



## AZ Creative Voices: Fostering cultural pride, agency and action

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Douglas 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.

# Fostering cultural pride, agency and action

## Understanding our border narrative

On day one of the Arizona Creative Communities Institute (AZ CCI), we proudly showed up to our first Learning Session after a four-and-a-half-hour drive, bearing the name APACHES on our chests. Our team name did not reveal whether we lived on this side or that side of the



**Jenea Sanchez is an artist and the founder of the Border Arts Corridor. She was part of the Douglas AZ CCI team.**

border; rather it brought to the forefront our sense of unity with the people and stories that connect us all to the land, air, and water we depend on.

Walking into this process, eager to tell our stories as representatives of Douglas and Agua Prieta, engaging in dialogue where voices from all corners of the state filled the air, was a gift, especially in our current environment, where we are more likely to consume content from a third party, hyper-curated for our screens. In these moments, centering the particularities of our border narrative felt like a radical act for a community like Douglas/Agua Prieta, whose place in the constructs of society is used as political fodder, typically every two years,

enduring a consistent flow of insults, acts of violence, and calls for the building of walls, which would be visible from our own backyards. Bringing our histories, experiences, fears and dreams to AZ CCI Learning Sessions allowed space and time for our teams to unpack the idiosyncrasies of our home and begin a process with each other, with mentors and, later, with our community in developing community-centered public art and public spaces in order to reframe the ways creative engagement renews interest in local history and the recovery of cultural narratives.

Sister cities Douglas and Agua Prieta are no strangers to rich tales, beginning with the presence of the Apaches and the battles with the U.S. and Mexican governments over land and freedom and continuing with trade deals and migration deals. Two hundred years of history and pockets of folklore include stories of Indigenous settlements, war, peace treaties, Mexican revolutionaries (Pancho Villa), smelter stacks, splendor, cheap labor, segregation, lavish theatres, vaudeville, labor strikes, sulfur dioxide, slag, environmental activism, migration, high-tech drug tunnels, and of pride and resilience through significant moments of change. Organized archives of a handful of these stories live within the walls of places like the Williams House Museum and the Gadsden Hotel; yet they also live, unrecorded, in homes during times

of gathering that spark moments of remembering throughout southern Arizona and northern Sonora.

Additionally, spaces that were the backdrops to stories exist within Douglas' historical hub; walls keep the legends that took place inside 100-year-old hotels, taverns and churches. There is an intergenerational push between community members to no longer allow for the perils of time to erase the foundation of our identity, and to find ways to tell the stories to the public by saving historic buildings.

As a mother, artist, educator and wife of the 31st mayor of Douglas, I have come to realize the power of creating opportunities for thoughtful learning and discussions related to place. Nothing fills me with pride more than listening to my children speak about how great Douglas is. The privilege of having even the slightest influence on the way students see and speak about their community is moving because at a young age, many of my peers and I bought into the negative rhetoric about this community we heard from the outside, and we let it fester among us. We left Douglas/Agua Prieta with no thought of returning other than for holidays.

Stories have a way of pushing you in or out of a place.

When my education and art practice guided me back home, I realized I knew very little about the history and the story of the land that comforted me and shaped my identity. I feel lucky to have landed on a trajectory back to the border, and I often think, "What if my sense of place and pride had been established earlier in life?" What effect would a grounded sense of self have on communities like Douglas/Agua Prieta? The process of sitting with community members during AZ CCI, for the first time and for extended periods of listening, with nowhere else to be, allowed us to answer these questions and return home prepared to dialogue with our community.

## **Leading our own cultural development**

By focusing on process and the fluidity of collaborative spaces, another public art project came to fruition. Jose Pedro Teran, Team Douglas member, artist and educator, showed up on day one of AZ CCI with a collection of laminated photocopies and a vision of large format prints depicting historical figures and moments of great significance — Chief Cochise, Pancho Villa, and the first discovery of one of El Chapo's drug tunnels — mounted on the windows of a historic building.

Two years later, Mr. Teran's project was installed after months of discussion and planning with David Carranza of the City of Douglas. Although this project did not manifest as an official outcome of the AZ CCI initiative, the chance encounter with an artist, economic developer and former sign maker set a path for Mr. Teran's idea to become a reality because he had done the work of ideation during our scheduled convenings.

Discussion led by Dr. Maribel Alvarez, Leia Maahs and Kimi Eisele created openings for our team to consider an array of cultural assets outside of Pancho Villa and El Chapo. We were challenged to look toward our home for the answers to our questions, such as: How do we fit into the trajectory of the state's artistic and cultural aspirations? How can we design our path to ensure we are responding to the imminent needs of the borderlands? And, most importantly, how do we want to see ourselves reflected in public art and spaces?

