

## THE STORY OF OUR CULTURE

THE ARTIST'S PLACE  
IN THE COMMUNITY

# THIS ISSUE

There is a symbiotic relationship between artist and community. The artist needs an audience to interact with their art, and the community benefits from the inspiration and improved environment the art provides. Some artists, however, move beyond this give-and-take, and are so immersed in their communities that their work and identity are inextricably bound with a certain place or people, such as street artist Jetsonorama on the Navajo reservation in Arizona or Irvin Mayfield in New Orleans.

Others, like Ballet Hispanico and Deaf West Theatre, have focused their organizations on serving specific populations, while the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, Washington, actually engages with the Asian-Pacific community to curate the art it presents. Carolyn Mazloomi, a 2014 NEA National Heritage Fellow, champions her fellow African-American quilters to ensure they are treated fairly, and Meg Medina uses writing to reach an audience typically underrepresented in children's literature: young Latinas.

All the stories in this issue are told in the first person, either by the artist or the head of the featured organization. Taken together, they explore the fluid nature and meaning of community, and its relationship with art.



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(Cover) Jetsonorama's mural *Black cloud over future generations*, which he created to raise awareness on the issue of rising carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. PHOTO BY JETSONORAMA

# JETSONORAMA

# THE HEALING POWER OF ART

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



“**W**hat... is an old black doctor doing wheatpasting images of Navajo people along the roadside on the reservation?” According to a blog post Dr. Chip Thomas wrote last year, that’s the question he is asked most frequently. To be fair, it’s a valid question. The answer, in many ways, revolves around the concept of community. Soon after he started practicing medicine on the Navajo reservation in Arizona 27 years ago, the North Carolina native began to document reservation life with his camera. But in 2009, his art became not just of the community, but for it as well. He began wheatpasting enlarged images of his photos on abandoned roadside stands, water towers, and sheds under the moniker Jetsonorama, turning ramshackle walls into arresting black-and-white installations. Three years later, he launched the Painted Desert Project, and began inviting other street artists to spend a few weeks at the reservation and then create installations based on their experience. They are all, essentially, offering the Navajo a reflection of themselves, as seen through an artistic lens. In his own words, Thomas, who has become an internationally acclaimed artist with installations around the globe, describes his work in the context of his community.

**In his photo Aldo returning to the jewelry stand, Jetsonorama’s mural looks out to the south rim of the Grand Canyon National Park.**

PHOTO BY JETSONORAMA



Artist Jetsonorama at a mural installation in Flagstaff, Arizona.

PHOTO BY FLICKR  
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## Restoring Balance

I'm a physician. I'm a healthcare provider and in that capacity, my job is to help people realize their optimal health and to thereby hopefully realize their dreams and goals by being as healthy as they can be. I see this art project as being an extension of that same thinking in that it's another attempt to restore balance, to create beauty done with a loving, positive intention.

I think that being a non-Navajo person, I will always be viewed as a non-Navajo person and unfortunately, for as long as I've been there, I'm not fluent in the Navajo language. But I think even despite that, certainly within the communities where I work, where people see me on a regular basis, they've come to trust and respect me. It's cool to hear from patients as they're leaving the room, "Thank you for still being here. Thank you for taking care of my people."

But a lot of places where I go to put up art aren't necessarily close to home. So people who see me working in the field don't have any idea that I'm a physician who's been here for 27 years doing primary care medicine.

Being in the field, in a community that doesn't know me, flips the power dynamic in that I'm a lot more vulnerable. In a clinic, physicians are placed on a pedestal, but in the field, people want to know what I'm doing, why I'm there, who's paying me, who said I could put the picture on the wall. I really have to defend what I'm doing, but I think even in that defense, there's an opportunity for dialoging with people and deepening my relationship with the community, with the culture.

When I'm installing in the field, if someone from the community comes up and asks me what I'm doing and why, there are a couple of responses I have. One is that I'm reflecting back to the community the beauty that they shared with me. I try to use imagery that I think is reflective in a positive way of the culture. When I first started pasting images, I was going back through my negatives from the 22 years I'd been there at that time, and wanted to find imagery of elders to really remind the youth of some of the values of the culture that I feel they are forgetting. That determines, in part, what I put up.

## Creating Tangible Changes

Some of the imagery I choose to use is controversial. Some of it is blatantly political. Some of it deals with health issues. I'm willing to take the heat for the imagery that I use, but I feel that it's coming from a good place. I feel that I'm fighting the good fight and at least opening a dialogue around different topics.

[An example is] when the Navajo Nation was considering building a resort at a sacred site in the Grand Canyon. There were Hopi and Navajo people who were opposed to the development of this project. I was able to get a photograph of a Navajo woman whose family is from the area where the resort was going to be built and she had a protest sign saying, "Sacred sites are not for sale." So I did a series of installations along the roadside leading to the proposed site with her opposing the development of the site.

There's an image I shot I think in 1995 or so of code talkers being recognized. They were dressed in their uniforms from many years ago, but at this point, the men were probably in their late-70s, early-80s and they were marching in a parade. One of the first places I put that image was on a roadside stand that was falling down. I did it at night and a week later, I was driving by and I saw men out working on the stand, building it back up. I stopped and asked, "So, what's going on?" They didn't know that I had put the picture of the code talkers up. They said that so many people traveling from Lake Powell had seen this picture and had stopped to take pictures that they decided to start using their roadside stand again, which was a wonderful shot in



the arm. I was then bold enough to say, “I put the photo up,” and they thanked me and asked me to put something on the other side of the stand to stop traffic coming from the other direction.

### Inviting Outsiders In

Before artists come out [to participate in the Painted Desert Project], I send them some reference material regarding the Navajo cosmology and the creation story, just to give people an idea that they really are coming into a different world-view. When they come, I arrange for them to meet with an elder or two with whom I have a close relationship, who can share with that person some of the taboos and/or imagery that may not be considered appropriate. I ask them to come without a preconceived idea of what they’re going to paint, and just to vibe off of their experience in that land with those people and then create something based on that experience.

