and places are badly needed, to provide

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<sup>11</sup> 80 percent of South Valley’s population is Latino: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Valley,\\_New\\_Mexico](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Valley,_New_Mexico).

<sup>12</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Valley,\\_New\\_Mexico](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Valley,_New_Mexico).

<sup>13</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Superfund\\_sites\\_in\\_New\\_Mexico](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Superfund_sites_in_New_Mexico).

local youth and their families with needed comfort, opportunity, support, and hope. LPI is described as a cultural “hub” for area youth, adults and families who attend weekly ceremonies and programs in education, arts, health, conservation, and entrepreneurship (in product and service areas like organic farming, ceramics, silkscreen design, and community health services). The LPI organizational framework flows entirely from the *La Cultura Cura* construct. The community that LPI serves otherwise lacks authentic, culturally-based resources aimed at remedying its social and economic challenges.

Owing to the nature and extent of the problems facing local youth in LPI’s service zone, comprehensive, rather than isolated interventions are required. I ask Albino to tell me about the breadth of LPI’s programs, strategies, and activities that respond to this reality. But Albino tells me the Institute’s restorative justice work with juveniles serves as the essential prism from which one can glean the core values and principles that guide all of LPI’s work. So he focuses his comments on that important body of work.

### ***LPI Restorative Justice Approach***

Albino García, Jr. does not believe that America’s juvenile and criminal justice systems can be the leaders or architects of their own reform towards a restorative justice model. In his view, the principal leaders and stakeholders of that universe are too wedded to conventional detainment and policing practices that are fundamentally at odds with the best interests of Latinos and other men and boys of color across the nation. At the same time, Albino acknowledges in his exchange with me that an authentic partnership must ultimately be forged to constructively engage law enforcement, its leadership, and rank-and-file personnel as members of the communal family.

Albino tells me that producing the space for such an alignment with traditionally hostile law enforcement leaders and agencies requires a holistic approach to cross-cultural (re)education, training, and planning. Cultivating trust within a community that has been largely “mis-served” by local law enforcement and justice practices requires substantial healing, reorientation, and trust-building across all sectors. The task is not easy, as Albino confides; but it is essential work that LPI has begun to undertake by beginning to introduce select law enforcement personnel to the healing powers of *La Cultura Cura*, using ritual and inclusive dialogues to advance collective support for restorative justice’s values, principles, and application in real life situations.

In this work, LPI has played the essential role of intermediary in what Albino calls an environment of “hateful complexity.” It is no simple endeavor to erase the legacy of injustice in sentencing and mass incarceration. Where Latinos and other communities of color are concerned (and especially our at-risk youth), the law enforcement, justice, and education systems have been more adversarial than cooperative. The dance of objectivity and neutrality in facilitating the creation of a new form of relationship between community and commanding institutions like the police, the courts, and the schools is difficult for any grassroots advocacy organization. LPI nevertheless hosts monthly meetings with law enforcement and court officials, as well as education and civic leaders in an atmosphere of *Cultura*—in a communal and ceremonial fashion.

These unique and powerful exchanges bring together all sectors within the community and local law enforcement to seek mutual understanding and enhanced cooperation based on restorative,

rather than punitive approaches to the greatest extent possible. The sessions include at-risk youth and adults, family and interested community members, juvenile justice court staff, judges, juvenile probation officers, prosecutor and district attorney staff, public defenders, correctional facility leaders, education system leaders, and local safety net providers.

This groundbreaking work establishes the space for finding collective voice in support of the restorative justice model. It is not merely a one-way street designed to attend solely to the pain and needs of Latino youth and community members. On the contrary, the sessions invite reciprocity and authenticity that extends to the significant benefit of participating local and county officials and other civic and community leaders, most of whom are not residents of South Valley. Albino tells me this is to address what he calls “trauma on the institutional side.” By this he is referring to the layers of draconian laws of recent decades, such as minimum mandatory sentencing requirements and forced youth transfers to adult prison facilities that actually preclude institutional agents of the justice system from contributing to the healing, restoration, and corrections policy reforms that are so badly needed in our times.

