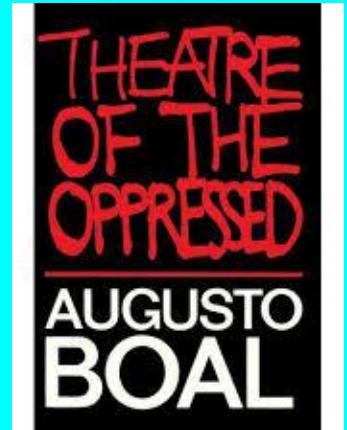

Using Theater of the Oppressed to Unite Black & Brown Communities on Chicago's Southwest side.

A look at 3 projects over 6 years with artist Jasmin Cardenas

Can Theater of the Oppressed support community work?

In 2006, Lifelong Chicagoan and theater artist Jasmin Cardenas moved to La Villita/ Little Village, a predominantly Mexican working class neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. This community was right next to an African American community called North Lawndale.

Struck by the divide, violence and negativity between both communities, Jasmin wanted to get involved using her expertise. She knew of important community work happening to unite both communities. Thus began her journey in support of this cause.





An Overview

Highlights & Testimonies. Three different projects over the course of 6 years in the same community with the same stakeholders. Using Theater of the Oppressed (technique detailed in 1st project example) and facilitated dialogue with the aim of Black & Brown Unity.

→ **1st Project**

Dividing Lines. An initial approach.

→ **2nd Project**

Ambassadors for a United Lawndale.

→ **3rd Project**

Unity Dinners

1st Project

Dividing Lines:
An initial approach



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Jasmin asks 2 local youth pastors: Can we use theater as a tool for dialogue?

What makes us different?

What makes us the same?

WHAT: Explore Race, Issues of Border, Geography,
Culture, Language, Community

WHO: Youth participants as experts, point of view

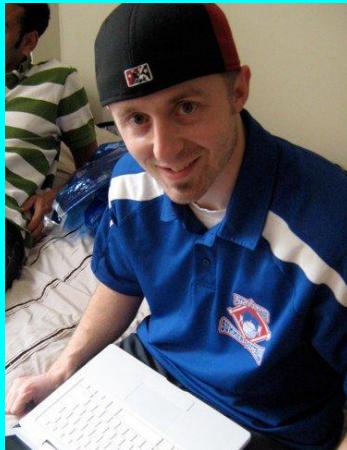
HOW: Using our bodies, voices and life experience

WHEN & WHERE: 2 Meetings. Alternating community

Community Partners



Terence Gadsden
Youth Pastor
Lawndale Christian
Community Church



Matt de Mateo
Youth Pastor
Nueva Vida
Community Church



Jasmin Cardenas
Theater Artist &
New Little Village
Resident

1st meeting:
September 30, 2007
Nueva Vida Church

T.O.Game: How Many A's in an A?
Participants stepped forward and

using **sound & movements**

communicated different things with specific vowels. Youth Response:

"Everyone sees symbols differently"

"Similar feelings were being represented but expressed differently"

"Our body language speaks many words"



1st Mtg: in La Villita

Young people entered cautious & quietly. Then youth immediately self segregated and sat with their own group to eat pizza.

A Graphing exercise: youth reveal their own truth and observe others.

"I didn't know we would be so much alike."

"I thought we were more different than we actually were."

IMAGE THEATER

Partners mixed 1 from each community. Sculpt "How you feel about the train tracks that divide the communities." Sculptures were different but similar:

**Anger, Frustration, Confusion,
"I don't know" "I don't care."**

Reflecting on the activity:

"You got to know how your partner feels about the tracks."

"Partnering with someone made you get into the other person's head."

"You really had to think about how you feel about the tracks. I normally don't think about it."



Closing Circle:

"I liked meeting new people from the other side of the tracks."

I liked the fact that my partner was outside my race and we worked together."



"I liked it and I didn't like it both. I liked doing new things and meeting new people but it was not long enough."

"I like how my partners sculpture looked real. When we first got here we were **so far apart** and the circle was way bigger. Now we are a much smaller group sitting close **together**."

2nd meeting:
October 7, 2007

Lawndale Christian Comm. Church

Youth spread out and ate pizza at integrated tables. Using anonymous comments collected on the first day, we return to T.O.'s Image Theater. Groups of 4-5 listened, discussed then sculpted images from comments.

Stereotypes or things said about the other group

- Everyone on the other side is dangerous and it's scary to walk alone over there.

- Some of them don't like Latino's.
- Tons of gang members
- It's nothing but wetbacks over there.



Discussion: 'wetback' comment:

"Some are, some aren't."

"I don't feel they are wetbacks, they are just here illegally." "I don't think it's up to us to judge how anyone gets to where they are. It isn't right to say that only certain people can be in this country." "The term 'over there' is in itself a way to segregate."

- I feel nervous and worried about those people, because I don't know what they're feeling

Participants share: "This is especially true when we are the only one that is different." "You walk into a room and it gets silent." "We all bleed red."

- Like 17 people live in a house. Image:



The TO activities including the Image Activity helped create a sense of comfort and community which allowed Youth to share stories:



- Confrontations between Latin Kings & GD's in both neighborhoods

- Tensions at local HS between black & latino students in the hallways, classrooms and campus

- A big street fight and police block off the street "to let us fight"

Stories of violence, territory and TRANSFORMATION



After sharing and listening about these moments of crisis and division I asked them to resculpt images based on new information and a **NEW VISION** for their community.



ACTION STEPS

Youth envisioned future projects together to strengthen community ties, learn each other's culture & community, grow relationships.

- Youth-led neighborhood cultural tours
- Bring schools together in sports activities
- Interview community members & develop a video, screen in a park or a block party by the train tracks
- Photography project: take pictures of what is important in your community, develop questions among the neighbors
- individuals go to opposite communities and really learn the history of the community. Having a big group dinner with both communities present. Talk about shared vision/space

