

# AZ Creative Voices: How art and heritage helped a neighborhood

By Marc David Pinate  
Barrio Anita AZ CCI Team



**AZ CCI** is a learning program wherein diverse teams from Arizona cities, towns, and neighborhoods reimagine community assets and devise meaningful projects that place creative engagement, ethical and equitable practices, and local wisdom at the center.

# Barrio Resurrected: How art and heritage helped a neighborhood

## The glue that held the neighborhood together

If you speak to one of the elders from Barrio Anita about the old days, one of the first things they will tell you is how everyone knew each other. These deep, intergenerational relationships were the glue that held the neighborhood together. Relationships continue to play a key role in the health of the community.



Marc David Pinate is a theatre artist, musician and educator. He was part of the Barrio Anita AZ CCI team. Photo by Milta Ortiz.

Barrio Anita is a historic Mexican-American neighborhood situated a mile and a half from Tucson's downtown core. Originally an Apache encampment outside the presidio walls in the days of colonial Spanish rule, the area was populated by families traveling north from the Mexican state of Sonora in the 1880s and 1890s. By the 1930s the small neighborhood of just over 100 houses was a thriving Mexican-American barrio with multiple Chinese owned grocery stores, Davis Elementary School (one of Tucson's oldest schools, built in 1901), the Oury Neighborhood Center and public pool, and soon after a dry cleaners and gas station. Extended Mexican-American families with names like Tellez, Benton, Felix,

Carbajal, Acedo, Dalton, Valenzuela and Bustamante intermarried and built new houses, often in the Sonoran adobe row style.

Barrio Anita's golden age spanned from the 1940s through the '50s and '60s. The old-timers still alive to remember speak of this era with an almost sacred nostalgia; a glint in their eyes hints at something more special and pure than words can describe. It was a time of unlocked doors when neighbors watched over each other's children — there were tons of "bukis" (Tucson slang for "kids"), and every weekend the backyard fiestas went until the wee hours.

It wasn't perfect, of course. There was poverty and the dysfunction it brings, but the good more than outweighed the bad. There was love and familia, and hard work, and good food, music and dancing, respeto, laughter... so much laughter, and most precious: the feeling of safety and belonging.

With the introduction of street drugs in the late '70s, followed by gangs in the '80s, adult children began to move out, selling their family lots. Transient renters replaced home owners and neighbors began to know less and less of each other. The corner stores closed. Eventually the pool closed and the understaffed neighborhood center was closed more than it was open.

As downtown Tucson grew with new electric street cars and redevelopment dollars, predatory developers set their sights on the little barrio, which is walking distance from downtown and right next to the I-10 freeway. They tried erasing its ethnic heritage, calling it McKinley Park in listings, flipping houses at nearly 10 times the purchase cost and razing historic architecture to be replaced by plans for university student housing complexes.

But all was not lost.

### **The looming threat of gentrification**

In 2017 a few of the older families were still around. The one corner store remaining, Anita Street Market – well known for their tortillas made on site – was open and thriving. Davis Bilingual Magnet School was home to TUSD's flagship bilingual immersion program (ironically the elders recall being slapped for speaking Spanish at Davis in the old days) and the oldest (started in 1983) after-school Mariachi program in the city.

This was the year when Gracie Soto started holding community meetings once a month. Soto's nana is the owner of Anita Street Market. Soto grew up in Barrio Anita, working at her grandparent's store, swimming as a child in Oury Pool before it closed and hearing all the stories of what Barrio Anita was like back in the day. A young, single mother and community organizer in the making, Soto wanted to see the pool re-opened. She wanted the homelessness and drug usage at the park to stop. She wanted the abandoned lots cleaned up. In short, she wanted her old neighborhood back.

Around this time, as the artistic director of Borderlands Theater in Tucson, I had been raising monies and resources for the second iteration of the Barrio Stories Project, a long-term initiative aimed at preserving and celebrating the history and heritage of Tucson's historic barrios. We chose to focus on Barrio Anita because it was one of the more well-known barrios in Tucson and had an interesting history (though all neighborhoods have interesting histories if you go back far enough).

