

Latino Youth Mental Health Comic Book Project

Project Summary Report

Prepared for:

Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health
Strategic Communications Division
Underserved Cultural Communities
Latino Sub-Committee

Prepared by:

Luis Antonio Pichardo
Founder, Executive Director
DSTL Arts

Project Description

DSTL Arts, a nonprofit arts mentorship organization that inspires, teaches, and hires emerging artists from underserved communities, was hired in the Summer of 2019 for the purpose of implementing and developing the LA County Department of Mental Health–Underserved Cultural Communities’s “Latino Youth Mental Health Comic Book Contest” in Los Angeles County. DSTL Arts has been providing arts programming within Los Angeles County since our organization’s inception in late-2012, offering mentorships in the visual and literary arts for emerging artists, ages 16+, from historically-marginalized communities, as well as hosting teaching artist residencies for emerging artists whose work reflects the communities DSTL Arts serves, and various publishing opportunities for our community members through multiple literary and visual arts anthologies referred to as zines; unique, community-oriented publications that are produced often by hand or in limited-edition print-runs. Given DSTL Arts’s strong standing in the community, especially across East, Northeast, and South Los Angeles, our organization was well situated to meet the deliverables of the “Latino Youth Mental Health Comic Book Contest” project developed by the LACDMH Underserved Cultural Communities—Latino Sub-Committee.

This project was designed to target Latino Transitional Aged-Youth (TAY), ages 16-25 countywide. Youth from different Latino groups (Mexican, Central American, South American, etc.) in LA County would be targeted, especially those who lived in areas with high concentrations of Latino community members. Given these parameters, as outlined by the original Scope of Work provided by LACDMH staff to our organization, DSTL Arts identified the Los Angeles Public Library–Vernon Branch located at 4504 S.

Central Ave, Los Angeles 90011, as the ideal host venue for the series of comic book writing and illustration workshops that would form the basis for completing the final, agreed-upon deliverable of this project: a print-ready comic book anthology. This location was selected because of its centralized location in relation to the cities of Vernon, Huntington Park, and the City of Los Angeles neighborhoods of East/Northeast Los Angeles, Pico-Union, and South Central Los Angeles, areas with a Latino population averaging 90% of all residents. Furthermore, the accessibility to public transit options via the Metro Blue Line and multiple buses, and the proximity to a multitude of schools, community clinics, and public libraries informed this decision.

The original Scope of Work stated each youth participant would be tasked with writing a comic book (minimum of 22 pages and maximum of 30 pages) illustrating how mental health issues impact their life. Once completed, the comic books would be submitted as part of a Comic Book Writing Contest and would be showcased at an Awards Ceremony, which would be part of a larger community event. The winner of the comic book contest would receive an award in addition to having their winning comic book professionally printed and distributed in the community as an educational and mental health promotion tool.

Given the level of experience and expertise DSTL Arts staff has in publishing, and the creation of community-centered visual/literary artistic projects, it was very clear that the original Scope of Work did not take into account the level of intensive work required to complete a professional-grade comic book, even for professional, independent comic book creators. The expectation that each Latino Youth participant, regardless of skill level, would create a publishable 22-page-minimum comic book within a year, a task that takes the average full-time, professional independent comic book artist at minimum 2 years to complete, was unrealistic. As such, we offered an alternative plan for the Scope of Work.

Through a revised Scope of Work, DSTL Arts and LACDMH staff agreed to DSTL Arts conducting a 10-week series of comic book writing and illustration workshops that would guide Latino Youth participants through the process of writing and illustrating a 2-page comic that focused on mental illness, mental health strategies and resources, and the reduction of stigma. The 10-week writing and illustration series would then immediately be followed by a 4-week series of workshops dedicated to teaching comic book cover design and illustration. With a total of 14 weeks of

instruction, Latino Youth participants would be taken through the entire process of finishing their 2-page comics and a cover design, and said products would be delivered at the end of the full workshop series for publication in a comic book anthology called "Cómics que Curan," an anthology that would showcase all of the artwork and stories created by our youth participants collectively, as opposed to only one story with one point of view relating to mental health in the Latino community.

