

Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center

San Pablo, California

Background

Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center is many things simultaneously: a nonprofit organization, a music academy, a band, a community space for youth and families, and a hub for Latino artists that seeks to amplify Mexican roots in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. Located in San Pablo, a rural area that is a majority Latino, specifically Mexican-American, working-class community, Los Cenzontles engages and supports a cross-section of the different Latino constituencies represented in its community and promotes personal and collective resilience through shared cultural heritage and artistic practices.

Folk and Traditional Arts Awards (2013-2015)

Grant Category: Direct Grants to Organizations

Fiscal year 2013 (\$45,000)
Project: Routes of Resilience

Fiscal year 2014 (\$40,000)
Project: Routes of Resilience

Fiscal year 2015 (\$20,000)
Project: Routes of Resilience

Activities

Founded by Eugene Rodriguez as an artist-led nonprofit, Los Cenzontles has become a Bay Area cultural arts cornerstone and an innovative leader in participatory arts programming that meets the needs of a growing Latino community.

One of the center's projects is Routes of Resilience, which uses music, performances, documentaries, and web-based videos rooted in traditional and contemporary Mexican-American art forms to share personal narratives on the challenging transitions particular to Mexican-American communities. The project has received multiple National Endowment for the Arts grants.



The Los Cenzontles Touring Group. Photo by James Hall

Los Cenzontles's primary work is in education. The Los Cenzontles Academy offers students of all ages lessons in music, dance, arts, and crafts, taught by traditional master Mexican artists. Classes are held weekly for over 200 students, usually from the local neighborhood. The community helps to shape the programming and selection of musical traditions learned and performed, with the goal of representing the different Latino constituencies present in the community.

Perceived Impact

Los Cenzontles' presence and activities in San Pablo help to dispel stereotypes and misconceptions about Mexican culture, especially its music. Established in a time of high immigration rates in the 1990s, and amidst the excitement and challenges of the social tensions between the different Latino communities, Los Cenzontles discovered that the youth attending its programs found common ground in the traditions of Mexican music.

Most academy students remain part of the program throughout their entire childhood, and many come back years later to support the program. The Los Cenzontles performing group, the Mockingbirds, counts academy alumni as its members. Altogether, the center instills youth with a strong, positive sense of their cultural heritage and their personal potential to excel.



Los Cenzontles Academy students perform with teachers Lucina Rodriguez and Fabiola Trujillo. Photo courtesy of CLYLP

“One of the worst things in this neighborhood is how little people expect of our kids...so when I see how much we've done and that all that work has been done by kids from this neighborhood, I love the fact that we are basically saying it's just not true that our kids don't have capacity, or that our culture doesn't have value, because we're proving that it does.”

– Eugene Rodriguez

This sample grant was developed by the National Endowment for the Arts as part of "Living Traditions," a report that examines the agency's grant and fellowship awards in the Folk & Traditional Arts program between 2013-2015. The full report is available for free as a downloadable PDF at www.arts.gov.