It was no secret that encroaching development was a primary issue for the neighborhood, and the civic practice mission of the Barrio Stories Project begged the question of whether arts and culture could somehow intervene in the looming threat of gentrification. Having gained support for the project from the Network of Ensemble Theatres and Arizona Humanities, we applied and were accepted to be part of the inaugural cohort of the Arizona Creative Communities Institute.

A team of five Borderlands artists, including myself, embedded ourselves in Barrio Anita for a year. We attended Gracie's community meetings and introduced ourselves to the neighborhood, or at least the five to seven neighbors that attended. We traveled to Phoenix for Creative Communities Institute training sessions, learning from experts in creative placemaking and from our fellow teams around the state. We canvassed the neighborhood with surveys to understand its challenges and assets. We got to know the principal and a teacher at Davis, and the program coordinator at Oury Neighborhood Center. We recorded 20 oral histories from Barrio Anita residents, which became the basis of a culminating event which took place in April, 2018. In short, we developed relationships with the people that lived and worked in the neighborhood.

### **The palpable feeling of authentic pride**

Barrio Stories in Barrio Anita was a two-day heritage festival featuring large-scale video projections on historic buildings and screens of oral histories and archival images, a music stage featuring youth mariachi groups from around the city, a Davis Elementary School stage showcasing its magnet dance programs, a resource fair, roving youth poets, shadow theatre, a pop-up Barrio Anita history museum, and a 1950s style backyard fiesta with outdoor heritage cooking and musicians for dancing.

Many of Barrio Anita's residents attended along with about 2,000 other Tucsonans, some from the nearby barrios like Hollywood, Menlo Park, Viejo, Blue Moon, Sobaco and Centro. The impact of the event is still being realized a year later.

The full reach of this project necessitates a separate article, but some of the more tangible effects in just the past 15 months include:

- Residents held elections and reestablished the Barrio Anita Neighborhood Association after years of inactivity – neighborhood meetings now average 20 to 30 neighbors with over 50 on their email list.
- Oury Neighborhood Center saw a substantial increase in staffing, hours of operation and usage.
- Oury Pool was reopened.
- A much needed four-way stop was created near Davis school.
- Increased police patrols and elimination of drug activity at the neighborhood park.
- A dialogue between developers and residents has begun.
- Two mural projects in the neighborhood were completed.
- An increased number of residents who now know each other and participate in a variety of neighborhood events ranging from neighborhood meetings to movie nights, back-to-school fairs and neighborhood clean ups.

At the core of this impact was the palpable feeling of authentic pride the project engendered among residents.

## **The newfound relationships**

Underlying these benefits are the strong relationships that have formed between neighborhood residents, city officials, partner organizations and artists. Barrio Anita falls within the jurisdiction of Tucson City Council Ward One, headed by Council Member Regina Romero. Ward One Chief of Staff Steve Arnquist was part of the Barrio Anita Creative Communities team. Arnquist attests that Ward One did not hear much from Barrio Anita residents before the Barrio Stories Project. Today, he says the volume of calls and activity is on par with the largest neighborhood in their ward, which holds a hundred times more residents. Before going through the CCI training and the Barrio Stories process he didn't personally know any residents of Barrio Anita.

"Now I know dozens of residents and their issues," he states. "Not very many people will call [the Ward One office] blind, but once they know someone in Ward One... just having a face that people know makes a huge difference in how comfortable they feel calling us with concerns."

The effect of knowing people, placing someone's name to their face and their face to their story leads to empathy and that makes action more likely.

