

# SUCCESS STORY: Restorative Justice for the Arts



## Restorative Justice

*This is the second story in a series of success stories focused on restorative justice work. The work featured in these stories seeks to acknowledge the impact of harmful practices and creates opportunities to heal that harm between those who enacted it and those impacted by it to transform the community.*

*Additional media for this story can be found [here](#).*

## Responding to Mural Erasure

[Restorative Justice for the Arts](#) (RJFTA) was created as a response to an alarming amount of mural erasures in Highland Park and greater Los Angeles. Longtime residents of Highland Park (L.A. Council District 1) were particularly outraged when beloved and iconic grandfathered murals were illegally whitewashed by developers. One particular peace mural by prolific L.A. muralist John “Zender” Estrada titled “Resist Violence With Peace” depicted a sacred Aztec warrior. The mural was created in 1993 following the 1992 civil unrest and was later whitewashed despite local, state and federal protections. I founded Restorative Justice for the Arts to resist the vandalism and whitewashing of L.A.’s murals, starting with Highland Park, by creating unique frameworks utilizing Indigenous and arts-based methodologies to address accountability for erasing cultural community art monuments. The L.A. Basin is part of the ancestral lands of Mexican Indigenous people, the Kizh, Tongva and many other Native Americans who still live here. My research investigates the importance of sacred Indigenous symbols and community art to ensure a psychological sense of well-being, truth, social justice and ultimately, healing intergenerational, displacement and collective traumas. By utilizing an arts-based facet of reconciliation and reparations (restoration), this approach aims to develop critical consciousness and socio-political action to encourage healing and transformation. RJFTA hopes to help remediate some of the historical trauma of Native peoples’ misrepresentation, erasure or total lack of representation (ghosting) in the artistic, political and social justice arenas. To mediate the path towards truth and reconciliation, I am writing about this experience at a scholarly level to establish and document a counter-narrative to set the stage for self-determined expression of identity, restorative justice, preservation of history, gentrification and current realities affecting many cultural communities far and wide.

## Mural Protection

RJFTA has spearheaded a series of events to commemorate endangered murals, including blessings of artwork by Indigenous elders, community vigils for lost murals, petition signing,

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restoration of damaged murals and participatory arts, such as community mural making. [RJFTA is the originator](#) of mural blessing ceremonies, as well as mural vigils. These activities are well documented as evidence for the federal Visual Artists Rights Act (1990), which states that “if an artwork is of ‘recognized stature’ and has some meaning to the community, artists have the right to prevent its destruction” ([Zaratan, 2018](#)). RJFTA’s community-based artist-activist (activist) actions and ceremonies support legal protection of the murals while enacting the Indigenous knowledge that is threatened by gentrification and erasure. By building partnerships with other activist organizations, RJFTA’s goal is to create critical consciousness, community input, documentation and policy that would protect wall art around the country by using mural vandalism in Highland Park as a First Amendment violation case. RJFTA works to educate communities on how we can honor community murals as sacred sites and document their importance, history, existence and overall well-being.



This mural is the right side of the larger 'Indigenous Cosmovisions' mural painted by the RJFTA 2021 summer youth mural program students and community at the Los Angeles College Prep Academy campus by lead artist and mentor John 'Zender' Estrada.

## Centering Indigenous Communities

RJFTA puts forth unique, Indigenous led, culturally relevant art initiatives to open critical dialogical spaces that encourage advocacy, transparency, restoration and preservation. Indigenous and arts-based methodologies, such as mural making, honor and center Indigenous ways of knowing and being, give a platform for oral histories and set the stage for marginalized community members who disproportionately lack access to the arts and justice. Arts-based initiatives can help create bridges to the ongoing process of relationship rebuilding between Indigenous/Native communities and those who have settled in the United States. A reconciliation process must be Indigenous led, center Indigenous voices and prioritize their ways of being and knowing to upset the paradigm where all conflict resolution must happen within the settlers’ comfort zones. Artistic heritage can aid the

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process of unsettling these comfort zones and bring forth the neutral baseline so that “transitional justice” (a response to systemic and widespread violations of human rights) can be established to achieve friendly relations.

