Report of the first Central American youth leadership Conference
2015

Conferencia de Liderazgo de la Juventud Centroamericana
2015

Santee Educational Complex, 1921 South Maple Ave., the Angeles, CA, 90011
Saturday, 19 of September, 2015
Homies Unidos Declaration

Homies Unidos works to end violence and promote peace in our communities through the empowerment of young people and their families to become advocates of social justice rather than agents of self-destruction.

In January 2015, one of Homies Unidos’ program graduate, Wilmer Escobar, wanted to bring Central American Refugee (CAR) youth together to share space where they could speak about the issues that affected them. This conversations led to the idea of the Central American Youth Leadership Conference. Our mission supported such a vision because it helped to pursue the elimination of the stigma labelled on so many of our youth. In addition, Homies Unidos supported this cause because it would present culturally competent access to alternative education, development of leadership and self-esteem, and health education programs linked to the promotion of social justice programs that make a difference in the homes, schools and streets of our community.

We declare that we will not abandon these youths or their families. That we will be there as they struggle to integrate into their communities, schools and home. We will seek resources through our allies to help them heal from their traumas and have successful lives.
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Introduction

Homies Unidos would like to thank all the volunteers, sponsors and youth who participated in our first Central American Youth Leadership Conference on September 19, 2015. We formally welcomed over 250 Central Americans refugees (CAR) and their families into our community. They were connected to resources to deal with their legal issues, trauma and social determinants of health.

CAR youth have been dealing with the effects of violence experienced in their country of origin, which was the reason they were forced to emigrate. They embarked on a dangerous journey through Mexico, were arrested by immigration and customs enforcement (ICE) to end up imprisoned in the United States detention centers. There they were reallocated to refugee centers, until they finally were handed over to their parents/legal guardians.

Currently, the recent support to those children and young immigrants is fading and not a priority. In that context, the extremely difficult reality of young Central American immigrants generates the mental conflict of integration into their environment. Youth are facing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders, the effects of displacement, the barriers of language and the lack of tools to succeed. In some cases, youth are showing signs of misbehavior in school and home, and are prioritizing employment over education.

Families, shelters, and school staff are lacking the tools and resources to build effective approaches and culturally relevant interventions. Locally, the Director of Mental Health of the Los Angeles School District, Pia Escudero, reviewed records of newly arrived students that entered to a school; “It was found that 94 percent of those examined in mental health, reported at least three traumatic events, and 65 percent had clinical symptoms, in the range of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.”¹

The previous story reaffirms the fact that immigrant children would be at risk of getting involved in in negative activities including gang violence.

¹ Mother Jones magazine (Ian Gordon – 70,000 kids will show up alone at our border this year. What happens to them? | Tue Jun. 3, 2014)
Community members expressed distrust of the excessively hard laws and fear that the police will collaborate with immigration authorities. While at the same time, the police expressed frustration that they, "were not able to take proactive measures to build relations in the community." In addition, the increasing number of deportations is spiking up the number of family separations and launches low-income families into serious economic difficulties.

The impact of economic pressure makes them experience changes in behavior, especially in older youth who have parents deported or imprisoned. This often leads to increase in: aggression, the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders (particularly, if they witnessed the arrest of their parents from inside their home), of criminal activity, violence between communities, the imprisonment of minors (who stay trapped in the vicious cycle of the recidivism), and self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, the self-harm, self-mutilation and suicide.

Historically, the consequence of not creating a plan of support for refugees has created much to reconsider as this is the best chance to overcome the lack of planning to now involve both traditional and new actors in the communities. Yet, their hopes and dreams of starting a new life, free of violence, have them facing the harsh reality of the complex process of transition and reintegration of being reunified with their family. Members who they have not seen for years, and more commonly, for more than a decade. They were placed in schools where they felt isolated; did not know anyone and many of the communities where they arrived to live lack youth programs that would allow them to better integrate. Further, they are dealing with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Organizations in Los Angeles like, CARECEN, the Bresee Foundation, and Saint John's Well Child Center among others, have done a great job providing support mental health and immigration legal services. However, there has not been the same effort to provide violence prevention services for this population.