### Traditions & Modern Realities

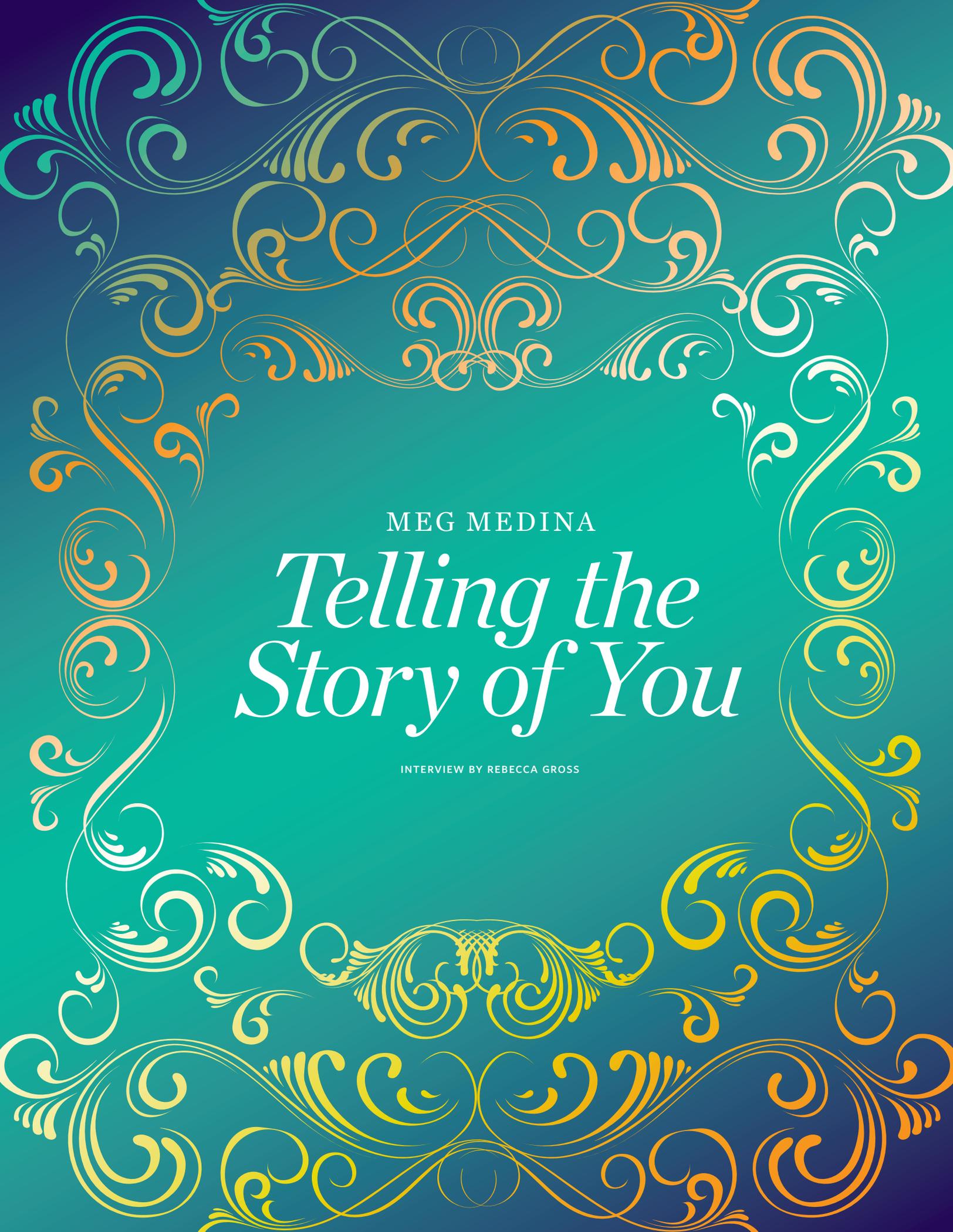
One of the challenges of doing street art on the reservation is this is a traditional culture with no history of public art. So attempting to introduce something totally new is met with some questions and skepticism. The younger people tend to get it. Older, more traditional people, some get it; some just don’t like it. But then again, it depends on what the imagery is. If it’s images of animals, especially sheep, traditional Navajo grandmas love it.

The Navajo Nation is a place that has an unemployment rate that approaches 50 percent. The teen suicide rate is like four times the national average. There are issues with alcohol. There are issues with self-esteem. I’m really hoping that the imagery I put up just causes people to reflect for a moment on how beautiful they are and causes a slight shift in their thinking.

It really is an effort to support the community while bringing art forward.

Jetsonorama’s mural *What we do to the mountain, we do to ourselves* was made to highlight what 13 tribes in the Flagstaff, Arizona, area saw as desecration of a sacred mountain site by a local ski resort.

PHOTO BY JETSONORAMA



MEG MEDINA

*Telling the  
Story of You*

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



**M**eg Medina is on a mission. The author of four books, including *Milagros: Girl From Away* and *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, she casts strong Latina girls as her protagonists, an unusual occurrence in children's literature.

According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, less than eight percent of children's books published in 2013 were about people of color, a statistic Medina is adamant about changing—she even helped mastermind the Twitter campaign #WeNeedDiverseBooks, which went viral last spring. She hopes her own realistic portrayals of Latino culture will rebuke negative stereotypes, while generating pride amongst the Latino community. Medina, currently in her fourth season of "Girls of Summer," a blog series that highlights books that feature (and hopefully foster) strong girls, recently spoke with us about how she hopes her work affects the female community, the Latino community, and the community of children as a whole.

### Putting a Different Lens on Community

When I think of community, I think of it on multiple levels. There's a family community—the child and his family—the school community, the city that you live in. But it's all interconnected. And in my case, I think of how stories of universal experiences connect us all.

I think story is a human impulse. Just think of cave paintings. Capturing what our experience has been is a basic way that we move through the world. What's amazing to me is the similarities of experiences, especially when we're talking about writing for children: the universal experiences of growing up, of wanting friends, of wanting connection with other people, of struggling to understand yourself, of pulling away from your family, of falling in love, feeling isolated and broken. All of those significant experiences of growing up are universal, whether you're an African-American child, an Asian-American child, a Latino child, an Anglo child. We're all struggling with those same desires and needs.

What is beautiful to me is what happens when we put a slightly different lens over the experience. Then we're able to really appreciate the nuances of how we're different, but still acknowledging that we have experiences that bind us.... It's important that we know each other's story, and become comfortable with each other's lens, and with each other, period.

### The Importance of Reading Your Story

I spent a lot of time thinking that my being Hispanic was something I had to get past in order to be successful. Sure, I was Cuban. I spoke Spanish. But it mattered more that I could shine academically. My roots were something that I kept completely separate from my idea of what

success was going to be. And that's sad. Because what I had found in life is that my culture and my roots were so entwined with my success.

I want to bring to kids this notion that who they are, the language of their families, whoever their families were in their home country, whether humble people, big-shot people—everybody's story has value. I don't want anybody to feel like they have to be embarrassed by their cultural heritage or it's something that they have to get past in order to make it in this country. They're exactly enough. Who they are is exactly enough. And I think our jobs, as children's book authors, as teachers, as librarians, is to help kids understand that early. That they have everything they need.

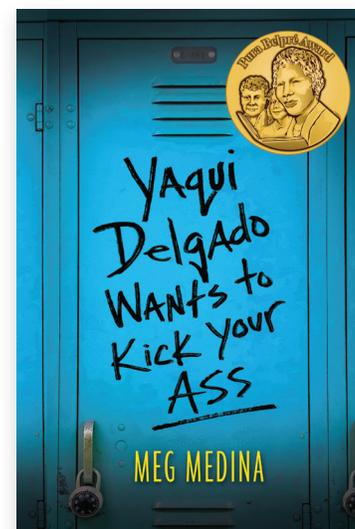
A lot of Latino kids are English dominant, so I want them to experience magical realism, which is such a part of Latino fiction, in their dominant language, and to be able to celebrate it as something that has its roots in our literature. I want them to feel that comfort and that pride as they're sitting in their classroom, and 23 other kids are reading a book where the characters say words that they hear in their house and are eating things that they eat in their house.

It's a subtle thing, but it's also affirming that you exist, that your family has value and that the story of you, the story of your family, matters enough and is deserving of being captured in a story. When we have an absence of that, the implied message is that you don't matter as much as the stories that are being captured.