Southwest Folklife Alliance reinforced the importance of seeking expertise within our city limits. We understood that change did not need to be designed or led by experts looking in from the outside. Rather, that model only works when it's flipped, when we as a community must jump into leading our own cultural development.

Our AZ CCI project began to take shape after artists Alexandra Jimenez and Estrella Esquilin spent three weekend trips in our community, which included community tours in Douglas and Agua Prieta, organic encounters on the street, home visits with families and formal meetings at City Hall and with educational organizations.

Jimenez recounts her thought process below:

“Public town halls only go so far, and the one that we hosted was great, but it was mainly attended by people who were directly invited. The AZ CCI grant provided funding for us to go into schools where we really interacted with the youth. It is the youth who we have to empower to want to remain and live and invest in Douglas, so we were keen on hearing their perspectives.

What gave me the idea for the 'Reframing Douglas' was the comment from the kids that they like to travel to Bisbee for photo opportunities in front of public art pieces, like the many murals in Bisbee. Then, in thinking about ways to create 'selfie' moments, I started thinking about framing and how we can frame the world around us and started to question how I could create an object that engaged the public to interact with the city itself. And that's when the idea of a viewfinder came into my head.”

## **Reframing our community**

Upon returning to our formally convened Learning Sessions after the process of introducing Jimenez and Esquilin to the community, the momentum began to broaden. What was revealed in Year 1 and understood by the artists was that expanding our sense of pride and community self-esteem was the common thread informing the process that would allow the project to arrive at a solution: a project that allows the community to 're-frame' their surroundings, taking pride in local stories with added context to the histories. Through the use of sculpture, residents and



visitors could engage in a moment of pause to reflect on unique characteristics and history of Douglas/Agua Prieta.



Team Douglas in the balcony of the Gadsden Hotel.

Side conversations, chit-chats on the way to the restroom and afternoon cocktail discussions launched our team into conceptualizing a deeper exploration into how our community could take hold of cultural narratives, visually and with community, in clear daylight for all to share. We were intrigued by the conversations and presentation related to placemaking and outcomes of policymakers, city planners and artists at the table when developing public spaces.

The role of artists in this context is no longer about the romanticized idea of being commissioned to make a work of art in solitude and install it into a public space. Rather, our roles as cultural practitioners and artists have shifted to also serve as a guardrail for issues that cause inequity. Setting precedent for equitable systems of engagement to the process, hand in hand with the community, and holding agency in this way, is how we see our role.

Douglas Team member Dave Tarullo said, “The most drastic change I saw in how I viewed public art is in the importance of the end product. In the past, I placed a great deal of energy on the final outcome. Through the CCI program, I realized that the process and engagement are actually much more important, and the final piece is a byproduct of all the pieces and collaborations with the community, so the work becomes something everyone can take pride in.”

## **Renewing our pride and empowerment**

With all of these ideas circulating around equity, placemaking, community engagement and process building, we remained in the midst of relationship building and our continued education through AZ CCI.

We could not have been matched with a better mentor than Gabriela Muñoz, former Arizona Commission on the Arts’ Artist Programs Manager, who is keenly aware of the artistic climate, trends, opportunities and sensitivities within communities. Joining a lunch conversation led by Subject Matter Resource Xanthia Walker, co-founder of Rising Youth Theatre, on the value of creating space for intergenerational collaborations and tactics for how to approach bringing together elders, adults and young people to inform how we cultivate dialogue and the vision for our future, resonated in a way I could not explain at the time. A seed was planted that allowed me to engage Walker and Rising Youth Theatre as a partner for an Our Town NEA proposal.

Our core values and aspirations as participants, facilitators, moderators and funders were all so interconnected, perhaps by design. Between Muñoz, her colleagues at ACA, ASU and Rising Youth Theatre, Team Douglas was equipped to apply for this prestigious endeavor.

Our grant proposal, titled To Support Douglas Community Revitalization Through Intergenerational Storytelling, aims to support the economic, social and cultural revitalization of a declining downtown district by developing more community-centered public art, and designing more walkable spaces in the border crossing corridor that would lead pedestrians and traffic from Mexico to our historic downtown district.

Team Douglas has great hope that coupling our deeply rooted pride with intergenerational teams to lead our very own placemaking and placekeeping journey for our binational community will begin a sustainable progression on community-led change. Artists, city policymakers and border residents will begin the critical process of reclaiming and reshaping our local narrative, uplifting engagement in our stories within the larger border narrative. With three CCI Douglas Team members directly involved in this creative placemaking initiative, we are sure to continue to co-lead with community generating a renewed sense of pride and empowerment, demanding a more just and equitable existence for the present and future generations of *fronterizos*.

Cover image: Artist Estrella Esquilin teaching workshop participants how to develop cyanotype during the unveiling of CCI sculptures. Photo by M. Jenea Sanchez.