

An Open Door for an Invisible Community: A Profile on Ricardo Venegas

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Meeting Ricardo Venegas

If you take a walk through Santa Barbara's many public parks, you'll start to notice a theme. In almost every park there's a full-size mural, sometimes two or even eight of them. Many of these high-quality pieces depict children at play, wondrous fictional storybook scenes, inspirational leaders, and can be deeply rooted in Chicano/a/x and Indigenous culture. These murals, new and old, are highly regarded as an integral part of the local community but they didn't appear overnight by some mystery mural magician. What may seem on the surface as a fun motif of vibrance and creativity, is the product of a project called the Santa Barbara Arts Alliance (SBAA). This city-run program provides Santa Barbara's youth with a creative outlet and mentorship, a program spearheaded by Franklin Neighborhood Center Facility Manager, Ricardo Venegas.

Ricardo Venegas.

Source: <https://youthsafetypartnership.org/speakers/>

I had the fortune of connecting with Venegas once before over the summer while working on art policy for Santa Barbara's Parks and Recreation Department. Everyone in the City's Parks and Recreation Department knew who he was and could only sing praises about his work and his involvement with the community. The first time we spoke was on the phone; he had just gotten out of a meeting and called me on the fly as he went to his next destination. Despite being in a rush, he seemed patient and genuinely interested in helping me gather information about his program and other art in Santa Barbara. He even went a step further as to connect me to the right resources and people to help me complete my report when he didn't know an answer.

I was able to reconnect with Venegas some months later on Zoom to get to know more about him, the SBAA, and his role in the community. Sitting down with Venegas, face to face for the first time (albeit virtually), was initially a little intimidating. His strong build and stern expression provided a stark contrast to his friendly demeanor and professional, yet colloquial tone. But just as before, he jumped right in and started telling his story.

“It started out under the umbrella of the Summer Youth Enrichment Program with only some plywood and a handful of supplies...”

Santa Barbara Art’s Alliance

In the early 2000s, Santa Barbara city was facing significant increases in youth-on-youth violence, graffiti and vandalism, and rising tensions between the East and West sides of Santa Barbara. Ricardo recalled that at that time he was just beginning his career as the new Facility Manager for the Franklin Neighborhood Center, prior to that he was the Director of the Lower Westside Community Center where he was coordinating a variety of summer youth enrichment programs, including a summer youth art program. It was then that Ricardo was approached by neighborhood advocates and parents, to find a way to mitigate the ongoing escalation of youth-on-youth violence by incorporating the arts as the main vehicle. He recognized that Ortega Park, home of the oldest murals in Santa Barbara, had been one of the sites hit the hardest by vandalism. Not to mention, these murals were over 20 years old with faded colors and chipped paint. Combining his appreciation for art and community organization, Ricardo was able to take a small-scale plywood art summer program and develop it into a fully-fledged City mural restoration project. Initially, (2000-2003) the project included limited repair and restoration and included a handful of local youth from both sides of town. This summer pilot project turned out to be very successful in eliminating the ongoing vandalism and significantly reduced youth violence in the neighborhood.

In 2004-05, Ricardo successfully pulled together \$14,300 in funding including \$3,800 in grant money from the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission to undertake a much more robust restoration of the Ortega Park murals. He recruited local artist Carlos Cuellar to lead the 2005 Mural Restoration Project to provide the artistic vision and art mentoring for 20 local aspiring youth artists; ten of which were hired as paid apprentices under the City’s Job Apprenticeship Program. By the end of 2005, the Ortega Park Mural Restoration Project successfully restored all of the existing murals and provided an opportunity for youth from different sides of town to work together on a meaningful public art restoration project that in turn help them develop of sense of belonging. Not only did the murals receive a facelift but the value of community-based art helped unite the youth and prevent further vandalism! The project received so much positive feedback from both the city and community that other cities and interest groups started to take notice; they wanted in on the action. This helped the project grow, gaining traction and acclaim. “We never expected it to grow this big,” Ricardo admitted, but as the project grew, he started looking at other locations for additional mural installations he realized, “...it’s more of an alliance. So, I said ‘Why don’t we call it the Santa Barbara Arts Alliance?’”