## Student and Community Collaboration

RJFTA is a grassroots community organization, rather than a non-profit organization. At this time, RJFTA has no staff members. Before the pandemic, RJFTA was working with students and community volunteers. In 2019, RJFTA started a community partnership with [Oxy Arts](#) to enable students to volunteer in our ongoing community projects. The students found the experience of contributing to our projects so gratifying and successful, that they advocated for a class with RJFTA at Occidental College to officially receive education credits for their amazing work. In the fall of 2019, I assisted in teaching a Mural & Social Justice class at Occidental College. The students enrolled in this class were able to directly engage in RJFTA's community goals and mission, as well as develop plans to create a mural themselves in the school's [Lavender Lounge](#) – a space intended to support LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals to build community, engage in programming and foster conversation. The students were directly involved in helping RJFTA organize the Mural Blessing Ceremony for the then threatened "Tenochtitlan, The Wall That Talks" iconic mural in Highland Park, which successfully took place in January 2020. However, in March 2020, the pandemic interrupted the class due to school closures. As Occidental College began to reopen, some students continued to volunteer with RJFTA's projects. Most student participants have been undergraduates from Occidental College and have expressed their enjoyment in learning Highland Park's history and the efforts to help empower our community and address collective traumas through the arts. Many of our artworks have been inspired by Indigenous artists, such as [John “Zender” Estrada](#), [Miranda Villanueva](#) and [Celina Villanueva](#), who value giving back to our communities in need. RJFTA continues to engage both Occidental College student volunteers and the RJFTA Mural Youth Team to help heal a variety of traumas.

## La Vecindad (Neighborhood)

Community plays a vital role within RJFTA. Culturally speaking, *la vecindad* (neighborship) is the theory behind the methodology. In predominantly low-income Indigenous/Latine communities, a *vecindad* is known as a very enmeshed close knit and warm community. Our *vecinos* (neighbors) are not just neighbors, our *vecinos* are like extended family members living in close proximity. This village consciousness honors Indigenous cosmology, *familismo* (putting family above the self) and humility. RJFTA honors this village consciousness, and the community's needs are paramount. In many culture-rich communities, we experience a deep rift with politically tied organizations, corporations and the privatization mindset. Often because these top-to-bottom business models frequently exclude our working-class communities, they can displace them, may exploit them and can forfeit our trust. Comaz-