Homies Unidos is helping these youths to deal with the "culture shock" that they are experiencing in their schools and families. Homies Unidos has been approaching schools to provide support for youth who have been dealing with this culture clash. We have partnered with community service providers to refer youth who need mental health or legal services. As part of our violence prevention strategy, we are supplying culturally relevant character development programs, to provide a safe space where youth can express themselves. With our limited resources, we have supported more than 88 young people in four different schools: Santee High, Hawthorne High, Hawkins High and the L.A. River High.

With input from these youth, the idea to support Central American refugees arose. Homies Unidos successfully organized the first Conference of Central American youth. The goal was ensuring that these refugee youths feel welcome, participate in workshops they felt were relevant, and introduce them to service providers while at the same time promoting Central America art and culture. Through this Conference, we connected with other schools with newly arrived Central American youth. These youths also expressed not benefiting from these services and share their experiences. While at the conference, they were exposed to service providers in health, education, legal and other resources. The purpose is to ensure that these youths have a successful, healthy, safe and well-supported integration into our communities.
Activities Carried out Prior to Conference

The event coordinator worked tirelessly to create and develop a program and structure for the conference. We applaud all volunteers that helped in the process. The following are the activities:

- Fund Raising: Via Phone, Online and Facebook/Email
- Volunteer Recruitment
- Program Design
- Coordination of Entertainment and Refreshments
- Coordination of Sponsorships and Marketing
- Co-Coordination and Facilitation of CAM Youth Leadership Program
- Preparation of Printed Materials
- Outreach
- Coordination of Event

Objectives 1 and 2 were complete 100%, and objective 3 was achieved before the end of the year ended when we established the Central Americans Youth Council. In general, the objectives were achieved by 80%, which is excellent compared to other events of the same magnitude and considering it was our first time do in it.

All activities were marked completely in all its facets before and during the Conference. These were fulfilled within the period required, although 4 months to prepare was not enough time to achieve a 100% pre-planned with the efficiency and efficacy desired event.
Results of the Conference

The program was a success. There were a few glitches such as, the conference starting an hour late and not having a solid idea on how to guide the attendees to their workshops. Still, we believe it was a good program that manifested beautifully. The Resources Fair in place and the location was perfect.

We had many volunteers supporting before the event, but mostly the day of the Conference. Understanding that it was not easy to establish working committees, throughout the Conference we relied on 10 volunteers and staff 2 members. However, we reaffirmed that outcome as "normal" since about 90% of the organizers of the Conference were voluntary and among them, 50% were youth. The volunteers helped in; registration, tables of resources, workshops, set up, food, clean up, and transportation.

The day of the Conference started the day with 35 volunteers, but some left in the afternoon, so we ended up with 15. We intended to do evaluation and collect data from all participants, but were not able to.

According to our numbers, we had around 250 participants. Most young people were between 14 and 26 years old. Since they came in, many in a hurry, they didn't register and many were bouncing between workshops/sessions, booths, food lines, and the concert music. People tended to scatter all over the place. Some left right after lunch. For next year with this valuable experience, we will improve our data collection.

Estimated assistance was not fulfilled because schools did not actively recruit youth to participate. We needed to conduct more outreach and build relationships with schools. In numerical terms, we had the participation of more than 50%. Now, if we focus on the social base that has been working with Homies Unidos, the participation of 58 young people who went through our program has tripled. They brought in family members and students from others schools we did not reach out to.

Food was provided from Viztango Café for a reduced price and Northgate markets, with the help from Council District 9, was free.

Through social media and press coverage, we were able to get additional exposure from La Opinion who held a series of interviews about unaccompanied minors that led more youth to the conference. Univision was present and interviewed participants as well. Participants from our Youth Leadership Training were able to engage in interviews on radio stations like KPFK and others.

In sum, considering that it was an event that began to take shape four months before event, and conducted with almost 90% volunteers, it was a great success.