The original contest component was revised to instead be a Cover Design Contest, where the submitted cover designs produced through the final 4-week workshop series would be judged by professional working artists, with the First Place design being used as the front-facing cover, the Second Place design being the front-interior cover, and the Third Place design being the back-interior cover design. All 2-page comics would be printed, collectively, and all submitted cover designs would also be printed in the comic book anthology as "bonus content" using the comic book industry standard of "Variant Covers" to acknowledge and celebrate the efforts of all Latino Youth participants and their contributions to the larger community as local artists.

During the months of July and August of 2019, our Artist Residency Workshops Program—Teaching Artist Team developed the 10-week series of workshops that would provide training and technical assistance in comic book writing and illustration for workshop participants. Additionally, a licensed therapist consulted with staff in developing an introductory lesson on mental illness and treatment resources available within Los Angeles County, a lesson that he would lead on the first week of instruction. Concurrently, through collaboration with community agencies, including multiple public libraries, community clinics, and local schools in South Central Los Angeles and the surrounding communities of Pico-Union, Boyle Heights, East LA, and the City of Vernon.

By the first workshop¹⁴ Latino Youth were recruited and enrolled in the "Cómics que Curan" workshop series. A total of 12 enrolled Latino Youth attended and completed the entire workshop series. Each participant was provided with an education in mental health issues and resources, as well as skills in the art of comic book writing and illustration. 11 of those same Latino Youth submitted their comics for publication in the

final anthology, along with their own, original comic book anthology cover design to be considered for the contest component of this project.

The goal of this project was to provide Latino Youth an opportunity to share how mental health issues impact their life, their family and their community, through comic book writing. Mental health issues that were highlighted by our workshop participants included a variety of topics including social anxiety, depression, issues, substance abuse. Our Latino Youth were asked to include how cultural factors have impacted their mental health issues (e.g. stigma, acculturation, intergenerational conflicts, etc.), if appropriate, with most creating stories that came from their respective personal lenses. Participating youth, through workshop discussions, had an opportunity to share how they cope with their mental health issues and/or the mental health issues of their loved ones, as well as the impact it has on their relationships. This project aimed to outreach, educate, and increase awareness about mental health-related struggles that Latino Youth experience by utilizing a non-stigmatizing and empowering method that ultimately accomplished the following objectives of the project:

- Increased awareness and knowledge related to mental illness and combated stigma and discrimination in the Latino community through comic book writing and illustration.
- Provided resources and information regarding available mental health services in Los Angeles County, especially those services geared towards the Latino community.
- Encouraged help-seeking behaviors and provided linkage to mental health services whenever possible when encountering individuals in need in the community.
- Encouraged and empowered Latino mental health consumers to actively engage in their own wellness and recovery through the development of skills in the arts.
- Discovered and developed the untapped skills and abilities of the youth, with them taking pride in their accomplishments.
- Built and strengthened the confidence of Latino Youth to overcome and/or better accommodate their mental illness challenges, barriers and the discriminatory behaviors of others.

The overall workshop structure was collaborative and inviting, with all instructors often sharing their personal stories related to mental illness and the tools they used to overcome such challenges, plus frank discussions about how the artwork the Latino Youth participants were developing would have a positive impact on the future of our overall community. The empowerment each participant felt was clearly demonstrated in their overall engagement throughout each weekly, 1.5-hour workshop session, and through their commitment to completing their individual stories and cover designs,

which they saw as investments in not only their own artistic futures, but as investments in the overall Latino community.

Following is the full “Cómics que Curan” 10-week workshop series lesson plan highlighting the primary topics covered in each weekly session, in addition to the 4-week lesson plan for the Comic Book Cover Design series and the Cover Design Judging Criteria provided to the workshop participants and judges.

The judging of all submitted covers resulted in the selection of First Place winner, Anthony Rivera (front-facing cover), Second Place winner, Esmeralda Flores (front-interior cover), and Third Place winner, Eduardo Flores (back-interior cover).