**Author Meg Medina.**

PHOTO BY  
GABRIEL PEDRAJA

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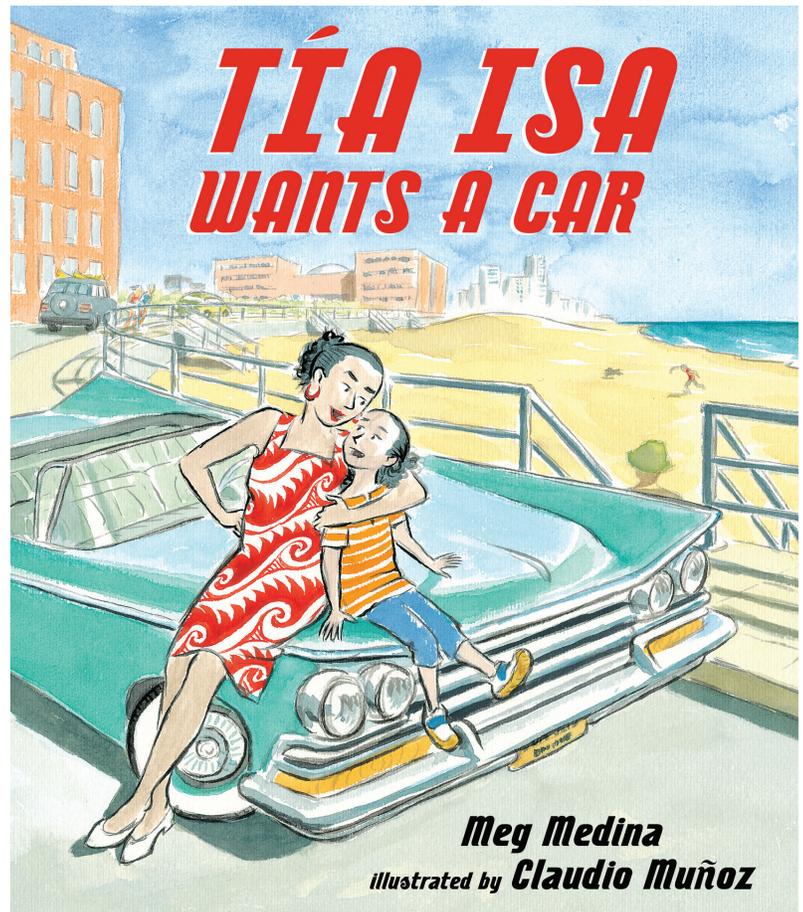
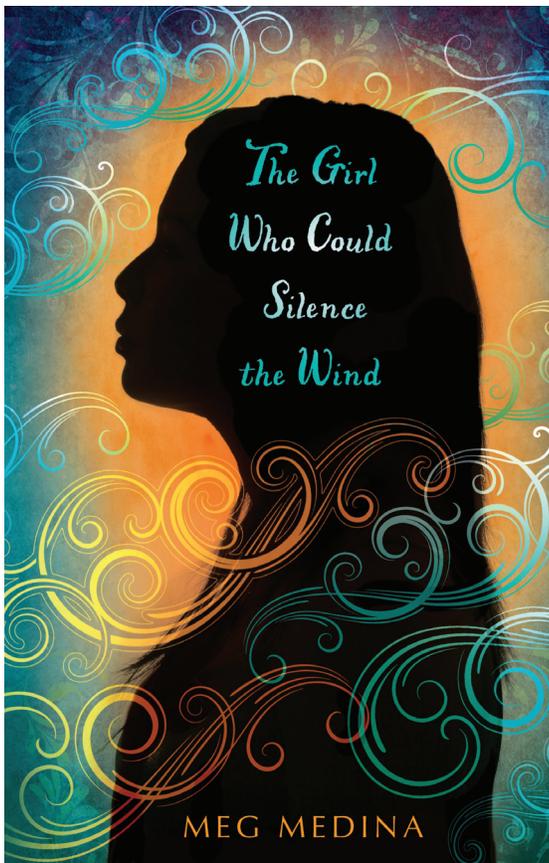


### Creating a Community of Strong Girls

I love to write for girls. I'm unabashedly feminist. I believe that we need to celebrate girls and empower girls and encourage them at every turn to be in charge of themselves, in charge of their bodies, their choices, their careers, their future. There's so much to conspire against that. Just open any magazine. It's crushing. So I write to help girls feel strong. I celebrate girls as they are.

I try to give them stories that give them a chance to reflect on themselves and things happening in their own life. I try to give them women in these books—not only the girls who are their age, but also the women who are adults—[who are] women as they are: resourceful, powerful, loving, strong.

Growing up into a healthy strong kid who's resilient is really hard. I laugh when I hear people say to young people, "This is the best time of your life. You should be so happy. It only gets worse from here." I'm like, "Do you remember? Do you have any idea the effort that goes into facing all of those problems for the first time? And getting your skills up to face them?" It's tough. So I picture myself in a dark cave with a candle and young



people behind me, and I'm holding up the light, [saying,] "You're going to make it through this tunnel. You're going to get through."

COVERS COURTESY OF  
CANDLEWICK PRESS

### The "So What" of It All

For me, the basic thing is the "so what" of it all. You can't move through being an artist or being a writer just entertaining yourself—"I wrote this story for me, and it only matters to me."

I have three children. You work like a dog when you're a parent to raise them, and you put your best self in there. You're working on creating somebody who's going to be about light and good and positive things. And then you send them out into the world with all your hope. Creating any art form is like that too, but writing books for children especially. It's your story only while you're working on it on your computer. Then it becomes a book, and you send it out and it becomes everybody's story. You send it out with hope that it's going to do good and it's going to be about light. So you want it to have meaning. You have to ask yourself, "How will this matter? How is this going to help something out there?"

BETH TAKEKAWA

# Community as Curator

*at the Wing Luke Museum*

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE



Wing Luke Museum  
Community as Curator  
Wing Luke Museum  
Community as Curator





Beth Takekawa,  
executive director of  
the Wing Luke Museum  
(photo below) in  
Seattle, Washington.  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF  
WING LUKE MUSEUM

The idea of a museum as a community anchor is not a new one. But what makes the Wing Luke Museum (a Blue Star Museums participant) so extraordinary is its level of community engagement. As Executive Director Beth Takekawa explained, the museum draws its roots from the spirit of Wing Luke, a young Chinese-American leader, and his “interest in cultural pride and heritage and also civic engagement.” Luke arrived in the U.S. as an immigrant, working his way up to assistant attorney general and then Seattle councilman before he died in a plane crash only three years into office. The funds to start the museum came partially from money the community had raised to help search for his plane. That spirit of community is the basis of the museum’s curatorial philosophy, which relies on deep and active involvement with the community to decide and shape what the museum presents. As Takekawa said, “It has been a thread that’s carried through with a lot of the same people, or their descendants, being the ones who support the museum today.” In her own words, here’s Takekawa on the idea of community as curator, and how community engagement can lead to community empowerment.

### Telling the Communities’ Stories

We share the stories, the culture, and the art of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, and we share it with everyone. We’re a nationally recognized museum known for our community’s role in creating exhibitions, and also the community’s role in supporting their own museum.

One of the distinctive things about the Wing Luke Museum is that we tell the stories of many different Asian ethnic groups. The last time we counted, more than 26 different Asian countries of origin and ethnicities are represented here. It’s a tribute to the area and also the people who’ve built this museum because... sometimes they have histories of warring with each other, and so it is not easy to have it all in one place. [It’s also] a growing mixed-race and mixed-ethnic community and includes a good number of adoptees from Asia. As far as the communities that we serve—our visitors, our donors—they are 35 percent Asian-Pacific American. That’s a very high participation [rate] in the arts for a community of color.

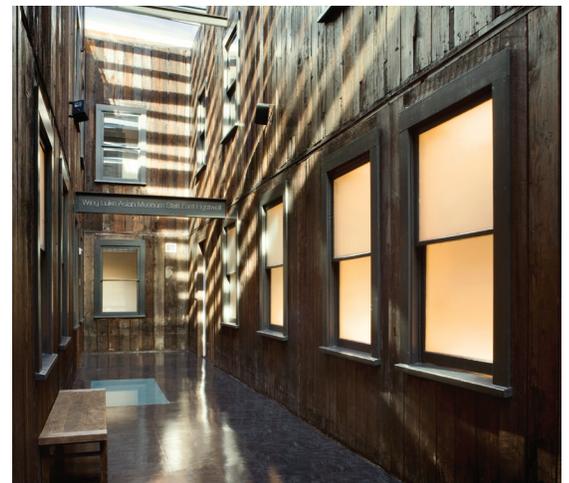
Empowerment is our goal, community empowerment. [This mission] probably reflects our origin as a small museum with no endowment and few resources. So back then, and even now, our greatest asset was and still is our people. And a very important part of [those] people are the artists from our community. Our core constituency is our number one asset. The mission of the museum is that rather than having other people tell our stories, it is an opportunity for us to tell our own stories in our own words. That’s a really basic thing that is from way back and still continues till today. It is a differentiator, and I think it is why the museum has been supported over the years, even though some of the stories are not particularly pleasant. But if it’s true, then it has power.

