Using Culture to Build Community:

How Oakland Arts Activists Turned Their Dream Into the Reality of the EastSide Cultural Center

A Case Study

By Bill Wong

At the Cultural Center's grand opening, Traci Bartlow leads a dance performance while Francesca Serrano cuts the ribbon.

"The way to connect to the community is through culture because culture is something people live and breathe every day. It's the language. It's the diet. It's any kind of expression that you have, whether it's creating a piece of music or marching down the street for immigrant rights. That's still culture."

—GREG MOROZUMI

"I'm extraordinarily impressed and not just a little surprised that they pulled this off. They just would never say no or allow defeat to be the result."

—Bart Lubow

Inside

The dream of a group of Oakland artists—to develop a cultural center that would use the arts to help pull together a very diverse community—was not unique: many activist artists have had a similar dream. But unlike many others, this group of artists—organized as the EastSide Arts Alliance—actually realized their dream, in an "amazing" amount of time, in the words of a member of the Oakland City Council.

Starting as an incorporated group in the early part of this decade, the Alliance built an organization, enlisted a broad range of partners, developed a plan, secured funding from multiple sources, bought and completed renovations of an historic building that had deteriorated into a drug den in a struggling part of Oakland called the Lower San Antonio and, in early 2007, opened the EastSide Cultural Center.

As the dream envisioned, the Cultural Center has quickly become a focal point for this neighborhood, providing not just a space for a wide range of art and dance classes and cultural events, but also a place for young people to come and learn, a space for pre-school programs to meet, an office for a growing design business, a gallery for local artists, a space for an intergenerational arts project and much more.

The Cultural Center's building also includes 16 units of affordable housing, four of which are for young people aging out of foster care.

"I am so amazed that it came together in as few years as it did," said Pat Kernighan, the

"We're not interested in cultural tourism, we're interested in empowering a community. When we talk about artists, we're talking about artists who have evolved from neighborhood programs."

—Greg Morozumi

EastSide Arts Alliance helped renovate a former hotel that had become a drug den. It now includes 16 affordable apartments.

Oakland City Council member who represents the Lower San Antonio. "I am delighted to have a facility like this, particularly in Lower San Antonio, where there isn't much else. It's really important. It wasn't really that long ago that they came up with that idea and to actually have realized that in such a short period is pretty extraordinary."

A key early supporter, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Bart Lubow, uses the same word. "I'm extraordinarily impressed and not just a little surprised that they pulled this off. They just would never say no or allow defeat to be the result."

Another early supporter, Catherine Howard of the Northern California Community Loan Fund, calls the Cultural Center "an anchor for the Lower San Antonio and for development of International Boulevard and overall in trying to make this a safe and strong community."

But the aspirations of those who helped create the Cultural Center are even more ambitious. They see it as part of a strategy of pulling together a very culturally diverse community, helping people make connections across cultures and see common interests, such as building a safer community and finding ways for their kids to have better lives. In other words, they see something like the Cultural Center as a key step in community change.

"We're not interested in cultural tourism," explains Greg Jung Morozumi, one of the EastSide Arts Alliance's founders. "We're interested in empowering a community. We're

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—Xochitl Nevel Guerrero

not trying to find affordable housing for arts professionals coming over from San Francisco looking for cheaper rents.

"When we talk about artists, we're talking about artists who have evolved from programs in the neighborhood, like our art teachers, who came out of our youth programs. And they're excellent artists and teachers.

"They've learned management and technical skills, administrative skills, bookkeeping skills, public relations skills. They could actually make a living."

"We're about unity," said Elena Serrano, another of EastSide's founders, speaking at the Center's grand opening. "We're in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country, the San Antonio district. If you're dealing with Southeast Asians, African Americans, Chicano/Latinos, immigrant populations, longstanding populations, Native Americans, this is a neighborhood rich in culture. It's going to be the artists and the sharing of the culture and the building of unity between those groups that makes something happen…."

This theme of bridging racial and cultural differences comes up constantly when people talk about the impact of the Cultural Center. "We're providing a space where people can communicate, where Chinese people will meet black people, where black people will meet Mexican immigrants," says Morozumi. "There are very few places where that happens."

Xochitl Nevel Guererro, who taught mask-making to a group of families, agrees with Morozumi. "They open the doors to everybody, especially third world people, to have programs here, and they bring in all different people, young and elders, different cultures and languages, and somehow we all communicate, and it feels really good. This place is a safe place."

Randolph Belle, an artist and activist who coordinated a program for families that uses this space, says that the Cultural Center is "a true community center—community artists for the community, multi-activities, multiracial, multiethnic. It's really a model for what a community cultural center should be."

The story of how the EastSide Arts Alliance developed their dream into a functioning reality is a very interesting case study for many reasons:

- It underscores how much complicated work is involved in a development like this one, as well as how essential—and potentially powerful—it is to enlist a broad range of partners and supporters to help work through all the challenges.
- It suggests the potential role a cultural center can have in a community-building process, particularly in a community as diverse as the Lower San Antonio.
- It suggests that one effective strategy for pulling together diverse neighborhoods like the Lower San Antonio is to use culture as a bridge. Similarly, it shows the power of

"The Cultural Center is a true community center—community artists for the community, multi-activities, multiracial, multiethnic. It's really a model for what a community cultural center should be."

—Randolph Belle

art and culture as a way to pull in young people and give them a sense that their lives have potential.

- It demonstrates the critical catalytic role an outside supporter like *Making Connections* can play in helping a group connect with funders and other partners and build their capacity to pull off a project like this one.
- It suggests the potential payoff if funders move beyond support for established arts institutions.
- It suggests the potential payoff if activist artists move a little beyond their own comfort zones and invest time and energy in developing a building and operating a cultural center.
- It says something about the potential of a community change effort like *Making Connections* Oakland responding to the passion and energy it finds in its target communities.
- And finally this story points out the critical role that funders can play first in trusting the ability of a group of people to turn their dream into a reality and then investing time and personal energy to help them implement their ideas.

Transforming an appealing dream into a functioning reality

Oakland has long had a community of artists who see the connections between arts and politics. In the 1970s, Malaquias Montoya, a teacher in the Univer-

Elena Serrano, Susanne Takehara and Greg Morozumi played key roles in realizing EastSide Arts Alliance's dream of a cultural center.

"I started curating graffiti artists, giving them a more politicized vision of what they could be doing with their art, making it more functional for the community. That's how we came together as a collective."

—Greg Morozumi

sity of California at Berkeley's new Chicano Studies Department, ran arts workshops at a Chicano arts center and other community-based organizations in East Oakland.

"We'd ask agencies if there were posters they needed, and those became assignments for students," Montoya explained. "So students were learning how to silkscreen and at the same time learning how to serve the community.

"That took them off the streets and taught them the importance of art not only as an empowering tool, but also as a tool to serve the community. Their work brought images familiar to the community, something different from what was offered by the daily media."

One of Montoya's students at Berkeley, Greg Morozumi, joined Montoya at those community workshops, conducted under a grassroots organization called *Taller Sin Fronteras,* or Workshops Without Borders.

"I started curating graffiti artists, giving them a more politicized vision of what they could be doing with their art, making it more functional for the community," Morozumi said. "That's how we came together as a collective."

He was referring to EastSide Arts Alliance, the group that ultimately created the Cultural Center. Montoya remembers the significance of that time. "We felt art was a very important tool for youth, a very empowering way for kids to start looking at themselves, a way of getting and receiving pride in the work that they did.

EastSide's Susanne Takehara says that traditional cultures "do not separate out art and culture and social events and politics."

We felt this could develop the self-esteem of young men and women. We kept trying to find a home."

This dream of a home—a permanent place where this kind of arts education, practice, activism and community building could occur—began during these early workshops. Morozumi said that, after the workshops, young people would say, "That was great, but now that that's over, I might have to be back at the corner slinging dope again."

That made Morozumi and his arts activist colleagues—inspired by the black arts movement of Amiri Baraka (aka Leroi Jones) and others—realize that there had to be a community cultural center. "You have to have staying power through that space. It's a much more empowering thing to have."

"I liked them because I thought they were genuine community activists who were committed to a larger vision of community transformation. They were energetic, enthusiastic and they were doing stuff."

—Bart Lubow

Thus began the long journey of Morozumi, Elena Serrano, Susanne Takehara and their associates to find a permanent space in Lower San Antonio, a community that became increasingly diverse during the 1980s and 1990s as Latino and Asian immigrants and refugee families moved into this neighborhood, joining African American, white and Native American families, most of whom are lower income or working class.

When Bart Lubow came to Oakland in 2000 to lead the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* initiative in this city, he quickly recognized the energy that many local people had for a cultural center. "They were always clear they wanted this part of town to be a cultural district, with the centerpiece to be a cultural center."

Lubow was personally supportive. "I liked them because I thought they were genuine community activists who were committed to a larger vision of community transformation. They were energetic, enthusiastic and they were doing stuff on behalf of the kids of the neighborhood. They have a real social consciousness about the art they care about."

Making Connections is a long-term effort to make very low-income neighborhoods in cities like Oakland more supportive of children and their families. An initial step in the *Making Connections* process in Oakland was to bring together a range of community people and organizations to prioritize the neighborhood's needs. Called the Lower San Antonio Collaborative, this group identified as a high priority the neighborhood's cultural diversity and the importance of "community connectedness."

The Lower San Antonio

The Lower San Antonio (LSA) neighborhood is immediately southeast of Lake Merritt and downtown Oakland. Approximately 33,000 people live in the LSA, or about 8 percent of Oakland's 400,000 population.

People of Asian descent form the largest plurality, about 36 percent, of the LSA, according to 2000 Census figures. Latinos are another one-third, with whites and African Americans each making up 20 percent or so.

Half of the LSA population was born outside of the United States (compared with one-fourth of Oakland residents as a whole). About one-third of LSA children five years old or younger don't speak English well or at all. That compares with about 13 percent of Oakland's younger children who don't speak English well.

Mean household income of LSA residents was $38,820 in the 2000 Census, compared with $57,267 in Oakland as a whole. LSA families and children were relatively poorer than Oakland families and children overall.

Its poverty rate is 28.5% compared to 9.7% for the Oakland metropolitan area. The number of children in poverty is 42.5% compared to 12.3% for the metro area.

"We recognized the power of culture to bring the community together and tackle issues that are important to the community."

—Elena Serrano

Eastside Arts Alliance: Finding the connection between art and politics

The EastSide Arts Alliance came together as a collective in 1999 to organize the first Malcolm X JazzArts Festival in San Antonio Park. The collective consisted of four Oakland grassroots arts organizations working in low-income neighborhoods that combined art with activism and community organizing.