Cómic que Curan – Comic Book Workshop Lesson Plan

- **September 11, 2019 – Week 1: Orientation**
 - ***Introduction to Mental Health Comic Project***
 - Goals of the project
 - Produce a comic book anthology that focuses on mental health topics that affect the Latino community, as according to the participants
 - Comic book format
 - 2pg. comics as a storytelling medium
 - Show samples of previously published 2pg. comics
 - Cover design contest introduction
 - 1st Place: Printed on Front Cover
 - 2nd Place: Printed on Interior Front Cover
 - 3rd Place: Printed on Interior Back Cover
 - All others published as “Bonus Content” in the interior pages
 - ***Mental Health Professional Presentation***
 - Introduce definition of Mental Health
 - Provide statistics of occurrence of mental health illness in the community
 - Lead conversation surrounding mental health illness that teaches how to recognize it and how to find treatment
- **September 18, 2019 – Week 2: Intro to Visual Storytelling**
 - ***Introduce the Concept of Visual Storytelling***
 - Panel layouts and narrative structures in comic books
 - Using text balloons
 - Word balloons vs. Thought balloons vs. Whispering balloons, etc.
 - “Finish the Story” drawing/storytelling exercise
 - Participants will finish an unfinished 4-panel comic
 - Participants will finish a text-less 4-panel comic by adding text for story
 - Brainstorming session
 - Participants will work individually and as group to brainstorm their own story idea
- **September 25, 2019 – Week 3: Story Design**
 - ***Introduce Final Elements of Story Design***

- Participants introduced to blocking, layout, and visual metaphor
 - Visual hierarchy and alternative storytelling devices presented to subtly evoke emotion/imagery in readers
- Participants finish brainstorming
 - Participants will start their rough draft sketches for their individual stories
 - Rough drafts will contain elements of their dialogue/text panels blocked in for future reference
- **October 2, 2019 – Week 4: Studio Session**
 - ***All Participants Finalize Rough Drafts and Script***
 - Participants will review their rough drafts with Teaching Artists and make edits to their stories on a one-on-one basis during the entire sessions
 - ***Final Rough Draft is DUE at the end of the session***
- **October 9, 2019 – Week 5: Ruling and Margins**
 - ***Introduction to Ruling and Margins***
 - Participants will be introduced to standard margins and terminology for print design
 - Interior Margins (Safe Area), Gutter, Bleed
 - Participants will begin laying down margins for final artwork
 - Using 11in.x14in. Bristol paper, participants will draw, in pencil, their final artwork
 - Basic inking techniques will be demoed at the end of the session, if time permits
- **October 16, 2019 – Week 6: Inking**
 - ***Introduction to Basic Inking Techniques***
 - Participants introduced to proper inking techniques using markers
 - Hatching, Cross-Hatching, Stipling
 - Use of Contrast and Negative Space for shading
 - Participants will finish their pencil layouts and begin inking their final artwork
- **October 23, 2019 – Week 7: Studio Session**
 - ***All Participants Finish Drawing and Inking Final Artwork***
 - Participants will finalize all pencils and inks for their 2pg. comics to be considered for publishing
 - This does not include text/dialogue

- Lettering will be added digitally during final publication design process by DSTL Arts staff

- **October 30, 2019 – Week 8: Coloring Demo**
 - ***Introduction to Coloring Techniques for Comics***
 - Participants introduced to various methods for using colored pencils to color a comic
 - Washes (using watercolor pencils), blending, and color theory
 - Participants provided tools for coloring their final artwork

- **November 6, 2019 (Week 9) and November 13, 2019 (Week 10): Studio Session**
 - ***All Participants Complete Final Artwork for Publication***
 - Participants will be provided with the materials and tools for finishing their 2pg. comics for submission to the final comic book anthology
 - ***Final Art DUE at the end of Week 10 session (November 13, 2019)***