The people who attended were able to receive legal and health services from other organizations that were tabling and had questions answered after panelists presented during the workshop.
Activities Carried out During Conference

We started with a welcome and introduction in the Auditorium, with Juan José Mangandi as master of ceremony who introduced Alex Sánchez, our CEO gave an inspirational opening to the event and honored all the youth who participated in the development of the conference.

solidarity message from Oscar Torres, Director of "Innocent voices" video.

Breakout Workshops that ran simultaneous were:

**The Current State of the Central American Community**
- Moderators: Jose Adonay Rivas, Homies Unidos
- Presentors: Dra. Suyapa Portillo, Pitzer College
  - Dra. Leisy Abrego, UCLA
  - Dra. Alicia Estrada, CalSt. Northridge
  - Alex Sanchez, Homies Unidos
  - Osvaldo "Ozzie" Cruz, National Compadres Network
  - Guillermo Hernandez, National Compadres Network

**Conserving Our Roots & Coping With Culture Shock**
- Moderators: Dr. Steven Osuna, Cal. St. Long Beach
- Presentors: Dora Magana, Centro Cultural Centro Americano
  - Romeo Duran, Homies Unidos
  - Alondra Juarez Torres, Didi Hirsch
  - Dra. Leisy Abrego, UCLA

**The Importance of Education**
- Moderators: Jasmin Iraheta, UCLA Labor Center
  - Lleferson Hernandez, Hollywood High School
- Presentors: Cristina Gonzales, Undocumented Project at UTLA
  - Ilse Escobar, Miguel Contreras Foundation
  - Federico Bustamante, Casa Libre

**Navigating the Legal System**
- Moderators: Hilda Guerrero, Alhambra Civic Center Library
- Presentors: Eryk Escobar, CARECEN
  - Kathleen Gulino, International Rescue Community
  - Susan Alva, Immigrant Defenders Law Center
  - Haydee Sanchez, Centro Cultural Techantit

**Know Your Body: Knowledge Keeps You Healthy**
- Moderators: Maria Beltran, Evans Adult School
  - Jacqueline Lucero, Homies Unidos
- Presentors: Manuel Umanzor, Clinica Monsenor Romero
  - Pablo Barrios, St. John’s

**Hip Hop in Central American Culture**
- Moderator: Elias Cabrera, El Salvador Rap.com
  - Osmin Zavaleta, Homies Unidos
  - Sistah Centzi Black Indian Movement
  - SEN ONE, Graff Artist SoyLos
  - Cruz Kontrol, Reyes del Bajo Mundo(Hiphop Por la Paz)
  - DJ Warlock ONE, Lab of Nightmares
During lunch youth were entertained with music from; Roberto Dueñas, The Jade, and songs from Will Echegoyen.

The result of the sessions or workshops was excellent. The information was disseminated to students successful. Workshops were co-facilitated by out Youth Leadership graduates. Youth participated and were grateful for the information provided.

Some highlights are:

- All workshops were fulfilled and presenters informed young people of their reality, their education. Youth expressed that the door of hope was opened they were feeling confidence.
- Conversations of stereotypes of youth Central America with presenters from Casa Libre on how they should act to not continue with the negative stereotypes placed on them. In addition, they spoke about the importance can get involved to continue their studies.
- Miguel Contreras spoke about the trauma of coming to the United States and then losing his ID, his involvement in activities organized by the Dreamers, so he could return to his roots and help his community.
- Cristina touched on the themes of the discrimination in the education system, in educating herself of the system and to find organizations for support.
- Our volunteer of Homies Unidos, Jacqueline Lucero had the opportunity to express her experience with Homies Unidos of Epiphany Project program. She was encouraging youth to tell their stories. We need more youth to motivate others to be more engaged in activities. We want to have someone who can make check-ups of AIDS or something similar.
- We educated youth in how to navigate the education system, the crisis of identity loss and options of agencies, activities to continue with their education and healing.
- Although the Conference had no character of a Congress, we were not able to finish a concrete list of resolutions, which we will improve next year. Also, we need to make the workshops more interactive with the youth. The highest attended workshop was the Hip Hop in Central American culture.

