

# THIRTY YEARS OF ESPERANZA — WHAT DO WE WANT NOW?

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*Editor's Note: The Esperanza first opened its doors in January of 1987. Susan was the Esperanza's first director. She was able to serve only during the first year and subsequently moved to Norway but has always maintained a presence at the Esperanza.*

To start with the future, I will begin with the past. Thirty years ago, I stood and officially opened the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center together with Maria Berriozábal and Amy Freeman Lee. This was an act of faith, hope and love by hundreds of people in San Antonio.

San Antonio activists worked together to make that happen. Already in 1986 groups and individuals carried furniture, books, cleaning rags and repaired sewage lines so that people like you and me, would have a “political” and “public” home in San Antonio. Children played and then took their naps while parents toiled to fix up the building on S. Flores, and through working together a community was formed. New friends, new faces, several causes and a place to fill with creativity, dialogue and work. A public home, a home for sharing in workshops of art and play for network and growth.

Together with other visionaries. After some brief periods of volunteer leadership, Graciela Sánchez has been the torch bearer for over 25 years. Gracias, Graciela, board members, volunteers and all staff members since then.

In 1986 people like me needed a home. People like me were the generation which never dreamed of leaving home, but learned to “make do”, which is a strength but also led me to never know what choices I could put for in life; as a woman, as a worker and as a citizen. My story is that—call it destiny— it took me to other parts of the world to work. Many others of my generation moved away because they reaped the benefits of the civil rights movement and equal opportunity policies, and could qualify to enter universities which previous to these rights, had never been accessible for bright kids from low income households to attend.

Many returned to San Antonio, too, in the 80's and had no place to go and do political work. I recall performance artist and MacArthur prize winner, Guillermo Gomez Peña once said at the first “MacArturos” seminar in San Antonio at the Esperanza (1997) “we are political orphans”. That really resonated with me

from that day on. And then, in 1986 – 87 it had been true. There was no collective meeting space for us to know who we were and how to network. No, I am wrong here. There was already the Interchange Network, a network which gathered activists, both religious and civil, at the St. Paul's cafe, on the east side of downtown. A variety of communities, but not any broad mixture of organizations representing African-American and Mexican American issues.

At the start of the Esperanza, it was important for the ethnic groups for civil rights and justice, to begin to work side by side. We wanted a space in order to know about each others ambitions, visions and resources.

We needed a space to do our work, gather, share and learn together about justice and social issues, health, education, economic issues and political issues. We needed to learn how to connect the dots and build alliances where it was possible and desired.

We needed a physical space to create individual and common visions and manifest these through the power of the many genres of art so we could be able to see and be our public selves; formulate our political identities and act as citizens and residents, enabled beyond the realms of our individuality, family and friends.

It belongs to a democracy, for people from all walks of life to be able to act and communicate in the public sphere, and not limit that arena to political parties and public.

## What do we want now?

The present is formed by the past. The future is unpredictable. We do know that what we do now, gives form for the future. As of January 20, 2017, the United States will be in dire need of building connections among advocates of equal opportunity and social and economic justice. Equal opportunity in work life, in education and for health care. As of January 20, 2017, we risk that civil rights and the quality of our earth will be weakened, if not destroyed. To know what we want, it is the time to reflect and learn from other nations and leaders like Nelson Mandela and Cesar Chavez, who mobilized for the power of justice in utmost adversary conditions.

We can also look to the stories of our own ancestors. I have a story of hope with my grandparents as the “stars”. He and she met after the Mexican revolution during the time when Mexicans had to wander across the dry land of Northern Mexico and move



The first banner of the Esperanza hangs behind Cindy Duda (left) of the Interchange Network and Susan Guerra, Esperanza's first Director addressing a community gathering at 1305 N. Flores, the first location of the Esperanza.

towards new communities gathering where there were opportunities for work and housing. Towards San Cuilmas or now known as our lovely city of San Antonio. Wanderers, with only the threads on their backs, but hopeful, in need of building their future without any home or material goods.

They had their bodies as tools of hope to work, build and grow food. They had their hearts of faith, which gave them vision when the external, real world seemed harsh and empty. They knew, and taught me, that when you have nothing, you can begin



The Interchange Newsletter was a forerunner of La Voz de Esperanza that was first published in November, 1988.



with the resources you have. That is faith, hope and charity. Personal knowledge. Physical strength.

To have faith in one self is to have inner-strength. Faith has always been visualized as either an image of a God and Goodness; visualized through rituals for the Earth and Nature; or felt as a connection of love within families and communities; as energy.

Hope, is how we move forward. Gives us a reason to continue to do the work. If one person's work is not ever noticed in the public sphere, it still is essential. Maliciousness is counteracted with benevolence. Everyone can choose acts of benevolence. It does not require money. Only hope to contribute in the best way that you can and encourage others. That is what gives wings to hope. Applaud and appreciate what contributions all people do.

And not least is love. Charity, caritas; leads us to empower ourselves, and each other. How do we share the wealth of love? Wealth of knowledge and of experience? We can teach ourselves this. Analyze what we are doing which works and moves our visions forward.

To have a desire is not enough. Faith, hope and charity must have a manifestation to have transformative power. What do we want now?

I want to talk about transforming our hope and experience to skills. To manifest something tangible and powerful. The power of dialogues, of art and of actions which reach out in the public sphere are ways to create something. That something which is important to a life quality which promotes health and well-being. We can ask our-

selves what is it that we want to promote, what is the subject we want to set for the agenda? Where do we gather in order to ask these questions?