Cómic que Curan – Cover Design Workshop Lesson Plan

- **November 20, 2019 – Week 1: Orientation**
 - ***Introduction to Cover Design Contest***
 - Provide participants with all margins and design element considerations (i.e. masthead, byline, and required DSTL Arts and DMH logos)
 - Explain Cover Design Judging Criteria
 - Show how designs will be reviewed and scored
 - Prize details announced
 - Participants begin brainstorming their cover design submissions
- **December 4, 2019 (Week 2), December 11, 2019 (Week 3), December 18, 2019 (Week 4): Studio Session**
 - ***All Participants Work on Cover Design Submission***
 - Minimal instruction provided by Teaching Artists, only offer feedback and answer questions related to the design elements that are required of all cover design submissions
 - ***Final Cover Design Submissions DUE by the end of Week 4 Session (December 18, 2019)***

Cómicos que Curan – Cover Design Judging Criteria

All Cover Design Submissions will be judged and scored based on the following 4 criteria:

Story

Is there a Narrative informing the execution of the artwork? Does the Story of the design add value to, and acknowledge, the entire collection being anthologized?

Metaphor

Does the use of Metaphor reinforce the Story present in the design? Are all Metaphors clear and easy to interpret?

Design

Does the Design illustrate carefully considered composition? Is there visual tension where unnecessary? Are all required Design Elements, including masthead and logos, taken into consideration for the cover?

Intent

Is there a clear Intent present in the artwork? Does the Intent of the design illustrate an understanding of all the other categories (Story, Metaphor, and Design)?

All Cover Design Submissions will be scored in each category using the following scale:

0 – 1: Marginal

Works do not, or marginally, meet the defined scoring criteria.

2: Needs Improvement

Works show very basic understanding of the scoring criteria elements.

3: Acceptable

Works show an elementary understanding of the scoring criteria, and executes this understanding in a manner that shows intent and effort in meeting the defined scoring criteria, but could use improvement in one or more areas.

4: Strong

Works show a strong understanding and execution of the defined scoring criteria, especially representing unique and clear approaches that begin to reinforce other scoring criteria, including Story, Metaphor, Design, and Intent.

5: Exemplary

Works clearly meet and exceed all scoring criteria, utilizing innovative approaches that clearly and directly reinforce ALL other scoring criteria, including Story, Metaphor, Design and Intent.

A submission's scores in each category will be totaled and averaged, thereby producing a weighted final score.

The highest scoring submission will receive 1st Place, while second highest and third highest scoring submissions will receive 2nd and 3rd Place, respectively.

In the event of a tie, the scores of a fourth, "administrative" judge will be included in the final weighted scores, and winners will be determined using the newly tabulated scores.

Judges will not include the Teaching Artists, except for the DSTL Arts administrator acting as "administrative" judge. All judges will be invited guest professionals with experience in the comic book/art sector and/or mental health sector.

Project Outcomes

Comic Book Anthology Production and Publication

As part of the primary outcome for this project, DSTL Arts staff collected, designed, and printed a limited, 75-copy print-run of “Cómics que Curan: Volume 1,” the first anthology of mental health-related comics written and illustrated by Latino Youth participants enrolled in the workshop series. As previously outlined, this anthology collected not only the 2-page comics created by each participant, but also the submitted cover designs that were produced by all of the workshop participants at the conclusion of the series. This anthology also featured the selected First, Second and Third Place cover designs as awarded by our panel of judges in their corresponding placement within the printed anthology. The design files were transmitted to the LACDMH staff digitally, via Microsoft OneDrive with full instructions for future high-volume printing in February 2020.

Award Ceremony and Community Celebration 1

In coordination with the Vernon Branch Library, our workshop host site, the comic book anthology release party and awards ceremony was scheduled to occur on Saturday, February 29, 2020. Concerns related to viral spread were allayed by DSTL Arts staff and the Vernon Branch Library staff, but event turnout started to show signs of potentially being impacted.

Although all of the Latino Youth workshop participants attended the scheduled Cómics que Curan release party and award ceremony at the Vernon Branch Library, a lower-than-expected turnout limited our ability to meet the secondary outcome of this project. In total, only 20 individuals attended the full event which featured light snacks and refreshments, the conferring of awards, and a Q&A panel discussion with the workshop participants. 61 copies of the 75-copy print-run were distributed that same day among our event attendees and library patrons who stopped in to see the event while conducting their library checkouts.

