



What We Really Need is Liberation

*Gracias a la Vida 2019
Executive Director Address
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Today, I want to spend my time talking about **liberation**. But in order to do this in a productive way, I first want to set a few intentions.

- This is an invitation to listen, to open up your heart and head to the notion that multiple perspectives, lived-experiences and personal truths, can, and should, co-exist.
- That traditionally, the definition of liberation is *the act of being freed from oppression*.
- But today, we allow ourselves to be expansive in our thinking, while anchoring ourselves in a belief that many of us want the same things...

We all want to live our lives with dignity, in safety, and surrounded by those we love. And, we want to have purpose and the freedom to advance dreams- for ourselves and for our children.

At SOMOS this is our definition of liberation and what we are bringing to life through practice every day.

I start with these intentions to recognize that the majority of us in this room today, are grappling with many issues and challenges that **are rooted in inequities and institutionalized oppression**.

For the many Mayfair residents in this room- you know what the “affordability and housing crisis” means, from a very real place. You know how it feels to live 16-20 people deep in one single family home; or how hard it is to find a quiet space for your children to do homework when living your cars.

Some of you also know how it feels to be displaced from Mayfair, from San Jose, and to try your luck in more affordable places to only find limited access to resources, social services, and networks of support, like the ones you’ve built here, in **this** neighborhood.



So, you've returned, accepting the realities of harsh living conditions, instead of isolation.

And, you know how it feels to live in fear that you may be separated from your families; that the murals and symbols you uphold may be erased; or how difficult it is to do back-breaking labor every day, with limited wages and mobility.

We also acknowledge that the many people in this room- nonprofit staff, educators, board members and volunteers, philanthropists, public officials, small business owners, are **feeling, seeing, and wrestling** with the mounting pressures of the inequities that are surrounding us...For ourselves, our own families, and the people we are intending to serve.

- Homelessness
- Attacks on our indigenous, immigrant, black, brown and LGBTQIA communities
- Cuts to education
- Limited economic opportunity
- And the list can go on and on

All of these things are pervasive here in Silicon Valley. And, all of us are being impacted by these realities in different ways.

Thus, many of us are being **called upon to evolve...**To change how we address problems.

Some of us are spending our time in dialogue, researching, and reading everything we can get our hands on. And we are compelled,

- To engage in deeper conversations of race, diversity, equity and inclusion;
- To demand for more People of Color representation on our Boards and elected bodies;
- To do more community engagement with the people most affected by issues.

This work, when done meaningfully (*not to check off a box*), is deep, painful and hard. But it's also necessary.

If you feel like me...

Some days this work is inspiring...it feels like we just may be at the tipping point where:



- Critical mass, allyship and solidarity across ethnic lines and socio-economic levels is mounting;
- That deeper partnership between nonprofits and philanthropy **will** better align our work;
- And that with committed, diverse staff within our institutions, systems change **is** possible.

But, at the same time, the days of sheer exhaustion are also compounding.

In the last few weeks alone, many of us who walk alongside the most oppressed communities have been reminded through a host of decisions that our voices don't matter. That no matter how much **we celebrate our diversity, understand the need for equity, and thirst for shared prosperity...**

That we, the collective WE, are not ready for liberation

- Because liberation requires us to shift dynamics;
- To name, acknowledge, address and own privilege and guilt;
- To allow ourselves to build new and bigger tables;
- To demand that the whole pie get bigger...rather than succumb to scarcity.

The liberation I am talking about is not about flipping systems so that an oppressed group takes over and has power over others. But rather it is a new way of operating, where power is shared, where the intentions of democracy are upheld, and that economic prosperity isn't reliant upon the suffering of others.

So, how do we open ourselves up to this liberation?



Now, some of you may be thinking,

This is all too much! What are the solutions? How do we find hope?

Or you may be uncomfortable with my word choice and tone.

That's ok. This is my job as a community leader and organizer, to push and challenge; and to offer a vision of what's possible, here in East San Jose and beyond.



So, here are some of the things I can offer from our practice and learning...

- 1) **To stay hopeful and committed, requires bold and long-term generational visioning.** That while we will engage in grant periods, strategic plans and election cycles, our focused time and energy *has to be* on creating pipelines of leadership and sustained community change.

We must affirm that the work we put in today is ever evolving, that it is part of a long, generational movement. That we stand on the organizing, community building and resistance that came before us, and that there will be more to come from the generations ahead.

At SOMOS, you will see this type of investment in human capacity and potential through:

- Working with **1,300 families** and their young children across **Alum Rock**.
 - The **leadership development** work that uplifts resiliency, voice, analysis and skills of over **200 leaders**.
 - **Parent committee** organizing work that has been influential in systemic change affecting **10,000 students**.
 - **The neighbor to neighbor and youth organizing** work that is focused on a vision for Mayfair 20 years from now; a vision that includes them and their families; and does not displace them.
 - Our commitment to incubating and supporting **spaces that are created for community, by community**.
 - And done in ways that allow for access to economic opportunity and growth, for the people, like the **26 immigrant women who are running their own cooperative, META, or earning living wages** right out of our leadership pipeline.
- 2) **To push through complexity and exhaustion, requires us to connect with one another.** To actually see one another. To be honest, authentic and vulnerable. To share fears and hopes. To take the time to build trust and relationships. To come together in real collectives, that are grounded in shared power. To allow each other so step up and step back when needed, or most strategic.