- **Taller Sin Fronteras**, a grassroots art collective begun in 1985 that offered multi-disciplinary visual arts classes for youth, community forums on art and politics, and curated local art exhibits.
- **Black Dot Artists Inc.**, an arts organization begun in 1996 that sponsors sound-recording and hip-hop music and dance workshops and produces hip-hop performances and cultural events.
- **TDK**, a group of local graffiti artists and muralists.
- **10–12,** a loose-knit collective of Chicano "technologists" and web engineers that eventually became Tumi's Design.

Before the Alliance created the EastSide Cultural Center, the four organizations held their classes, workshops and performances in different rented venues, in the Lower San Antonio and in other parts of Oakland. But the desire to consolidate their programs and activities under one roof grew stronger in the new millennium.

"We recognized the power of culture to bring the community together and tackle issues that are important to the community," said Elena Serrano, one of EastSide's founders. "Culture is who we are and how we define ourselves. We look toward movements like the black arts movement with Amiri Baraka and Chicano arts movement with Malaquias Montoya."

The annual Malcolm X JazzArts Festival, sponsored by the EastSide Arts Alliance, began in 1999.

Prominent arts and political activists like Montoya and Bobby Seale, founder of the Black Panther Party, serve on EastSide's advisory board. "That's the whole idea of our advisory board, bringing folks who were connected to that history," Serrano said. "When we are working with younger people and our younger staff, we want to show them where we fit into this continuum."

"EastSide artists try to use what we're doing in theater, poetry, music and murals to show there are a lot of similarities in struggles and in things that groups are confronting. People can see those connections and better understand the need to work together."

—Elena Serrano

One understanding of art is that it entails creating things for their own sake, creations that are appreciated based on individual taste and that are collected by aficionados, wealthy people and museums. Another understanding is that art is an instrument for improving humanity and/or bringing communities together. This is the EastSide Arts Alliance understanding.

So-called "high art" for collectors and museums is a European tradition, according to Susanne Takehara, an EastSide leader who studied art history at an art school. "It's a European concept of art that separates art into fine art, high art and museums.

"The rest of us from other parts of the world, the traditional cultures, do not separate out art and culture and social events and politics. One was supporting the other. One was commenting on the other. One was criticizing the other. That is what we really need to get back to, and what our community still understands on the real gut level."

Before it completed the Cultural Center, the Arts Alliance told its story with display boards.

Elena Serrano doesn't completely dismiss the "art for art's sake" theme, however. "If you redefine what art means, we do do art for art's sake," she said. "At its basic level, art is everyone's story. It's how people define themselves. It's how they pass on their history."

The history that is usually taught in Oakland and other public schools is dominated by descendants of European immigrants to America, she thinks. Such a perspective worked when public schools had mostly white students, but that's no longer the case in Oakland and other U.S. cities.

One role today's artists can play is to keep alive their own cultures, stories and history, Serrano said. If they don't, then all this will fade away.

They can also help break down divisions between different ethnic and cultural groups. "At the basic level, folks can come together around food and music and then you can move on to create deeper ties on another level," Serrano said.

EastSide's artists "try to use what we're doing in theater, poetry, music and murals to show there are a lot of similarities in struggles, and in things that groups are confronting," she added. "People can see those connections and understand the need to work together better."

Greg Morozumi also doesn't see art and politics as being mutually exclusive. They are one and the same. "It's really an understanding of the two elements of the same thing.... If you're trying to represent the culture of the neighborhood, you have to understand how that population got here, and what are the issues that force people on the streets looking for work."

"EastSide leaders were skeptical at the beginning. They had spent their entire lives representing communities they feel have been wronged by the real estate development community doing things like redlining."

—Jess Wendover

EastSide's Greg Morozumi believes that, "If you are trying to represent the culture of the neighborhood, you have to understand how that population got here," as well as the issues it faces.

Guided by this "community connectedness" priority, EastSide's leaders—principally Elena Serrano, Susanne Takehara and Greg Morozumi—told Lubow they really wanted to establish a community cultural center, and asked for assistance from *Making Connections* Oakland.

The initial assistance was to help EastSide's leaders visit places where groups were combining arts and community building. They visited the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a Chicago community jazz organization that uses the arts as a political organizing tool. They also visited the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans, another community-based arts organization. Through this connection, an EastSide team went to South Africa to learn from community arts organizations dealing with life after apartheid.

When *Making Connections* created a work group to envision and plan for the development of the Lower San Antonio's 23rd Avenue Corridor, the Alliance was at the table. The resulting comprehensive plan included a cultural center.

Making Connections then funded a feasibility study for a cultural center. "That was the first important step to creating the conditions for the cultural center to come about," said Fred Blackwell, *Making Connection* Oakland's local site coordinator from 2001 to 2005.

The next key step was EastSide's partnership with Affordable Housing Associates (AHA), a Berkely-based nonprofit developer. *Making Connections* facilitated their introduction through the Real Estate Council, another *Making Connections* work group of nonprofit developers who want to bring more affordable housing to the Lower San Antonio.

Kevin Zwick, AHA's deputy executive director, credits the Casey Foundation and *Making Connections* with doing the feasibility study and helping EastSide organize in the neighborhood. "Out of that work came everybody agreeing they wanted to see an EastSide Cultural Center in the neighborhood. The Casey Foundation helped fund the work that identified this need."

"It was always a struggle, and I always felt like it was a healthy tension between us and EastSide. We felt we needed a business plan, something you could put before potential investors. They were resistant."

—Fred Blackwell

Elena Serrano believes that "folks can come together around food and music and then move on to create deeper ties on another level."

Developing the capacity to undertake a development project

While there was broad agreement with the idea of a cultural center, many people also recognized that the EastSide Arts Alliance wasn't ready to pull off such an ambitious project. At the time it wasn't organized as a nonprofit and had no paid staff.

Takehara, who had worked in the affordable housing field, knew that EastSide had to have partners to develop a cultural center. "We couldn't do a business plan by ourselves." Serrano agreed: "We couldn't have done it on our own. We didn't have the capacity to property manage."

Lubow saw EastSide in those days to be "this very determined and dedicated organization that was completely disorganized." He said EastSide leaders at first resisted becoming a nonprofit organization "because they thought that somehow establishing what the law requires in terms of bylaws and having a board of directors and stuff like that was the slippery slope to bureaucratic hell."

EastSide's leaders also had basic philosophical concerns about the real-estate industry. "I think they were skeptical at the beginning," said Jess Wendover, who served as an architect-advisor for the Arts Alliance. "They had spent their entire adult lives representing communities they feel have been wronged by

"This is an example of placing a bet on a still developing group, either because their mission is so important or their energy is so good. It's very easy for foundations to look for well established organizations and not invest in ones that require nurturing."

—Bart Lubow

the real estate development community doing things like redlining."

Making Connections Oakland Site Coordinator Blackwell recalled, "It was always a struggle, and I always felt like it was a healthy tension between us and EastSide Arts Alliance. Bart [Lubow] and I felt we needed a business plan, something you could put before potential investors, so you could bring the money in. They were resistant to that every step of the way, but they went along with it, because they felt that was the way to get money from the foundation."

Indeed, *Making Connections* did give grants to the Alliance (through a nonprofit intermediary) to develop its organizational capacity. Lubow explains why: "This is an example of placing a bet on a still developing group, either because their mission is so important and relevant or their energy is so good. It's very easy for foundations to look for very well established organizations and not necessarily invest in ones that may require some nurturing or a period of growth."

Lubow says that the Alliance "clearly brought to the table a deep and abiding commitment to the well-being of poor people in this particular neighborhood. They were going to be active in organizing the neighborhood, in enriching its life and creating opportunities for its children.

"When you have people who demonstrate that kind of commitment and who operate on the kind of values that align well with the overall effort to help build the community, that stuff is real. I believe in that stuff and you want those people in your game."

Another funder, the Northern California Community Loan Fund, also took a risk and decided to support the Alliance despite the fact that initially they "were absolutely clueless about what they were thinking about undertaking," according to the Loan Fund's Carolyn Johnson. "They literally had very little other than a desire to do something and to stay in this community…by securing real estate."

Despite this, Johnson decided to support the Alliance. Why? "You look at [their] mission and the enthusiasm and fervor and intellectual capacity that they bring. You can assess those things….

"It comes down to the people involved and their ability to dig into themselves to put up with five more years of hell." And, she adds, it comes down to a funder's "connection with the person, whether it be their mission, who they serve, their enthusiasm, some affinity you have with them."

This enthusiasm can overcome a lot, Johnson believes. It wasn't just funders who were initially skeptical about EastSide's ability to realize its dream: many nonprofit affordable housing developers also had their doubts.

Wendover said that she will "never forget that meeting where 15 affordable housing developers were in the room, and they

"This is one of the most unique projects we've done and could ever do. It was a complicated acquisition."

—Kevin Zwick

looked up with shock on their faces" when they heard of EastSide's dream to combine affordable housing with a cultural center. One said such a project was "a capacity killer" for a housing developer because a space devoted to the cultural center most likely wouldn't bring in enough revenue to cover the costs.

But what seemed to overcome all these concerns was the "spirit" that Eastside's Serrano and her colleagues brought to the table, according to Johnson. "They were able to get people to say, 'Yes, I love it. Let's do it.' And when [funders] have to pick from a million things, they will tend to choose a group like EastSide…."

Connecting with complementary—and compatible—partners

Others that EastSide approached, such as city leaders, were also skeptical. But Affordable Housing Associates expressed interest because it wanted to become more involved in the Lower San Antonio.

"What it took was the executive director of AHA saying, 'We want to work in this neighborhood so badly that we will work on this project even if it's a loss leader because it's a community partnership in this neighborhood that we are committed to," recalled Wendover.

Affordable Housing Associates' Kevin Zwick said EastSide "really stepped up" and was "a true development partner."

"Alliance leaders were absolutely clueless about what they were thinking about undertaking. They literally had very little other than the desire to do something and to stay in this community...by securing real estate."

—Carolyn Johnson

Having a nonprofit affordable housing developer as a partner made sense. For one thing, a developer-partner could access affordable housing funds. For another, having affordable housing attached to a cultural center would bring in revenue to reduce the need for a big mortgage.

But probably even more important was the development expertise that AHA brought to the partnership, something the Arts Alliance lacked.

Critically, the relationship that developed between the Alliance and AHA was a true partnership. "It was really a team effort with AHA," Serrano, the EastSide leader, said. "They have a long history of doing affordable housing stuff, but I don't think a cultural center with sprung floors, a stage and a piano and an artist-run collective that had a different idea for the space was what they bargained for. But they hung in there and the work we did with them was invaluable."

Kevin Zwick of AHA agreed. "We thought AHA would do everything and EastSide would focus just on the cultural center space, but EastSide really stepped up. EastSide was a true development partner with us. They wanted to understand all the money we were raising. They went to the city council meetings when the city was voting on affordable housing loans for us."

The cultural center was practically a full-time job for several EastSide leaders for three or four years. "They were very involved," Zwick said. "We wrote grants together. We filled out applications together. They attended every construction meeting. They probably put more hours and time into the building than we at AHA could."

