

ENDINGS BRING NEW BEGINNINGS

By Kayla Miranda

I'm sure that at some point in your life, someone has told you that as one door closes, another opens. Or maybe you've heard book references, the end of one chapter is the beginning of another. For me, this first year of *Escuelita de Paz y Justicia* is both a celebration and a point of finality. I am so proud of what we created, the relationships we built, the progress we made. At the same time, it's sad. No matter how far we go, how much this *Escuelita* grows, the first year will forever be etched in my memory. I'm sure this sentiment is shared among everyone involved. But, we also know that we can not stay stuck in our comfort zone if we wish to rise higher in our purpose. So we celebrate our accomplishments and look ahead to a bright future full of possibilities.

When I started out as a community fellow in the **Mellon Grant** collaboration between **Esperanza Peace and**



Justice Center & UTSA's *Democratizing Racial Justice*, we had several ideas on how to use the funds to better our neighborhood. I had finished

my fellowship with *Texas Houser's Academy*, a statewide *Leadership Academy for Housing Justice Organizers*, a few months prior. I represented San Antonio, alongside Teri Castillo who had become councilwoman as we were graduating. This program was amazing for experienced organizers, but my personal thoughts while going into *Escuelita* were to make a lot of the knowledge more accessible and understandable to community members, while also addressing much of the deeper need that is often overlooked. **Esperanza** already had many ideas and experience around *Barrio Escuelitas*. My fellow teacher Luissana Santibañez also had experience with facilitating community circles. The amount of knowledge, expertise and creative imagination in the group of individuals planning this program was incredible. Through this collaboration, our *Escuelita* was born.

If you didn't have a chance to read the first article about *Escuelita*, check out the March 2023 issue of *La Voz*. Since then, we've worked on both local and statewide actions. In March, our class attended the *NACCS Tejas Foco* at the **University of Texas Brownsville** for three days. For many in our class, it was the first time they had set foot on a University Campus. Several of the students participated in a student panel and presented *Escuelita* from their perspective. It was incredible to hear their experiences in their own words. Luissana & I also presented on a panel with the UTSA professors from our perspective, which was an honor but not nearly as important in my mind. We stayed in a shared house, cooked together, worked together and strengthened our bonds. We were afforded the great pleasure of spending the last day at the beach in South Padre, a fun ending to our trip.

In May, our class took a trip to the Capitol in Austin to

Escuelita students learned from instructors on location at the Rinconcito de Esperanza and at various sites while attending events and conferences such as the NACCS Tejas Foco at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, UTRGV.





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meet with state representatives and learn more about policies being discussed in 2023. It was another first for most of us.

Locally, we took up work on the *Scobey Project*. It was extraordinary to see students who at the beginning of the year were shy and afraid to speak up, stand in front of large groups to fight for their rights and for our community. They asked hard hitting questions of elected officials, told their stories in their own words and gave their honest thoughts/opinions.

On June 2, 2023, our 1st year of Escuelita students graduated in a beautiful ceremony that allowed them to walk the stage, receive certificates and take pride in their hard work. For many in our class, it was another first. This time they were able to share the moment with family & friends. With a full audience, we shared in a powerful reflection of the year, the joy of our connection to each other and the hope we have for the future. Our guest



speakers were passionate and full of conviction, moving not only the class but the audience as well. Our students made us laugh, swell with pride and cry a little. By the end of the night, I was honored to have participated in something that has touched so many lives in a positive way.

Top: After the visit to UTRGV, Escuelita students gave thanks in ceremony on the beach at South Padre Island. **Center:** Escuelita teachers, Luissana Santibañez and Kayla Miranda (at the table) and the students (right) participated in panel discussions with professors on site and online. **Bottom:** At Rinconcito, students and teachers met with Juanita Reyna and Petra Mata (center L & R) of Fuerza Unida who sewed the students' graduation stolls.



We thank *Fuerza Unida* for the handmade stolls worn by our graduates. *Fuerza Unida*, a non-profit/grass-roots organization and garment workers coop was founded in 1990 to challenge the neo-liberal agenda of employer, Levi Strauss Co. who closed their plant in the San Antonio to open operations in Mexico without fair compensation for the employee's job loss. *Fuerza*

Unida empowers women and families to achieve social, economic and environmental justice through programs such as *Threads of Justice*, *Youth of Fuerza* and *School of Justice*.

Finally, I want to thank all who were a part of Escuelita. Without the collaboration with **UTSA's Democratizing Racial Justice Project** funded by the **Mellon Foundation**, we would have not been able to have such a life altering experience. Without staff support from the **Esperanza** & our wonderful guest speakers, we could not have pulled it off. Our second year will be coming soon. Here's to new beginnings!

BIO: Kayla Miranda was one of two Mellon grant community fellows, with Luissana Santibañez, that were coordinators of Escuelita in its first year. Kayla is also a community housing activist and on the staff of the Esperanza. She is also the mother of two Escuelita graduates, Melody and Nadia pictured in front of the Escuelita's Westside banner above.



The Escuelita Class of 2023 celebrated graduation at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. Professors that lectured throughout the semester were in attendance along with family, friends, Esperanza staff and Escuelita teachers. The program will continue next year.



Escuelita Class of 2023

Pearl Antu
Kassandra Apolinar
Jose Colón, Jr
María De La Cruz
Isabel Galván
Enrique Iglesias
Adriana Leija
Melody Miranda-Colgrove
Nadia Miranda-Colgrove
Athny Pérez
Jose Ramón
Jeannette Rico
Fray Xavier Reyes
Issac Salas
Nayomi Salas
Crystal Valdez
Michael Valdez
Lisa Vogt

UTSA Fellows

Jerry González
Jose Villagran
Sonya Aleman
Carolina Arango