Post-Workshop Survey

Post-workshop surveys (included with this report) were conducted with all Latino Youth participants who submitted comics, and the data produced from those surveys show that 100% of our workshop participants had a positive overall experience with our services and this project. Using a 1–5 scale, with 1 meaning “poor” and 5 meaning “excellent,” 9 out of 11 participants rated our Workshop Structure as a 5 (excellent) with 2 of the 11 participants rating the Workshop Structure as a 4 (near excellent). 10 out of 11 participants rated our Teaching Artist Team’s ability to teach as a 5 (excellent) with only 1 participant rating the instructors with a 4 (near excellent) rating. 9 out of 11 workshop participants indicated a 5 (excellent) sense of support from the instructors, while 2 of the 11 participants rated their same sense of support as a 4 (near excellent).

Additionally, 100% of our participants indicated that they felt as though they were given enough time, materials and support in completing their individual projects, and 100% of workshop participants indicated that they learned something new relating to mental health. The comments our Latino Youth left on their surveys ranged from “I feel like it (the workshops) opened my eyes to all the problems people can have and that no one is alone,” to the observation that “the program made me have time to think about mental health, time I might not usually have.” Our workshop participants also indicated that the workshops “addressed the stigma associated with mental health, and the program help (sic) end that stigma.” The most personal reflection on the workshop series came from one participant that indicated “I am not very social, but this workshop allowed me to be open and speak out more. As an adult going through mental illness, I can better understand the younger participants in their view of mental illness.” This same participant, when reflecting on how they feel our program helped them understand mental health in our community, also acknowledged that “it is still a struggle within our community to talk about mental health and take action, but the younger generation has been more open. Plus, with the help of our mentors (DSTL Arts staff) it allows for confidence.”

Community Celebration 2

Since the secondary deliverable of this project required culmination event attendance and surveying of up to 50 attendees, our executed event on February 29th did not meet these requirements. In consultation with LACDMH staff, it was deemed necessary to coordinate another release party that would have a larger number of attendees. Although there were already preexisting plans for holding a second release event in April 2020 in partnership with JC Decaux/OUTFRONT Media, one of DSTL Arts’s media partners that manages the installation of community-based artwork on bus shelters throughout LA County, the subsequent stay-at-home orders enacted mid-March 2020 resulted in the cancelling of this second event.

The sustained public health orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic required this contract be extended once more, resulting in the the culmination event to be rescheduled so that the secondary requirement be met. An agreement was made in July 2020 where LACDMH staff would work on modifying the Scope of Work to account for local, state, and federal guidelines that continued to prohibit large gatherings of people in any setting. In the meantime, DSTL Arts staff continued to work with JC Decaux/OUTFRONT Media to adapt the comics created by workshop participants into large format posters and art panels that would be installed on two bus shelters in LA City Council District 9, the council district that is home to the LA Public Library–Vernon Branch and the majority of workshop participants who were published in the “Cómics que Curan: Volume 1” anthology. The unveiling of this art installation featuring the workshop participants’ artwork was proposed by DSTL Arts staff as the final culmination event, along with the release of the “Cómics que Curan: Volume 2” publication that was produced through a second offering of the workshop series that was open to individuals of all ages and done independently of this contract’s funding.

In early-September 2020, DSTL Arts staff provided LACDMH staff with a finalized proposal for executing the final culmination event, which included using Eventbrite as the digital registration platform for event attendees, and Google Meet as the web-based platform for individuals to view the unveiling of the artwork installation on the two aforementioned bus shelters, the display of all published comics featured in both “Cómics que Curan” anthologies (Volume 1 and Volume 2), and a Q&A session with all of the “Cómics que Curan” workshop participants from both iterations of this program. It was also proposed that the event be recorded and posted to Youtube for future viewership, and a post-event survey would be sent to all registered attendees. To incentivize the completion of the post-event survey, DSTL Arts committed to sending complimentary copies of the “Cómics que Curan” anthologies to all individuals who completed the survey within 5 days after the event taking place.