For AHA, the EastSide Cultural Center was not a routine project. "This is one of the most unique projects we've done and could ever do," Zwick said. "It was a complicated acquisition. Not often do you acquire a building that's 75 percent complete and hire the seller as the contractor to finish it out."

At first glance, this project makes no financial sense, Zwick said. AHA has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in staff time, and this project has no developer's fee to pay it back for this time. "We were able to set it up so at least the rental apartments upstairs can pay all the costs of operating the building and afford to have property management and pay all of its bills," Zwick said.

There are no economies of scale because it has 16 small apartments and commercial space in an area of high commercial vacancy. "We couldn't access any conventional sources of housing funds. We couldn't use tax credits. We couldn't use bond financings and other programs that fund affordable housing," Zwick related.

AHA had to convince funders that this building could work for them. The project also used a special program of the City of Oakland. The partners found a lender, Washington Mutual, that wasn't turned off by the idea of a complicated, risky building. It also got help from the Casey Foundation's program-related investments (PRI) program. And it

"All of us at the Loan Fund really got involved, we were able to help them swing a bigger stick. We really understood what they were trying to do and wanted to make sure that it happened because conceptually it made a lot of sense."

—Carolyn Johnson

At all of its events, EastSide has tried to pull in a diverse audience. These people are listening to a jazz performance.

went after as many grants as it could for the arts component. "It was a very unconventional project," Zwick said.

"We would absolutely not do a project where we have $1 million plus to raise in one to two years after the project is physically completed, which is the situation we have now," referring to the short-term loans the partnership needs to pay down in a relatively short time. (For more about how the building was funded, see page 16.)

With all of these impediments and barriers, why did AHA agree to do this project? "Someone had to do it, and we were working in this neighborhood and we believe in this mission and we believe in the revitalizing aspects this building would have in this neighborhood," Zwick said. In short, "AHA believes this project adds value to this neighborhood."

Other organizations played important roles as well. One was California Lawyers for the Arts, whose ArtHouse program provides technical assistance and resources for artists and arts organizations around space needs. ArtHouse's Kathleen Diohep used her financial and analytical skills to help the partners negotiate with the property's owner.

A senior program officer of the Evelyn and Walter Haas Junior Fund, a San Francisco foundation that has been a local funding partner with *Making Connections* in the Lower San Antonio, played an important behind-the-scenes role. "Brad Paul was a champion for

"It's a complicated project. They put together a good structure that would work for them. By having EastSide as an arts organization partnering with a development organization, there would be expertise on both ends."

—Catherine Howard

The big challenge: finding funding

The biggest challenge in realizing the Cultural Center dream was finding the money to pay for it. The entire project cost $4.3 million. The cost of the first floor arts space was about $1.7 million.

The key to making the funding work was being able to put together a mix of grant support with more traditional development project funding. To pay the cost of renovating the first floor space, the Cultural Center combined about $500,000 in grants with $1.2 million in short-term loans, including a Casey Foundation Program-Related Investment (PRI).

The key funder was the Northern California Community Loan Fund, which in essence eventually provided a $1.7 million loan. But few things are simple in the complicated world of affordable housing financing.

The fact that the NCCLF would even finance a project in Oakland was a consequence of the dot-com boom in the later 1990s. This boom led to a real estate boom in San Francisco that made it impossible for many nonprofits to afford to stay in this city. The NCCLF, initially restricted to San Francisco projects, expanded its geographical focus.

At the same time, a group of funders focusing on Oakland's Lower San Antonio neighborhood supported the creation of NCCLF's Lower San Antonio Fund. These funders included the Casey Foundation, the Evelyn and Walter Haas Junior Fund, the Lower Income Investment Fund of the Local Initiative Support Corp., and NCCLF itself.

When EastSide initially asked NCCLF for support, the answer was no. "There was no way we could give them a loan at the time for lots of reasons," said Carolyn Johnson, at the time in charge of NCCLF's space capital fund. "There was no site control. I had concerns about projections. I had to ask, 'Is this real?' But we continued to talk with one another."

Affordable Housing Associates becoming a partner was essential to obtaining financing. "We would have had serious concerns if it had just been EastSide alone," said Catherine Howard, an NCCLF senior loan officer. "EastSide was kind of just Elena [Serrano] in terms of staffing. Certainly she didn't have a real estate background."

NCCLF put EastSide and AHA through the arcane process of development underwriting—looking at their organizational structures and financial capacities, the development plan itself, other financing possibilities, and how the project was to be used.

"The most complicated thing for us, in terms of underwriting this, was taking a look at the corporate structure," NCCLF's Howard said. The two organizations had created a limited liability corporation, the EastSide Art and Housing LLC. Under that structure, EastSide became the master lessee from the LLC for the cultural art space.

"It's a complicated project," Howard continued. "They put together a good structure that would work for them. By having EastSide as an arts organization partnering with a development organization, there would be expertise on both ends." Reviewing the partnership's projections, NCCLF's Johnson said, "The financials they put together were very well done."

”This only worked because Deb Montesinos was in the neighborhood and because other Casey staff knew about the project and its importance. They were able to be flexible. It was not a huge amount of money, but it was very important to making that partnership stick.”

—Jess Wendover

EastSide Art and Housing LLC wanted to borrow a little more than the LSA Fund’s maximum loan of $1.5 million. NCCLF came up with a creative solution to meet EastSide’s needs—an “interest reserve” that would be used to pay monthly interest on the principal loan without impacting the borrower’s cash flow.

The interest reserve was, in effect, a second loan to pay the interest of the first loan, according to Howard. NCCLF was able to get a federal grant that allowed the loan fund to charge a low interest rate.

This arrangement meant the partnership’s interest payments were only $26 a month. “That gave them an opportunity to go about the process of buying the building, finishing the build-out, getting the project opened and doing their capital campaign to raise money to retire the loan,” Howard said.

The short-term loans were to fill a funding gap to buy the building and finish the construction. In addition to Casey and NCCLF, other funders included the City of Oakland, Washington Mutual, the Hewlett Foundation, the Local Initiative Support Corp. and the Haas Junior Fund.

While the Casey Foundation through *Making Connections* Oakland wasn’t a major direct funder of the EastSide project, it played an important early role. Affordable Housing Associates was able to access Casey’s PRI portfolio to get a $250,000 grant for a feasibility study and $1.6 million in short-term, low-interest loans.

“They wouldn’t have been able to close the deal if they hadn’t gotten this money,” said Deborah Montesinos, MCO’s current local site coordinator. “It was very risky. Usually a loan is underwritten by take-out financing. If it’s a construction loan, the construction lender gets taken out by permanent financing. Permanent financing gets funded by rents. In this case it was going to be taken out by capital campaign money. The short-term loan is going to be paid back by fundraising. It was a very risky deal for the intermediaries to say OK to this.”

Casey helped in other ways, such as “stop-gap” financing. EastSide wanted to set aside four of the 16 affordable apartments for young people aging out of the foster-care system. The funder that works with such youth had a lease program that capped the rent of these young people at $50 a month less than what EastSide Art & Housing LLC needed to rent those apartments to make its overall business plan work.

“At that point, Casey stepped in and said, ‘We’ll pay the $50 difference for each of these four units for five years,” Jess Wendover, the architect-advisor, said. “It was that kind of flexibility that Casey and *Making Connections* Oakland brought.

“We couldn’t have written a proposal to an out-of-town funder and said, ‘Can you pay $200 a month?’ This only worked because Deb [Montesinos] was in the neighborhood and because other Casey staff knew about the project and its importance. They were able to be flexible. It was not a huge amount of money, but it was very important to making that partnership stick.”

Because it had affordable housing units, the EastSide Cultural Center also got some tax breaks, which helped the funding strategy. In essence, because the housing units were intended to be affordable to lower income renters, EastSide didn’t have to pay tax on this rental income, which is seen as related to its broader purpose of community development. (Nonprofits must pay tax on unrelated income.)

The EastSide project had other fortuitous assistance, including a $1.3 million loan from the City of Oakland’s vacant-housing program.

"I felt good about working with them. What they are doing in the neighborhood is important. It wasn't a profit motive for them. That made giving up $200,000 a lot easier. "

—Delbert Hamilton

the project," said Wendover. "He organized meetings with other funders and he did a lot of talking to the Northern California Community Loan Fund to get them to support the project."

Another important partner was Maya Solo of the San Francisco-based law firm Heller Ehrman LLP, who provided free legal services.

Eventually the Northern California Community Loan Fund (NCCLF) provided crucial funding and other support, collaborating with EastSide's lawyers on contracts and leasing provisions.

"All of us at the Loan Fund really got involved through all of the processes," said Carolyn Johnson of NCCLF. "We were able to help them swing a bigger stick. We really understood what they were trying to do and wanted to make sure that it happened because conceptually it made a lot of sense and, with the right dollars in place, it could make financial sense down the road."

EastSide's leaders acknowledge NCCLF's role. "They helped us to know that we had to have all that [financial] stuff in place," Serrano said. "Carolyn Johnson, our person there, was very rigorous. She made sure we had a business plan and a 'pro forma' that worked and that our interests were protected."

In all, the EastSide project benefited from many partners and consultants. "Most consultants gave us a big break on their hourly rates," Takehara said. "We couldn't have done it without them."

Jimi Nakagawa of Somei Yoshin Taiko, based in the San Antonio neighborhood, draws attention to the Cultural Center's grand opening.

Even the owner of the building EastSide had been eyeing for years eventually agreed to give the organization a break in the price and to lend them some of the money, though initially he resisted selling the building.

It is located on International Boulevard, the main commercial street of the neighborhood, near the corner of 23rd Avenue, an important intersection. It was a three-story former hotel that had turned into a blighted drug den, but was now abandoned and dilapidated.

"Kids will be coming in, but they don't know their ABCs. They don't know their eyes, nose and knees. They don't know their colors. A program like this helps them get ready to start thinking about those things."

—Angela Louie Howard

Around 2000 or 2001, Delbert Hamilton, a contractor-developer who looks for distressed properties to buy and rehabilitate, bought the building. EastSide's leaders approached Hamilton, who said he wasn't interested in selling or leasing it.

But Serrano, Takehara and Morozumi were persistent. "We twisted his arm to sell this building to us," Takehara said. "He didn't want to sell it to us for four years." Hamilton said, "They kept coming back to me, and I finally relented."

By the time serious negotiations were under way, Hamilton had finished rehabilitating more than three-quarters of the building, turning the top two floors into studio and one-bedroom apartments. He wanted to convert the ground-level space into five live-work lofts, but hadn't gotten far when the deal with the EastSide-AHA partnership—called EastSide Art and Housing LLC—was struck.

Hamilton's initial asking price was $3.3 million, but he reduced it to $3.1 million. In addition, he agreed to another provision that helped the partnership make the deal. He lent it $400,000 so it would not have to pay the full $3.1 million upfront.

