

They're Still Here

Twenty-five years later, Barrios Unidos has a lot to celebrate

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It began in 1977, out of the trunk of Daniel "Nane" Alejandre's car. Alejandre talked to youths, hoping to educate them on the reality of drugs, and to persuade them to stop violence. Twenty-five years later—when approximately 28 percent of all state homicides are gang related—Alejandre is the director of Barrios Unidos, a vital local nonprofit that works for peace and to end youth violence in the community. On Saturday, Oct. 26, the organization celebrates its 25th Anniversary with a special event that features guest speakers such as Harry Belafonte, Danny Glover, Dolores Huerta and Edward James Olmos, among others.

In the late-'70s, Alejandre had already gained wisdom from a number of first-hand experiences he had—he grew up in a migrant farm worker family in the south, fought in Vietnam, got hooked on heroin, and fell into the drug and street warfare scene in Fresno. But after receiving degree in Community Studies at UC Santa Cruz, he began fighting for young people's lives.

Through the years, Alejandre has seen a number of successes. He's played an integral part in creating truces between gangs, and has helped inmates work together to create culture celebrations like Cinco de Mayo or Juneteenth in local prisons. Barrios Unidos has hosted large peace conferences where hundreds of young people gathered to make decisions about their futures. Many communities, seeing the successes of Barrios Unidos, created similar organizations.

Another success is The Violence Prevention Bill, which was drafted in 1997 (AB 963) as a result of work from Barrios Unidos. It was again funded this year by the state legislature even amidst a budget crunch. "We can rise up from our own community and succeed," Alejandre says. "We can change the political situation to make it respond to our needs."

Barrios Unidos has traveled far since its small beginnings. Situated at 1817 Soquel Avenue in Santa Cruz, the small sign above the entrance bellies the sprawling grandness of the center's various projects and influence. The Cesar Chavez School for Social Change occupies one of the first rooms in the building, which has enrolled 18 students, and after five years of serving as an alternative to high school, it recently garnered Charter School status. Another room is the media center with the latest, state of the art technology.

"We want youth to cross the digital divide, and have pride in the tools available to them," says Manuel Rivas. "We teach young people how to create their own message."

The idea is to take youths from a negative environment of drugs and violence to provide something more positive.

A variety of snapshots hang on the walls, such as Young Warriors, boys and teens that participated in a camp up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. It was there they learned about respect—for themselves, for women, for nature. They also learned to accept others. The opposite wall is garnished with the Adelitas, the girls and teens that have also unleashed their strengths. To thwart the possibility of youths being seduced into gangs and drug use—often attributed to lack of self-esteem—the organization has found the best prevention is early prevention.

Behind Barrios Unidos is a warehouse building that is home to a

silk screening operation designed to assist young people with understanding the working world. With poverty being one of the roots of violence, the center has found economic development to be essential to violence prevention. Barrios Unidos now has and is nearly self-supporting through their rentals.

Barrios Unidos is in the process of creating a café and child care center. Much of the work doesn't go on in the complex but in outreach on the streets, in the juvenile halls, and in prisons.

While Barrios Unidos has seen many triumphs over the years, there are still many challenges. Alejandre says the situation is harder now—there are a lot more people with guns and there are more drugs available than in the past.

"It's work to keep people from ending up in the joint," he says, adding that a great deal of money goes into the penal system compared to how much goes to violence prevention.

"The work is not done yet," Alejandre notes. "You get tired. You know it's got to be done yet there are a lot of positive things to celebrate. We're still here."

Events: 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 25 at UCSC Inn, 370 Ocean St., Santa Cruz. Panel discussion on race relations and the criminal justice system with speakers Harry Belafonte and Edward James Olmos. \$10/gen., \$6/students/seniors. **Celebration: 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 26** at the Coconut Grove Ballroom w/ Danny Glover, Dolores Huerta, Harry Belafonte and Edward James Olmos. Music: Dr. Loco's Rockin' Jalepeño Band, and Rondalla Alisal. For tickets call 457-8208.