From September 11, 2020 until October 22, 2020, collaboration between DSTL Arts, JC Decaux/OUTFRONT Media, and the LA City Council District 9 Council Office continued and resulted in the culmination event being scheduled for November 12, 2020. As part of the preparation for the event, social media-friendly flyers were sent to LACDMH staff with a request for their support in marketing the event, along with the Eventbrite link where all registrations would be collected. Furthermore, a video of the bus shelter artwork installation was produced, and the post-event survey was prepared for immediate distribution on November 13, 2020. Upon receipt of the event information, LACDMH staff acknowledged the culmination event and sent a modified Scope of Work finalizing the need to conduct a virtual-based event due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

Through an aggressive marketing campaign that included multiple social media posts by both DSTL Arts and JCDecaux/OUTFRONT Media, and email newsletters and invitations sent by DSTL Arts, in total, 54 individuals registered for the event through Eventbrite prior to November 12, 2020, and at its peak, 26 individuals attended the virtual event on Google Meet. Using the technologies available through Google Meet, a 5-minute video was presented to all attendees showcasing statistics related to mental illness among youth and adults, the LA County Mental Health Access Line, and other resources for accessing mental health services, plus the installation of the workshop participants' artwork on two bus shelters located at the corner of South Central Avenue and East Slauson Avenue in South Los Angeles. Additionally, both "Cómics que Curan: Volume 1" and "Cómics que Curan: Volume 2" publications were displayed on screen as PDFs for all attendees to see the comics that were generated from both iterations of the "Cómics que Curan" workshops, and a live Q&A session was conducted with several of the workshop participants from the first and second series of workshops answering questions from DSTL Arts staff and other audience members. With opening remarks provided by Councilman Curren Price, the councilman representing LA City Council District 9, Francois Nion and Melissa Hernandez, the co-directors of operations from JCDecaux/OUTFRONT Media, and DSTL Arts staff, including the Teaching Artist Team that conducted the workshops, our virtual culmination event celebrated the accomplishments of all the Latino Youth and individuals involved in the entire "Cómics que Curan" workshop series while sharing valuable information related to accessing mental health services.

Post-Event Survey

On November 13, 2020, all registered event attendees, including those who attended the event the day before, were emailed through Eventbrite and encouraged to complete a post-event survey hosted on Google Forms (included with this report). As proposed, individuals were provided with the incentive of receiving free copies of both “Cómics que Curan” comic book anthologies upon completion of the post-event survey. In total, 6 of the 54 emailed individuals completed the survey within the given time frame, with all expressing positive reviews and experiences in attending the event. 100% of survey respondents claimed to have learned something new relating to mental health through attending this event, with responses to the follow up question that asked respondents to share what they learned ranging from “I learned that mental health can not only be healing through words such as poetry, but also through picture (sic)” to other varied responses that similarly expressed the importance of self-acceptance and accessing mental health resources for others and themselves.

When asked how this event helped attendees understand mental health in their community, one respondent commented on the personal impact they felt from hearing one particular workshop participant speak about their experience as an individual with mental health issues related to having the neuro-developmental disorder of Autism during the Q&A portion of the event, especially because the respondent has a son with Autism and they were able to relate with the personal experiences that inspired the workshop participant to create the comic they produced featuring an alien that was a metaphor for a person living with Autism. Furthermore, multiple respondents expressed a greater understanding of individuals who may be suffering a mental illness, and how they learned to be a better support for them. Overall, respondents expressed positive remarks, and commended this project and culmination event for its purposeful highlighting of the importance of mental health during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The only major feedback offered by survey respondents was that programs such as this should be continually offered for more communities in Los Angeles County.

Lessons Learned

In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are several successes that can be attributed to the work done through this project.

With the successful recruitment, enrollment, and participation of up to 14 Latino Youth, ages 16–25 from diverse backgrounds, our “Cómics que Curan” workshop series enriched the lives and understanding of mental health for all participating youth. The fact that we had Latino Youth from multiple cultural backgrounds, including a variety of Mexican, Central American, Mexican-American added greater value to the final, published anthology. If this project had followed the original Scope of Work with only one individual’s comic book being published, the singular perspective that comic book would have shared would not have accurately represented the diversity of the Latino community as a whole. The plurality of voices collected in “Cómics que Curan: Volume 1” shows how mental illness and mental health is a deeply individual thing, and that the concerns of Latino Youth are not singular.