Subsequently we continued part 2 of the workshops after lunch, which repeated the morning sessions, except that we added the forum hosted by La Opinion newspaper in the central library of the school.

The Forum of Central American Immigrant Youth

This forum was sponsored by the newspaper La Opinion, we wanted to identify the causes of immigration and its positive and negative impact on Central American youth, from their place of origin to their current integration into our community.

The main focus of the panelists and the questions they concentrated was in relationship to the historical and socio-political of the CAR youth, their cultural interrelations, of identity, and a strong sense of diversity and inclusion. While the problem is not decreasing, its origin is not only pertaining to the Central American region for it is now a global challenge. They spoke of creating fast alternative solutions, realistic, inclusive, and above all very human.

The dream is to create a cultural process of identity, diversity, and integration where we can take the best from this country and our countries of origin. Always within the framework of humanity and mutual respect.
In that sense the main agreements and recommendations of the Forum are:

- Denounce the abuses and violations committed against CAR youth of all genders, women and LGBTIQ, ages, nationalities and cultures; while struggling to maintain equality, diversity, and the human and civil rights of CAR youth.
- Not to forget those who disappeared from the borders of Guatemala, Mexico, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Florida.
- Create project proposals with solution to the problems of CAR Youth that are proposed by youth themselves.

The human impact of Central American youth migration.

- **Moderator:**
  - Marlom Portillo, Homies Unidos
- **Panelists:**
  - Isaías Alvarado, periodista de La Opinión
  - Martha Arévalo, Directora Ejecutiva de CARECEN-LA
  - Nancy Zúñiga, Human Rights Alliance for Child Refugee and Families
  - Alex Sánchez, Director Ejecutivo de Homies Unidos

The Forum participation featured distinguished leaders and guests from our community as well as the participation of the Honorable **District 9** City Council member, Curren Price.

**Booths were available during the resource fair.**
Activities Music Art and Culture

Finally, we proceeded to enjoy the entertaining and multicultural music provided by Central American artists.

The Hip Hop in Central American Culture workshop included a basic introduction to the history of Hip Hop, its culture, and its elements such as Break Dancing, MCing/Rap, DJ, and Graffity. Additionally, the workshop addressed how the Hip Hop culture has been a tool for violence prevention among youth, self-expression, social change, cultural awareness, and entrepreneurship.

Sistah Centzi, born in the U.S to a Salvadoran mother, explained Hip Hop through the perspective of women/indigenous women with an emphasis on women/indigenous women’s rights, gender inequalities, and challenges within the male-dominated Hip Hop Culture. She also introduced her children, Black Indian Movement, as the new generation of Hip Hoppers who incorporate Native ancestral traditions and music, as a powerful tool promoting ancestral cultural identity, respect for Mother Earth and social justice.

The Hip Hop in Central American Culture also had an interactive component during lunch: participants were given a demonstration of Hip Hop Beat Making, Graffity Mural Painting, Turntablism and Rhyming. Some participants chose to pick the microphone to sing their “raps”, others Break Danced, while others were given graffiti mural painting lessons on the spot by Sen One as he worked on a native inspired Central American identity mural.
In conclusion, while we achieved the result expected of this Conference organized largely by CAR youth and graduates of our summer Youth Leadership Training of Homies Unidos, we have much more to do. Together we will learn to how to better organize around the social educational disparities and health projected in social determinants of health in our communities, and that will become an essential component of the Central American Youth Council of refugee youth.

In general, the Central American youth from several schools benefited of the resources of health and cultural activities provided by the organizations, sponsors, funders, and youth themselves; who finally created opportunities for positive feedback, a health referral system and the development of self-esteem of CAR youth, that in the long run will seek more support from participating agencies in the communities where they live and co-exist.

Sponsors

We will like to thank all of our sponsors for believing in us and investing in our youth.