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, folklorico, 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).