In another example of relationship formation that led to positive change, a few months after the reconvening of the neighborhood association residents, Ward One staff, police and other city officials participated in a ride along through Barrio Anita. Residents were able to point out where the homeless drug users congregated, illegal dumping taking place, what houses were vacant, where speed bumps and stop signs were needed. One rookie officer on the ride along took it upon himself to attend the neighborhood association meetings afterwards. He began getting to know the residents, which led him to petition some of his fellow officers to drive through the neighborhood more regularly.

"No one really knew each other," lifelong resident Julian Argote said. "Now that [city officials and residents] know each other more, the conversations are more productive. Everything's a lot smoother because in the beginning no one [from the neighborhood] knew what they were doing, especially with the city. Getting things tackled down now is a lot easier now that we know who does what, in what area in the city, when before it was like who do we get in contact for this? Who do we get in contact for that? Now we kinda know more. You can just see it. Even with the police. Now they're kinda knowing who's who. Before the only time they came is if they got called in. Now you constantly see them driving around... The homeless are there but none of them are zombied out. You're not finding needles, it's really clean compared to what it was. Just their presence around the neighborhood you feel that."





The Oury Pool was reopened. Photo by Marc David Pinate.

As part of the CCI process residents, artists, city council and parks and rec staff worked closely together to produce a large-scale heritage festival and the biggest event that had ever taken place in Barrio Anita. Through working together in meetings, on phone calls and in email exchanges — all done on top of full-time jobs, family and other existing commitments — we got to know each other as human beings. The overwhelming success of the event, after months of hard work, led to strong feelings of what anthropologist Jessica Tracy calls “authentic pride” or the “emotional response to successes that are hard won and that people know occurred as a result of their own efforts.”

According to Tracy, authentic pride influences the decisions we make and the relationships we pursue and increases empathy for stigmatized others, making us want to find or be our best selves.

As a consequence of these newfound relationships, Council Member Romero and her staff took it upon themselves to deliver on a long-standing request from Anita residents to re-open Oury Pool.

The pool, which closed soon after the Great Recession, held a special place in the history of the barrio. For decades it provided free (or extremely low cost) outdoor, healthy recreation for children, summer jobs for teens, and a cooling off spot for families to gather and talk during hot Sonoran summers (fortifying internal relationships). For such a small neighborhood it was one of their greatest public assets. Throughout its nine-year closure, residents, led by Gracie Soto, pleaded with the city through newspaper and television interviews, letters to city leaders, and Facebook campaigns to reopen their beloved pool. Just weeks after the Barrio Stories event Ward One applied for and received a \$50,000 gaming grant from the Tohono O'odham Nation to make the required construction upgrades needed to reopen the pool. Ward staff soon found out construction costs were actually closer to \$450,000 dollars. By this point they were committed and with \$50,000 in seed money they leveraged the additional \$400,000 from the City of Tucson's federally funded Community Development Block Grant program. Arnquist affirmed a recently passed Pima County bond might have rehabbed the pool in 2024 or 2025. Instead, on June 8, 2019, 14 months after the Barrio Stories in Barrio Anita project, the pool was opened. And that is how the wheels of progress turn.

### **The history, the connection, the neighbors**

Oury Neighborhood Center program coordinator Miguel Angel Garcia confirms how the work of Barrio Stories improved his relationships with residents and influenced the scope of his work at the center. In a recent interview he clearly identifies how the project allowed people to rekindle their personal relationship to the neighborhood and to their past neighbors, going on to express how this authentic pride has fueled efforts beyond the Barrio Stories project.

"Without [Borderlands Theater] doing that project, I don't think we would be where we're at today," he said. "A lot of people got to come back and [...] that kinda brought back, like 'dang, that's why we were so proud of our neighborhood, this is why.' The history, the connection, the neighbors, just the talking and reminiscing about playing in the streets and going to fiestas in people's yards, it really did, it lit them back up again. So with us doing stuff and Gracie doing stuff it's just kinda, like c'mon let's keep the fire going, let's keep it going, and whatever it is, it's gonna be awesome."

