

# Buena Gente y Esperanza: A Conversation on Community

## A Learning Opportunity at the Esperanza

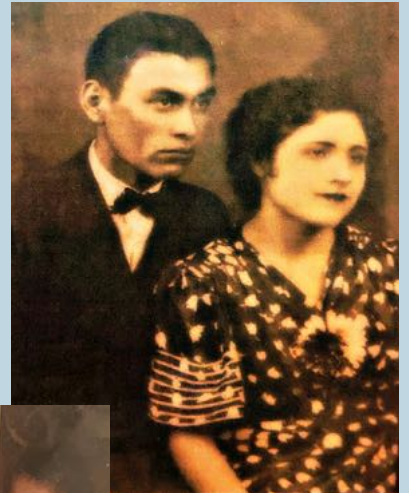
By Kai Velásquez



While interning at the Esperanza, Kai acquired a number of skills including using a camera to document programs.

Hello everyone, my name is Kai Velásquez, and I'm a rising junior and majoring in sociology and Urban Studies at Trinity University. Under the supervision of Dr. David Spener, I had the great privilege and honor of working for the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center under the MAS program. First, it would be hard to summarize all that Esperanza does because—they do it all! As a cultural arts organization dedicated to social change, they tackle any and all subjects. Esperanza is queer, black and brown, feminist, and woman-centered. They are for reproductive, climate, housing justice, immigration and indigeneity. Esperanza aims to speak for the voiceless, shine a light on the unseen, and welcome the forgotten. Esperanza offers a way for people to see themselves reflected in ways

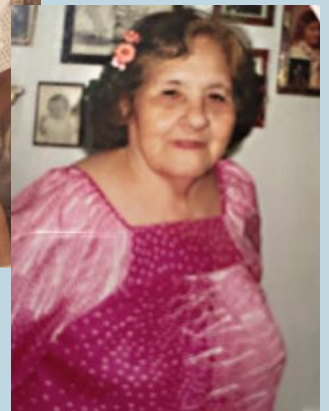
your own self. That being said, my history and journey to the Esperanza and the Westside community began long before I was born. It began with my great-grandparents—amá and apá—who lived on Balboa Avenue located within the Westside of San Antonio. My apá—Santos Camarillo—worked as a field worker when he met my amá—Maria Gallegos. Amá worked as a housewife and together they went on to have 8 children—one of which was my grandma, Amalia, who married my grandpa, Jesus Ruiz. They raised my mom, Irma, who grew up on the Westside but then moved to the Southside before she married my dad, Rodolfo Velásquez, and they had my brother, and myself. This leads us to my own upbringing—and my grandma taking me, and my brother, frequently, to spaces within the Westside. We would attend mass at Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe and I would listen eagerly to mgrandma's



Kai's great grandparents, 'ama and 'apa, Santos Camarillo and Maria Gallegos lived on the Westside or San Antonio on Balboa Avenue..



Kai's grandparents, Amalia and Jesús Ruiz, holding Kai as an infant and her brother, Tristan. Amalia was one of the 8 children Santos and María had. At right, is Kai's 'ama who bore 8 children with Santos, one of them being Kai's mother, Amalia. Family photos provided by Kai Velásquez's family.



that they may have never been reflected before. They offer solidarity and above all else community.

At Esperanza, we split our time on the corners of San Pedro and Evergreen and at Guadalupe and South Colorado at the Riconcito de Esperanza, which is Esperanza's center for Westside programming. It is there—in the Westside of my hometown—that I learned one of the greatest lessons that Esperanza had to offer. It was within those spaces that I was welcomed into the community that my family was once a part of, many years ago.

Aside from many other things—I learned that the history of everything that came before you: the land, the conversations, and of course—the people, is vitally important in understanding how today came to be and in understanding



Kai and interns, Nonye (seated), and Lily, all from Trinity University, working on the Esperanza archives.

stories frequenting Lerma's nightclub before she was married. This led me to my college essay that got me into Trinity in which I wrote about wanting to be able to pave a path for myself that was undoubtedly my own but that was also able to represent the history of my family and everything that came before me.

Esperanza offered me the opportunity to pridefully bridge the history of my own family and city—a way to embrace my own path and visualize my own future. We worked alongside people from all walks of life. Within the scope of our work at Scobey, which is a development plan by VIA that will displace generational residents on the Westside, the stories that we heard were not the kind that you would see within the headlines of a newspaper. We heard stories of people who have spent their whole lives in the 78207 zip codes, several community activists from various generations, and other people who had already seen the effects of gentrification within their community. Folks bound together just to protect the streets, the walk, maybe the house that their grandparents grew up in, some even their own livelihoods. Even amongst the lack of transparency with the public for VIA's plans for Scobey, the community of the Westside moves on. The other interns and I created a survey that would hopefully allow for all types of people on the Westside—the people who own the history, to have a say in what they would like to see in their own home of the Westside. Pueblo Over Profit, a coalition formed by community members and those simply interested in the Westside against gentrification, plan to host a block party that will offer the transparency that VIA lacked and remind them of the essence of the Westside.

At Esperanza, we were also constantly surrounded by immensely strong women who had seen their communities be built from the ground up. They were the type of women and leaders who knew how and when to fight for their people, and who were never shy to speak their mind, but would also

offer you meals even if you had already eaten and ask you if you had been resting enough. We met migrants, city council women, and activists who had seen places and things that you could not imagine, but still found that the 78207 was what home was and what it will always be. At Esperanza, we were consistently connected to people who unspokenly practiced the belief that the sole fact that we were walking on the same soil was enough to connect people for life. That



Nonye and Kai working concessions at one of the Noche Azul performances. Esperanza photos by Sherry Campos.

what bound us all was the sole fact that we were all trying to be Buena Gente. Good people is what Esperanza calls the volunteers who are lucky enough to find themselves in such a place. A place that is able to bridge what community is but also all that it could be. They taught me that yes—it is important to understand the history of your community and where you originated from—but it is also what you can make of it and what you can shape it to be. Esperanza is about family, not confined by blood—but out of a relationship to the human race.

If you ask me what community means and what my experience at Esperanza has taught me, I would tell you that it is the ability to stand together. To welcome someone into your home and not care where their shoes have been. Unless, we just got out of the garden, and we smell like fish oil. It is greeting someone with hugs over handshakes. It is a sense of familiarity in someone you have never met before. I would tell you that it's not perfect, and should never remain stagnant. It should bloom into changing times like the zinnias in the garden in front of the Rinconcito but remain deeply rooted in the history of who walked the Earth before us. Sometimes it's a simple "I got you" and the faith in knowing that that's mutually true. Sometimes it's difficult. Sometimes it's like a tiny umbrella underneath the water pouring down Evergreen Street. Sometimes it's the shade of the porch at Rinconcito from the blazing Texas sun. It is making a small packet of seeds into a garden. It is the ability to see someone—not with your eyes—but with your heart. It is love without definition or directions. It is the act of standing together—not out of obligation, but out of choice. Thank you so much to the MAS program and Dr. David Spener for providing me with this opportunity and thank you so much to all the immensely hardworking folks at Esperanza and of course, my family.

BIO: Kai Velásquez, a rising junior majoring in sociology and Urban Studies at Trinity University, was an intern at the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center in the summer of 2023. She has family roots in the Westside of San Antonio.