Today SBAA still operates out of Santa Barbara’s Parks and Recreation Division supplying their parks with the mural installments and restorations. Over the past 20 years, they have completed over 8 different restorations, added over 30 new murals to Santa Barbara’s public parks, and has won several community awards. The lead mentor right now, Miguel Rodriguez, is an alumnus of the program who, only through informal training with the SBAA, developed the skills necessary to keep the tradition of high-quality community art alive.

What stuck with me the most was that Ricardo rarely took credit in retelling his involvement. “It was a lot of different people in different areas that really made this happen,” he said, “It wasn’t just the artists, it wasn’t just [me], but it was a collaboration of ideas, efforts, and energies across several years.” He continuously mentioned other collaborators that helped him along the way such as the ongoing support and funding from the City, City Council, Santa Barbara County Arts Commission, and the Human Services Committee via Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) as well as the many individuals throughout the years that have allowed his project to thrive. This was a recurring theme throughout our conversation, that despite his significant contributions, he was always willing to give credit elsewhere. At one point when talking about grant writing, he gave credit to his strict writing professor Dr. Behrens during his time at UC Santa Barbara for helping shape the skills that he still uses today.



*Ricardo Venegas speaking at the unveiling of a mural at Eastside Library
Source: <http://www.dannymezaart.com/>*

“I said, if I ever make it to college, this is where I’m going to go.”

Connection to Community

Ricardo’s path to UCSB wasn’t always easy or direct. He grew up in a Campesino or farming working household in Indio, California, and recalled the tough work of picking grapes and dates with his family. Education was a big part of the messaging he got growing up. His parents

pushed for him to continue his education as an avenue for a better life but remembered his older brother being an especially big part of that. He admitted with a laugh, “He was a lot more studious. I was a little more lax than him, but I looked up to him.”

After a brief stint in the California Army National Guard, he decided to step back and set his sights on community college with the goal of getting into UCSB. Starting as a political science major Venegas got involved with activism, supporting migrant workers, and low-income families' rights. When he successfully transferred over, he carried his love for activism with him and involved himself in issues revolving around the Chicano community and the protests against the Gulf War. Within a few quarters, he switched majors to Cultural Anthropology and Chicano Studies and found his most memorable position with Migrant Education through the County Office of Education. There he helped secure scholarships and raised money for lower-income families. “I loved it,” he said. He identified his passion for helping these students and families and found strength in his ability to relate to their struggles and give valuable guidance and support. It was through this work that he would also conduct home visits where he would see three to four families squeezed into a two-bedroom apartment. Working with migrant families and helping their students pursue the education they needed kept him “... grounded with the needs of the community.” It helped him keep perspective and focus on helping what he called this invisible community that, to this day, is outshined by Santa Barbara’s flashy, wealthy exterior.

“I still have this internalized notion of the need is always great, the faces always change but the need is always there.”

Job Apprenticeship Program

Venegas would apply this knowledge in the early 90s with one of his first jobs, working as a coordinator for a job apprenticeship program through Santa Barbara city. He recalled being one of the coordinators and having the task of identifying youth who were at high risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system and giving them mentorship and job opportunities through the city or partnering groups. He would bring in kids from opposing sides of town and build community between them by showing them how to collaborate, work, and play together, preparing them for the workplace. There was a really human moment when he described his experience. He took a pause and then asked,

“How do you convince a kid that a job is good for [them]? You're going to be working 15, 20 hours a week, you're going to make 60 bucks. And they tell you, ‘Well, in three hours, I can make 100 bucks, 200 bucks just by hanging out with my friends.’” To my open-mouthed silence, he replied, “It's a hard sell! But for me, it was easy because I was able to relate to them.”

Growing up in a tough neighborhood with similar circumstances, Ricardo was able to connect his journey to those he mentored. “You know, once you start breaking things down for them and speaking their language, they understand that ‘I’m not the institution that's against you. I’m here to help you.’” At its peak, the program would provide 120-150 jobs a year at the city or with their partners if there were an excess of applicants. He threw out a figure that when he started there were over 3000 youth that was a part of the juvenile correction system and within 15 years that

number had gone down to under 100. Like the SBAA, the Job Apprenticeship program took time to see the change reflected in the statistics, but its success echoed throughout the community.