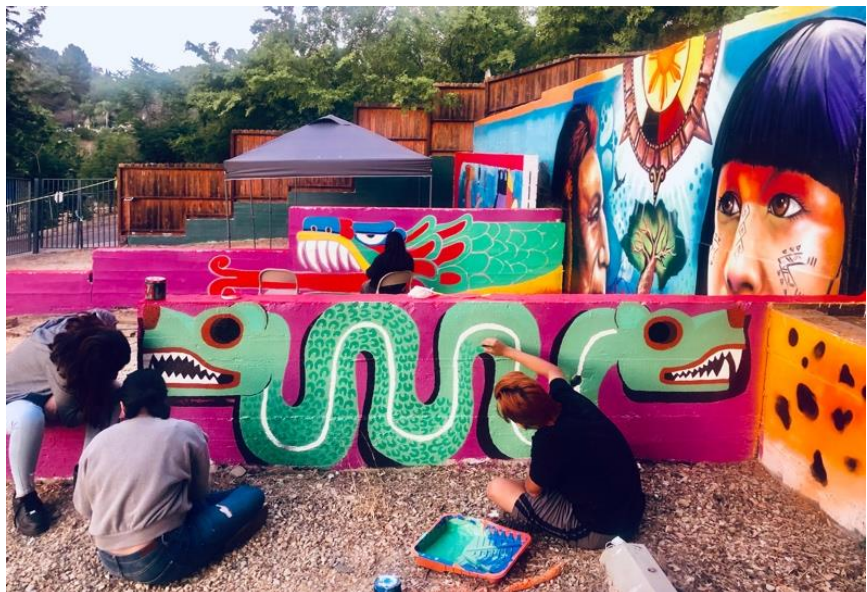


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Diaz (2007) states that adverse experiences, especially those which affect a large number of people, are “formative events that lead to feelings of shared participation in social experiences that create firm bonds, distinguishing persons who have endured these events from those who have not.” Mural vigils and blessing ceremonies are arts-based/artivism methods that can cultivate trust, cultural insights and empower *vecinos* to come together in ceremonial and community-based events. They are unique, community-centered actions that can foster a psychological sense of community (well-being) and encourage consciousness building initiated by one of us, a *vecino*, an authentic insider with similar lived experiences and not an outsider. Data collection of this work includes recordings of speakers present at the mural blessings, the vigils, pictures of *vecindad* and allies in action, letters of support from neighborhood organizations and other communities and actions like petition signing to restore our lost murals. RJFTA is always committed to do what is best for our neighbors, our families, cultural traditions and community values.

## Community Mural Making

RJFTA embraces and upholds the importance of community mural making, which includes the participation of families, students, teachers, school administrators and stakeholders. This protocol is grounded in community and ecopsychologies which includes the participation of culturally relevant role models, leaders and artists to achieve such standards. This process is vital to establishing trust and understanding within communities that are collectively experiencing a great deal of strife and trauma. My research shows that Indigenous art, mythologies and symbols provide deep existential meaning to individuals and communities and are essential in preserving and maintaining cultural health and well-being. Murals embrace the land's cultural spirit of “survivance” and those who were there before us. For the people of these cultures, the spiritual has more value than the terrestrial. They live and speak the people’s most heartfelt



RJFTA 2021 Summer Youth Mural Program students Hailey Gomez, Marco Gomez, Mckenzie Peña, Leslie Velasquez and Zeke Gutierrez painting the "Indigenous Cosmovisions" mural at Los Angeles College Prep Academy in Highland Park, Northeast Los Angeles by Lead artist John 'Zender' Estrada.

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expressions and bring life to their stories. Spirituality helps people of color to cope by addressing the meaning of life, hopelessness, victimization, racism and dehumanization. Combating a long history of oppression, people of color develop resilience by affirming their spirituality ([Kay, 1998, p. 105](#)).

## Factors for Sustainability

A major factor in creating a sustainable organization is our grassroots initiative. RJFTA is originally and fundamentally a grassroots, bottom-up organization, and its strategies oppose the corporate-based top-to-bottom organizational model. RJFTA centers the community's best interest while using an ecopsychology lens as our guide. RJFTA's arts initiatives aim to help increase one's connection to nature, the land and spirit. The trust established within the community is extremely important to collect meaningful data. This process of collecting data puts forth the community's *testimonios* (testimonies) in the front lines to create a meaningful and truthful community narrative while dialogical interview methods foster transparency, community building, relationship building, empowerment through awareness, cultural insights and most importantly, trust. I was born and raised in Highland Park and am deeply invested in my community, its original members and its future. RJFTA's successful community actions and cultural art initiatives have proven its legitimacy within L.A. neighborhoods.

Although funding projects has been the biggest obstacle, RJFTA has been lucky to have a few small donations from the community, the Highland Park neighborhood council and some sponsorships. Occidental College has been highly involved in supporting our community projects by hosting them and recently helped fund the Yorkdale Elementary mural project. The Magdalena Abakanowicz Foundation for the Arts scholarship supported and funded mural art projects, including the RJFTA summer youth program pilot in 2021.



Yorkdale Elementary school community mural featuring Highland Park's own Villas Tacos (best taco in L.A. back to back), NELA Riders Lowrider and Penny's Burgers to name a few. Yorkdale mural lead artists, Miranda Villanueva and Celina Villanueva assisted by artists Mariana Botello, Remy & Ariel Laheurte, Chala Escobedo, Angie Avila, the RJFTA mural youth (Nicolas Peña, McKenzie Peña, Johnathan Peña, Aimee Gomez, Hailey Gomez), Yorkdale staff, Oxy Arts, Oxy ICC/MSI and community.