"I felt good about working with them," Hamilton said. "What they are doing in the neighborhood is important. It wasn't a profit motive for them. That made giving up $200,000 a lot easier. It wasn't as painful as it would have been otherwise."

EastSide Arts Alliance maintains its connection to an earlier generation of artists and writers through its advisory board. At its Third World Book Fair, painter Arthur Monroe talks with writers Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka.

"What they offer the kids is things they identify with, that's relevant to them, that's going to turn them on and keep them engaged and create for them a vision that there might be a future besides the Alameda County jail."

—Bart Lubow

He added that EastSide's commitment to the neighborhood is obvious. "They're compassionate about it. I really appreciate what they're doing."

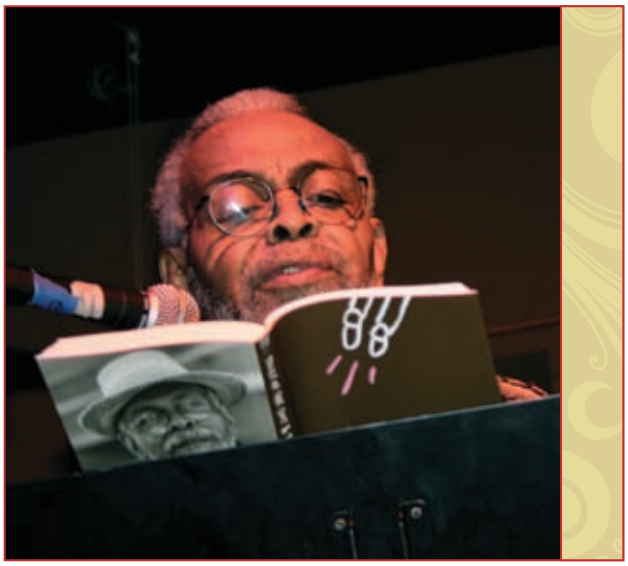
Creating a mix of events and activities that appeal to many cultures and many ages

After all the work to buy and finish transforming this building into the Cultural Center, the Arts Alliance finally got to the fun part: developing a wide range of events and activities that appeal to all ages and backgrounds.

The ground-floor cultural arts space has a 1,900-square-foot all-purpose space where concerts and performances take place. The well-known poet and activist Amiri Baraka flew across the country to perform several times in the center's first year. The space allowed the Malcolm X JazzArts Festival—long sponsored by EastSide Arts Alliance—to expand from a nearby park, becoming a multi-day festival.

The ground floor also has smaller spaces for different art forms—visual arts, recording studio, video production, conference room, office space, a dressing room and a lounge area.

This space is considered community space, a place where community members "can come in and put on cultural events," says Serrano. "They also learn to embrace it as a place where information is disseminated and connections are made so you're not an isolated community."



Writer Amiri Baraka, a founder of the Black arts movement, has performed several times at the Cultural Center.

During the days the space is used by programs for a diverse range of families and children, such as the Lotus Bloom play group and 100 Families, an Oakland-wide intergenerational art project (see page 21).

The space is particularly open to youth, though it's not a typical youth center, providing programs for young people. Instead it tries to engage young people, getting them to think about culture and community, finding ways to have them work with people from other generations, helping them "understand that they are part of a *community* cultural center," in Serrano's words.

"That's everything—all the generations that come in, all the different organizing groups that come in under this roof. That defines EastSide."

"This is a wonderful space for us. It's warm. It's welcoming.
It's children friendly. It's family friendly. It's safe.
There's decent equipment here. And it's perfect."

—Angela Louie Howard

Meeting the needs of children and families

Family and children's activities at the Cultural Center include the Lotus Bloom play group and "100 Families," an Oakland-wide intergenerational art project.

Lotus Bloom is a play group partially funded by *Making Connections*. It started at the EastSide Cultural Center's ground-floor rental space in October 2006, even before the center formally opened months later. Oakland Ready to Learn, a nonprofit partner of the center's and of MCO, leases the space.

Lotus Bloom traces its roots to a San Francisco play group started by Angela Louie Howard, who happens to live in the Lower San Antonio. Louie Howard explained how her play group worked to *Making Connections*' Early Childhood Education Work Group, which asked her to start a group in Lower San Antonio. The new Cultural Center proved to be the perfect space for it.

"This is a wonderful space for us," Louie Howard said. "It's warm. It's welcoming. It's children friendly. It's family friendly. It's safe. There's decent equipment here. And it's perfect."

Kerry Forbord of Oakland Ready to Learn concurs. "It's huge, having EastSide space. There are a lot of people who aren't part of Head Start or Even Start or other [early childhood] programs. We like to reach out to people who aren't part of anything so that anybody in the world can come here at any time. Having this space makes all the difference in the world. You can keep all the materials on hand. You're not just bringing a box or something."

The play groups sponsor monthly performances by groups such as Cambodian dancers and African drummers.

Lotus Bloom uses the space two mornings a week while another nonprofit, Asian Community Mental Health Services, rents it two other mornings for its own play group, which is conducted in Cantonese Chinese and Vietnamese.

The Lotus Bloom play group usually attracts around 15 parents and their children, most of whom have little if any preschool exposure. "The children aren't really getting the stimulation that they really need to prepare for school," Louie Howard said. "You'll notice that in the test scores or you'll notice that in the kindergarten or first grade. Kids will be coming in, but they don't know their ABCs. They don't know their eyes, nose and knees. They don't know their colors. A program like this helps them get ready to start thinking about those things."

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"A lot of our immigrant families have come from villages or from other places that are closer knit than America, where people just go to work and come home and don't have a lot of social interaction. So it's nice to see one another at the store or at the farmer's market."

—Angela Louie Howard

Meeting the needs of children and families (*continued*)

The Lotus Bloom families are ethnically mixed – about 40 percent Latino, 30 percent Asian, 15 percent African American and the remainder a variety of other backgrounds. In many cases, this is the first time families mingle with families of a different cultural or ethnic heritage.

Some have even formed bonds beyond the play group. "Parents love it," Louie Howard said. "For them, it's a source of support, to be able to meet other parents, but also to have other kids to do art with, to celebrate with, to have birthday parties with." Some parents have even gone on field trips together.

Another benefit for some Lotus Bloom families is getting to know their neighbors. They will recognize one another at restaurants or stores. "It's reaffirming. It feels fresh," Louie Howard added. "For a lot of our immigrant families, they may have come from villages, or they come from other places that are closer knit than here in America, where people just go to work and come home and don't have a lot of that social interaction. So it's nice to see one another at the store or at the farmer's market."

During the free three-hour play group sessions, parents and their children engage in art, music, literacy, "circle" and "puzzle" time activities. There's a free lending library, and every month, special groups such as Cambodian dancers, African drummers, a youth opera company, and Mexican dancers perform for the families in the center's performance space next door to the play group space.

"It's kind of like a school-readiness play group where you are preparing your children for school because they're learning their basic socialization and body recognition," said Louie Howard. "The idea is to help parents with children zero to five to socialize and play with their kids, and help stimulate their social and motor development skills."

100 Families

100 Families is a community art project conceptualized and funded by F. Noel Perry, an artist and venture capitalist. It is now affiliated with the California College of Art in Oakland.

Started in 2005, its first phase brought together 100 Oakland families at four sites to engage in intergenerational art activities. In its second phase in 2007, it chose the EastSide Cultural Center as a site.

About two dozen families from the Lower San Antonio participated in the 10-week program in the autumn of 2007 at two times – Saturday mornings and Wednesday evenings. They started with a shared meal, then broke into smaller groups to learn different art forms – mask making, mosaic tiles, mural painting, "cube art," etc.—from community artists.

Among the community artists who guided some of the EastSide families were the husband and wife team of Roberto and Xochitl Nevel Guererro. They taught parents and children three different types of mask making with the goal of mounting some of the masks in a public alleyway across the street from the center.

This public art project will inject pride into the community, Roberto Guererro said. "Instead of having

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"Some parents and kids have a communications gap. They don't talk to one another. This center is almost like a healing kind of thing. It could really open up more doors."

—Xochitl Nevel Guerrero

all of these negative things associated with the community, why not the positive?"

It's more than just art, but it's educational too. "I bring books, and I talk to them about past mask-making events," Xochitl Nevel Guererro said. "I talk to them about how they are used in different cultures."

The intergenerational art activities have benefits, she added. "It is good for them to work together because lots of times parents don't get that opportunity. A lot of parents stopped doing art because they have more responsibilities, and they don't have a chance for an artistic or creative outlet. The kids are fresher. Some are actually helping the parents. Sometimes parents want to dominate or take over. I say, 'Work together.' I get to see the interaction, and it's great."

The center itself plays a potential healing role, bringing families and people of different backgrounds together, according to Xochitl Nevel Guererro. "Some parents and kids have a communications gap," she said. "They don't talk to one another. This center is almost like a healing kind of thing. It could really open up more doors [for families]."

It was certainly that for Gabriel De Leon and his family. De Leon, a construction worker, liked the 100 Families project because "it was an opportunity to show off our abilities in something besides graffiti on the streets. Our intention is to create something beautiful for the streets," he said.

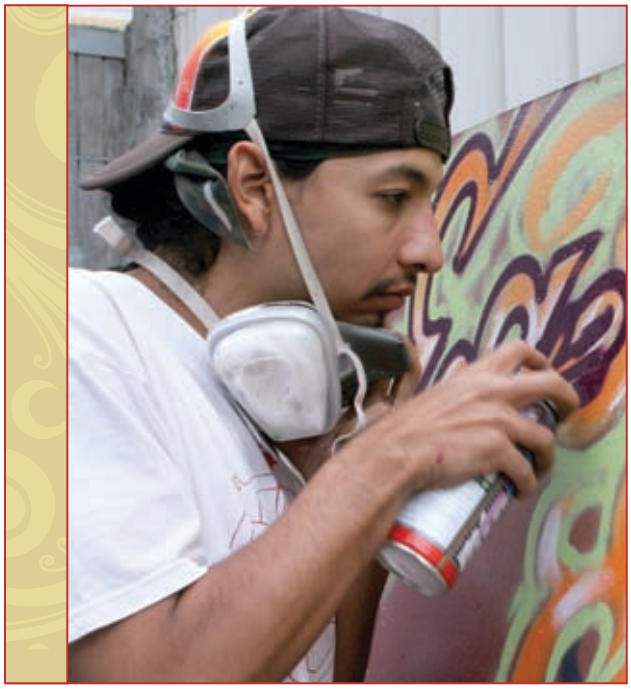
The De Leon family, which includes three children, doesn't usually do group art activities at home. "I really liked the fact that we had to come here together because with his job and the children always watching TV, we really don't have activities like this all together," said Maria Montez, De Leon's wife. "Coming here was mainly for my daughter. I could pay more attention to her, I could bond with her more."