García tells me that, metaphorically and ironically, the punitive system that has prevailed over the decades until now effectively handcuffs the criminal justice system’s own agents from exercising natural human instincts of compassion and reason in the dispensation of their duties to protect and to serve. It systematically compels these actors to take decisions that real life evidence makes clearer and clearer are at odds with the basic tenets of our democracy and common sense. The current, restrictive state of affairs in conventional law enforcement and the administration of justice thus prevents groups like LPI from joining forces with sympathetic district attorneys, prosecutors, judges, probation officers, and defense attorneys. Presently, even professional law enforcement leaders and practitioners of goodwill, heart, and conscience cannot follow restorative values or avenues; instead, they are compelled to follow only the color of law.

Gratefully, the swing of the political pendulum has opened a window to reform; and this in turn has allowed LPI and other leading groups to open up new space for experimentation through innovations like the alternative youth sentencing practices the local courts have introduced in recent years and the powerful circles of community and law enforcement leaders coming together in *La Cultura Cura* exchanges under LPI’s auspices. Albino tells me that what makes these changes possible is mutuality. He underscores the need for both sides—community and law enforcement—to examine their own appropriate degrees of culpability, responsibility, and accountability for the present situation’s prolongation. Ownership for individual and collective accountability are cornerstone tenets of restorative justice.

Nevertheless, none of this means that culpability is necessarily an even proposition in the relationship between local police and law enforcement, on one hand, and aggrieved families and community interests on the other. The reality is that virtually all of the conventional power in terms of resourcing, authority, and force resides in the police, rather than in the people. And this reality is further reinforced by the very depth of local challenges and disadvantages confronting LPI, its service population, and community partners relative to law enforcement and justice issues. The data speak for themselves: Albuquerque holds the dubious distinction of having among the nation’s highest ratios of school drop out to criminal detention rates.

The singular, unifying goal for the restorative justice movement is not assigning blame, but rather changing social reality. LPI sees itself therefore not as a social service agency or even as a social justice organization—though it would not be unfair to characterize its role in either

context. Above all, LPI sees itself as transformational change agent. In order to move its restorative justice work forward, LPI deploys its full cadre of programs and services aimed at both juvenile justice reform and broader strategies to build change leading to the greater social, political, and economic empowerment of Latino and allied indigenous peoples across New Mexico and the Southwestern United States.

To complement its role as a regional intermediary and catalyst, LPI activities include services that:

- provide traditional healing and cultural services to incarcerated Latino and Native youth and adults through purification sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies within various correctional institutions (including the Juvenile Detention Center, Metropolitan County Jail, and Santa Fe Adult Detention; as well as on site at La Plazita Institute;
- enhance and expand outreach, support, and mentoring groups, educational programming, community engagement and healing circles to high-risk, adjudicated, post-incarcerated, local youth and their families;
- bolster opportunities for youth, adults, inmates, ex-offenders, and families to engage in meaningful individual and collective advancement through education and job training programs, professional and trade associations, policy advocacy networks, entrepreneurship circles, and language, arts and crafts projects;
- advance collective impact work with policy makers, judicial system representatives, and community members to reduce race-based disparities among Latino, Chicano & Native American youth and adult inmates.

Following below are brief overviews of LPI's core programs and priorities, and associated descriptions that reflect its broad range of institutional modalities.

***Rudolfo Anaya Urban Barrio Youth Corps*** – A tangible sign of endorsement and recognition relative to the LPI's work, based on evidence of its impacts and benefits in the local community resides in its most recent program innovation—the Rudolfo Anaya Urban Barrio Youth Corps. With financial support totaling \$50,000 from the national organization Hispanics in Philanthropy, La Plazita Institute, has established its important new program center for youth and young men ages 16-25. The program seeks to engage adjudicated, disconnected or otherwise at-risk young people exhibiting promising and enterprising service to their community. The intent is to help these young people build on their innovations and service inclinations by providing them with tangible, hands-on training and work experience; as well as access to transformative holistic learning experiences, networks, and opportunities.

Program participation requires involved youth to complete conservation service projects on ancestral Tribal lands and water ways, located on the historic Town of Atrisco, Land Grant-Merced. La Plazita fields crews of Latino, Chicano, and Mexican participants, comprised in each instance of four members and two leaders. The project supports community-based conservation efforts to protect and restore local habitats and natural areas, enhance water quality, and promote traditional and cultural urban farming and agricultural practices. It also provides transformative educational, professional and technical training to Latino youth and community leaders on sustainable and indigenous agricultural practices.