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In 2021, I led the RJFTA Summer Youth Program at the Los Angeles College Prep Academy in Highland Park, L.A. where middle and high school students learned about critical race theory, critical pedagogy and mural art history. This summer program was open to any students attending schools in or near L.A. who were 14 to 18 years old with no arts experience. Another goal of the program was to provide students who were displaced, as well as those facing traumas caused by displacement violence, and students who are the least resourced with an opportunity to work alongside iconic L.A. muralists and help plan, design and paint a historic mural on campus as a way to help them heal from the collective traumas that many students and families of color have experienced throughout the city.

Participants in the program also learned about the history and importance of murals, how to preserve murals from vandalism and weather, the importance of community art, sacred imagery, why it is important to know who is funding the artwork and how to protect their art from erasure. This program also involved educating the students, muralists, other artists and community stakeholders about the local and state public art registration laws and the federal Visual Artist Rights Act. One of the long-term goals of this program is to help protect existing and restored community artworks through the establishment of a Mural Youth Team. In collaboration with Indigenous artists, the Mural Youth Team will also pay it forward and assist other artists in need of additional training to protect endangered artworks. Additionally, this team can support training for new students and engage residents from marginalized communities to become agents of social change and vigilant guardians capable of noticing and preventing vandalism to public art.

The program also shared how restorative justice practices can be utilized within the community to address accountability and healing when art vandalism occurs. This summer program collectively engaged 20 students, and all students were involved in the creation and painting of a mural at the Los Angeles College Prep Academy campus. During the last phase of the class, the community was invited to help paint the mural with the students, lead artists and their parents. The youth and other participants shared that this was a beautiful, healing and memorable experience.

## Community Impact

RJFTA has hosted numerous well-attended neighborhood vigils for murals that continue to be erased. Most of the mural vigils RJFTA has hosted have resulted in the restoration of the murals that were once lost in our neighborhood and have raised awareness about this problem beyond L.A. Murals that have been blessed in ceremony have been protected and are still intact.

RJFTA is always looking for new sites for new murals and intends to create these in a collaboration with legendary muralists from L.A. and Mexico City, as well as young people

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interested in the arts. Lastly, [Oxy Arts](#), Yorkdale Elementary School (L.A.) and organizations like [Jenesse Center, Inc.](#) continue to approach me about co-curating exhibitions of local artists working on themes of Indigenous identity and art decolonization. RJFTA completed an anti-domestic violence and awareness mobile mural for youth groups organized by the Jenesse Center, Inc. that was exhibited in museums throughout L.A. in the summer of 2021. The Occidental College Multicultural Summer Institute (MSI) asked RJFTA to facilitate a Highland Park mural tour as a way to engage newly accepted international students and Obama Fellows to learn about the damages that gentrification and displacement violence has on community art, its original inhabitants, L.A.'s artists and the community's collective well-being. The RJFTA Mural Youth Team was included in the mural tour to help provide a voice for community youth and members who have been negatively impacted by the erasure and vandalism of these cultural monuments. MSI was so pleased by the outcome of the RJFTA mural tour, that it is now part of the MSI student summer orientation to help orient international students who are new to the college on the present struggles and social injustices taking place within the community that they will be sharing with the longtime residents of Northeast L.A. A new mural tour for MSI and its Obama Fellows took place in July 2022.

## The Future of Restorative Justice For The Arts

Our aspirations are to advance RJFTA's mission of addressing collective traumas via community mural art making not only in L.A. but across the United States and possibly internationally. It is important for bureaucratic organizations and other corporate entities to collaborate with BIPOC-led grassroots community organizations with proven impacts, to help advance equitable access for students who are the least resourced and from low-income households to ensure their Indigenous voices and needs are represented and central to the work.

RJFTA is working to develop an ecojustice arts initiative which will focus on making art and murals with younger generations to educate them on the damages that globalization has on our world starting with us (humans), our communities (relations) and mother earth (nature). RJFTA works to inspire young people, especially those who have experienced trauma, incarceration and have never painted a mural and center them, their land (environment/nature) and healing as opposed to solely focusing on the artist. RJFTA seeks to work with artists who are comfortable shifting the focus away from themselves and giving it away as a gift to the youth and the community for social/ecojustice and healing. Community art making is an ideal medium for Indigenous people to reclaim and center their voices as it honors the fact that these cultures often have oral traditions which are also centered and illustrated through many forms of art. Art and murals have the capacity to



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create a totally new narrative of who we are at this moment in time within our given circumstances. It can help us focus on good intentions and the greater good for all while creating a new reality of what we want our world to look like going forward.



