

Escuelita de Paz y Justicia:

Transformative Education in the Barrio

by Luissana Santibanez, Esperanza Peace & Justice Center

It is not always acknowledged by mainstream media, and sometimes not even validated within our own Latinx community, but leadership can take many forms. Often it is born out of the need to challenge oppression, marginalization, or even the status quo. Whether it's a mom defending her family's rightful belonging to their home in the face of eviction, or a young person fighting to steer clear from drug use by finding alternative ways to cope with life's painful hardships, I believe that the very act of resisting systemic and internalized violence demands leadership. Leadership, however, cannot stand alone without the support of a community or other entities who share the same values and are equally invested in challenging the multitude of ways in which oppression exists.

Longstanding injustice rooted in colonialism, racism, and violence continues to plague our barrios, and in the struggle to assert one's dignity and place in this society, people have had to fight to enjoy basic liberties such as housing and healthy environments. In the case of the Alazan-Apache Courts and the surrounding barrio in the Westside of San Antonio, the struggle has been to defend the permanence of public housing for the families who live there, but also to defend its historic buildings from being demolished given its deep meaning and significance to the largely Mexican American community who have raised their families here for multiple generations now.

For elder leaders of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, building community power by identifying and supporting new leaders is a matter of political urgency and long-term community sustainability. Otherwise, gentrifying urban developers from outside of the barrio, in collusion with *vendidos* from inside the barrio, will continue to sell the land in the Westside to the highest bidder resulting in the displacement and erasure of people who give character and bring life to this community despite their economic plight. Thus, when the opportunity arrived for Esperanza to partner up with an institution like the University of Texas in San Antonio through their *Democratizing Racial Justice Project*, seed funding for a transformative education program arose and we collaborated to form a community school called *Escuelita de Paz y Justicia*. Inspired by the long history of community schools in the South & Southwest that were born in the face of segregation and racial violence, we decided that the best way to honor this legacy of resistance and knowledge formation was by creating our own *escuelita*.

This program came at a time when Ethnic Studies programs and analysis about racism or critical race theory have been outlawed by our public education system or limited to selective historical moments and leaders of the past. In *Escuelita de Paz de Justicia*, we wanted to make sure that we were centering the curriculum through



Luissana Santibanez who heads up Escuelita de paz y justicia addresses Escuelita students

the lens of racialized communities, because we wanted to undo the stigma and the harm created by systemic racism. It was also an opportunity for some of our local elders, community organizers, healing practitioners, cultural bearers, and activist scholars to share some of their wisdom, art, *remedios*, social justice movement building skills, and important research with our class. From its inception, the vision of *Escuelita de Paz y Justicia* was for it to be a brave, intergenerational, multi-racial, multi-gendered, and ANTI-racist/sexist/homophobic/xenophobic/classist shared learning space that could serve as a catalyst for intersectional solidarity, healing, cultural preservation, and personal/political empowerment. We believe that the impact of this program will be that it grows new leaders who are historically rooted, community connected, and unafraid to speak up in the face of injustice whenever necessary. More importantly, we wanted to affirm the cultural power

that our community has to live joyous and fulfilled lives without the deficit feeling of shame that poverty and spatial inequality often-time bears.

Also, given that the yearly income of Westside residents is on average between \$10,000 - \$25,000 a year, it was a critical element of this project to attempt to remove any barriers to student participation. We sought to integrate equity by offering childcare and transportation stipends, including a participatory scholarship that awarded bi-weekly stipends to students who attended and engaged in class. Classes were offered twice a week in the evening and once a month on a Saturday. Students were also required to volunteer a minimum of 4 hours a month at one of our Esperanza sponsored events. As part of our first class, we selected young learners in both Middle School and High School, included adults who had not yet obtained their GED, others who graduated but never enrolled in college, some politically disenfranchised community members, single mother head of households, and two UTSA first-generation college students. Altogether, we had 18 community residents who finished the semester strong with an end of semester project that they presented for a community exhibit and that was streamed live via the Esperanza Facebook page.

Our classes conjured up interest, personal connection & meaning in some way to the education and experiences being shared. There were powerful moments of vulnerability followed by solidarity where students opened up about their lived experiences and the source of their intergenerational trauma. It was important for us to welcome people exactly where they were at in their life journey and for us to allow solidarity to grow in ways that offered real support in that moment and beyond class. For example, one of our guest speak-

ers Celynda Fuente shared her poetry and offered a tapping meditation of self-affirmations with us after our lead organizer Kayla Miranda led a fire ceremony that burned away memories of negative self-talk and *chisme*. This ritual was then followed by a Chakra cleansing and bead making exercise led by our own *escuelita* student Bel Galvan. Together we practiced radical self-love in community, extended ourselves compassion for our trespasses, and spoke of the need to forgive others, sometimes even our own parents, but especially ourselves for all the harm that had been caused. We closed the afternoon acknowledging that healing is a constant practice of staying present in the body while finding ways to release from the chokehold of its memory.

Another important element in *Escuelita* that was vital to our understanding of peace and justice was our acknowledgment that the lands we live on, presently known as San Antonio Texas, are ancient and sacred homelands of the First Nation communities who survived racial genocide and land displacement as a result of colonial violence and settlement. It was also important to learn from the perspective of a woman who not only represents tribal membership within a First Nation community, but who also leads frontline efforts to preserve and defend Indigenous sovereignty. One person we felt represented that kind of matriarchal leadership was Lucille Contreras, member of the Lipan Apache Band of Texas and founder of the Texas Tribal Buffalo Project. Born and raised in San Antonio's West Side, her family lineage runs deep in this historic neighborhood with her own parents graduating from Lanier. Thus, her time in *Escuelita* was a powerful moment of coming back home! We learned so much from Lucille while breaking bread over dinner that evening in class. Her teachings affirmed the power that comes from reclaiming and reconnecting to our Indigenous lifeways, most especially to the relationship we have with the Buffalo. Her efforts to take back the land to steward the reviving of this sacred animal who once roamed free, uniting north and southern tribes, is a testament of the powerful role that Indigenous women have in nourishing the health and spirit of Mother Earth, her resources, and



Escuelita students and teachers gather at Esperanza's Casa de Cuentos for Thanksgiving dinner.

and organizers alike, felt like we were robbed of the opportunity to learn in this way from our formal schooling systems, so attending this community school was a powerful experience to be a part of.

Our *escuelita* was led by two matriarchs who made sure to budget funds for hearty meals at every class and who encouraged students to take ownership of the program itself by taking care of our learning space and helping to cook when needed. For some men, it was the first time that they had ever been asked to cook or aid in cooking, so we're proud to see that our *escuelita* was doing its part to help break gender norms and expectations. We definitely hope to continue talking about and practicing ways to begin undoing harmful norms, but it will not happen if we do not continue to create brave and inclusive spaces in our barrio.

Escuelita de Paz y Justicia resumes classes for spring semester in 2023. Every stage of the curriculum formation is a collaborative process, and we look forward to incorporating more student led classes and workshops to share ownership of this community learning experience. After all, isn't this what democracy looks like?

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Above: Escuelita students attend classes at Esperanza's Casa de Cuentos listening to their instructors and guest speakers.



At left: Lead organizer, Kayla Miranda led a fire ceremony outdoors that burned away memories of negative self-talk and *chisme*.

Lucille Contreras of the Texas Tribal Buffalo Project addresses students of the *Escuelita*.

Read more about the Texas Tribal Buffalo Project on p.7-9.