Montez said she also liked working and getting along with other people. "I really discovered I liked doing art."

Maria Montez enjoyed creating masks "because in the masks I represented who I was and how I felt."

"There are not a lot of resources to pay for classes or extra out-of-school activities, so to have a place like this—where kids can come and learn how to do art and dance and music and have a way to express themselves in a positive way—is really important."

—Pat Kernighan



Jose Garcia teaches painting and mural-making at the Cultural Center.

"We have times when all of our youth come together to explore these concepts more deeply, and we as a staff are always exploring them too. 'What does that mean? How best do we do that? How better do we do that? Who are we?'"

Ongoing youth-oriented programs include "Beats/Flow" (audio recording and spoken word), "Visual Element," dance and "guerilla theater." There is also "Holla Back," a weekly open-microphone poetry and spoken word event. These programs serve more than 200 young people ages 16 to 25.

On the final Friday of each month, the center features a video, usually with a progressive political or cultural theme, with audience discussion.

"They use art very much as a youth development tool," notes *Making Connections'* Lubow. "That was pretty terrific. We're all complaining about the kids hanging out on the streets and smoking dope. What they offer the kids is things they identify with, that's relevant to them, that's going to turn them on and keep them engaged and create for them a vision that there might be a future besides the Alameda County jail."

The variety of programming at the Cultural Center is intentional, reflecting the multicultural realities of life in Oakland—indeed life in most American cities—today. Artists, musicians and performers of various ethnic backgrounds and many ages do their thing at the EastSide Cultural Center.

Photographer Kathy Sloane says that the diverse audiences at EastSide's events are "like no audience I had ever seen at jazz festivals." This is EastSide resident Guadalupe Nuño Garcia and her son Mateo.

"The Cultural Center is a really nice way to get folks in the door. It gives people something that they're interested in doing—whether it be dance, music, or art. It's definitely about resident engagement and family support."

—Deborah Montesinos

At times, some performers draw a crowd made up mostly of people from the same background. At other times, the audience is ethnically mixed, regardless of who is performing or exhibiting.

The center isn't yet a multicultural Nirvana. "It's going to take time," Takehara noted. "People have to get used to going to other people's cultural events, and knowing it's theirs too."

The one event that EastSide has sponsored for many years, the Malcolm X JazzArts Festival, does draw a very diverse audience, according to Kathy Sloane, a photographer who lives in the Lower San Antonio and who has documented local jazz scenes in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area.

"At the first jazz festival, the audience was like no audience I had ever seen at jazz festivals or jazz clubs. Which meant I saw Vietnamese grandmothers. I saw Chicano/Latino. Older people and babies. I saw African Americans. Everybody was there in San Antonio Park and was super mellow. There was this exchange of energy that I had never seen at any kind of festival."

Trying to gauge the impact on a neighborhood

In many communities, a place like the Cultural Center would be a nice addition. But in a struggling neighborhood like the Lower San Antonio, which has very few of the amenities that better-off neighborhoods take for granted, a space like this is much more than a venue for performances, art shows and classes.

It is also, potentially at least, a drop-in rec center, a bridge between cultures and generations, a place where individuals and cultures can find their voices, even an economic generator, helping attract other businesses.

One place to get a sense of the Lower San Antonio's diversity is at the farmer's market at Garfield Elementary School. *Making Connections* early childhood work focuses on children who will go to Garfield.

"The center is where residents see themselves reflected on the walls, through a mural, through a poster. When I say reflected, I mean it will be about them. That is what is awakening culture back to that community."

—Malaquias Montoya

It's too early to measure impacts like these. But many people think that the Cultural Center is already having these kinds of impacts.

Pat Kernighan, the Oakland City Council member who represents the Lower San Antonio, thinks the Cultural Center is helping fill an enormous gap in programs for young people. "There are so few resources for young people in this neighborhood. It's fantastic that there is one now.

"There are not a lot of resources to pay for classes or extra out-of-school activities, so to have a place like this—where kids can come and learn how to do art and dance and music and have a way to express themselves in a positive way—is really important.

"As we know, there are so many negative influences and violence that can get kids off on the wrong track. Here's a place where they can really express themselves and grow as people and be successful human beings."

The art in the Cultural Center reflects the people who live in the Lower San Antonio, helping residents feel that "this is my art," says Malaquias Montoya.

"Quite often, when I was there, youth would just stop in, after school, they'd be walking around, and people might be giving them a hard time in the street. They can always go into the Cultural Center. There'd always be somebody there. "

—Jess Wendover

The EastSide Cultural Center strengthens the neighborhood, believes Deborah Montesinos, *Making Connections*' local site coordinator. "The Cultural Center is a really nice way to get folks in the door, such as kids looking for a place to hang out. It promotes positive energy. It gives people something that they're interested in doing—whether it be dance, music, or art. It's definitely about resident engagement and family support."

The center also has the potential to touch neighborhood residents in deep ways, according to Malaquias Montoya, the activist Chicano artist who is on the center's advisory board and an inspiration to EastSide's leaders. The center is where local residents can "see themselves reflected on the walls, through a mural, through a poster. When I say reflected, I mean it will be about them. That is what I think is returning or awakening that culture back to that community."

Once residents see themselves reflected at the center, they will return and "they'll start to feel the awareness," Montoya continued. "It reaches down inside and tells them, 'This is my center, this is my art, this is what I can do.' That is such an important thing."

The EastSide Cultural Center can also strengthen families, Montoya said. "One of the most important things is bringing parents and young kids together from the same family. All of a sudden it really changes the dynamics of a community because now parents are walking children to the center, and it's not a school situation, it's just a place to go to do what they do, to listen to a lecture, for children to do artwork. It brings families together."

Residents can also have their voices heard at the center, according to Traci Bartlow, a dancer-choreographer who teaches young people at the center and elsewhere. "It's empowering for the community to build up youth and give them an understanding of the importance of having their own space, of having their own voice [to address questions such as] 'What are your ideas and what affects you and your family and your community?'"

In learning different art forms, young people will also see the center is a community space. "It's very different from going to a jazz school or a dance studio," Bartlow said. "It's more of an inclusive community space because there are so many different events going on."

For funders, the center's potential neighborhood impact was central to their decision to support it. Catherine Howard of the Northern California Community Loan Fund said, "I think this is a really clear argument for us that this is an important project in terms of strengthening the neighborhood and that people are coming to the neighborhood for the facility."

The center's community and neighborhood focus is no accident. "We said we'll build a cultural center there to transform the cultural environment," Morozumi said. "It's a violent neighborhood. Kids call it the 'murder dubs.' They see police action all the time—drugs, prostitution. But if you transform the cultural environment, you can provide services and

"I know for a fact, a strong fact, it kept a lot us, including myself, out of trouble."

—Kevin Akhidenor

"Everything I am doing all started from here at EastSide."

Almost as far back as Kevin Akhidenor can remember, he was a "hip-hop kid." "I've always been into rap music," Akhidenor said. "By the time I was 11 or 12, I was a full-blown hip-hop kid, with baggy jeans and all. My life was just hip-hop straight through."

When he was 18, Akhidenor was somewhat adrift. A high school graduate, he wasn't sure what to do next, other than find the next "open-mic" opportunity, where he and other hip-hopsters "free-styled" their rap music and lyrics.

He met some age-mates also into the hip-hop scene who told him about the EastSide Arts Alliance, which at that time had a hip-hop workshop in cramped rented quarters. Akhidenor went with them to EastSide's "Beats/Flows" workshops. "That's how I met a lot of EastSide people. It was a big enlightenment for me," Akhidenor said. He liked the workshop because everyone there was from the neighborhood. "We always had fun."

That was about five years ago, and now Akhidenor is a regular at the EastSide Cultural Center, and his involvement and activism there have changed his life.

When he was a teenager it was a place to go. "At 18, I didn't know what to do with my life. In the afternoon you have nothing to do, so you'd come here to free-style, crack jokes. This was a place we came just to hang out."

This hanging-out had a positive outcome. "I know for a fact, a strong fact, it kept a lot us, including myself, out of trouble," he said. "Even if you didn't come to rap, or do graffiti, or do art, you at least had a place to hang out. By the time everything is done, it's already nighttime, and you'd just go home. We spent so much energy here."

Akhidenor said his EastSide experience grounded him and built a foundation for his maturing life. He credits Tommy Wong, an artist and EastSide leader, with putting him into a structure "that basically gave me something to do with myself." In addition to the Beats/Flow workshop, he learned how to edit videos.

The learning he and his peers got at EastSide—in the arts and in life lessons—steered them away from trouble with the law, Akhidenor believes. "For some of my peers, if they didn't come here to EastSide, they could have gotten into trouble," he said.

Their experiences at EastSide gave them discipline and taught them how to think for themselves, according to Akhidenor. "As adolescents, you worry about the latest fashion and stuff like that, or stuff that's happening 'on the streets.'"

EastSide's arts activities and conversations about life with mentors "taught us not to worry about those things. I'm 23 now and I feel I am free of thinking of things like that."

He regards his EastSide arts instructors—Tommy Wong, Sergio Arroyo—to be like older brothers, who advised him on his college choices. Akhidenor had attended Diablo Valley College without further plans. The EastSide instructors suggested that he

> "Even if we grow up in a community that is multicultural, many of us are ignorant of each other's cultures. Coming here taught me a lot about different ethnic backgrounds. Now that stereotyping is completely gone."
>
> —Kevin Akhidenor

transfer to a four-year college like San Francisco State University.

That is now where Akhidenor is studying business administration and marketing. He hopes to combine his love of music with a business career. He also plans to continue to work with young people, the way he was helped at EastSide when he was a teenager. In his spare time, he does administrative tasks at the Cultural Center's office.

"Everything I am doing, however big it gets, it all started from here at EastSide," Akhidenor said. "Because of that, I know what I'm doing in life, and I know where I am going in my life, and I'm already doing it."

Akhidenor, the son of Nigerian immigrants, has also learned to get along with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds because EastSide's programs attract a highly diverse group of teenagers and young adults.