As a frequent visitor to the center himself as a youth, Garcia arrived about a year prior to Barrio Stories with an existing knowledge of the historic value of the center along with an awareness of

its decline. His understanding of and relationship to Barrio Anita over the course of his life was behind his initial efforts to offer the free use of the center for Gracie Soto's early neighborhood meetings.

In this way he developed a relationship with Soto prior to Barrio Stories that led to the two working with Parks and Rec upper management to allow kindergarteners from nearby Davis Elementary to attend the Kidco program, an afterschool drop in program heavily subsidized by the city. Kidco gives working parents a safe place for their children to be during the gap between the end of Davis' school day and when they get off work.

To date, Oury Center is the only youth center in Tucson that has expanded its minimum age for participation in Kidco from first graders to kindergarteners, affording all Davis parents, regardless of their child's age, this valuable cost saving option.

Garcia's enthusiasm for Barrio Anita influenced his decision to allow Oury Center to be the central meeting place for all Barrio Stories production meetings, community workshops, and resident steering committee meetings leading up to the main event. Under his leadership, Oury Center became the central hub for the Barrio Stories festival, leveraging his relationships with Ward One to waive costs for a slew of Parks and Rec equipment like mobile stages, sound systems, chairs, tables and other resources. Oury center remains the hub of all neighborhood activity today.

Garcia's understanding of how city processes work led him soon after the Barrio Stories event to recommend to Soto that she hold elections for an official, city recognized Barrio Anita Neighborhood Association.

"At the beginning I always told her, because [Gracie] never wanted to [restart the neighborhood association] and be president but I always told her... a title always has more power. It's kinda one of those things where I had to go back and forth with her, she didn't want to... but I told her the only way you're going to accomplish anything is if you get this established and you have that president title under you [...] When you're writing a letter to the city or to the ward office and it's signed Gracie Soto, Anita President and you're the spokesperson for that entire community, it holds a lot more water."

## **The faces and stories of Barrio Anita**

It has been my deepest honor to work with the residents of Barrio Anita. The Barrio Stories project was aimed at putting the faces and stories of Barrio Anita on public display, so residents both within and without the neighborhood, city leaders and staff, community service workers, and others would learn or remember the special place this neighborhood has always been.

The event was supposed to kick off a relationship between the city at large and Barrio Anita itself. I think we accomplished this, however we discovered something we didn't expect. In the



making of the project, in the multitude of mundane steps of meetings and logistics that led up to the big culminating event, this is where residents and city staff really started to know and “see” each other, forming a small coalition of individuals that have made dramatic changes in less than a year and a half.

There are many more examples that I could not fit into this article, such as the new relationship between Primavera Foundation, a large CDO, and Barrio Anita that has sent several residents to leadership trainings around the country among other capacity building assistance; or the local architecture firm of Poster Frost Mirto, which has given Barrio Anita free consultation about their zoning and advice on how to deal with developers. What remains at the core of all this positive activity are the person-to-person relationships engendered by the process.

I believe Gracie’s Facebook post after the reopening of Oury pool says it best as she credits the various relationships that have made the past year her best ever:

“I’m so proud of My Barrio. We Have Learned that coming together to help one another is the only way, the right way!!! Me and my family and our Business we do the best that we can to help our Barrio, our community in any way we Can!!!!!! Life is hard as it is [...] if we don’t reach out to one another who are we really?? My Barrio has grown in so many ways! From the Neighborhood Association and meetings, projects, working with Davis, working with Marc David Pinate [Borderlands Theater], working with Oury/Miguel Angel Garcia cleaning up our Barrio with Juan M Urias and Johnny Urias to making new memories and bringing life with art to Anita and Julian Argote and our Pool re opening!!!!!! I can say that this year has been the Ultimate year for me I am proud to be President of my Barrio and to work with other Neighborhoods around us Hollywood Menlo, Dunbar, etc. it has been a long time coming but this is only the beginning!!!!!!”

Cover image: Barrio Anita residents and Borderlands Theatre staff. Photo by Luis Juarez.