Indeed, the Corps experience consciously exposes participating youth to applied research, community engagement, and advocacy techniques that help them to support locally-based

community agricultural projects. The goal is to enhance their stewardship capacities on public and private agricultural lands in order to enhance local water quality, and to maintain and reinvigorate agricultural productivity across the region. This component of the Barrio Youth Corps program seeks to address local inequities by protecting the health and safety of those involved in food and farms systems. The project also promotes education to establish reductions (or elimination) of toxic materials in agricultural production processes.

***AgriCultura Network*** – La Plazita is co-founder of the AgriCultura Network, which contracts with Albuquerque Public Schools to provide quality organic food to students, schools, and community members who may not otherwise have access to healthy food products. In 2015, La Plazita negotiated a new contract with the Bernalillo County Youth Services Center to become a local vendor providing detained youth with certified organic produce as part of an effort to make healthy meals available daily to these young people.

In addition, LPI's *La Cosecha*<sup>14</sup> Program delivers organic parcels each week to 250 community members and families. The project is committed to maintaining certified organic status for the benefit of low-income families and those youth and elders who are further marginalized through incarceration. The goal is to develop infrastructure for a new community-supported agricultural program (CSA) at three new farm sites recently donated by local residents, heirs, and community organizations to bolster urban agricultural systems, and promote economic and community development within Bernalillo County and the Town of Atrisco.

The desired outcomes of this remarkable body of work and innovation are worth enumerating. They include:

- Reduction of race-based and ethnic disparities among Latino and Native youth through engagement in critical prevention work and collaborative policy reform efforts involving local, state and national stakeholders.
- Development and implementation of culturally-appropriate strategies and best practices to reform the juvenile and criminal justice systems.
- Provision of meaningful and sustainable job opportunities that expose young people—and especially urban, tribal and minority youth—to the natural world and related career opportunities in conservation, agriculture and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.
- Reinvigoration of agricultural systems, as well as economic and community development efforts through programs that focus on poverty alleviation, food sovereignty, social justice, and land and water reclamation
- Restoration of local urban youth's connection to their agricultural heritage through social enterprise and entrepreneurship.
- Augmentation of local families' and youth's access and affordability relative to organic produce through a community-supported agricultural program

***Multiple Worlds*** – The Multiple Worlds Community Leadership Program (MWLP) is offered to anyone who qualifies for participation in LPI programs and services. The MWLP (see the curriculum overview included later in this volume as resource material) is rooted in the core values of community culture, wisdom, and history. The program, specifically designed for youth,

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<sup>14</sup> *La Cosecha* is the Spanish term for: the Harvest.

adults, and elders, is based on the premise that everyone has the inherent power to maneuver in and out of a variety of environments; thus creating the concept of Multiple Worlds.

The experience creates space for youth participants, facilitators, and elders to pursue a journey of self-discovery leading to an enhanced sense of identity, ownership, and belonging among individuals that have lost touch with, or been denied teachings about, their core cultural identity. The program highlights five centers, or “worlds,” of focus to establish a context for lifelong learning and growth. In essence, this is a journey to gain understanding of oneself, first by unlearning what is harmful, and then by re-learning what is innate in the individual’s ancestral/cultural world view. These worlds encompass the following meanings and purpose:

- *First World* – Look internally for answers, seek the authentic self;
- *Second World* –Treat each other as mutually linked and dependent—*In Lak’ech Hala Ken*<sup>15</sup> (you are the other me, I the other you);
- *Third World* – Extend *In Lak’ech* to others outside of your normal *cultura* and circles of influence;
- *Fourth World* – Understand systems and institutions for the purpose of moving and strengthening our world;
- *Fifth World* – Maintain well-being of self, family, community, systems, and society.

Within each stage of the MWLP curricula, the theme of spirituality, civic engagement, community, diversity, and leadership is addressed and defined through the lens of *La Cultura Cura*. The curriculum is intended to reconnect youth, adults, and elders within the Latino, Chicano, and Native-American communities through: rites of passage; learning rituals; ceremony; and symbols. LPI’s process takes participants through a journey of self-discovery that helps them to develop empathy for others, while at the same time providing them with the nuanced skills required to maneuver effectively across different worlds.