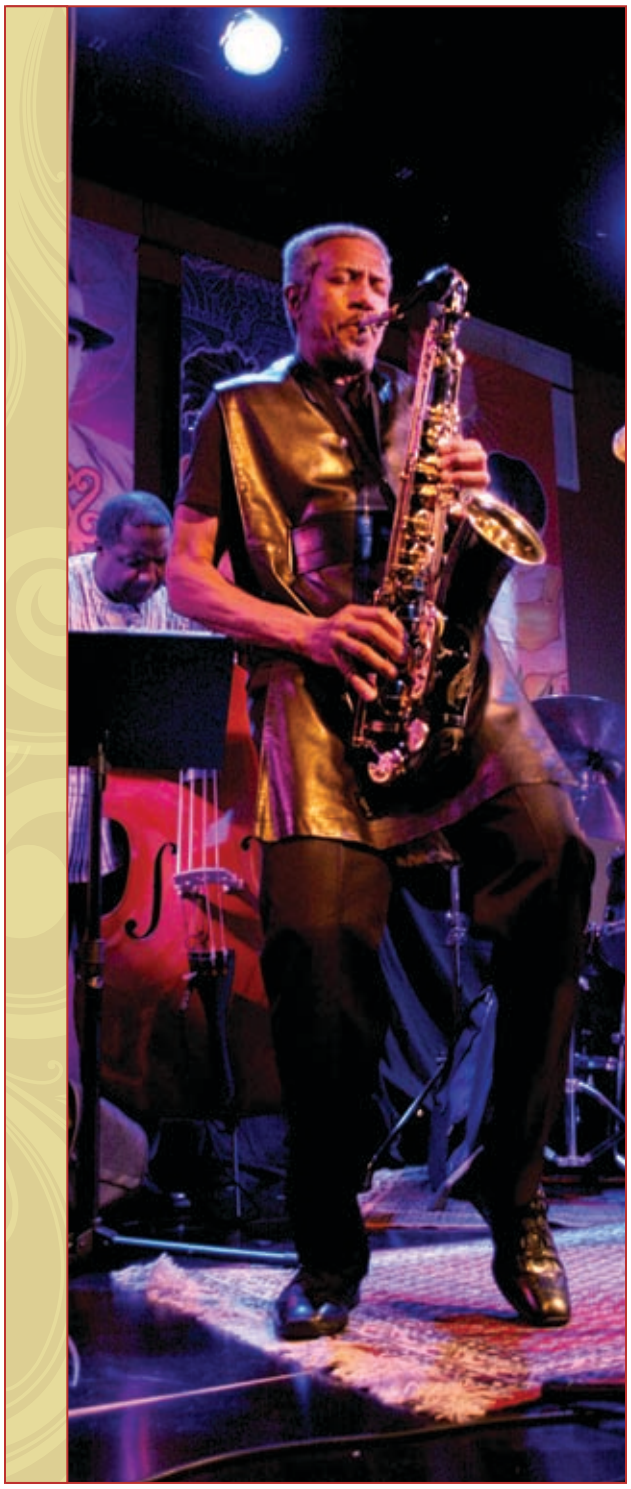
"A lot of youth don't know their own background and culture," Akhidenor said. "They don't know what's going on in their root countries like Southeast Asia, Africa or Central America.

"Even if we grow up in a community that is multicultural, many of us are ignorant of each other's cultures," he continued. "Because of that ignorance, we tend to look down upon each other or perpetuate racial stereotypes about each other or insult one another. Coming here, it taught me a lot about different ethnic backgrounds. Now, that stereotyping is completely gone."

That the EastSide Cultural Center exists is a good thing, according to Akhidenor. "What these community centers and what these good people educating youth do is that they will show that life is better and bigger than just [material goods]. You're more than just that. That's definitely worked for a lot of us. I am living proof of that. So we definitely need these community centers in all communities around the country."

Kevin Akhidenor (left), rapping at the Malcolm X JazzArts Festival, says he is "living proof" that community cultural centers can make a big difference in a young person's life.

"At the end of the day, kids need somewhere to go. They need role models. They need a path. You don't get into trouble if you've got something to do. If you want to get rid of the homicides in Oakland, give people something to do. It's really that simple."
—Carolyn Johnson



The Billy Harper Quintet played in the Cultural Center as part of EastSide's expanded Malcolm X JazzArts Festival.

programs. You open up small businesses and restaurants owned by neighbors rather than franchises and gentrification. That will create a whole new healthy community."

The impact on young people is especially profound. The center in effect has an open-door policy for them. "Quite often when I was there, youth would just stop in," Jess Wendover, the architect-advisor, recalled. "After school, they'd be walking around, and people might be giving them a hard time in the street. They can always go into the EastSide Cultural Center. There'd always be somebody there. They would always be welcome to hang out and read the books or pamphlets and materials they have. It's sort of a no-questions-asked flexible space for kids."

To Carolyn Johnson, a loan officer at the Northern California Community Loan Fund when the center was forming and who grew up in a rough East Oakland neighborhood, said the EastSide Cultural Center's role is simple.

"At the end of the day, kids need somewhere to go. They need role models. They need a path. You don't get into trouble if you've got something to do. Get rid of the liquor stores and give kids something to do, then there wouldn't be any violence. If you want to get rid of the homicides in Oakland, give people something to do. It's really that simple."

Given the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of the Lower San Antonio, the EastSide Cultural Center is also breaking down social barriers, Wendover believes. "Cultural expression is a way to help bridge

"All neighborhoods need and deserve a vibrant culture and organizations like this help that to happen.... Culture can be a great unifier and a great way to connect people from different backgrounds."

—Bart Lubow

some boundaries. I've heard that other parts of East Oakland have much more of a turf—a Latino area, a Vietnamese area, etc. Finding a way to share culture and cultural backgrounds in a more constructive way, through artistic expression, is probably a big part of helping break down those barriers."

All of this is hard to measure quantitatively, which is a challenge for foundations and initiatives that emphasize concrete results, according to the Casey Foundation's Lubow.

"It's a lot easier from a FES [Family Economic Success] perspective to count tax returns prepared and dollars returned under EITC [the Earned Income Tax Credit] than to compute the economic improvement that results from the creation of this building."

The impact on young people, on how they see their futures, on how they feel about their culture and its history, is even harder to compute. Lubow is convinced that, while it's hard to measure, the Cultural Center is producing results and is helping insure "the viability of this neighborhood," while also "generating a lot of spin-off activities.

"I don't know exactly how that fits into our results framework. Their activities are vague in terms of our framework. But those activities are positive contributors to the neighborhood's development and to the overall atmosphere.

"All neighborhoods need and deserve a vibrant culture and organizations like this help that to happen.... Culture can be a great unifier and a great way to connect people from different backgrounds."

Ada Chan, left, and Donna Griggs Murphy, members of EastSide's Capital Compaign Committee, remind people at the Cultural Center's grand opening that EastSide's Capital Campaign must raise $1 million to pay off short-term loans.

"It's hard when you have a project up and running to really get funders to understand that we still need your support. It's a lot easier to show funders a vacant building and ask for help."

—Catherine Howard

Finding ways to sustain a community cultural center

Realizing the dream of a community cultural center has been complicated and challenging enough, but it's been successful thus far, with a lively cultural arts center and16 affordable apartments. That is reason enough for EastSide Arts Alliance and all of its partners and supporters to celebrate. But that's only a beginning. Ahead is a tougher challenge to become a sustainable community asset.

For revenue, the EastSide Arts and Housing LLC rents the apartments upstairs and rents out two ground-floor spaces, one to Oakland Ready to Learn for early-childhood activities, the other to Tumi's, a for-profit graphics arts and design company that specializes in work for progressive arts and culture organizations.

But the biggest short-term challenge is to raise the money to pay off about $1 million in short-term loans that are due in approximately two to three years.

As soon as it had its official grand opening early in 2007, EastSide launched a capital campaign to raise this money.

Over its first two years, the LLC had raised $250,000. It hopes to raise another $500,000 to retire its short-term loans.

"The person on the street would say, 'Oh, it's open, it's done,'" Catherine Howard of the Northern California Community Loan Fund observed. "It's true. They're done with the complex development process, but this is a multi-phase process. In this second phase, the capital campaign is hard—especially when you have a project up and running—to really get funders to understand that we still need your support. It's a lot easier to show funders a vacant building and ask for help."

Elena Serrano with her mother, Ola Serrano, outside the entrance to the Eastside Cultural Center.

"Realistically, if we are going to serve the neighborhood the way we should, we need to double our budget. All of us are part-time and none of us gets benefits."

—Elena Serrano

Because funders know that some nonprofit organizations acquiring their own buildings have failed, some remain skeptical, despite EastSide's success in acquiring and opening the Cultural Center. Funders want to see that the investments they made will indeed pay off in the form of a stable community asset that becomes the hub of a neighborhood.

"It's a little early to get the kind of answer that they are looking for," in the judgment of Johnson, who helped EastSide acquire funding when she was a loan officer at NCCLF.

The doubts about whether nonprofit arts organization should own their buildings haven't yet dissipated. "It's early to assess that question," Johnson said, adding that it takes at least four years to start seeing the financial benefits of these kinds of investments.

Right now, the EastSide Arts and Housing LLC is jointly owned by EastSide Arts Alliance and Affordable Housing Associates, with AHA holding a slight majority position. But the plan all along is for EastSide to own it outright, according to AHA's Kevin Zwick.

"Eventually the idea is that AHA will step out of this project and EastSide Arts Alliance will take over the building. That has always been their vision too. They wanted an asset owned by the community, for the community. I think we're well on our way to that. The current partnership is 60–40 AHA, but we make all of our decisions by consensus."

EastSide's leaders are well aware of the challenges ahead. "We need to double our organizational budget," Elena Serrano said. "All of us are part-time, and none of us gets benefits. We have 12 people on staff. Some work only eight to10 hours a week. Our budget is $450,000 a year. I don't have an idea of how to double that. Realistically, if we are going to serve the neighborhood the way we should, we need to double our budget."

Ironically, when EastSide needed operating funds, *Making Connections* Oakland ceased making operating grants. While MCO played an important role in facilitating the start-up of the center, over the years its focus changed to three core results areas—Family Economic Success, Children Healthy and Prepared to Succeed in School, and resident engagement. Because of this change, MCO made the hard decision not to continue its operating grants to EastSide.

That decision riled EastSide's leaders. "That's why I'm upset at Casey," Serrano said. "Just as we were moving in, they took back the organizational support. We were hoping for at least one more year. That was not the time to pull back, especially when they put money into the pot to buy the building. That was a poor business decision."

Deborah Montesinos, MCO's local site coordinator, acknowledges the painful decision. "This is where tension played out. Things got tighter when I came on board. We were narrowing the results and outcomes. I didn't continue that straight core operating support money to EastSide. I couldn't justify it.

"We started being proud of being brown-haired, brown-eyed young women and being part of our culture and speaking Spanish at our school without anybody saying anything."

—Leslie Lopez

"It just opens up your mind."

Despite being the second child in a traditional Mexican immigrant family in Oakland, Leslie Lopez displayed an independent streak when she was young. Graffiti art, "a guy thing," fascinated her.

"When I was about eight years old, I was interested in doing graffiti, doing those letters and the taggings on buildings," she remembers. "I'd see people doing it, and I'd go home and print stuff out of the computer and try to do it."

That didn't please her parents at all. "They didn't like the whole thing about a girl doing graffiti. They didn't think it was art; they thought it was garbage," she said. "They wanted me just to go to school and stop drawing."

Nor did her parents like her "getting wild" during the transition from middle school to high school.

Her mother had a ready response—get her into a community-based program for at-risk youth. The Raza Youth Leadership program of the Spanish-Speaking Citizens Foundation in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland taught her and her older sister leadership and organizing skills, how to get involved in their community, and "our history and culture."