### Practicing Community-Based Exhibition Development

People are the core [and] relationships are the foundation for our work. Community empowerment and ownership are the goal. I would say labor-intensive work is the route to the goal. As a differentiator from a standard curatorial museum, our staff relinquishes control [of creating the exhibit]. Our staff is not here to [advance] their individual vision; the staff actually does not decide the themes and the story [of our exhibitions]. That’s determined by the community. I would say that’s a fundamental difference in the approach of the Wing.

In practice it does take museum staff with professional skills [to facilitate this process] because you’re working with communities, you’re translating their personal stories into a 3-D experience. That is, it’s both true to the teller of the stories and it’s also meaningful to the visitor and the person who’s experiencing it.

We put a high value on certain skills that might be different from other arts organizations. Facilitation, organizing, relationship-building—those are of great value to the work that we do. We’ve found that if it’s very clear to the community that you are there for the long term and that you are committed to long-term relationships with people and communities and their



Members of the community take in the *Yellow Terror: The Collections and Paintings of Roger Shimomura* exhibit at the Wing Luke Museum. PHOTO COURTESY OF WING LUKE MUSEUM



organizations, that many differences and shortcomings are met. [People are] more patient. They support you even though you're not perfect. They have more understanding even though nobody ends up personally agreeing with every single thing that is presented in the museum. But if the commitment to relationships is there, it crosses a lot of barriers.

### Facing the Challenges of Being Community-Driven

One challenge is, when you're community-driven, and especially as we have so many communities [involved], that there are such immense needs and demands. How do we appropriately address them? It could be that's more of a business growth challenge, but it's important. I remember when this museum first shifted to be Asian-American as opposed to the folk art of Asia. In the museum field, there was a lot of skepticism about if there was sufficient material for a whole museum on Asian Americans. With the experience of [accomplishments] at the Wing, that is not a top-of-mind question anymore in the field. When you're close to your community, you know what the issues are; you're reminded of them every day. So that is a challenging thing—how do you best use your resources and serve those needs?

If an institution or an arts organization is trying to engage with the community, the starting position has to be to respect the historic cultural assets of that community or neighborhood or whatever it might be. Sometimes [the] arts come in... as sort of a foreign energy,

and I would say that doesn't work with community engagement. The second thing is [you have] to prioritize building long-term relationships. If people come in and want to do a one-off, like an event that has diverse faces or something like that, that is not really community engagement. It does have to be a commitment to long-term relationships.

A third thing is that it's important for museums and arts organizations to understand the ecology of their community... The only way you can do that is by being involved and participating in issues that are not just your own. So in our case, for instance, immigration rights is a very hot issue and it is being worked on by many different components of our community. Some people are policy people, some are political advocacy, some are social services. Our role in that ecology is that we can tell the stories and help inspire people. People don't have to agree with the issue to come and engage with the Wing.

I do feel like museums can be life-giving, and we can be relevant, and we can be loved by our constituents. It is a role that needs to be played.

**“When you're close to your community, you know what the issues are; you're reminded of them every day.”**

A 1900s ad scrim from the former Nippon Kan Theatre in Seattle's Japantown on display at the Tateuchi Story Theatre of the museum.

PHOTO BY LINDSAY KENNEDY

# CAROLYN MAZLOOMI

# QUILTING

# THE COLLECTIVE HISTORY

INTERVIEW BY BARRY BERGEY



**Carolyn Mazloomi, awarded the 2014 Bess Lomax Hawes NEA National Heritage Fellowship for advocacy in the folk and traditional arts.**

PHOTO BY CHAS. E. MARTIN

Carolyn Mazloomi is as much a storyteller as she is a quilter. A 2014 NEA National Heritage Fellow, Mazloomi uses thread and needle to create a visual narrative of the African-American community and its history, from the Selma-to-Montgomery marches to Billie Holiday to church music and traditional ring shouts. Her work has been exhibited numerous places, from the Los Angeles Folk Art Museum and New Orleans Museum of Art to the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery—unusual accomplishments for a woman who received her doctorate in aerospace engineering. She founded the Women of Color Quilter's Network (WCQN) (which today boasts 1,700 members) in 1985, has authored five books on African-American quilts, and has curated a number of exhibits that have brought further attention to the art form. Considered the leading expert on African-American quilts, Mazloomi recently reflected on the community she has both fostered and reflected during her three decades of "living and breathing quilts." From an interview with NEA Folk and Traditional Arts Director Barry Bergey, here she is in her own words.

## Founding the Women of Color Quilter's Network

Quilters are so giving, like most folk artists. They're very special people. They're very kindhearted people and very gentle people. I really feel that the creation of artwork is spirit-guided. We as artists are endowed with something from God that propels you to create the work that you do. It's like a little miracle. Each piece, each quilt.

But I felt that there had to be an organization to safeguard the quilters and the quilts. As I traveled the country in my work, I was astounded by the cost that galleries were commanding for quilts. And that cost was not reflected in what the quilters were getting. So I felt that there should be an organization to disseminate information to the African-American quilters about not only the historic significance of the work, but the monetary value as well. Because they didn't have a clue. It's terrible for collectors and scholars to steal or misappropriate from the people that they are studying.

I hated to see too that the quilters gave away the work and did not leave anything within the culture, or leave anything to their families, to their children. You have to leave something behind, or we'll wake up one day and be like folks in some parts of Africa—[much of] the African antiquities are in Europe or European museums or American museums. All the best stuff is gone. We have to keep something for ourselves. That's a mission for me: to find a place in American quilt history for the documentation of African-American quilts, because that's been sorely lacking.

## Respecting Variations

For decades, African Americans were not the scholars that were studying the quilts, and that caused a lot of misinformation about what African-American quilts are, what they're about, how they look, the purpose of them. We didn't have a say in that.

Because of early scholarship, people think in terms of the African-American quilts being improvisational, and that's where that relationship to jazz comes in. But that's not true, necessarily. That's just one tiny little aspect of a quilting style that you can relate to African-American quilts. I wrote a book, *Textural Rhythms: Quilting the Jazz Tradition*, and in that book, there are narrative quilts as well as abstract quilts and improvisational quilts and all of those quilts related to jazz somehow. So that's just one facet of what we do.

