

Elizabeth Mendez Berry

Tamara Alvarado knew the Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latinoamericana well before she got a job there; she lived a mile from the San Jose storefront that housed it; she had acted in fringe plays there, and was an enthusiastic donor. She was already part of MACLA's extended family. "I knew MACLA from being here in the 'hood; I checked out art there, I partied there," she said. "I'd been in love with MACLA for a long time. It's a community treasure."

But when the organization's board began its executive director search in 2002, they were looking for someone else: an arts professional with proven years of experience. As a 28-year-old program director at the Washington United Youth Center, Alvarado was not that person. MACLA's board pursued an out-of-state candidate, but ultimately he decided against the position. Relocating to San Jose is a difficult proposition: houses are too expensive and the salaries that nonprofit organizations offer are too small.

So MACLA began a second search. This time the board decided to throw out the standard job description they had used previously. They crafted an announcement that read simply "Leader Wanted." They decided to look closer to home for anyone—regardless of experience or degrees— that had the attributes of an effective leader. "I'd worked with Maribel Alvarez, the co-founder of MACLA, at the youth center where I was working, and she was helping the board with their search," said Alvarado. Alvarado's name, said Maribel Alvarez, "came up among the top ten natural community leaders that the board identified at the outset."

Alvarado lead a staff of 18 people at Washington United, and had a history of incorporating the arts into her community work, but she had no idea what a profit and loss statement looked like—and said so during her job interview. "Everybody was silent after Tamara walked out," said Alvarez. "She was very raw. But Bob Brownstein, a member of the board experienced in community organizing, said, 'Let's hire her, she's got guts.'" MACLA offered her the job. "I think the board chose me because I represent the community they serve," said Alvarado. "I was part of the artist community; I was part of the youth community. They took a chance on me. They were walking the walk."

NALAC welcomes your comments on the concepts and topics explored in this essay; submit your ideas by writing to us at nalac_conversations@yahoo.com.

Note from the Editor:

This essay was commissioned by NALAC following a convening of artists, scholars, art administrators, and cultural activists in San Antonio in January 2010. It is one of three essays commissioned after three conversations. Although the content reflects solely the perceptions of the author, the essay also offers a snapshot of crucial themes, priorities, and ideas that are shaping the meaning and evolution of Latino arts and culture. NALAC is circulating these essays among cultural workers and thinkers as an invitation for further dialogue and to stimulate research on the opportunities and challenges that Latino arts and culture face in the 21st century.

About the Author:

Elizabeth Méndez Berry's work has appeared in the Washington Post, The Nation, Vibe, the Village Voice, Smithsonian, and Time, among many others. She is an adjunct professor at NYU's Clive Davis School of Recorded Music, where she teaches music journalism. She writes about the intersection of pop culture and politics, and is known for her bold hip hop feminism. She has also worked for non-profit organizations, including the Drug Policy Alliance, and was a founding board member of the League of Young Voters. She has won several awards for her work, including the top music journalism prize for "Love Hurts," an expose of domestic violence in the hip hop industry. Of Colombian and Irish Canadian descent and raised in Toronto, she now lives in Queens, NY. She has a masters in journalism from Columbia University. For more visit her website: www.mendezberry.com

Muchos Caminos

At NALAC's National Conversation on Latino Leadership in San Antonio in January 2010, Alvarado shared her story, emphasizing that without Alvarez's encouragement, she would have never have tried for the MACLA job. Not coincidentally, most of the people gathered for this conversation had "come up" the ranks of Latino artistic leadership by similar unlikely paths. "One does not know that one is a leader until there is something to lead and no one else raises their hand; then, one hears the calling loud and clear," said Maribel Alvarez, who was also serving as moderator of the gathering in San Antonio.

Some of those present had grown up in the organizations they worked for, like Julia Gutierrez of Los Pleneros de la 21, whose father founded the organization. Julia had been "breastfed on cultural work," in Alvarez's words. Evonne Gallardo, executive director of Self Help Graphics and Art in Los Angeles, had taken over a beloved but financially troubled organization in May 2009. And Heather Eichling, of San Anto Cultural Arts in San Antonio, was thrust into a position of leadership when the founding director of the organization passed away at the age of 40.

They represented organizations with budgets big and small. Some were promoted from within their organizations; others like Gallardocame back to them after years away. Juana Guzman, vice president of the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, is a legendary, longtime Latino arts advocate and co-founder of NALAC. There were also younger leaders, like Alberto Mejia, program director of Seattle's Youngstown Cultural Arts Center, and Javier Torres, director of the Villa Victoria Center for

the Arts, in Boston. NALAC Executive Director Maria Lopez de Leon and board member Charles Rice-Gonzalez, who coordinated the conversations, were also present.