During the LACDMH staff review phase of our workshop participants’ rough draft comics, LACDMH staff expressed surprise at the lack of participating youth addressing suicide as their main mental health concern for our community. This appeared to DSTL Arts staff to actually be endemic of the limited view of mental health in our community. It was not at all a surprise to DSTL Arts staff that the majority of our workshop participants created stories centered on social anxiety and its primary roots in deeply-held societal expectations of young people, particularly those related to social interactions, societal pressures surrounding physical appearance, gender and sexuality, and religious views surrounding mental illness. These topics, during conversations with our workshop participants, were seen by them as the most prevalent mental health issues experienced by youth, with suicide often being seen as the ultimate escalation of those untreated issues. Therefore, based on these in-class conversations, nearly all of our Latino Youth participants felt compelled to address the aforementioned issues, and more, through their comics in order to show that those issues are universal, acknowledged by them and others, and that these issues are treatable through open dialogue with peers and professionals alike.

Clearly, the biggest challenge came down to the unprecedented closures of all public spaces, and social distancing requirements enacted by all governmental agencies upon the clear threat of the COVID-19 virus. Given the scope of this pandemic, this challenge required this project be creatively, and realistically closed out with a virtual event that had its own challenges and barriers for participation from both our workshop participants, and the intended community that the culmination event was intended to serve. In spite of the digital divide that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, where the Latino community, among others, has limited access to reliable internet service and knowledge for using virtual meeting platforms, DSTL Arts still managed to conduct an event that celebrated the community of South Los Angeles, and the contributions of our Latino Youth in elevating mental health awareness in their own neighborhood and beyond.

Recommendations

DSTL Arts recommends that LACDMH strongly consider retaining a trained arts-professional specifically for the development of arts-oriented programming, especially when it relates to visual and literary arts projects such as comic books, poetry, graphic design, photography and other visual/literary storytelling projects, including video and live performance. The technical knowledge and skillset that is needed for the implementation of in-depth, quality arts-projects needs to be clearly outlined through the appropriate crafting of Requests for Qualifications and Scope of Work documents for projects such as this one. The lack of clarity offered through the original Scope of Work document from the Latino Youth Mental Health Comic Book Project not just frustrated planning efforts for this project, but were never clearly addressed by LACDMH staff because they, themselves, could not answer the questions for lack of knowledge in the technical areas necessary for successfully completing this project.

To appropriately encourage mental wellness within the community, specifically the Latino community where artists are already undervalued, it is highly recommended that competitions be eliminated from these kinds of projects, and instead, the language of economic justice be used to promote deeper engagement of Latino Youth and their families. The concept of competition will always overshadow the healing nature of the arts, and immediately assigns value on one voice over another. This ultimately has the effect of inducing varying levels of social anxiety within individuals, and will lead to individuals often self-electing to withdraw from participation, or never participating at all. Therefore, this is not a recommended practice for any future arts-related projects.

While offering gift cards to participants at any denomination is helpful in retaining youth participants, it is also important to understand the full economic impact the arts have in the larger community. The reason why DSTL Arts has been a successful arts mentorship organization for over 8 years is because our programming model always celebrates the skills our participants have as artists. We serve emerging artists, regardless of age and skill level when they enroll in our programs, and we consistently value them as the artists they are. For this reason, we recommend that all future arts-related projects developed by LACDMH include a focus on treating artists as artists, and incorporate, at minimum, an introductory course or seminar on the workforce impact the arts have on our local economy with resources for supporting the emerging artists who participate in LACDMH projects.

Overall, our strongest recommendation for LACDMH is to value and respect the experience and expertise of artists in the field, and to use the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture's recently adopted county-wide policy for Cultural Equity and Inclusion as a model for appropriately incorporating the arts in their outreach and education programs.