I'm active in the quilt scholarship community to dispel the myth about what African-American quilts are all about. You cannot pigeonhole this work. It is not just about improvisation, even though early scholarship

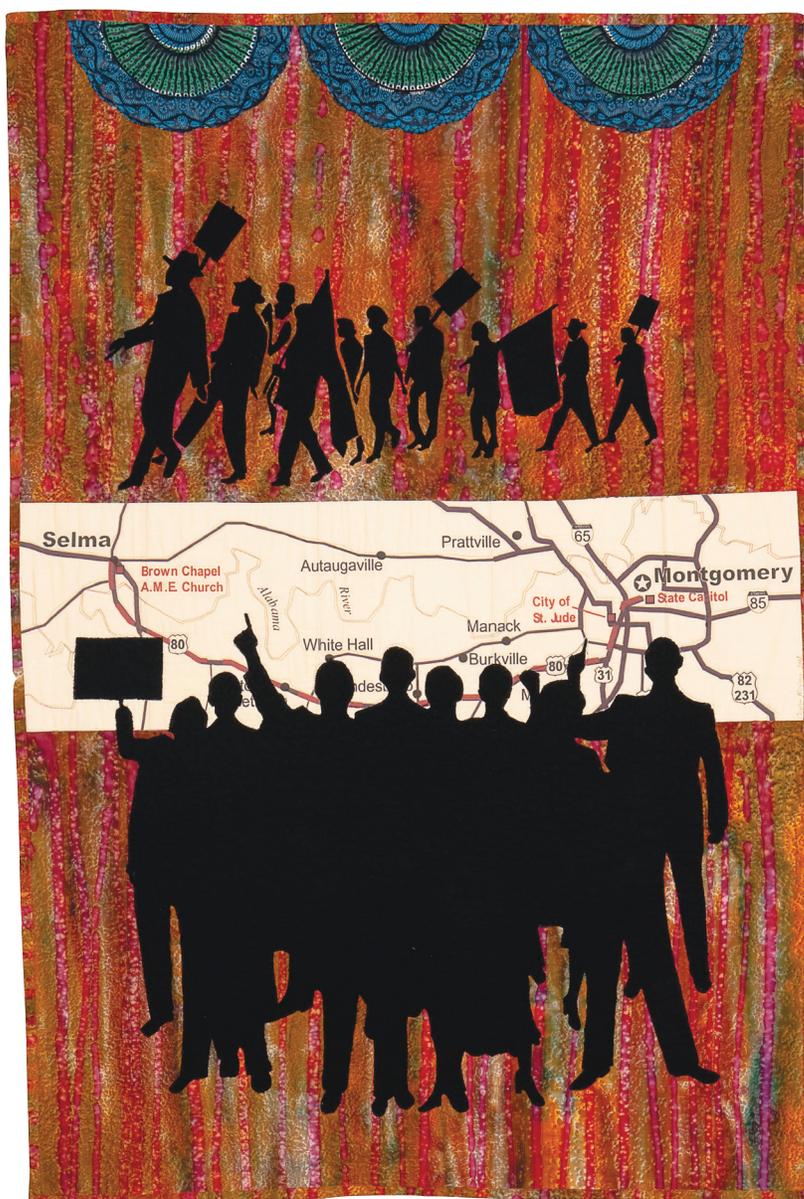
would have you think that. But that scholarship was not inclusive. The scholars were just looking at a certain set of quilts, utilitarian quilts, that came from the South, and declared that to be the definitive of what we made. We're bigger than that. We're broader than that. There are many styles of quilts made within the African-American community. The quilts are as varied as we are a people within the culture, so you can't pigeonhole us.

## Quilting the Story of a Community

I love narrative quilts. Narrative quilts, or story quilts, that's something we've been doing since we stepped off the boat. That is our community. When the quilters are

Mazloomi's quilt *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around* was inspired by the first Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, where marchers were attacked by state and local police. The quilt is dedicated to Congressman John Lewis, one of the leaders of the march.

IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST



in synch with the social and political and the cultural currents in their community, they render that in their artwork. So the quilts are community property. It's one of the ways that we as artists use this tool, these quilts, to foster knowledge. And it's about engaging other people in our culture as well.

I curate shows, and every show is like pulling teeth because the quilters don't care if the public sees the quilts or not. The quilt wasn't meant to be exhibited. They made them for the community. They made them for their families. They made them for their friends. [Exhibiting] is the last thing on their mind when they're making a quilt. But they're creating these community documents and actually they're cultural documents. They're pieces of history that tell the story of our culture, what's happening here in the United States. They're serious, serious cultural documents and I'm just in awe.

That's the power of quilting, the ability of these African-American quilters to tell a story, to quilt a story. It's amazing, with needle and thread, you can create such a powerful statement about the history of our country and who we are as a people. Every piece, to me, is a learning lesson. It's a history lesson.

When you can look at something and it has the power to touch you and inform, then you've done your job as an artist. And I often tell the quilt makers sometimes you

can make a quilt that's so powerful in story and it touches so many people. Then you have lost that quilt, because the quilt does not spiritually belong to you anymore. It belongs to the public. It belongs to the people that see it because it becomes a part of their spirit, and it's touched them in such a way that is so profound it becomes unforgettable. I see that so often in these African-American story quilts, how powerful they are. And how powerful they are in capacity to touch people's lives.

It becomes a part of the story of our national community. It becomes a part of our whole collective history, the whole collective history of our country. These are powerful cultural documents. And that's the allure, the mystique, the magic of quilts for me.

### Fostering the Next Generation of Quilters

It's been extremely difficult to teach young people quilt-making. In this age of technology and hurry, hurry, they're not interested in it. Some countries like Japan have so many special programs for young people to teach them their cultural arts. But it's hard, in essence, for young people to lend themselves to making anything by hand.

We have several programs within the network to teach young people, and one of them has been ongoing

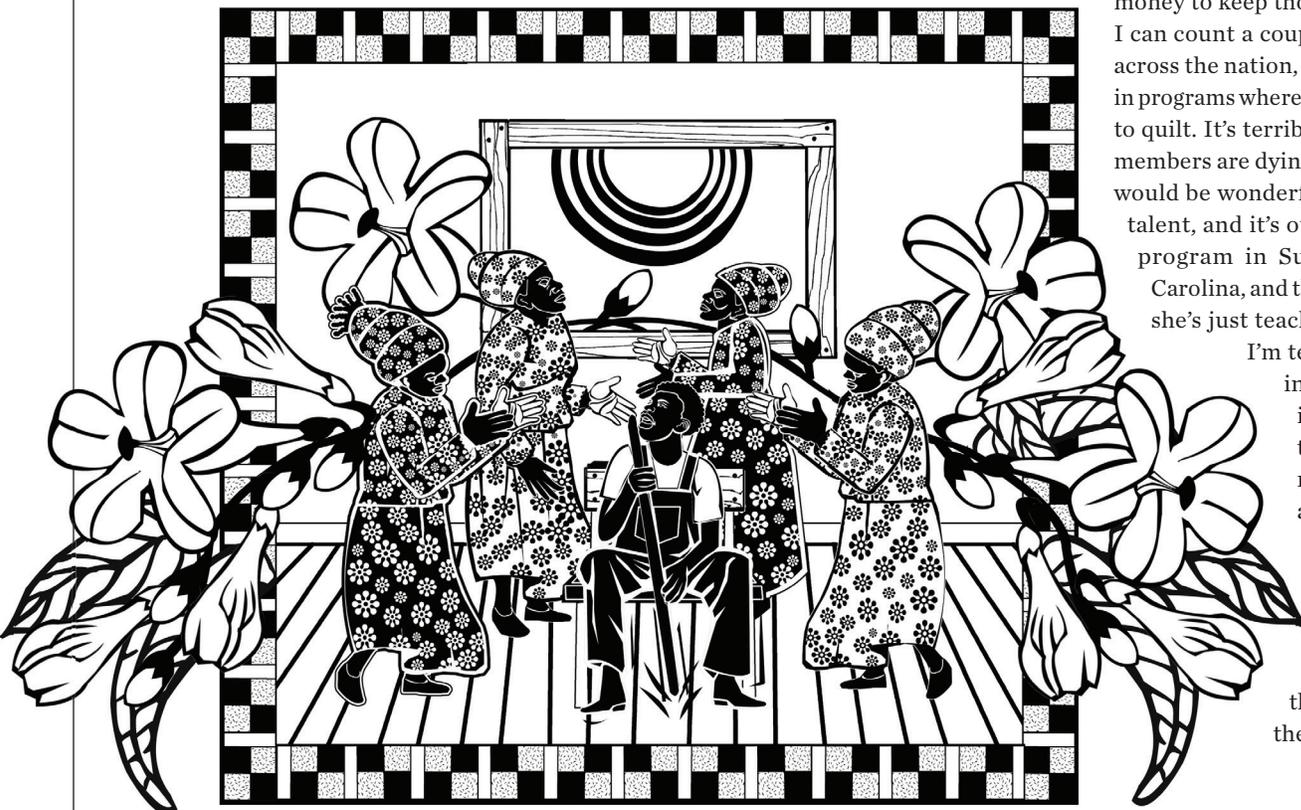
for 20 years. But it's a struggle to find the money to keep those programs going.