And while this type of work is often fluid and organic, and is slow to start...this work allows for the shared ownership of challenges and solutions, is faster to implement and is more transformative and impactful in the outcome.

SOMOS is proud to create, co-lead or engage in spaces like this:

- **Parent and Leadership Workshops**
- **Vecinos Activos**
- **Jovenes Activos**
- **Empuje and its work with Teachers, Administrators and a Community for a Better Alum Rock**
- **The East San Jose PEACE Partnership**
- **ALF's CEO- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Liberation Cohort**
- **Alum Rock's Birth-3rd Initiative and the County-wide Universal Access Pilot**
- **The Si Se Puede Collective**

And so much more...

Our intentional leadership and participation in these spaces have proven to be impactful on issues of housing; neighborhood development; education; violence and trauma, racial justice and systems change.

3) And, to advance liberation, and allow people the space to dream, create and live their potential, requires that we be supportive when needed, but to also get out of the way.

- While we should have high expectations of students and residents, we must also nurture *their* interests, gifts, talents and agency. Trust in them and their own visions.
- We must also reduce layers of bureaucracy. Dismantle processes, policies and structures that create and perpetuate inequities.
- And, we need to allow other people to lead. To push beyond the leadership vacuums, and invest and support emerging leaders...because, seriously, there is enough work to go around...I heard a staggering data point this past week that there are over 250 nonprofit Executive Director openings in the Bay Area right now. We also know that Boards and commissions have openings. And that local tech companies can do so much more to increase their workforce diversity, especially amongst our Black and Brown communities.



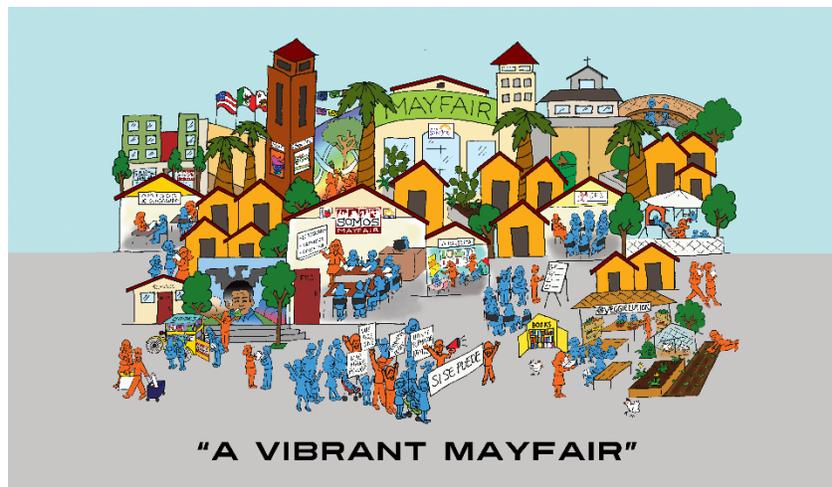
Leadership and opportunity **can no longer be designated to a limited few.**

At SOMOS, we strive to implement these values and practices and build upon them every day.

We are oriented as organizers, connectors, facilitators, and bridge builders, all in service of investing in the people of this community, uplifting *their* voice and leadership, and building *their* power. We do this with **parents, neighbors, youth, and community leaders, like Hipolito, Elizabeth and Araceli.**

And, we have demonstrated that when we do this, time over time, with trust and respect at the center, both formal and organic projects, networks, and movements emerge becoming a ripple effect, across the neighborhood. One that is not reliant solely on SOMOS as an organization but rather the relationships and networks that have been tended to along the way.

Knowing this, and building a shared vision of a vibrant Mayfair is what sustains us...what pushes our team to stay engaged and to do everything we can do to get closer to liberation.



So today, our vision is that we all show up and do the work to advance liberation. To commit,

- In our work, decision-making and spheres of influence, to inspire hope and righteous anger, so that we can cut through complacency and complicity.
- To move beyond ego, competition and politics as usual, and to be accountable to one another.



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- To take a stand to dismantle oppressive systems that keep families and communities in perpetual crisis, fear, and gridlock.
- To build new visions and tables, where power is shared and emerging leadership is supported.
- To shift from charity to transformation.
- To remove barriers, eradicate waiting lists and have an equity lens in everything we do.
- To center the work we do on people's needs...

So that we can all ***live our lives with dignity, in safety, and surrounded by those we love. To manifest our purpose and advance our dreams- for ourselves and for our children.***