"A lot of information we got was really helpful," Lopez said. "We started being proud of being brown-haired, brown-eyed young women and being part of our culture and speaking Spanish at our school without anybody saying anything."

She and her older sister still were acting a little "crazy," however. Lopez had maintained her fascination with graffiti, so she hung out with young men practicing that controversial art form, one of the few girls to do so.

It was about this time that she met Sergio Arroyo, an arts activist working first with the Raza Youth Leadership program and later with the EastSide Arts Alliance. Arroyo introduced Leslie to EastSide's Visual Elements workshop. That was about seven years ago, when she was 14.

Leslie Lopez (middle of the second row, in black) taught art to this group of young people at EastSide's youth empowerment school.

"You learn so many things about your culture and history, it just opens up your mind. It gives me a lot of pride. The murals we're doing are about empowering our neighborhood, empowering our culture, empowering our ancestors."

—Leslie Lopez

One of the few girls wanting to do graffiti art in the EastSide workshop, Lopez started with the basics, moved on to helping paint a mural, stuck it out, and today is the co-coordinator of the Visual Elements workshop. As co-coordinator, she both teaches and does administrative functions.

Her pathway to EastSide took her away from a potentially more dangerous life on the streets. She grew up in the Fruitvale neighborhood, adjacent to the Lower San Antonio.

"You grow up around people in your neighborhood, and they claim something. When I say 'claim something,' I mean being part of a gang, part of the community," she explained. "People ask you, 'What are you?' 'What do you claim?' 'Where are you from?'"

Those questions refer to specific areas, which different Chicano gangs claim to be their territory. "Growing up in the neighborhood, you're going to have to choose one way or another. I could roll with them in being part of whatever gang it is, or just be around them, but choose a different path."

She chose to "learn how to do all this positive stuff that EastSide has taught me, like learning more about art and my culture, rather than just throwing up my 'hood, or my block, or something that has made us hate each other. That was one of the main things that made me stay here at EastSide."

Her EastSide experiences have broadened her horizons. "You learn so many things about your culture and history, it just opens up your mind. It gives me a lot of pride. The murals we're doing are not just about my neighborhood, or killing people. They're about empowering our neighborhood, empowering our culture, empowering our ancestors."

She's learned other valuable life lessons. "The hip-hop culture, the Chicano culture or the Cambodian culture, all the different cultures—you can wrap them all up in one [at EastSide]. That's beautiful to see because that's what's in our neighborhood," she said.

The exposure to different people drew her to EastSide also. "There are all these faces that you don't normally talk to, you don't normally see. You only see your circle, but at EastSide, I got to be cool with all different races, and understand that all our struggles are connected."

She's often thought, "All right, I shouldn't hate you. It's not that I hate you, it's just that I didn't know you before. You don't judge people. Everything is connected. Meeting people of different racial backgrounds is a wonderful thing."

Lopez goes to the EastSide Cultural Center six days a week. "I see EastSide like a family. It's like a second home to me."

Her regular family—parents, three siblings—now also attend EastSide programs and events. "Now they really love EastSide," she said

Lopez is finishing up at the two-year Laney College in Oakland and is being encouraged by her EastSide mentors to attend a four-year college. She's also considering art school and wants to incorporate her love of art with teaching children in local hospitals to do art, "like what EastSide did for me."

"Things got tighter when I came on board. We were narrowing the results. I didn't continue that straight operating support to EastSide. I couldn't justify it."

—Deborah Montesinos

"I asked if there was a way they could show me how they could help us meet our performance measures in the three core results areas, but they couldn't show me how they could do that. "

The biggest revenue stream for the building comes from the lease with Tumi's, which expires in mid-2009. Tumi's has decided to move at that time, to be closer to its clients in downtown Oakland as well as to be closer to public transportation. In early 2009, EastSide will be looking for another compatible tenant to take over Tumi's space.

"With a new building, there are a lot of issues," Tumi's Favianna Rodriguez said. There are also crime and safety concerns in the surrounding area. "My employees' cars have been broken into," she said.

The relative lack of economic activity in the immediate vicinity is also discouraging. "There's also almost no food around here," she continued. Rodriguez acknowledged the nearby area is seeing some economic growth, but right now, it isn't like a downtown Oakland location.

"In a few years, this should be a much different area," Rodriguez surmised. The cultural center is the beginning of a push for economic development in the neighborhood, she believes. "If this neighborhood is going to transform, you need the collaboration of merchants, residents, arts and community organizations. That's what needs to happen. Art and culture can get [additional economic growth] motivated."

Once the Cultural Center achieves sustainability, Rodriguez thinks the next step is to find ways to replicate what EastSide has done. "How do we showcase what we're doing here to the entire country? How do we move beyond thinking local? We have to think about having a bigger impact. How we can take our art and our practices to much larger audiences because that will create opportunities for us to be more sustainable? We have to think big."

Thinking big includes identifying and acquiring more resources. Thinking big means perhaps of opening a vegan or vegetarian restaurant at the cultural center. "I would love to have something like that because that is where you can influence the eating habits of this community, which eats really poorly," Rodriguez said.

Thinking big especially means engaging business-like planning methods, something that some nonprofit arts organizations tend not to do well, she added.

"One thing I learned in business is if you can plan out your next three to five years and really think of where you want to go, it makes it easier to run your day-to-day operations," Rodriguez said.

Business-like planning also includes giving employees benefits, which Tumi's workers have. (EastSide's staff does not because of limited operating funds.) To cover its higher operating costs, including employee benefits, Tumi's has had to raise its rates.

"How do we showcase what we're doing here to the entire country? How do we move beyond thinking local? How can we take our art and our practices to much larger audiences because that will create opportunities for us to be more sustainable? We have to think big."

—Favianna Rodriguez

A Reflection about Lessons Learned from Creating the EastSide Cultural Center

"It was an amazing accomplishment," says Alma Robinson of California Lawyers for the Arts, speaking of the creation of the EastSide Cultural Center. "It was done by a collective of artists, not a group with a well-financed board of directors and an endowment. It was amazing."

Randolph Belle, coordinator of the 100 Families project, agrees. "It's basically a near perfect model for bringing together all the resources in a coordinated fashion—the residents, community artists, the leadership, the philanthropic community—with a sound strategy for sustainability. I hope others take note and learn."

What should people learn? There are very interesting lessons in this story for many people: arts activists themselves, foundations and other funders, those who want to bring about community change in struggling neighborhoods, people who care about young people who live in these neighborhoods and no doubt many others.

Bobby Seale, founder of the Black Panthers, sits on EastSide's advisory board. "When we are working with younger people, we want to show them where we fit into this continuum," explains EastSide's Elena Serrano.

"As cultural workers and activists, we are afraid of money. But we really need money to make our projects happen. We have to think in strategic ways because we don't necessarily have the resources, but they're out there."

—Favianna Rodriguez

- **For arts activists and others who want to bring about change in challenging neighborhoods, be open to stretching yourselves and your groups and taking on a development project like this one, *if* you are convinced that it can make a real difference in your community.**

Working on a long-term development project like the EastSide Cultural Center involves a big jump for many people, not just artists but other community activists. They are often leery of being pulled into something that takes a huge amount of their time and energy, requires them to learn about topics ranging from organizational structure to development financing to tax law, and distracts them from critical community issues or from their own art work.

The leaders of the EastSide Arts Alliance, which wasn't even organized as a nonprofit organization, worried that the need for by-laws and boards of directors and business plans would be "the slippery slope to bureaucratic hell," according to the Casey Foundation's Bart Lubow.

EastSide Arts Alliance member Favianna Rodriquez believes that a lot of the unease with development projects is really about money. "As cultural workers and activists, we are afraid of money." But the problem is that, "We really need money to make our projects happen. We have to think in strategic ways because we don't necessarily have the resources, but they're out there."

It certainly wasn't easy getting the resources for the Cultural Center (a task that is continuing), but the result of all this work was worth it, according to the core of EastSide's artists who spent years of their lives trying to pull this off. The sense that the result of all this work is already making a difference in this community, particularly for young people, is widespread and impressive. It's providing 16 units of affordable housing, four for young people who have aged out of foster care. It is providing at least part-time jobs for 12 people. It's provided a space for a half dozen groups to run their programs. Lots of young people (and many others) have learned useful skills. The list goes on.

And beyond these hard measures of impact, many people are convinced that the Cultural Center is also already having a broader, less concrete impact. Catherine Howard of the Northern California Community Loan Fund (NCCLF) says that the Cultural Center is already "a cornerstone for the neighborhood" and "an anchor for the Lower San Antonio…."

"It just brought some liveliness to the neighborhood that I didn't see before," says long-time resident Lara Amin.

"I know for a fact, a strong fact," says Kevin Akhidenor, "it kept a lot of us, including myself, out of trouble."

In other words, the investment of time these arts activists made in this project seems to be paying off in many ways. None of this would have happened if they hadn't been willing to develop an organization, raise money, engage partners, learn about

"You just have to assess people's personal lives.
It comes down to the people involved and their ability
to dig into themselves to put up with five more years of hell."

—Carolyn Johnson

development, help design the space and operate a cultural center.

- **Understand at the beginning just how much work, knowledge and *time* most development projects require.**

Yes, developing something like the Cultural Center can produce some impressive results, provide a legacy and a base for future work, and help meet many community needs. But it is far from easy, especially for people who don't have a background in development.

"They were arts activists and not in the business of real estate and you could tell that when they first came in," said the Loan Fund's Carolyn Johnson. "They were absolutely clueless about what they were thinking about undertaking.… They literally had very little other than a desire to do something and to stay in this community."

But EastSide's artists are not alone in this. "We run into that level of capacity a lot," Johnson said. She estimated that 90% of the nonprofits who want support for a development project have no real development experience.

EastSide's Takehara, who actually did have some experience with affordable housing from an earlier job, acknowledged that the group "couldn't do a business plan by ourselves. We didn't have the capacity to property manage."

Looking back, Tumi's Rodriquez said that she had no idea of the "sheer amount of work" involved in developing and then operating a cultural center.

Johnson believes the key is that people understand how hard it is going to be and that they believe strongly enough in what they want to create that they accept the sacrifices. A good funder will look for this awareness and commitment, Johnson believes.

"You look at the mission of what they are trying to do and the enthusiasm and fervor and intellectual capacity that they bring. You can assess those things."

When Johnson first meets people asking for her support, she looks at their plan and asks whether it makes sense. "But I also look at the person's face," she adds. "I give them some idea of what they're about to go through. I ask them, 'Are you burnt out now from just getting the organization to where it is, and do you have the capacity to go through twice as much hell for five more years?'

"If the answer is unequivocally 'yes', I'm good. If it's a hesitation, like, 'Well, yeah, I'm thinking of doing something in two years,' I won't work with you. I already know this is not going to work.