In the course of a day spent at a conference room at Bromley Communications, just a few blocks from the Alamo, the group discussed how to cultivate leadership and share wisdom, especially between generations. They talked about what credentials make a really effective leader (passion, creativity, a balanced sense of financial responsibility) and what don't (advanced degrees, though they sometimes help and many among the group yearn for time to return to graduate school). They addressed why arts organizations are important: "We are the bearers of the collective memories of our communities," said Alvarado.

What was most striking about the group was how interconnected it was, though the conversationalists came from Texas, Illinois, Massachusetts and California, among other corners of the country. They had mentored each other, shared ideas, stories and support well before this meeting; none of them worked in isolation. That sense of community was present throughout the conversation. "We can't be seduced by the idea of just creating heroes," said Alvarez. "We have to build collective wisdom and capacity."

In her introduction, Alvarez talked about what these organizations have in common, and why developing and sustaining the broader Latino Arts movement is so important. "Latinos are part

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of the American fabric” said Alvarez; “you can’t tell the American story without us, though of course Ken Burns tries. We have to continually tell our story, or else.” The conversation dealt with the evolution of Latino arts organizations and their priorities as the broader social context shifted. “In the 60s, it was about civil rights; now it’s about human rights,” said Juana Guzman.

Alvarez also emphasized the heterogeneity of the Latino community, and how it is shifting. “What is it that makes you Latino?” she asked. “It’s evolving and mutable; it’s not only about traditional folk dancing, but modern dance too.” The diversity of Latino identity was clear from those in the room; several were trained dancers, but they were trained in very different disciplines, from flamenco to bomba to danza azteca. When Julia Gutierrez, an accomplished bomba and plena dancer, led the group in a seventh-inning stretch dance, Alvarado joked, “I’m Mexican! I don’t know about hips!”

Alvarado’s own story introduced several of the themes of the day. Being hired at MACLA was just the beginning for her: the board supported her and helped her grow into the position. She also had the benefit of having in the staff she inherited someone who had a long history with the organization: “Anjee Helstrup [who is MACLA’s current director] had the institutional memory that I lacked; you always need someone in the team who can help map the context and help you sort out what is important and what isn’t,” said Alvarado.

The board hired Alvarez as her mentor, and she remembered working side-by-side with Alvarez on a grant application—having a cofounder help her articulate the organization’s mission was invaluable. Alvarez urged her to make a five year plan of what she hoped to accomplish with the

organization: Alvarado’s goal was to make MACLA more deeply and systematically rooted in the San Jose community.

A year into her tenure there, like several of the other conversationalists, Alvarado participated in the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture’s (NALAC) Leadership Institute. Rosalba Rolon, the artistic director of Pregones Theater who has taught at the institute since its inception, was a source of inspiration. “She told us to communicate with people at the same level, whether you’re a \$5,000 organization or a \$5 million one; if you’re the executive director, talk to their executive director,” recalled Alvarado. “The institute taught me about being strategic. When I came back I felt like I really belonged in the position of executive director.”

Alvarado left MACLA after being there for five years and accomplishing the goal she’d set for herself, and now works for a multicultural leadership development organization called 1st ACT Silicon Valley. Her job is to give other people the opportunities that MACLA gave her.

Being mentored and mentoring others was a huge part of building capacity for many of the leaders in the room. They weren’t born with the skills; they grew into their positions with help from many diverse sources. For Julia Gutierrez, the concept of “bambula” or re-remembering, has been crucial. “You have to remember the remembrances of the past; it’s how families teach younger generations to take their own roles,” she said. “Something will come up for me, and my father will tell me that he went through the same thing 15 years ago.”

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Gutierrez has her father to ask for advice, while others have created their own extended families. “More experienced leaders told me about their struggles, and that woke me up,” said Evonne Gallardo. “I’m so grateful for that; it’s an enormous teaching tool.” Rosalba Rolon, Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, and Raul Salinas, who died in 2008, were all mentioned as generous mentors. “I think people gravitate towards them because they have a genuine curiosity about new ideas,” said Alberto Mejia. “They want to bring the new generation’s ideas to fruition.”

Shifting generations, shifting landscapes

Still, intergenerational dialogues haven’t always been smooth, as those in the room, who ranged from their 20s through their 50s, acknowledged. The civil rights strategies of the 60s and 70s sometimes clash with today’s much more diffuse and eclectic approach. A recent flashpoint was the exhibit “Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement,” originally presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2008. In his review, *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight wrote,

“What’s passing into history is an aesthetic that matured in the 1970s, produced by Mexican American artists with an eye toward articulation of Mexican American experience. A full generation later, what has arrived on the scene is something different -- an aesthetic produced by Mexican American artists with an eye toward articulating whatever they darn well please.”

