

RECLAIMING CULTURE: ¡QUE VIVA LA POSADA!

By Aryeh Shell

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The Mayfair community of east San José, California, seeking refuge on the traditional Posada walk. Here they sing in front of Mayfair's Mexican American Community Service Agency. Photo by Emmanuel Mendoza

Twelve immigrant women stand in a circle, holding hands, reflecting on why it is important to organize an annual *Posada* and *Pastorela* event in the Mayfair community of east San José, California. The women are members of *Familias Unidas* (United Families), which is dedicated to raising awareness and analysis of issues facing this small *barrio* of 20,000 residents that was historically called "*Sal Si Puedes*" (Get out if you can). *Familias Unidas* is a community theater ensemble with *Somos Mayfair* (We are Mayfair), a nonprofit organization that is using popular theater and culture to transform the community to "*¡Sí Se Puede!*" (We can do it!).

Somos Mayfair

[Somos Mayfair](#) started in 1996 as the Mayfair Improvement Initiative, a community-based organization that grew out of a neighborhood planning process and was supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Mayfair was selected by Hewlett because of its rich organizational history and low socioeconomic status. Mayfair is a primarily immigrant neighborhood that dates back to the 1920s and remains a gateway community for immigrants arriving from Mexico. Its history of activism began in the '40s when Mayfair residents fought for better working conditions in the packing plants, and in the '50s Mayfair was the home and base for the legendary work of César Chávez.

Justa, the head shepherd, persuades the community to prioritize family health and unity over junk food and consumerism. Photo by Emmanuel Mendoza [click to enlarge](#)

For ten years, projects were undertaken to build gardens, paint murals, repair street lights and lead community planning processes. As the funding ran out, interviews and focus groups were conducted throughout the community to reflect on lessons learned and vision the organization's future.

Through this process, the organization changed its name to more accurately reflect its identity.

Jaime Alvarado, the executive director, explains that "*Somos Mayfair* (We are Mayfair) is an affirmation, an embrace, a challenge, a call and response. It is inspired in part by the civil-rights-struggle call from the past — "I am Somebody!"

Currently it is run by a staff of 14 with a *promotor* program of people from the community who provide immediate support to families with children 0-5, a civic action program that organizes neighbors to take collective action on pressing issues including health and immigration reform, and the community engagement team that engages the residents in popular-education workshops, cultural events and theater skits to bring people together in dialogue and celebration.

Posada and Pastorela

The Posada and Pastorela event grew out of a desire of the community mothers to preserve their cultural heritage. To give an overview: Posadas are well-loved annual Christmas pageants celebrated throughout Mexico in which community members reenact the story of Mary and Joseph seeking refuge. A candlelit procession walks through the streets and stops in front of various houses, singing back and forth, night after night until the pilgrims are received at the final resting point. A *fiesta* begins with *piñatas*, tamales and music. The Pastorela, or Shepherd's Play, tells the story of Archangel Michael who appears to the shepherds and tells them to follow the North Star to Bethlehem to bear witness to the baby Jesus, a symbol of new humanity. He warns them that along the

way they will face dangers and temptations by devils that will appear on their journey to try and impede their arrival.

Lucifera, a devil, tries to seduce the shepherds off their path with promises of iPods, cell phones and video games. Photo by Emmanuel Mendoza [click to enlarge](#)

Two of the women, who have been active with our popular theater work and initiated this project, start the reflection. Sandra, a mother of three who holds her newborn in her arms, shares, "I will never be able to return to Mexico. I participated in Posadas throughout my entire childhood and I don't want my children to lose a part of their cultural heritage. I'm here to preserve what I can and to provide experiences for my children so that they can be proud of their roots." Teresa, speaks next. She is a single mother struggling to provide for her three daughters. "I want to be a role model for my children. I want them to see me on the stage and know that if I can have the courage to get up there, they too can do whatever they set their minds to." Teresa has the role of the lead shepherd in the play, embodying a character named Justa, who convinces the other shepherds not to succumb to the devil's temptations.

The sharing continues around the circle as other women reveal their motivations to find their voices, to preserve their culture, to break out of their loneliness and isolation and contribute something valuable to their community. These women live in the shadows of the United States immigration system that marginalizes them through discriminatory policies. This reinforces the marginalization they already experience as women in traditional family settings. While acknowledging the challenges and hardships, they affirm the power of their culture and commit themselves to the work that needs to be done with a resounding "*iSi Se Puede!*"

Focus on Community Health

Somos Mayfair began to meet with the women months before the December event to craft a script that would reflect the contemporary realities of the community, while resting on the foundation of a cultural tradition. "Culture is alive," reflected Artistic Director Arturo Gomez, as the group improvised theater exercises in the cold church hall. "It is not frozen in time but something we breathe life into with our struggles and dreams." The women tried on different characters, exploring the humility and resilience of the shepherds, the great power of the Archangel, the trickiness of the devils; they also discussed how these archetypes applied to their own lives. We decided to focus on the theme of health to illuminate the epidemic of diabetes and obesity that affects low-income Latino communities lacking access to healthy food, healthcare and safe places to exercise. We used the play to communicate the message that the temptations of junk food and corporate-led consumerism — as well as our own apathy -- are all detrimental to our health, and that an organized community can overcome these problems and ultimately thrive.

A team of devils, plotting to tempt the shepherds, makes its entrance with a rousing Ranchera. Photo by Emmanuel Mendoza [click to enlarge](#)

We rehearsed for months as the women also organized committees to prepare healthy traditional food, costumes and piñatas and solicit Jarocho musicians from Veracruz to perform for the community. On the night of the event, hundreds of families arrived and walked together through Mayfair holding candles, singing and embodying the journey of immigrants seeking refuge. Our first stop was the historical home of César Chávez, one of Mayfair's beloved residents. In the form of a giant puppet, César greeted the pilgrims and encouraged us to challenge the corporate food system that is poisoning our earth and our bodies. Our second stop was at the Mexican American Community Service Agency, a gang-prevention center providing alternatives for youth. They greeted us with a poem calling for an end to the violence between Chicanos and Mexicanos, reminding us that we all come from the same land. We were finally welcomed at the Eastside Neighborhood Center by community elders who received us with open arms and traditional songs.

The women then performed the Pastorela, many of them on stage for the first time. The audience howled with laughter at the antics of the devils trying to persuade the tired and hungry shepherds

by seducing them with the trance of the American dream. The devils offered them the convenience of fast foods like hot dogs, chips and cold sodas and encouraged them to give up their pilgrimage and satisfy their personal desires with free iPods, CDs and other consumer goods. They were almost tricked until the character Justa passionately called on the shepherds, and the community, to claim their dignity by holding strong to their cultural values of health, family unity and respect for the earth.

Food, games and piñatas followed: traditions of the Posada that all have been carried by memory from the distant home country of Mexico. In the small neighborhood of Mayfair, a group of immigrant women came together to continue their heritage, and pass it on to their children with the hope that they will ultimately make it their own.