I can count a couple of hundred kids across the nation, black kids, involved in programs where they're being taught to quilt. It's terrible because network members are dying every month. So it would be wonderful to cultivate new talent, and it's out there. We have a program in Summerville, South Carolina, and the network member she's just teaching a few kids, but

I'm telling you it's amazing. It's amazing the ideas that come from these young people's minds. So there's a glimmer there. There's a glimmer into what could possibly be the future if we could expand on that and give the kids the proper tools.

Mazloomi's quilt *Ring Shout* is based on a religious ritual practiced by the Gullah people of the Sea Islands, perhaps the oldest surviving African-American performance tradition in America.

IMAGE COURTESY OF ARTIST



EDUARDO VILARO

# Exploring Latino Identity with Ballet Hispanico

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE



In 1970, dancer, choreographer, and future National Medal of the Arts honoree Tina Ramirez founded Ballet Hispanico. As current artistic director Eduardo Vilario explained, Ramirez created the company “in order to give voice to the Hispanic artist at a time when Hispanics were typecast and struggling to find their place in the arts.” More than 40 years later, even with a rising number of Latino arts leaders, Ballet Hispanico’s mission remains critical. Through programs such as in-school residencies, a professional choreographic institute, community social dance events, and many others, the company nurtures and celebrates a diverse number of Latino dance traditions while fostering engagement with and understanding of those traditions with Latino and non-Latino audiences alike in New York City, as well as in 46 states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Latin America, and Europe. We spoke with Vilario by e-mail, and in his own words, here’s his take on what community engagement looks like for Ballet Hispanico at home and across the country.



**Eduardo Vilaro, artistic director of Ballet Hispanico, in rehearsal with Johan Rivera Mendez.**

PHOTO BY PAULA LOBO

### **Ballet Hispanico and Its Community**

Many of the communities in our New York residency programs are schools that are interested in the arts because they understand it is a necessity for their students' learning and development. Often there are few arts educators working in those schools, and no art classes that form part of the school's curriculum. We help bridge a gap for those communities.

The communities that we reach on tour vary, and most are in need of cultural expansion and exposure. As our society gets more global, arts organizations continue to be an important source of cross-cultural education, dialogue, and exposure. But even in small rural areas throughout our nation, there is still a huge need for quality arts education. Teaching the value of the empowerment that the arts can give our young people and how it can change lives is a value we bring to communities on tour.

We define community engagement as the aorta of our organization and a direct link to the mission of Ballet Hispanico. It pumps energy, possibilities, and new

perspectives to our vision. It is the vehicle by which we connect to the vision of sharing and exploring Latino identity and artistic creativity. Culture is not static and our community engagement keeps us connected to the realities of our communities and steers us away from being inaccessible. Touring fits into our community engagement strategy by allowing us to intersect with multiple communities and learn.

In our planning, we value the needs and experiences of the community we are serving. It is imperative for us to build a platform where artist and community share responsibility for the art created and experienced. Sometimes it takes a while for the school or arts center to wake up from the sleepiness of the day or the daily routine; Ballet Hispanico needs to shake things up by inviting our community partner to see things differently and with a new sense of possibility by joining voices in the decision-making and experience-building process. In order for the experience to be transformative on the micro and macro level, the interaction must engage these qualities from all involved.

## Creating a Safe Place to Experience Culture

The diversity of learners that exists in classrooms, including special-needs students, across the country challenges us to reconsider and reimagine how we reach learners and engage them long-term.... Ballet Hispanico presents the past and reimagines the future of the Latino story through dance. With the diverse engagement of choreographers from all over the world, the diversity of experience and stories we share provides the opportunity for people to engage with challenging or difficult topics in a new manner.

Our programs also function as an opportunity for community building; Ballet Hispanico's presence in a school brings people together, and school perception by families is different—and better—than before. Through exposure to professional teaching artists, Ballet Hispanico provides students with another example of “possibility” for their futures. For communities oppressed by social and economic circumstances, experiencing the company also provides a reprieve, a safe space to experience their culture, history, and celebration of their personal and cultural identity.

Our artists also gain a great deal from our community-focused activities. Ballet

Hispanico artists have spent most of their lives honing their craft and performing. As teaching artists, they have the opportunity to share their knowledge of dance, choreography, creativity, and performance with students, which requires the cultivation of a different set of skills and outcomes.

## Building Lasting Connections

Ballet Hispanico's education and outreach programming plays a significant role in the organization's reach. The organization engages increasingly with communities where we tour, through the establishment of permanent residencies, new partnerships, workshops for children to seniors, and mentoring initiatives.

When you go into a community and make them a part of your journey, inevitably you connect on a very human level. But the most surprising thing is the community's response. We have experienced the pride the community feels in their hearts as they connect and respond to a reflection of themselves. We have had incredible moments of sharing, in which the community demonstrates their arts and passion, not just artist to audience but person to person. And best of all, we have had a community adopt us, feed us, and become family.



## ENGAGING COMMUNITY ON TOUR

Here's how Eduardo Vilario sums up Ballet Hispanico's approach to touring, whether it's to neighboring New York City boroughs or other states: “While on tour Ballet Hispanico is a guest, whether it is in a theater, classroom, or community center.” For the company, communication is the key to engaging a sense of community on its touring stops. Here are a few examples of recent tour activities.

**Miami, Florida:** Ballet Hispanico returned to Miami after more than a decade to perform at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. Community activities while in Miami included a master class and conversation with students at the New World School of the Arts, and several in-school performances whereby two Ballet Hispanico dancers and the education team visited three schools in Miami's community. Specific focus was placed on securing schools in underserved communities: Little Haiti and Little Havana. A mini-performance and narrated experience was conducted for students who learned about history, culture, and dance.

**PS 110, Queens, New York:** The principal wanted us to infuse their English Language Arts curriculum with the study of Latin American dance from different countries. We worked with kindergarten and first grade, teaching the history, music, song, and dances from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, and Mexico. Students participated in dance and reflected on their residency experience through writing exercises. An added layer of stress for this community was the fact that the school is an “overflow” school located outside of the community it serves. Ballet Hispanico was able to help broker understanding and cohesion between parents and administration through a parent engagement dance class.

**Ballet Hispanico coordinator Caridad Martinez working with a student.**

PHOTO BY EDUARDO PATINO

DJ KURS

# DEAF WEST THEATRE'S SIGNS OF COMMUNITY

INTERVIEW BY BILL O'BRIEN





For deaf individuals, the inherently verbal nature of theater poses obvious, often prohibitive challenges. While some theaters have made closed captioning available to audiences, others approach deafness as a unique artistic opportunity rather than as an obstacle to be worked around. One of the most prominent organizations in this latter category is Los Angeles' Deaf West Theatre, created specifically for and by the deaf community. At Deaf West, a frequent NEA grantee, deaf and hearing actors perform onstage in a mix of American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken language, opening new cultural and professional opportunities for deaf audiences and actors, while exposing hearing patrons to deaf culture. In an e-mail interview with NEA Senior Advisor for Program Innovation Bill O'Brien, Artistic Director DJ Kurs wrote about the role his theater plays within the deaf community.