That new aesthetic, coupled with the show’s title, raised concerns. “Being of that generation of the 60s and 70s, when you hear the term ‘Post-Chicano,’ you think, ‘Are they erasing us?’” said Maria Lopez de Leon.

“There’s blame to go around on intergenerational issues,” said Heather Eichling. “But we need to instill in the

younger generation the belief that you can ask and learn from the older generation.” Evonne Gallardo agreed. “I think the younger generation has to reach out. I’ve done that and been so wowed by our older peers,” she said. “But they tell me that a lot of younger people never follow up.”

Sometimes veterans can feel threatened by the new kids on the block: “I could see how, in my own case, advancing into a new role every two years could be intimidating to some people,” said Alberto Mejia. The fact that young people aren’t always ready to make a commitment (even a short one) to an organization also makes investing in them challenging. “At MACLA, we always wanted to give many talented young artists and activists an opportunity, but we also needed a commitment,” said Alvarez. “It is not easy to balance the need for maturity and experience that it takes to run all the nuts and bolts of an organization with the freshness and improvisational style that the young ones, rightly so, practice.”

For young people working in communities that lack a strong Latino arts scene, finding mentors is a challenge even with the best of intentions and follow through. “In Boston, most of the Latino leaders are in the for-profit world, and they’re not really looking to mentor people,” said Javier Torres. “I haven’t really had mentors. Coming to

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the [NALAC] Leadership Institute in June was the first real contact I'd had with Latino leaders in the arts. It's been a touchstone." Torres has also found guidance outside of the Latino community. "I have found a lot of support and strength in seeking out leaders of color in general, especially from the African-American community that have faced the same struggles our community faces," he said. "I think it's about finding a leader who subscribes to the same values or a similar aesthetic that can help you through the political, funding, and cultural environment of the arts."

Many of the conversationalists, regardless of age, have made a conscious effort to include younger people in their organizations. "You have to train young people of color in museum careers, and teach them to be responsible," said Guzman, of the National Museum of Mexican Art. "If you don't manage a checking account well, multiply that by 100. Financial problems are the biggest issue. Nine out of ten people don't know how to handle finances—and the older generation can't leave because they don't have the money to retire."

For Guzman, being a leader is about sharing responsibility. "I have to make sure that young people are involved in every aspect of running the organization," said Guzman. "We didn't want to be another mainstream museum. We can't allow departments to work in isolation; every team has to work together. I may not be around in 10 years, so I've identified five people who could take over for me. If an organization depends on one person, it's doomed."

Leadership: Good and bad

Several people had witnessed the weakening of organizations that relied on "cult of personality"-type leadership. In the case of L.A.'s Self Help Graphics, in Los Angeles, a "perfect storm" of bad luck and organizational weaknesses almost led to the demise of a treasured community institution. "One common mistake people make is to keep things close to their chest—not speaking frankly, not telling the board or the community at large what is going on, not reaching out for help," said Evonne Gallardo, now the organization's executive director. "It's like, 'Do you pull over and ask for directions, or not?' Me, I'm gonna pull over."

To Gallardo and many of the other participants in the San Antonio conversation, being a leader is about building community and sharing your successes, but especially sharing your challenges—realizing that there are different ways to get from point A to point B, and your route isn't necessarily the best. "I'm still figuring out what makes a good leader, but a big part of it is asking yourself who you're leading, and being responsive to them," she said.

Gallardo has been very deliberate in revisiting Self Help's mission statement, and making sure that the organization's current work embodies it. "We're an artist-led organization," she said. "That doesn't mean dumping all the work on them and not mentoring them." She's also a big fan of "peer to peer power," leveraging the skills of her contemporaries, "by helping each other, by being on each other's boards."

For Alberto Mejia, leadership is a balance between skills and sincerity. "You have to be curious and open to complexity, you have to keep the office door open, and support your staff and community," he said. "You also need to have legitimacy in the community you serve." In addition to dreams, there were nuts and bolts concerns expressed: Juana Guzman emphasized the importance of evaluation; measuring the impact of your work on your community. But for Maria Lopez de Leon, Latino art organizations need to find the balance between logistics and the big picture. "You need the ability to dream and the audacity to make it happen," she said.

