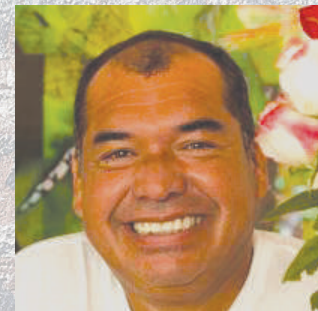


# Unity and Pride



By Peter F. Ortiz, Jr.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Artist, Peter F. Ortiz, Jr., was born and raised in Montopolis and has exhibited his work throughout the U.S., Mexico and Italy. His mural "Unity and Pride" featured in this month's *La Voz de Esperanza* is located on the western wall of the new Montopolis Recreation Center. It honors the diverse roots of his home community. Peter tells *Voz* readers about his mural:

"Unity and Pride" is an art project commissioned through The City of Austin's *Arts In Public Places* for the Montopolis Recreational and Community Center. It is one of 5 art pieces by different artists commissioned. It measures 13' x 16.5' painted on six 1/8" aluminum panels. Four measure 4' x 8'3" and two measure 5' x 8'3". The panels are primed with acrylic, top coated with an isolation coat and topped with a protective UVL varnish.

Montopolis has a rich history existing before the City of Austin was established. It was not annexed fully by Austin until the 1970's. It is south east of the city. Some of us would say, we are east of east. This barrio was once dubbed "Poverty Island". Growing up it was predominantly latino and black. It was separated by the Colorado river—an undeveloped stretch of land, unlit, with a two-lane road called Riverside Dr. running east to west. The idea of the commissioned works was to reflect this special community thru the artist's eyes with the input of stake holders. My approach to getting inspiration was a questionnaire I used asking residents, ex-residents, business owners and others, "In one word how would you describe Montopolis and how it make you feel or what does it mean to you?"

The descriptive responses included the words: *home, family, tranquilo, community, blessed, rooted, cultura, united, understanding, different and diverse.*

For my creation I tried to emulate these words and reflect memories only long term residents could recall: the horses which graced our fields, cornfields farmers worked in and that we played in which for some of us butted up to our back yards; the grand oak tree which divided our main road coming off of the Montopolis bridge which is largest present day landmark; and the migration flight of the Monarchs that still pass thru.

When creating my art I try to use emotions to carry my story. I rarely use modern elements in order to keep my works timeless—not dating them with period references. I use not-so-ordinary colors creating faces or figures in the hope of focusing on the soul of the image and not the race. Vibrant colors give a sense of joy. In this mural I introduced American sign language with images at the bottom. On the left saying "Home" and on the right, "Family". These two words were the most frequently used in response to the questionnaire. By introducing sign language into my painting I added a new dimension to my playing off of movement.

Being raised in Montopolis in a family of 11 who moved here in 1958 before my birth in 1960, with my grandparents next door, and uncles and cousins following us here as well, has a very special place in my heart. Cities are geographically identified as north, south, east and west. Austin has all four sections, but Montopolis residents have a sense of self and community within a city.

In the mural there is a grouping of three people praying that reflects the many churches that have been part of this community. The indigenous figure (originally of the Tonkowda tribe) gives tribute to the native Americans who inhabited this area. The people building a structure is in reference to the many homes built here in a number of ways that reflected the owners' working trades. People walking the road carrying products reflect the small neighborhood markets, children playing ball symbolize the community center and children holding each other is the sense of victory in creating unity.

The bluebonnets are symbolic for the sea of bluebonnets that still bloom around the historic Montopolis School for Negro Children, that is in the process of being preserved as an historic site

My mural, "Unity and Pride" is simply one artist's effort to portray Montopolis as the diverse and historic place within a place that is—truly unique.



Pictured at top left: *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores Catholic Church* built in 1952 when it was at the edge of Montopolis.

Top right: *The Montopolis Bridge* that connected Montopolis to the City of Austin across the Colorado River is now used by bicycles and pedestrians. It was added to the *National Register of Historic Places* in 1996.

Below: The historic *Montopolis School for Negro Children*, a Jim Crow-era school at 500 Montopolis Dr., operated from 1935 to 1962. It is one of the last surviving structures among 42 rural schools that Travis County operated for black children when Austin schools refused to enroll them. Community folk saved it from demolition and are moving to preserve it as a historic structure and museum.





## "The Seeds We Sow"

Creating this painting is symbolic for what I believe is love's history within a family structure. In my experience of a family—it is a foundation of two parents, others many have one—both with strong conviction to provide and nourish. Represented in this portrayal is my father the strength of a base who laid the foundation of our home. The tree is the growth of achievement rooted to the base of what we are today. The female figure is the maternal part of this family structure, giving as well as nourishing the family—building a home—giving of herself and protecting us. Symbolically, she takes a branch from the foundation to build a nest/home for the offspring. The offspring are the seeds that were planted and nourished from her bosom with love until sprouted.



Felicidades to Peter's father, Peter Ortiz, Sr. on Father's Day.