"You need someone like Elena, and you really need to understand their support system. 'Is it just you and if you were hit by a bus, what happens?'

"You just have to assess people's personal lives. It comes down to the people involved and their ability to dig into themselves to put up with five more years of hell."

The other side of the coin is that, if you are asking for support for a project like this,

"We essentially are not great administrators. We are good at it because it's what we have to do, but in the end, we have to keep doing the cultural work. That really is what we can do best."

—Favianna Rodriguez

communicate not just your plan but your enthusiasm. Johnson says that she was very impressed by Elena Serrano's "spirit."

"They were able to get people to say, 'Yes, I love it; let's do it.' And when [funders] have to pick from among a million things, they will tend to choose a group like EastSide" because of the enthusiasm.

- **Acknowledge your limits and understand the need for partners.**

Given how much work and expertise is involved in nearly any development project, a go-it-alone mentality is a problem. The EastSide project "very easily could *not* have happened given their capacity," Johnson believed. "They could not have pulled this off at all without all the partners that they had."

Catherine Howard, a senior loan officer at the Northern California Loan Fund, agrees. "By having EastSide as an arts organization partnering with a development organization, there would be expertise on both ends."

"EastSide needed the expertise of a nonprofit affordable housing developer that could access funding and loans and grants in order to build a new mixed-use building," explains Kevin Zwick of Affordable Housing Associates, EastSide's primary partner.

The key was that these two partners turned out to be very compatible. "It was really a team effort with AHA," says Serrano. She says that designing arts and performance spaces was a very unconventional project for AHA, "but they hung in there and the work we did with them was invaluable."

One key was that EastSide worked with AHA on every aspect of the project. "EastSide was a true development partner with us," says Zwick. "They were very involved. We wrote grants together. We filled out applications together. They attended every construction meeting. They probably put more hours and time into the building then we at AHA could."

Another key was that AHA wasn't simply the hired development consultant. They too had a deep commitment to the project, in part because it involved affordable housing, in part because it was in a neighborhood to which they had a commitment. "We were working in this neighborhood and we believe in this mission and in the revitalizing aspects this building would have in this neighborhood," explains Zwick.

The work of course doesn't end with the grand-opening ceremony. Programs must be operated; the building must be managed. One key is whether people who have worked so hard to create something can step back to allow someone else to manage it. Tumi's Rodriguez thinks it's necessary to bring in people who are administrators and managers "because we essentially are not great administrators.

"We are good at it because it's what we have to do, but in the end, we have to keep doing the cultural work. That really is what we can do best."

- **Accept the fact that any significant development project is going to entail**

"Foundations appear to us to be more conservative than banks. We wish they would be more risk taking and less cautious."

—Alma Robinson

sacrifices in other parts of your life and work.

Rodriquez's comment suggests the balancing act that any artist or activist or person committed to helping others needs to consider when thinking about getting involved in a development project.

"What attracted me to the idea of a cultural center is that we would be able to practice our craft," Rodriquez said. "It hasn't happened that way. Unfortunately, we are so busy trying to maintain and sustain what we have, we don't get to fully do our craft." She says the "sheer amount of work" is the challenge.

But the experience of being involved in the creation of the cultural center and running a design business hasn't completely cut off Rodriquez from her art, she says. She has continued to build her art career, though she acknowledges that this has "sometimes been at the cost of Tumi's or EastSide."

Her art has also developed as a result of this experience, she thinks. "As an artist, I've learned so much about communication with our audiences. I learned about marketing and funding, so I was able to apply that to my art." The connection between her art and her community work has also been reinforced. "A lot of my art has to do with people in my community and what we're experiencing."

- **As a funder, be open to supporting nontraditional groups and individuals.**

Artists and other community activists are not the only ones who need to stretch and learn new things if they want to develop something in their communities. Many funders also need to stretch and acknowledge what they need to understand better, at least according to many supporters of the EastSide project.

California Lawyers for the Arts Alma Robinson says that, "Many times, foundations appear to us to be more conservative than banks. We wish they would be more risk taking and less cautious…."

Stretching can mean many things, depending on the type of funder. For many funders, it could mean working with much less-established organizations. The EastSide Arts Alliance is a good example of that. Robinson says that she "salutes the Casey Foundation for having the trust and interest to take a risk like that with a group that had no track record."

What a risk like this requires is for a funder to trust a few individuals rather than always look for organizations with long track records. "When you're thinking about investing," explains the Loan Fund's Johnson, what's critical is "your connection with the person—whether it be their mission, who they serve, their enthusiasm, some affinity you have with them."

It was the individuals involved with EastSide—"their deep and abiding commitment to the well-being of poor people in this particular neighborhood"—that led *Making Connections* Site Team Leader Bart Lubow to decide to "make a bet that others might not have been willing to make."

He adds, "When you have people who demonstrate that kind of commitment and

"As a cultural organization, you have to sell to foundations the idea that culture is part of a community. That's a weak understanding of foundations."

—Greg Morozumi

who operate on values that align with the overall effort to build community…you want those people in your game." If you don't take risks like this, he believes, "You lose out on the opportunity to help groups like this come into being and grow."

You also can lose out on the opportunity for a big win, according to *Making Connections* former site coordinator Fred Blackwell. He thinks that, long-term, the EastSide Cultural Center "might be some of the most significant work that comes out of *Making Connections* Oakland. I know it's the most tangible thing you can point to.

"There may be some results that people can point to in a site report, but Joe Blow who lives in the Lower San Antonio can point to a building where there are some vibrant activities going on, along with some affordable housing upstairs."

A community cultural center is outside *Making Connections*' current focus areas, which is why it halted operating support for it. This suggests another way that funders can stretch, which is to look beyond what Robinson calls the "very narrow structures" in which some foundations think.

In the arts world, she adds, this means "thinking about projects that have broader applications than just a performance or a music education program." This could mean investing in the "unraveling" infrastructure of arts organizations or finding ways to support the preservation of culture in changing neighborhoods.

"When neighborhoods gentrify," explains Affordable Housing's Zwick, "indigenous cultural capital can be lost if you're not making deliberate attempts to make spaces for it."

For funders interested in community change, stretching may be seeing the role that the arts and culture can play in strengthening low-income communities.

"As a cultural organization," states Greg Morozumi, "you have to sell to foundations the idea that culture is part of a community. That's a weak understanding of foundations."

An organization like the EastSide Cultural Center helps build community, Serrano believes. "Underneath what Casey wants to achieve with *Making Connections* is that communities work together and have some level of self-determination. To make that happen, people have to be in dialogue and understand that issues are related."

She thinks that is exactly what has been happening at EastSide, especially among young people, who talk directly about overcoming stereotypes and finding commonalities. As Leslie Lopez put it, through her experiences at EastSide, she came to "understand that all our struggles are connected."

Lubow agrees. "Culture can be a great unifier and a great way to connect people from different backgrounds."

"Underneath what Casey wants to achieve with *Making Connections* is that communities work together and have some level of self-determination. To make that happen, people have to be in dialogue and understand that issues are related."

—Elena Serrano

For funders interested in youth, stretching may mean supporting something other than traditional service programs for young people.

Lubow was impressed by how EastSide uses art as a "youth development tool." He added, "They offer kids things they identify with, that are relevant to them, that are going to turn them on and keep them engaged and create for them a vision that there might be a future besides the Alameda County jail."

Malaquias Montoya, an artist who helped inspire the EastSide Arts Alliance, says something similar: "We felt art was a very important tool for youth, a very empowering way for kids to start looking at themselves, a way of getting and receiving pride in the work that they did."

Kevin Akhidenor confirms this potential of a community art program. "Everything I am doing, however big it gets, it all started from here at EastSide. Because of that, I know what I'm doing in life, and I know where I am going in my life, and I'm already doing it."

For funders used to primarily reviewing proposals and making grants, stretching may mean rolling up their sleeves and getting much more deeply involved with a project or organization.

The Loan Fund's Johnson said that she knew at the beginning that deciding to support the EastSide project would mean more work for her and her organization. But she accepted this. The enthusiasm of people like Elena Serrano led her to say, "'Fine, I will pick one project a year that I know will take four or five years and it's going to be hell because I'm going to be doing a lot to help them." She says that, "All of us at the Loan Fund really got involved through all of the processes."

The Casey Foundation also stayed involved over time, responding to needs as they came up, such as filling the gap in funding for the apartments for young people aging out of foster care. "It was that kind of flexibility that *Making Connections* brought," says Jess Wendover, an architect-advisor on the project. "This only worked because [*Making Connections*] was in the neighborhood…."

It was more work but, in the end, it was also more reward, with the Loan Fund staff believing that they had played a big role in turning this vision into a reality. "We were able to help them swing a bigger stick."

Johnson adds that, "The role of a foundation is huge." Part of this is a funder's willingness to provide different kinds of support over time, from a capital grant to matching funds to operating support to short-term loans—a development project can be a roller-coaster ride, requiring a range of strategic interventions at different times.

But another part of it is using a funders' non-financial capital. "Foundations can use their resources and networks and relationships with other foundations and individuals" to help a community-focused group like EastSide Arts Alliance realize its vision.

—Tim Saasta

"EastSide is basically a near perfect model for bringing together all the resources in a coordinated fashion—the residents, community artists, the leadership, the philanthropic community—with a sound strategy for sustainability. I hope others take note and learn."

—Randolph Belle

The Diarist Project

This is one of a series of publications about the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* Initiative put together by The Diarist Project. The project is a new approach the foundation is using to learn from its efforts to strengthen families and transform struggling neighborhoods.

Diarists work to capture strategies and insights of the people who are leading the neighborhood transformation work. In *Making Connections*, the diarist works closely with the staff people who lead the work in each city.

Jose Garcia teaches painting and mural-making.

This publication was written by Bill Wong, the *Making Connections* Oakland diarist. It was edited by Tim Saasta, coordinator of The Diarist Project, who also wrote the reflection on lessons learned. It was published in **December 2008**.

Making Connections is a Casey Foundation initiative to support work that demonstrates the simple premise that kids thrive when their families are strong and their communities supportive. What began in 1999 as a demonstration project in selected neighborhoods in 22 cities is now an intricate network of people and groups committed to making strong families and neighborhoods their highest priorities.

The **Annie E. Casey Foundation** (AECF.org) works to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. Its primary mission is to foster public policies, human service reforms and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

All photos by Kathy Sloane except pages 8, 9 and 26 (Mary Ann Dolcemascolo) and 29 and 34 (Tommy Wong).

For more information about **The Diarist Project**, contact Tim Saasta at Tim@CharityChoices.com. Diarist publications are available at: **www.DiaristProject.org**.

***Making Connections* Oakland** is a long-term effort to improve the quality of life of families living in this city's Lower San Antonio neighborhood. For more information: c/o NCDI, 900 Alice Street, Suite 300, Oakland, CA 94607; 510-530-0200.

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