Participating youth become stronger and more informed representatives of their own culture within these multiple worlds, thus enhancing their sense of self and their potential for community and civic leadership. They are challenged to think critically, and to develop their own definitions of leadership, community, service, and public responsibility. The main thrust of this work is to expand participating young people’s world views beyond being mere passive participants in their lives and society. Instead, this work seeks to encourage participating youth to become effective agents of change.

### **What are key challenges, opportunities, and priorities for the Latino Boys and Men, boys and men of color in your community and nationwide?**

In the final stages of my interview with Albino to inform this publication, he turned to my third and last interview question not with a story or another description of a comprehensive LPI program strategy, but rather with a passionate desire to focus on the Institute’s articulated target outcomes for work in Restorative Justice. These, he told me, are generally reflective of outcomes that would surface in any community working comprehensively to change the disparities faced by men and boys of color. Such outcome goals are reflective of the systems change, policy

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<sup>15</sup> Ancient Nahuatl—the language of Mexico’s indigenous Aztec tribal communities, meaning “You are the other me; I the other you.”

change, community change, and social change that leaders of the *La Cultura Cura* all ultimately seek.

What is distinctive about LPI's work, like the work of Jerry Tello that is highlighted herein in the previous chapter, is that it is increasingly well-documented on the public record in ways that promise to ensure its future study, replication, and adaptation across the national field of youth empowerment advocacy. Albino's

outcomes list (included below), although simple, identifies the fundamental elements that provide for the equity, justice, humanity, self-sufficiency, and dignity of millions of people in our nation who have been systematically denied their inalienable birthrights to these and other public goods. The challenge for us now, is to assess the waning state of our democracy in America and to apply our collective assets to advance needed changes in society that better serve both men and boys of color, and in the process, *all* Americans.

### ***LPI Restorative Justice Proposed Outcomes, Albuquerque, New Mexico***

- Build institutional and organizational collaboration through training and coaching so that all partners are aware of the special concerns of the Latino youth population, systemic barriers, as well as assets and strengths of the community.
- Improve equity in racial, ethnic, health, education and economic disparities amongst Latino youth in Bernalillo County.
- Become an evidence based model of successful social entrepreneurship in how to engage disconnected youth to positive and healthy supportive systems, thereby improving overall health and wellbeing through educational economic enterprise.
- Advance Positive Youth Engagement: Participants demonstrate resiliency, attitudinal and/or belief-system changes (e.g., sense of positive belief in future, positive self-esteem, connection to social, educational, workforce and community networks, goal-setting).
- Promote GED/diploma completion while serving in Barrio Youth Corps and/or establish education plan within 30 days after finishing the program.
- Discourage court and criminal involvement (technical violation of supervised release, diversion program, conviction, revocation, and re-incarceration).
- Maintain a drug free status or engage in drug treatment and/or substance abuse education and if positive, successfully participate in community supervision sanctions, alternatives to detention or other diversion programs.
- Complete job readiness training, professional, trade and technical skill development (including soft and transferable skills).
- Increase capacity of Community Supported Agricultural Program (CSA) developments, through the provision and acquisition of resources and farm operation materials, establish strong coordinated and aligned efforts for La Plazita Gardens and establish first cohort of members, shareholders and overall planning and infrastructure.
- Distribute locally grown, organic produce, generating new produce sales.
- Create mechanisms for families to apply SNAP and WIC benefits to purchase produce.
- Recruit 20 households to participate in CSA's pilot season, with the help of partner organizations.

- Recruit community support for the project to ensure second season capacity and to raise community awareness.
- Provide all promotional materials in both English and Spanish.
- Increase awareness and stakeholder support of pilot CSA and strengthen efforts with newsletters, information, resource materials, interactive education activities including community cooking classes and events at La Plazita Gardens.
- Strengthen capacity within Bernalillo County criminal justice, behavioral health and related social services systems to reduce adjudication and recidivism overall and address economic, education and health disparities.
- Build collaborative linkages among community services relevant to this youthful population, their families and social networks.