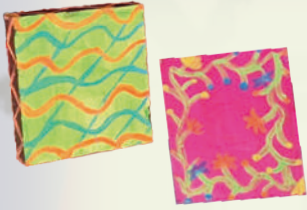


Critical Service-Learning



Reflections and Testimonios on Jardines

By Daniel Lince, Fabian Longoria, Mireya Villalpando, and Kaitlin Popielarz, PhD

Introduction

During the fall 2021 semester, I (Dr. Kaitlin Popielarz) participated in critical service-learning with the Esperanza Center alongside my undergraduate students (Mireya, Fabian, and Daniel) who are currently enrolled as teacher candidates in the middle grades teacher preparation program at UTSA's College of Education and Human Development. Through critical service-learning, teacher candidates have the opportunity to develop accountable and reciprocal relationships with a local community organization. The intention is that teacher candidates will experience transformative educational practices that they will implement in their own future classrooms as certified educators. For my students and I, critical service-learning is student-centered, collaborative, analytical, justice-based, anti-colonial, and culturally sustaining both in theory and practice. For our critical service-learning with Esperanza, my students and I collaborated with Michael Martinez on the *Jardines y Viviendas del Westside* project which was a "two-month long community

garden project as a response in a time of *Pandemic and Gentrification*". We supported this project and Esperanza's preparation for *Día de los Muertos* by creating garlands, planting flowers and garden beds, making nichos for the ofrendas, and cleaning. We learned from and with intergenerational community members about the history and cultural heritage of the Westside, the ongoing justice work of Esperanza to resist gentrification, and how Esperanza supports local school communities in centering the identities of students within the classroom. My students and I are deeply grateful for our critical service-learning experiences with Esperanza. We are especially thankful to Michael and the entire Esperanza volunteer community who supported us in understanding how Esperanza and the Westside community actively reclaim, restore, and revitalize public and community land, stories, identities, and histories. These are lessons that we will take with us into our classrooms and we look forward to future participation with Esperanza!

Student Testimonios

Daniel

When I think about my time at the Esperanza Center, I think of a time in which I got to work with fellow classmates and people within the community to gain a connection with the community. From planting flowers to making our own altars for *Día De Los Muertos* it was a unique experience in which I was able to get in touch with my heritage and celebrate it every Tuesday. When I think of my Mexican heritage, I think of the connection we have

with one another through music, paintings, and food. Through the Esperanza Center I was able to find myself celebrating all

these unique features by painting an altar, planting flowers, eating posole and seeing the creation of big altars celebrating the cycle of life. My time at the Esperanza Center was unique because it put me inside

the San Antonio community for the first time, it allowed me to see what life was outside of this college bubble I currently live in. It was a great experience, and it is one I will carry forever.



Students engaged in building garden boxes and planting marigolds at the Rinconcito de Esperanza and throughout the near Westside.



with the Esperanza Center

y Viviendas del Westside

Fabian

My time at the Esperanza Center this semester was very insightful and impactful. Seeing the passion and hard work of the incredible people there was inspiring and will stay with me for a long time. In my education courses at UTSA the idea of community involvement and the impact a community has on a school is talked about often and I believe the Esperanza Center is a great example of



Casa de Cuentos at the Rinconcito de Esperanza served as a base from which to work on the Jardines project.

Mireya

I have worked within the San Antonio community for a while now; as a Peer Mentor, as a student, and even as an after school counselor for elementary students. Since moving to Texas, I have been surrounding myself with people of the community, yet neglecting to actually take part in its appreciation. In working with Esperanza, I have gained not only an experience that will impact my understanding of empathy and culture, but I also take away a sense of belonging. I have learned that when starting with personal autonomy to understand issues and injustice, it just takes the work of mul-



Michael Martinez leads participants in the distribution of potted marigolds for *Día de los muertos*.



this relationship. The Esperanza, amongst many other things, is a place of education and awareness of our past and culture that I believe every student should learn about and share with

others. One memorable moment I had was walking around the community and seeing the culture and connectedness the neighborhood had with one another. My experience at the Esperanza Center will encourage me to not only tell others more about the center but also take the importance of culture and community into my classroom and teaching in the future.



tiples to elicit real change. From *Día de los Muertos* preparations to walks around the neighborhood, anyone can see the beauty and diversity that Esperanza works so hard to preserve. This isn't just "that" community, but this is our home. This is the school my father left, the neighborhood my Grandmother lived in, and the cemetery where my uncle is buried. We have to continue this work in appreciation and avocation in order to preserve these valuable stories.



Flower boxes were constructed at the Rinconcito and at homes nearby at the Alazan Apache Courts on the Westside.