SBAA receiving Santa Barbara Beautiful Award in 2013, Venegas pictured fourth from the left.
Source: <http://www.dannymezaart.com/>

“Real change doesn’t happen overnight”

Mobile Farmers Market

Having developed this understanding of the needs faced in the community, Venegas was able to translate the skills he had developed and apply them to his position as the Lower Westside Community Center Director which he started around ‘96. Sticking true to serving the community, one of Venegas’s proudest achievement remains his help in developing the Mobile Farmers Market / Food Pantry, one of the first projects he worked on that positively impacted and improved access to quality, nutritious food for extremely low-income families.

He recalls pitching his idea to his colleague Craig at the Food Bank to deliver their produce to satellite locations all over the city for those in need to stop by and pick up what they needed. After rubbing his confidence off on Craig, who was nervous about wasting food on this *Field of Dreams*-esque vision, Ricardo was able to secure enough food for 80 families. On the day of the first food distribution at the Lower Westside Community Center, over 250 families showed up, over triple the number they were expecting, with the crowd wrapping around 2 blocks. “This is how the Lower Westside neighborhood was in the late 90s, it was a very impacted community,” he remarked. Its overwhelming success slowly and surely helped build traction and soon interest groups started to take note. A couple of years later around the year 2000, the Westside Center made the project an official program with the Food Bank following suit. Soon the operation

would be replicated at the Franklin Neighborhood Center where Ricardo now works and would quickly become the training center for other interest groups to learn and mimic their operation.

Venegas refused to take credit but 26 years later and the success of the program has grown today to over 150 different locations that have copied this same method, reaching all the way to Santa Maria and beyond. The method was so effective because there was no need for storage (all the food was gone within three hours), and it could be run by a skeleton crew of 3-5 volunteers. Even to this day the pantry still serves a significant portion of the community. I saw it in action this last summer just how efficient and popular the drive-by food pantry was. Within an hour alone well over 40 families drove through the mobile food pantry just outside Venegas's Office. Ricardo admitted, "I shy away from individual awards/recognition." but his work won him and the city the 2006 Award of Excellence by the California Park & Recreation Society and remains one of his proudest accomplishments.

"My door is always open, I will help you, let's make this happen"

The Open Door

At one point, Venegas chuckled a little bit and mentioned that deep down inside he was an artist himself but didn't ever show or tell anyone. I think in many ways, that artistry shines through in his work: in telling a compelling story, in the words he writes, and in getting people to connect. It's those skills he has developed, honed, and mastered over the years that have attributed to his success.

What was interesting to me and obviously important to him was giving credit to those that he's worked with. Throughout the interview, he would constantly reference the contributions that other people made to talk about the success of his work. With every story and project, he always made sure to acknowledge the people that he worked with that helped bring success. We had to pause briefly just so I could write down all the names he gave. Some of the closing words he left me with were that "You've got to know your skills but also their limits. You may not have all the answers, so you have to know when to reach out when you need help."

Venegas's work with the community is done so well and so successfully, not only because of his ability to communicate but also because of his gift to unite different groups under the same goal. Venegas noted that his work with the youth, building community between rivals, paralleled his work with interest groups. Sometimes, interest groups lack collaboration because they are too focused on competing against each other for resources such as grant money and aid. "It's almost like a gang mentality," he remarked. "And that's unfortunate because it really prevents a lot of good work from happening."

Venegas loves his job there's no doubt about that. Santa Barbara is very much his community and one that he has grown to love and care for. He plans on staying with the city as an outreach coordinator and will continue to do so as a volunteer when he retires and take care of his own family. So long as there is a need, no matter the face it has, Ricardo Venegas's door will be open.

Figures:

Ricardo Venegas Profile Picture: <https://youthsafetypartnership.org/speakers/>

Ricardo Venegas Eastside Library and SB Beautiful Awards: <http://www.dannymezaart.com/>