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In a world increasingly mediated by language and sophisticated communication technologies, striking a balance between generating new content through scholarship around cultural practices and just “getting it done” can be difficult. The group’s re-sounding consensus was that you need both. “We need the tools and language to articulate our case,” said Juana Guzman.

While those present had varying experiences with the academy—some had advanced degrees, some didn’t, and some had partnered with academics, some hadn’t. They felt that good academic training, shared with humility, could help make organizations more sophisticated. “We should apply academic knowledge to strengthen the community,” said Eichling, who has had pro bono help from academics. “Don’t keep it in the ivory tower.” That being said, Gallardo cautioned against the idea of “the expert.” “We’ve been studied to death,” she said. “It’s about the ownership of our history. We do have academics on our board, but looking at academic credentials as primary for leadership is not what our organization values.”

Gender dynamics are another of the thorny issues that impact leadership. Gallardo runs an organization that was dominated by male leadership for many years. In her case, that has been a plus: “many female visual artists have re-engaged with Self Help because there’s a woman at the helm,” she said. But for other female executive directors at the meeting, succeeding men has been a challenge. “I took over after a very strong male presence,” said Lopez de Leon, who became NALAC’s executive director eight years ago. “It was very difficult for some people to see that I, too, could do the work.” And then there’s the stereotype of the “sexy Latina” artist and activist, the spitfire, which most in the group agreed has not been quite erased from the general culture. “Sexual harassment is real,” added Tamara Alvarado. “We can’t ignore that some people would look at us as Latina leaders through eyes and perceptions that are totally inappropriate.”

Sustainability and secession

All of the leaders present agreed that leading effectively is about much more than moving into the corner office (or cubicle as the case may be). It’s about navigating complex internal and external dynamics in order to make the organization thrive. Juana Guzman was adamant that Latino arts organizations need to learn how to manage their finances, and develop strategies for sustainability. “A vibrant organization isn’t necessarily a healthy one. People need medical benefits,” she said. “You have a fundamental responsibility to take care of people, and retain talent. We have to be entrepreneurs, and develop educational tools, or retail, or tourism, or other revenue streams. You can’t be afraid to look for funds, wherever they may be, you have to

shake every tree. You can’t be teetering on the edge of disaster if one funder pulls out.”

And when the time comes to move on, the outgoing executive director needs to prepare the staff and the community for his or her departure. “Invite everybody to a meeting and let them know with enough time so they get used to the idea,” said Guzman. Tamara Alvarado left MACLA after five years there, when she felt that it was the right time based on her personal and professional goals. But leaving was easier said than done, particularly when it came to her funders. “I was surprised to get a bit of backlash from some funders; they felt

I owed them. It was like, ‘We invested in you!’” My response was, why don’t you see the collective? It was such an individualistic approach. I’m no longer at MACLA, but I’m at MACLA—I have all this investment that I share with others.” Juana Guzman agreed. “It was really insulting to the work [of the organization],” she said. “Yes, transitions can be times of struggle, but we get through them, just like everyone else.”

For Alvarado and Guzman, as for all of those present at the National Conversation, there is a vital Latino arts movement that needs to be nourished and sustained. Perhaps in contrast to generations past, most of these leaders don’t see their work in terms of an exclusive allegiance to one organization that is the be all and end all. Evonne Gallardo worked for several organizations before returning to Self Help Graphics.

The consensus was that the Latino arts movement will succeed with good leadership, strong mentorship networks, close community partnerships, and a willingness to adapt to demographic and technological shifts. Alberto Mejia suggested pulling in unusual suspects from the street arts and tattoo communities, people who have good business sense, and being willing to offer the Internet generation decision-making positions. Javier Torres suggested leveraging social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook, which he uses religiously to keep community members up to date on Villa Victoria’s news. Gallardo advocated for engaging and educating Latino celebrities so that their dollars can return to the communities where they grew up. And Juana Guzman suggested that NALAC create a nationwide network of arts leaders who are willing to make themselves accessible, which could be particularly valuable to people working in areas with less-established Latino arts communities, like Javier Torres in Boston. Certainly, the San Antonio event made it

clear that good leadership doesn’t exist in isolation; it’s part of a constant conversation.

In closing, Alvarez emphasized the importance of not just doing the work effectively, but connecting it to broader social dynamics, owning it, and selling it. “Now is a time when everyone is looking at demographic shifts and most don’t know what sense to make of the wave of Latinidad that is hitting this country and you, as Latino leaders, need to be aware of this and take ownership,” she said. “Make a case for it, and stand firm.” Though passion, creativity and enthusiasm are priceless, in the end, even the best leaders need to pay the bills.

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