

There is No Poverty in the Heart of a Mother

Written by Aryeh Shell with Rebecca Bauen

"I am Velia, daughter of Amalia, daughter of Francisca, daughter of the unknown mother."



Women actors name their mothers, one by one, to initiate their performance of *¡Somos Mujeres, Somos Madres!* (We are Women, We are Mothers!), an original and collectively-developed theater production based on their personal and ancestral stories. At Somos Mayfair--a community-based organization located in the low-income, immigrant neighborhood of Mayfair in east San José, CA--we use cultural work, and theater in particular, to encourage women to tell their stories. The recitation of the matriline became a practice that our intergenerational theater troupe, *Teatro Familias Unidas*, used to define themselves. This practice honors the women who stand behind them and openly acknowledges the centuries of women whose names have been forgotten.

Somos Mayfair's Artistic Director Arturo Gómez began working with popular theater in Mayfair in 2003 to develop community leaders who can respond to the unique challenges that confront immigrant communities. Popular theater uses the direct stories of people to highlight common problems and then opens dialogue with audience members to discuss and analyze potential solutions.

Three years ago, Gómez organized Teatro Familias Unidas, a group of Mayfair mothers who have performed skits and developed skills in using culture to engage families and communities in dialogue. Through their theater productions, Familias Unidas has addressed immigration, diabetes and obesity, school readiness and mobilizing the immigrant vote. Now, the actors are breaking the silence on issues that affect their lives as women in particular.

The Lives of Immigrant Women

The lives of many immigrant women are constricted by isolation, silence and fear. Mothers are isolated in their homes because of responsibilities to care for young children. They are silenced by their lack of English language skills, as well as by a culture in which men speak for their families. They live in fear due to their immigration status as well the uncertainty that comes from living in a new culture and society. There are few places where immigrant women can meet with others to share their stories, offer support, and contribute their ideas and talents to improving the lives of not only their families, but the community as a whole.

The families of Mayfair live in extreme poverty and as immigrants face increasing repression. In addition to these hardships, the stories of Mayfair women bring up domestic violence

and gender discrimination. Yet, their stories do not just present the difficulties that they face. As one mother put it, *“Although there has been incredible suffering, when we look at our past, we also see the good, the beauty, the strength and the generosity of our people.”* In the play and increasingly in their lives, they call for their rights as women to be respected. They also seek to contradict any negative stereotypes that others might have: *“Aunque sea pobre, no hay pobreza en el corazón de una madre.”* (Although she may be poor; in the heart of a mother, poverty does not exist.)

Through Familias Unidas, and the process of regular meetings and support, women have developed their confidence to speak out. And, by publicly telling their stories they are seeing themselves reflected in the eyes of their children, husbands and neighbors in new ways, as role models and worthy of respect.

Mother’s Day



Since 2005, Familias Unidas and Somos Mayfair have sponsored a community Mother’s Day celebration. Mother’s Day is widely celebrated throughout Latin America. In Mayfair, festivities include Folkloric dance, Mariachi music, children’s arts and crafts and healthy food, highlighted by the women’s theater production. This year, on May 10th, over three hundred people came together in the flower-filled garden of the Mexican Heritage Plaza. Spirits were high as children, husbands and grandparents sat beneath the shade of palm trees to listen to the stories of their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. Tears rolled down their faces as the audience members recognized their own stories and legacies in the strengths and struggles of these women.

Familias Unidas started preparations for this celebration early in the year. They met once a week for three months with Somos Mayfair’s Community Engagement staff in the church hall of Our Lady of Guadalupe; the place where Cesar Chavez began his organizing career 50 years ago. As the performance neared, they met to rehearse nearly every day, juggling their responsibilities and supporting each other to fulfill their obligations at home. These newly built social networks can’t replace family ties shattered by the separation of migration, but friendships can be the foundation for re-building a sense of community and belonging.

The women looked deeply at their ancestral legacies as a means to understand who they are, where they come from and how they got to this place in their lives. They investigated their past and present, interviewed their families, and shared their stories and questions with each other. Through theater games, drama therapy, creative writing and ritual, they put themselves in the shoes of their ancestors and helped each other to think about the larger social and political context in which they live their lives. They decided on what they wanted to heal in themselves, and on what they wanted to pass down to future generations.

Through this work, they have recognized the effect of generational patterns on their children and the power that they have to affect change. *“I have been given the task of*

healing the wounds of history, of opening the doors to the cages that have trapped my mother and my grandmothers, so that we can liberate ourselves and our children.”

Together the women wrote the script of their new play. In their own words, they shared the realities and memories that they carry: *“I had to leave my community in Mexico suddenly, without questions, without answers. I had to leave everything I knew: my happiness, my culture, my family. Now living here, I will always have the memory of my people, forever burning in my heart.”*

On Women’s Voice

“As women, we want to be heard. History has often forgotten to mention our names. Silence is complicit with all of the injustices and violence that we suffer.”



A key element of systematic oppression is the erasure of stories and the contributions of women and people of color from official, written history. In schools, we are most often taught that great accomplishments mean conquering nations and claiming domination over other people. How often is it considered “great” for a woman to get up in the middle of the night to take care of a sick child or an elderly parent, or to plant seeds or cook the food that feeds our families? How often do we recognize the power that comes from an urgent “No” arising from the throat of a woman who has stood up for herself and left an abusive situation - who struggles to raise her children alone but has put an end to a cycle of violence for generations to come?

“¡Ya Basta! Enough! I have to speak about this and break the chain of silence! We cannot pass the same vicious cycle of abuse to the next generations.”

The purpose of feminist oral history is to bring forward the experiences and perspectives of women that have traditionally been marginalized. By bringing women’s voices to the center, we as a society can redefine ourselves and what we deem important. We can create legacies that emphasize the importance of relationship and the power of giving and caring for life.

Reclaiming Power

“Everything changed in my life when I realized that I have a voice, that I have the ability to change.”

The previously silenced women of the Mayfair community are claiming what it means to be a woman. Through their poetic and theatrical expressions, they are also recognizing themselves as artists:

*Soy Mujer por luchar cada dia
dejando atrás el silencio doloroso.
Soy mujer porque al mirarme en el espejo y
me reflejo como triunfadora de la vida.
Sueño, amo y valgo porque soy mujer,
soy vida.*

I am woman, made by the daily struggle
of leaving behind painful silence.
I am woman when I look at myself in the
mirror and see someone triumphant.
I dream, love, and am worthy
because I am a woman, I am life.

Building from the power of their words and stance this Mother's Day, the women of Familias Unidas will continue to perform throughout the community and beyond during the coming year, to spark dialogue and create spaces for other women to tell their stories and claim their dignity, beauty and strength.



Teatro Familias Unidas is comprised of Maria Teresa Bárcenas, Norma Chavez, Graciela Díaz, Nelida Hernandez, Sandra Mendoza, Estela Ortega, Lucero Reyes, Velia Sanchez, Cecilia Tavares, and Dominga Villa.

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