

Marcela Davison Avilès and Olga Briseño: San Jose and its Mariachi Festival are ground zero for preserving Latino heritage

By Marcela Davison Avilès and Olga Briseño
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As San Jose celebrates the 20th anniversary of its famed Mexican Heritage and Mariachi Festival, its core mission and values remain: to celebrate and preserve our Latino heritage in the United States and sustain heritage arts education for our youth.

In 2011, we as a community must reaffirm these values and mission in the face of increasing xenophobia against immigrant communities, loss of jobs, poor education, a struggling economy and dwindling support for the arts. The current platform to educate and celebrate the heritage of diverse communities is literally being outlawed in some states, and we have no other option than to declare a new civil rights movement and renew our fight for dignity, civility and justice.

This movement uses new tools -- the arts, the Internet and the cellphone -- to tell the important stories of our struggle and contributions. We are strategic in working at the grass roots, in the courts and in new media.

Internationally and in the United States, the elements of civic engagement and even civil disobedience are under way in cities and towns across this nation, at cultural events, in school board meetings and during state legislative sessions. Lawsuits are filed and demonstrations staged to stop poor public policy that threatens anything from the quality of education our children receive to the treatment of all Latinos when the ugly finger of racism is pointed in the framework of "immigration reform."

We know the challenges -- we've documented them. In East Chicago, Ind., 16-year-olds are still in fifth grade, the high school dropout rate is 60 percent and the crime rate is soaring. In San Jose, the recent report from the Hispanic Community Foundation of Silicon Valley on education describes a similar challenge amid budget cuts, rising crime and closed community centers.

Arizona's anti-Latino immigration law is spreading. Our efforts to balance this narrative have met roadblocks -- some of which are self-inflicted. In Washington, D.C., a Latino Museum was promised, but Congress has dragged its feet on funding, and some

question its value. In San Jose, the notion of a destination Latino cultural center was buried on the very ground where Cesar Chavez staged his first boycott.

Our new medium is virtual. Our muse is innovation and imagination. Our platforms are place-based but not landlocked. As we look to the next 20 years, our festival will keep innovating to sing the story of our humanity by celebrating the common dreams of our American neighborhoods. Here is our dedication:

- We won't allow anyone to say we are not good enough. We are.
- We will use the arts to create more jobs, improve learning and increase economic impact and human engagement.
- We will tell our stories to reveal and explore our common journey. We will share what connects us -- and create the meaning that binds us.
- We'll step up leadership roles, not only with organizations such as the Latino Leadership Alliance but also with the Rotary Club, Boys and Girls Clubs and local community foundations through donor support.
- We will vote.
- We'll work together. No more "locking claws" and sinking to the bottom of the lobster pot. Let's stop self-destructing. Now.
- We will work in solidarity with our national icons -- the Eva Longorias, Dolores Huertas, Isabel Allendes, Carlos Santanas, Martin Sheens and Linda Ronstadts -- all of whom devote considerable time, money and energy with small nonprofits -- to inspire and teach from the top down and the ground up.

San Jose is ground zero of our nation's renewed commitment. Let the work begin.

MARCELA DAVISON AVILÉS is president and CEO of Mexican Heritage Corporation and producer of the San Jose Mariachi and Mexican Heritage Festival. OLGA BRISEÑO, an award-winning journalist, is the founder and director of The Center for Media, Democracy & Policy. They wrote this for this newspaper.