### Cultivating Community Pride

I have been going to Deaf West plays since I was 13, but it wasn't until *Big River* (2002) when I realized what a Deaf West play truly does in terms of audience impact. I saw uninitiated patrons fall in love with our culture and language after seeing that play, and I immediately understood that a Deaf West play was a powerful medium that could effect change in the minds and hearts of our community. It was clear that this show came from a place where deaf people were in charge, and to this day I feel that art is the best way to achieve the political and cultural goals of our community.

In this age of Facebook and videophones, there aren't very many reasons for our community to gather, and I'm very proud of the sense of community that our theater fosters. We truly excel in audience development, and a sizable portion of our audience has never seen a Deaf West show before. Our loyal patrons come out to the theater partly because they're always curious about the new deaf actors that we cast, or the deaf designers and crew that worked to make the show a reality. We are very passionate about putting deaf artists to work because there are so few venues for them to ply their craft, and because we want to show the world how it's done, especially here in Los Angeles where there is so much proximity to film and television production.

### Bridging the Hearing Divide

Our patrons can be divided into two groups: people who know ASL and people who don't.

On the stage, we have talent from opposing sides of the spectrum: there are deaf actors who have been performing with us for years, and on the other end there are hearing actors who are new to the deaf world. There is a comparable mix in the audience. There are patrons who have been coming for 20 years and then people who

have never met deaf people.

For two hours in the dark, all becomes one. This community is a beautiful thing to behold.



### Translating to Speak to All

When we consider a production, the first question we will ask is: does it speak to our core audience? It took years to build trust with our deaf patrons, and they expect us to meet that standard. Then we will ask if it will also appeal to the greater public: we want it to have a footprint beyond our community. There's a sweet spot in which a production can speak to all audiences, and I like to think that we hit it every once in a while.

Our Founding Artistic Director Ed Waterstreet felt that Deaf West Theatre had to appeal directly to the deaf community in order to succeed. He knew deaf actors rise to the challenge of performing to deaf patrons, and that having them bring their "A" game would result in a ripple effect on the hearing actors on the stage and the non-signers in the audience.

Translating the play from English to ASL is a very important part of our process. ASL operates on parameters

**(Opposite)**  
A teaching artist works with students as part of Deaf West's Dramatic Gestures educational program.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEAF WEST THEATRE

**(Above)**  
DJ Kurs, artistic director of Deaf West Theatre.

PHOTO BY TATE TULLIER

**(Left)**  
Troy Kotsur and Bill O'Brien in the 2002 production of Sam Shepard's *True West*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEAF WEST THEATRE

that are completely different than English, and our ASL Masters work intensively with our actors so that they may approximate each line of written dialogue with its signed equivalent. It's like capturing lighting in a bottle, and the magic reaches everyone in the audience.

We encourage our writers and directors to present a vision that embraces the frisson between hearing and deaf actors amid a seamless ballet of signed and spoken dialogue. Stephen Sachs, who adapted our co-production of *Cyrano*, had Cyrano enlist his hearing brother Chris to woo the hearing Roxy, resulting in a fresh take on a familiar story. Instead of relying on time-worn staging approaches, we try to stretch the boundaries with each show.

### Educating the Next Generation

Our educational program [Dramatic Gestures] introduces hearing students to the deaf world. By teaching them and performing to them, we are creating valuable exposure that will be the building blocks for future audiences of our theater. We also dedicate considerable time with deaf students across Southern California. Our teaching artists know that deaf children are born communicators, and they draw on these skills to teach them visual vernacular, where sign language stories are told by drawing on the language of cinema. We recently hosted a production performed by students from Marilton School for the Deaf, an inner-city school. This original play addressed the Deaf President Now movement that took place at Gallaudet University in 1988, and the enthralling result was a close cousin of the celebratory folk plays that you find in any culture.

### Seminal Moments, Past and Future

I hate to bring up another deaf/hearing dichotomy, because our shows are so much more than that. But I wish I could take credit for *Big River*. Witnessing the evolving relationship between the deaf Huck and the hearing slave Jim was an all-time revelation. If I can develop a show that achieves one-eighth of the artistic brilliance of *Big River*, I will have died a happy man.

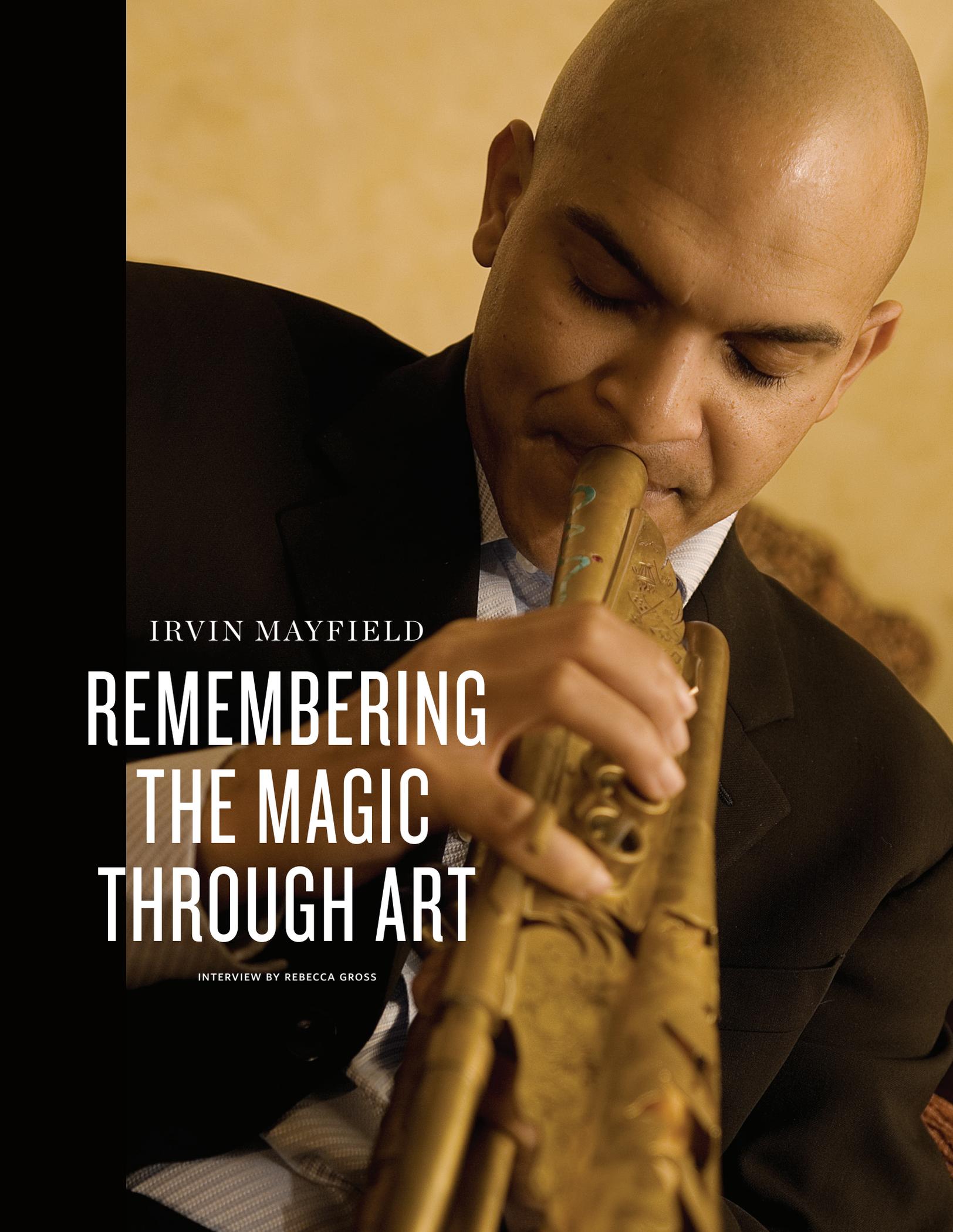
I totally bought deaf Stanley and hearing Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2001). The gulf between them was a Tennessee Williams-powered exploration of the negative space that exists between the deaf community and the rest of the world. And *Flowers for Algernon* (2013) hit close to home: through the story of a developmentally disabled man who undergoes a procedure to become unnaturally intelligent (we had a ghostly young boy voicing for our deaf lead up until the procedure, when an adult male takes over the voice), our deaf patrons saw echoes of the prevalent desire to fix our deafness through technological means.