All my adult life I have been learning different skills to connect my self with others and others to each other. Connect the dots. Create the future picture. Visions and ways and skills to be a builder of the future. To learn to live with those who want the opposite of my visions has been difficult. COPS, a community organizing organization grown out from The Industrial Area Foundations, teaches the skills of negotiation. First organize to gain position and power, and know what it is you want. Then learn how to negotiate.

Who will do that in the future of San Antonio? Who has skills to share with youth? What does our youth know today which my generation does not know? And how to formulate this, what must be done first and in what order?

It is time to ask many questions of ourselves. What do we want now?

Activity is meaningful once we know why we choose to do something. As the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire wrote in his book, *Pedagogy of Oppressed*, (1970)—*action without dialogue turns into empty action, and dialogue without action is empty dialogue.*

This is an essential thought for my life's work. To take action is a way to gain knowledge and meaning underlying the actions itself. To enrich the stories with depth and diversity of meaning. It may seem like what community wants is the same, but more often than not, community has a hard time to agree within itself. How to capture the essence of the lives in communities we want to live in is important across generational lines. We are different, and we are the same.

An old question with a new answer might be, how do we define community? It might be a smart start to begin in neighborhoods. A neighborhood identity is a microcosm for the

***In memory of some who have passed on since the early days of Esperanza.***

Left to right: **Ron Dodson** was an ever present figure at Esperanza helping at mailouts and events, eventually becoming board chair. He was also part of Veterans for Peace. Labor organizer, **Manuela Sager**, was a comadre of Emma Tenayuca. She continued being an activist as an elder in marches and rallies. **Emily Jones**, pictured with Gary Poole and Jack Elder at an early Peace Market, was part of the solidarity movement of Central America. She continued her work of organizing for justice in Austin where she died in 2009.



diversity of people in San Antonio and for what is considered a good quality of life.

For my generation, a big question we can be asking is, How do we want to be old in this city? Or for younger people; how do we want to raise our children in this city? For the working force, How do we want work life to be? What kind of social structures do we need for achieving the kind of lives we want to live in everyday?

As far as taking action in the public sphere, we might ask; Where and what is my role? How can I have a role in decision making which has an effect on my daily life? How can decision-makers connect with regular people's lives? How does dialogue take place so that decision-makers know what is important to people?

The distance between political decision-making and the lives we live as working people, or as students, as unemployed or underemployed, with good health and wealth or not, is seemingly not high on the agenda of most politicians.

Where is there a local social policy to be found? A local work life policy to be found? A policy for health and welfare for children?

Such local policies, and the lack of them, matter to our lives now and in the future. But these may not be found.

There are no democratic rights handed over to us. People throughout time have taken action to achieve these. And why?

To share a good government. Of the people and by the people.

But what kind of government? I will gladly pay taxes for low-cost, quality education. For medical safety for residents and citizens. For work programs for the unemployed. These are the programs and policies which create a city of people with skills, knowledge, health and sense of citizen participation from all socio-economic groups. These are the people who will build the future city we all love.

There it goes again, our future.

If we cannot re-formulate what kind of future we want, we will not get it.

What is it we want to build together? What are the assumptions and values we want for a caring secular and civil life? I say secular, because there is a strong diversity of religious and spiritual life which should be allowed to remain diverse. It is not constructive when a particular religious group assumes their own religion has a higher value than another's. Religious belief should be up to the individual.

We can lose a battle for justice by fear tactics, so let's decide to not allow fear be the steering force for the future. We have also experienced that the privileged do not want to let go of that privilege. So organizing for power is a skill we must continue to learn from those who know how.

As one of the elders, I want to share experience of how hope is powerful. How hope is a prerequisite to vision and actions. I bring here the vision statement and mission of the Esperanza Peace and Justice center:

### Mission and Vision

*The people of 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, the lesbians, queer, trans and gay community, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating and empowering each other. We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope... we are esperanza.*

On January 27th, 1987, The Esperanza Peace and Justice center opened its doors to people who had faith, and I, more than ever, have faith that, in the real world; even after January 20, 2017, that the vision of the Esperanza is still achievable.

Someone once introduced me to a classroom of students I was about to speak to, as a "warrior", and was alluding to my surname (Guerra), but he added that I was "a warrior of love and community". That felt ok. A warrior for a vision from my own experience growing up in San Antonio, and which I have learned after listening to hundreds of people from all over the world, refugees who have lost all, who have witnessed massacres and genocide, torture and loss beyond the imagination for many of us. Their strength has been faith, hope and charity, just like my grandparents.

I have faith and am still a builder. My hope is that there are many builders for the future in San Antonio. Even though I do not reside in the city, the city is in me. My people and family, my culture are all within me. I have learned that all people who have had to endure great loss and lack, also have stories of resources and richness which can be transformed into knowledge, achievements and skills.

I have a vision of San Antonio, as a city of "Neighborhoods of diversity, compassion and esperanza". I hope that the community builders gather on January 20, 2017 at the Esperanza Peace and Justice center to re-formulate, "What do we want now"? This is a question builders of compassionate communities will be asking in the year to come.



The patio of the first Esperanza site hosted many events including the original Peace Markets, Mujercantos, concerts and pláticas such as the one with poeta Ernesto Cardenal, Minister of Culture of Nicaragua from 1979 to 1987 pictured with Lutecia Chacón in 1989.