Left side of Indigenous Cosmovisions mural depicting a warrior woman with the sacred Aztec Xoloitzcuintli dog and the now endangered Monarch butterflies by lead artist Miranda Villanueva and the RJFTA summer youth program students at Los Angeles College Prep Academy.

*Additional media for this story can be found [here](#).*



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## Acknowledgments

[Restorative Justice For The Arts \(RJFTA\)](#) is a grassroots community organization founded by Brenda Perez with the mission to preserve murals and sacred imagery, cultivate decolonial pedagogies of creativity and protect the cultural identities narrated through community art. Perez founded RJFTA in 2016 in response to art vandalism in Highland Park, Northeast Los Angeles. RJFTA is an activist platform geared toward mural preservation, restoration, creation of new murals, and securing legal protections for marginalized artists. RJFTA educates communities on how to legally protect cultural monuments during mural blessing ceremonies, mural vigils and community teach-ins about the Visual Artists Rights Act, a federal law that was amended to the copyright law in 1990. As a research inquiry, RJFTA investigates the importance of sacred imagery as a visual language within culture that heals trauma and maintains community well-being. These visual symbols present in community art can serve to acknowledge collective traumas, bring forth healing consciousness, resist discrimination, and help repair the dissonance of displacement while utilizing the power of art.

### Author:

Brenda Perez is a Mexican (Raramuri) and Chicana woman born and raised in Highland Park, Northeast Los Angeles. In many urban areas of Los Angeles, murals and community art continue to offer images of Indigenous survivance. In recent years, our neighborhood's culturally historic and legally registered murals are being systematically erased as part of gentrification efforts. Brenda's research looks at Highland Park as a case study with the recent whitewashing of the Cesar Chavez Foundation funded farmworker mural at Garvanza Elementary during National Hispanic Heritage month, other lost or threatened murals featuring profound Indigenous iconography, sacred imagery and artistic heritage. Brenda shows how whitewashing Indigenous iconography in community art and constructing fenced walls or "gentrifications" around gentrifier homes exemplify the disavowal of the neoliberal psyche which [Lynne Layton](#) (2009) identified as the main defense mechanism of neoliberal subjectivity. Gentrification is a form of cultural homogenization that measurably increases disparities in community health. Furthermore, her research shows how the psychological shock of gentrification is an ecopsychological injustice that severs ties between people and the land, thus violating one's well-being. In Indigenous paradigms, psychological sense of community often includes relationships with place, plants, animals, and spirits. For communities facing de-indigenization and displacement, art-making is a means for cultural survival, not just therapy.

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In response to this erasure, Brenda Perez founded a grassroots community-based organization *Restorative Justice for the Arts*, which was mobilized as an activist platform to preserve, restore and create murals, protect sacred imagery, cultivate healing through the arts, and to protect cultural monuments and identities narrated through community art. Brenda's participant activist research is a sketch of an emergent critical participant action research that combines Indigenous and arts based methodologies greatly associated with the traditions of liberation theology, restorative justice and decolonial pedagogies of creativity. Brenda has gathered community *testimonios* and documentation (photos/videos) of vandalized or whitewashed murals to spur ongoing critical dialogue, educate the public, and empower different cultural communities to come together (specifically, native and non-native) in solidarity actions using restorative justice practices and deep participatory methodologies accountable to the goals of truth, solidarity and social justice.



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## About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation's hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts education and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success. This story is part of a new initiative that highlights restorative justice work that seeks to acknowledge the impact of harmful practices and creates opportunities to heal that harm between those who enacted it and those impacted by it to transform the community.

Are you interested in sharing your arts and restorative justice work for a future success story? Please reach out to AEP policy analysts [Krystal Johnson](#) or [Cassandra Quillen](#) to share your story.