We are presenting *Spring Awakening*, which I feel embodies the divide between deaf children and the hearing parents that do not share their world. And we are also developing a musical in which the rhythms and the beats of the music come from signed songs that our deaf actors develop. Past that, we want to present works by deaf playwrights. Theater is not typically an art form that is accessible to our community, and we hope to find and nurture new voices. I want to create an environment where deaf writers pound original plays out on camera, in our first language, ASL, without having ever touched a pen.

Ty Taylor (center)  
and cast of the 2009  
production of *Pippin*

PHOTO BY CRAIG  
SCHWARTZ





IRVIN MAYFIELD

# REMEMBERING THE MAGIC THROUGH ART

INTERVIEW BY REBECCA GROSS



**Irvin Mayfield (second from left) in the “second line” with Reverend Dean David Duplantier in New Orleans.**

PHOTO BY EPISCOPAL NEWS SERVICE

Few cities are as tied to a particular art form as jazz is to New Orleans. And few jazz musicians are as tied to New Orleans as Irvin Mayfield. A trumpeter, bandleader, composer, and member of the NEA’s National Council on the Arts, Mayfield has influenced the New Orleans community as much as it has influenced him, forming a sort of revolving door of inspiration. Among his many achievements, he founded the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra (NOJO) in 2002, owns two jazz clubs, has composed several pieces for city institutions, and teaches “New Orleans as Discourse” at the University of New Orleans, where he also founded the New Orleans Jazz Institute. But community is a fluid concept, and his definition—not to mention his accomplishments—extend far beyond any geographic city limits. As he points out, places wouldn’t exist without the people who built and populate them; it is this larger human community that Mayfield considers to be the central foundation of life. In his own words, the musician discusses what community means to him.

## What is Community?

I think [community] is a word that is overused. I think it is a word that is underappreciated and undervalued. It has become one of those words where people just assume it means bringing people together or people being together. Community is much deeper, much more profound, and much more provocative than that.

Being in New Orleans, we know that music brings community together. We know that good food can bring community together. We know that the design or the architectural structure of a thing can bring a community together. For instance, in New Orleans we have brick yards, and we’ve always had brick yards all the way back to the early 1800s, late 1700s. We always plan to use the outside as much as we use the inside.

[But] if we are still thinking of cities as actual limits of technical measurements, we’re really missing out on the opportunity to make a city what it truly is. City is

just a group of people. I can’t separate the human out of any of this.

We can sit around and talk about New Orleans like it’s a city. But it is not the music, the food, or architecture. It’s the people who made them. There have been scores of articles written about the vibrancy of Louis Armstrong’s personality. There’s been a lot written about the cockiness and interestingness of Jelly Roll Morton. These are people, everyday people, who were extraordinarily talented—some of the world’s most creative geniuses. They were in an environment that allowed, and spurred, and created that.

## Making Communities Magical

All art enhances the community. I don’t know how art cannot do that. Just the fact you’re trying to do that improves your community. You don’t even have to

accomplish it. One of the things I love about jazz music so much is that intent is first and execution is second. In classical music, execution is first and intent is second, meaning that you must first learn a piece before you can truly add your interpretation to it. But in jazz, you can just interpret. Sometimes your interpretation can be so great that even if you didn't execute it [well], people can feel the intent.

The arts are probably the most realistic tool we have to think about the reality of life and also the imagination and creativity of life. I think we have gotten to a point as Americans, unfortunately, where we take for granted the magic that life brings, and that life is really special and every life matters. We tend to go through life but not take the moment to step back and remember, you are here, right now, for a very finite amount of time. We have no idea, technically, what's going to happen afterwards, and we really can't remember what happened before. We can only see the world through our eyes. Art gives us the opportunity to remember that we're living magic on a daily basis. When you talk to people, they deal with life as if it's a mundane thing. Maybe it's because we're used to it. Maybe it's because we've been taught through systems and schools that it's really about something technical and tangible we can touch. But even the best of science, technology, engineering, and math—all those ideas at their core, are magical.

Art gives us an opportunity to not have to leave or go somewhere or do something to experience the magic in our lives. It actually gets us to sit back and be where we are and recognize we're already magical.

### Fitting into the Everyday

One of the things I want [my students] to recognize is not so much their relationship with New Orleans as the city but that community is real. Community is real in terms of dealing with the souls of folks, and souls are powerful.

I want my students to understand and be engaged with how what they're focusing on, especially as artists, fits into everyday life. A lot of times you'll talk to somebody about whatever their interest is. If they are majoring in engineering, their interest is strictly around engineering. Or their technical development is around engineering and then they go do something else for their leisure. I think that's a critical mistake. It's better to think about how engineering affects music and how music affects politics, and how politics affects communities. All of these things are going on on a daily basis and they're all a part of the one community, which is the human community. There's only one community really, out here.

### The Human Community

I don't see myself only as a member of the New Orleans community. I see myself as a part of the human community. I see myself as a part of the community that's trying to put things in the world that add value to people's lives. When you listen to a recording of Louis Armstrong, or you read a play of William Shakespeare, or you see the great artwork of Romare Bearden, when you read James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, all these folks are adding value to your life. What's so amazing is that each one of these folks that I've named has been gone for some time. The power of art is that you can engage with folks who are here right now and with folks who have already gone. [Art] gives us an opportunity to affect the future.

The most powerful things would be love, beauty, and truth. When you get down to the bottom of it, they're trying to get to the truth of our existence and our life. We're trying to add and experience beauty and we're trying to transfer love from one another. Being a part of a community is really all about that. Otherwise, why would you say we're together? Together means we're sharing. What is sharing really about? Sharing's about giving. What's giving about? That's love.

**Mayfield (right) with Evan Christopher, Leon Brown, and his son Little Leon Brown performing at Lafayette Square in New Orleans.**

PHOTO BY FLICKR USER ROBBIESAURUS





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## ONLINE



As part of our online content for this issue, which you can find by scanning the QR code or visiting arts.gov, we talk with the Los Angeles Poverty Department, which creates theater pieces written and performed by homeless individuals; look at the work of fashion designer Natalie Chanin, who has maintained a connection to her home state of Alabama; listen to the personal stories of LGBTQ people across the country who participate in the StoryCorps

OutLoud program; and experience the Project Youth ArtReach program that brings art programs to juvenile offenders in detention, corrections, or probation settings.

Don't forget to check out our Art Works Blog (arts.gov/art-works) for daily stories on the arts in the country.

**(Above) A performance from the Los Angeles Poverty Department's Walk the Talk event to celebrate the community on Skid Row.** PHOTO COURTESY OF LOS ANGELES POVERTY DEPARTMENT